

## Comment

Terror is nothing other than prompt, severe and inflexible justice; it therefore emanates from virtue; it is less a particular principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to the most pressing needs of the country.

Robespierre

The recent escalation of violence in Northern Ireland should prompt all parties in the province to intensify their search for a formula which would allow negotiations to begin on the political future of the area. The intensification of sectarian terrorism in the past few weeks is an ominous development. It has coincided with the disclosure that talks have been taking place between John Hume, leader of the constitutional nationalist SDLP, and Gerry Adams leader of Sinn Fein, which is often described as the political wing of the IRA. Mr Hume has admitted that the intention of both sides in the talks was that their contacts should remain secret. He had hoped that the course of these negotiations might follow that of the successful conferences between Israel and the PLO sponsored by the Norwegian government. However, news of the Hume-Adams talks was leaked. Why and by whom?

In her recently published memoirs Lady Thatcher, who has herself displayed considerable personal courage in the face of terrorism, admits that it is misleading to describe the terrorism of the IRA as 'mindless'. If it were such then it would be easy to categorise it as simply the manifestation of a disordered psyche. She goes on to say, 'But that is not what terrorism is, however many psychopaths may be attracted to it. Terrorism is the calculated use of violence—and the threat of it—to achieve political ends.' To her mind, and to that of most British politicians the issue is a simple one. The democratic will of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland has been consistently expressed in favour of one political option. It is therefore incumbent on the rest of the population of that political unit to accept that decision or to express their dissent through constitutional means. It was precisely this broad-brush vision that characterised the approach of successive British governments to the problems of Northern Ireland for fifty years. It was only when the products of the excellent Northern Irish Grammar Schools, praised so highly by Lady Thatcher in her book, emerged from universities in the 1960s that any pressure towards constitutional change in the form of the Civil Rights movement began to take shape. When young, educated and

intelligent Catholics decided to stay in the country rather than choosing the path of emigration they were naturally eager to claim a voice in the government of the community to which they belonged. In Northern Ireland in 1968 it became quite clear that the projection of local democratic structures in the country were a sham disguising the most cynical corruption and prejudice. It is from this generation that many of the leading nationalist politicians sprang. What we see in Northern Ireland is not a straight fight between the forces of democracy and the forces of anarchy, but a clash of democratic visions. Even Robespierre, however bizarrely, described himself as a democrat.

In the past twenty years the shape of the conflict in Northern Ireland has altered dramatically. The constitutional parties have found it increasingly difficult to control the political agenda. They are faced with sectarian terrorist organisations which operate with a similar vision to Robespierre, Saint-Just and the other engineers of the French Revolutionary terror. What motivates them is the conviction that there is one sole exclusive truth which constitutes the foundation of civic virtue. This vision seems to hold that in the ideal state there is no room for pluralism and that opposition can only be counted as factionalism. The ultimate paradox is that terrorism represents the triumph of factionalism.

The apparent willingness of Mr Adams to engage in some kind of consultations with the present constitutional parties in Northern Ireland was a major advance. Even the British Government recognised this by maintaining a peculiar restraint in its comments on Mr Hume's activities. But why continue a bombing campaign risking, amongst other things, indiscriminate slaughter in a fish shop on the Shankill Road on a busy Saturday afternoon? Why should Mr. Adams give a disturbing show of solidarity at the funeral of one of the bombers? Perhaps somebody in the IRA did not wish Mr. Adam's talks to succeed. Maybe Mr. Adams does not pull as much weight in the councils of the IRA as Mr. Hume thinks he does. The IRA may be more of a hydra-headed monster than was imagined. The indiscriminate reprisals on the Catholic population suggest that a similar fragmentation of central control may now be taking place in Protestant Terrorist agencies. Mr Hume has said that agreement between the communities in Northern Ireland can only be based on a recognition of mutual diversity. Clearly this does not feature on the agenda of any of the terrorist organisations. As one political commentator has observed, 'the notion of "armed struggle" has been elevated to a principle and not just a tactic'. Robespierre would be very pleased.

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