

Comment

A highly respected and competent Dublin journalist was asked by the BBC to take part in a programme after the Strasbourg report which found Britain guilty of the use of torture in Northern Ireland. He agreed; he was then told that what they would like from him would be some account of the embarrassment felt by the Irish government placed in the difficult position of having to proceed against Britain in court. When he explained that he had not noticed the slightest sign of embarrassment from any member of the government, he was told that his services were no longer needed. This was just one of the infantile reactions to the report from British institutions. With the honourable exception of the *Sun*, British newspapers seem collectively to have decided that the Report itself, and even more the decision by the Irish to pursue the matter in court, was in the Worst Possible Taste. The *Daily Telegraph* announced that the Report must have been wrong and it wasn't really torture at all (one of the victims was driven to such frenzy that he tried to tear out his own fingernails), others reminded us that torture can produce results highly satisfactory to the army, but not many of them achieved the inanity of Merlyn Rees. He complained about the Irish 'raking up' things that had happened five years ago.

There cannot be very many people left who believe that the British army in Northern Ireland is primarily concerned with the preservation of the rule of law, but there are probably quite a number who suppose this to be a fairly high priority with a man thought suitable to be Home Secretary. British law and British liberties will be to a great extent in his care. A certain scepticism about this proposition has naturally become more widespread since the retiring Home Secretary, Mr Jenkins, introduced detention and deportation without charge or trial and since it became clear that nobody is ever likely to be punished for the cowardly and vicious attacks on helpless prisoners awaiting trial in British gaols. Still, even Mr Jenkins is not on record as actually complaining about the process of law as such. That kind of thing is left to the Provisionals and to our new Home Secretary.

Listening to Merlyn Rees you would suppose that the Irish government had suddenly, after five years, decided to take action over the abominable savagery of 'interrogation in depth'. In fact, of course, the Irish government of the day acted immediately, as soon as the horrors began to come to light. (They were still, it need hardly be said, being lied about by the officers and gentlemen of the British army and concealed by Lord Compton.) The fact that it has taken five years for the report to appear is partly because what was involved was a careful

legal process, and law that tries to be fair does take time. If Mr Rees really prefers speed he should simply have handed over the names and addresses of the torturers to either the Republican Movement or the Provisionals. Justice might perhaps then have been done rapidly enough but it would not have been seen to be done. The other reason why the process took so long was that it was systematically obstructed by the British representatives. Thirteen pages of the Report are devoted to detailing the tortuous wriggings of the British, their procrastinations and attempts to put off the inevitable. Their blatant refusal to collaborate is explicitly documented in the Report. And then, when in spite of all this the judgement finally appears, we are told that it is unreasonable of the Irish to be interested in what happened so long ago.

But, revolting as the rest of the world has found the official British reaction to this tale of misery and torment (the failure, for example, of Merlyn Rees to express the slightest regret for this government-sponsored savagery), much more sinister is the fact that no undertaking has been given that such practices will be banned in future. The soldier ordered to take part in torture will have no official policy statement to appeal to if he wants to refuse. All we are told is that the practise has been discontinued (and this by people who once denied that it ever happened) meanwhile there is evidence that some of the 'five techniques' are still in use separately and it is not denied that men are still being trained in these methods of torture. Naturally the army says that they are being trained to resist torture—what else could the army say?

This is sinister for far more people than the 'mere Irish'. British subjects are now liable to seven days detention without charge at the arbitrary whim of the government (precisely the time required to break a man's mind by the five techniques) and they are equipped with a Home Secretary clearly unscrupulous about the use of such power. The outlook is not cheerful in Britain for anyone who can be represented as a danger to the government.

And finally, faced with all this, what are the Irish doing? Led by the liberal Conor Cruise O'Brien (who has admitted to keeping a file of Letters to the Editor in Irish newspapers so that when the time comes he will know his enemies) they have just managed to go one better even than Roy Jenkins and Merlyn Rees. There has been an evidently political purge in the Broadcasting service, the introduction of what amounts to explicit press censorship and the threat of a ten year sentence for anyone saying anything that could be construed as favourable to the Provisionals. Merlyn Rees did say petulantly that the British could take the Irish to Strasbourg about the treatment of British Northern Ireland subjects in Port Laoise gaol. As the darkness descends on the two islands it seemed about the only sensible remark around.

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