

AN INVITATION

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THE NORTHERN CONFLICT & BRITISH POWER

By Jack Bennett



The Irish Sovereignty Movement

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JACK BENNETT is a Belfast journalist who is a regular commentator, under various pen-names, on northern affairs. He was a foundation member of the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society and of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association.

This pamphlet is based on a lecture he gave to a conference of the Dublin Wolfe Tone Society in Carrickmacross on November 4, 1972.

The material is necessarily condensed to suit the requirements of a pamphlet. Many aspects of the problem upon which he only touches here, and the broader issues raised by questions of nationality and sectarianism in the six counties, are examined more exhaustively in an extended essay which Jack Bennett has written as an introduction to a new selection of Wolfe Tone's writings, edited by Sean Cronin and Richard Roche, which is to be published early in 1973 by Anvil Books.

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INTRODUCTION

The Irish Sovereignty Movement has pleasure in publishing Jack Bennett's thought-provoking pamphlet. Only an Ulsterman, with a Protestant background, could write of British power in Ireland so clearly and so unambiguously.

There is a grave responsibility on all of us on this island, especially the Irish Government and the leaders of both communities in the North, to come together and discuss ways of developing a climate in which institutions can be built so as to provide peace with justice in the future.

Even if all of us in Ireland were willing to do this tomorrow, there would still be no hope of success. A further, vital ingredient is required. The British Government must change its policies and attitude to Ireland.

It must cease its support for and subsidisation of sectarianism, intolerance and bigotry in its effort to maintain its sovereignty in Ireland in opposition to the sovereignty of the Irish people as a whole. It must declare its support for Irish unity and must take steps to cease its interference in Irish affairs. This action of itself will not bring immediate amity or unity but it will provide the one and only foundation on which the Irish people, however difficult it may be, can build a future in which political violence will be but an unhappy memory.

MICHEAL S. Ó LOINGSIGH.

1. THE ACTUALITY OF BRITISH POWER

To anyone aware of the plain facts about the absolute and totalitarian nature of British power over the six-county area, not only today but in its disguised form for 50 years past, any need to restate those facts must appear to be astonishing.

Yet the need now arises to re-state the obvious. It arises if we are to sweep away certain confusions and distortions surrounding the northern conflict and the sectarian problems associated with it, and if we are to arrive at an objective understanding of the political realities involved.

Nearly all of the current distortions of the problem derive from a misunderstanding of, and sometimes even the denial of the actuality of British power; from a pretence that British power is not really there, or from the delusion that, if it is, it is not really relevant.

To begin with, a simple descriptive definition of the position of Ireland today should be useful in delineating the stage upon which we are compelled to act. A brief definition which could be considered complete and accurate if included, say, in a text-book of political geography for Tokio schoolchildren.

That brief, accurate definition must simply state that we have a situation in which British sovereignty (as distinct from indirect political control) has been withdrawn from a large part of Ireland, but has been retained in full force over a small north-eastern corner. It may be added, equally accurately, that this is an arrangement fixed by a Westminster statute, the Government of Ireland Act, 1920.

Around and about that fact, many things may be said, for and against it, which are matters of opinion. That it accords with the wishes of the democratic majority, or that it does not; that it is a good thing or a bad thing, or the only thing possible in the circumstances. Etc. etc.

One thing can be said about it which is not debatable. It is a constitutional arrangement which, if deemed due for alteration, may ultimately be changed without reference to anyone except the democratic majority of the Westminster parliament. Furthermore, it is an arrangement, affecting Ireland, which CANNOT be changed constitutionally WITHOUT an act of the British parliament.

This stark, legal fact is largely ignored, however, in other definitions of the problem, which all tend to confuse the issue by according to the British parliament a role merely of spectator, or "mediator".

There are some who would attempt to define the situation simply as one of Ireland having been divided into two "states", with the suggestion either implicit or explicit that each has an equal right to "go its own way". That suggestion was stated explicitly in a recent document published by the New Ulster Movement. It is not only an incomplete and inaccurate definition. It is a distortion of the actual position. If included in a text-book for Tokio schoolchildren, it could deservedly be described as a scandalous falsehood.

It is patently fictional to suggest that the six counties constitute a "state" in any possible sense of the term. They are merely part of the territory included within the wider boundaries of the United Kingdom

state. Any suggestion that the population of them has the slightest degree of constitutional control over where they are going is dangerously deceptive. It ignores the overriding actuality of absolute British sovereignty.

Equally deceptive is the definition which would describe Ireland as simply having been divided into two parts, each part being given its own "government", with the suggestion implicit, and sometimes explicit, that the six counties have had anything which could be called self-government in the normally understood sense of the term. The suggestion is stated explicitly, for instance, in a recent book, the author of which shows such a capacity for self-delusion that he describes the Stormont era as "fifty years of self-government."

There are variations on the theme — all equally, and dangerously, deceptive. They all serve to conceal the reality of total British control — the fact that Britain rules, and always has ruled, the six counties.

The dangerous nature of the deception is easily illustrated. An extreme Unionist organisation called the Loyalist Defence Volunteers, in a statement denouncing direct rule, called for the "return" to the Ulster people of their "inalienable rights to self-determination", and for recognition of the "sovereignty" of the suspended local "parliament" — the "return" to them of two things, sovereignty and self-determination, which they most certainly never had. Thus, it may be seen how deception and falsehood, assiduously fostered, have been instrumental in producing the savage reaction which we see today, and which accompanies the shattering of the delusions.

At the time of the introduction of direct rule, the Presbyterian church, in a politico-sectarian statement signed by the moderator, deplored what it called "the loss of voice for the protestant people in the governing of their own country." The notion that the area is the protestant people's "country" is merely in bad taste. The belief that they ever had a real say in governing it is the serious misapprehension. Much of the agony of the northern conflict, and nearly all the political confusion surrounding it, arises from that misunderstanding.

While it suited their purpose, ensured their tranquillity and made their task of ruling the six counties that much easier, British politicians were always pleased to encourage the delusion that the people of the area had some significant "measure of self-government". For years, to exonerate themselves from blame for the evils associated with British rule, they told lies about the actual, legal position as laid down by statute.

Despite the Ireland Act of 1949, and despite the gross and wilful misinterpretations of it, there is not a word on the Westminster statute books which could possibly be interpreted as granting anything remotely resembling self-determination or genuine self-government to the six counties, let alone granting the people of the area the right to "choose their own destiny" or to "go their own way."

The relevant clause in the Ireland Act merely affirms "that in no event will Northern Ireland or any part thereof cease to be part of His Majesty's dominions and of the United Kingdom without the consent of the parliament of Northern Ireland."

It does not require a constitutional lawyer to interpret that. It requires

only an ability to understand simple English. The key word in that clause is the word "without". The clause does not even say that the six counties shall not be detached from the kingdom "unless and until" the local parliament so decides. If the words "unless and until" had been used in that sense, then the Act would, indeed, have virtually conferred a right of self-determination to the Stormont parliament.

It is not accidental that the wording is vague, and in fact meaningless. Parliamentary draftsmen, especially when called on to compose a clause designed as a propaganda gesture, are usually moderately careful to avoid using words which might unwittingly confer some right which there is no intention to confer.

As it stands, the relevant clause of the Ireland Act merely conveys a negative promise that the British parliament, the boss parliament, will **REFRAIN** from doing a certain thing **which is within its powers to do**, "without" the consent of a local parliament. It does not make a positive promise to **DO** anything, even if that local parliament should wish it to be done. It should be obvious today that the Ireland Act did not, in fact, confer the slightest degree of self-determination on the Stormont parliament.

It should be even more obvious today that the same clause is a fine example of the meaningless effect of writing propaganda clauses into legislation. Promises by governments made to overcome particular difficulties at particular times are notoriously brittle. Particularly so are promises made by British governments. The fact remains that the Ireland Act itself is a piece of legislation by a sovereign parliament, and may be amended by that parliament at will.

Today the promise must be doubly doubtful. What meaning can that promise to the "Northern Ireland parliament" have now, when there no longer is a "Northern Ireland parliament", and when any assembly which replaces it might very well not be a parliament even in name?

In eloquent contrast to the vague wording in the Ireland Act clause is the very precise and specific wording to be found in the Government of Ireland Act itself. Here we find it stated quite unequivocally that "unless and until the parliament of the United Kingdom determine otherwise", such and such a state of affairs shall be held inviolate in "that portion of Ireland which is under the jurisdiction of His Majesty's government". No humbug about self-determination here. Section 75, which sets out the overriding sovereignty of the British parliament, is by no means the only part of that Act which screws down the powers of the British Government firmly upon "that portion of Ireland". Every clause is worded to confirm those powers.

The Government of Ireland Act "transferred" certain limited powers to the six-county assembly and "reserved" the major powers to the Westminster parliament. The substance of those powers is now well known. For a long time, however, it was fondly supposed by the superstitious that any powers not specifically "reserved" might automatically be considered to be "transferred". In other words, it was thought that unless the Act specifically **forbade** the local assembly to do such and such, then it could be assumed to be within the powers of that assembly to **do** those things.

The contrary, of course, was always the case. The Stormont assembly possessed **NO** powers **EXCEPT** those specifically transferred to it. It could do nothing unless the supreme parliament expressly granted it permission.

The most cursory glance at Westminster legislation relating to the six counties reveals the extraordinarily restrictive nature of the principal Act in the actual legal sense, quite apart from the practical restrictions dictated by the financial relationship.

The Westminster statute book is veritably littered with dozens of enabling acts and miscellaneous provisions which had to be adopted to make it legal for Stormont to make laws on the most trivial of matters, and "to remove doubts regarding the validity of certain laws" (10 & 11 Geo. 6, 1947), etc., etc. These provisions relate to such matters as the fire brigade and electricity board, drainage and irrigation, highways, waterways and bridges, and even things like the dredging of shingle from the seashore. The power to make laws concerning the operation of ferries across tidal waters is granted, subject to the permission of the Board of Trade!

In Stormont publications, these provisions have been euphemistically described as laws "to extend the powers of the parliament of Northern Ireland". They are, rather, telling illustrations of the extremely inhibited nature of the powers which that assembly actually possessed.

Although these facts were always fairly accessible, and easy to ascertain by taking a minimum of trouble, it is only six to ten years since it was considered practical politics in Belfast left-wing and labour circles to draw up programmes for a "socialist Stormont". Any person who suggested that Stormont would not have the powers to carry out such programmes was looked upon askance as someone intent upon sabotaging "socialist policies", rather than intent upon dispelling mirages.

Thus, again, it may be seen that the ignoring of the actuality of British power did, indeed, constitute a dangerous act of self-deception which led many people who should have known better into a wilderness of political confusion.

The dispersal of the Stormont assembly and the imposition of direct British rule now unveils the reality which always existed under the Stormont charade. It should put paid to the curious belief that the six-county people ever had self-determination or the right to "choose their own destiny". It should establish the plain truth that every major decision of significance affecting their destiny and their status has always been taken over their heads and virtually without reference to them.

Within recent months, British politicians themselves have taken to stressing precisely that point. Heath, Wilson, Maudling and a number of others have been repeatedly and emphatically proclaiming the absolute sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament. It is up to Westminster to decide the future of the six counties. They are making that clear. What Westminster decides must, of course, be "acceptable", they say. But whatever Westminster decides must also be accepted. No real choice is being offered.

Therefore, in view of the British claim to absolute sovereignty over the six counties, and in the absence of any indication by Britain of a

willingness to relinquish that sovereignty, the proposed referendum about "the border" may also clearly be seen to be bogus in more ways than one.

Quite apart from the "foregone conclusion" inherent in the nature of the poll itself, no real choice can be said to be offered unless there is some prior legal and constitutional provision for the withdrawal of British power should the vote require it — however hypothetical that supposition might be.

The one-sided and entirely bogus nature of the poll lies not so much in the foregone conclusion as in the fact that the British government maintains legal and constitutional provisions to accord with only one possible outcome, while failing to provide the machinery for implementing any other outcome.

Without the provision of equal prospects for the implementation of either outcome, the poll itself is a farce. The legal arrangements necessary for implementing an "adverse" result could certainly be safely made by the British government without much danger of having to put them into effect. But the British government refrains from such a step because to do even that would constitute a radical reversal of its policy towards the six counties. To make such a gesture even for the sake of appearances would constitute an indication of willingness to relinquish sovereignty, and legal recognition of a right to self-determination. And to do that would lay wide open the entire issue of Britain's claim to sovereignty, which she at present holds to be absolute, and would, in fact, at one stroke undermine the entire basis of that claim.

That being so, it cannot be said even that the forthcoming referendum will in any way grant the people of the six counties the right to "choose their own destiny". The only right it can grant them is a right to vote to maintain the state of affairs which denies them the right to self-determination.

Furthermore, without any move by Britain to relinquish her claim to sovereignty over the six counties, all the schemes being cooked up to govern the area in another way, within some "Irish dimension" involving an all-Ireland council, are quite meaningless — if not positively menacing.

The all-Ireland council proposal is double-edged, with the sharpest edge turned against Irish sovereignty.

Without any set schedule for the ending of British sovereignty, and with Britain maintaining her absolute claim to rule that "portion of Ireland", quite clearly a council of Ireland composed of Dublin and Belfast representatives could be nothing else but a device to bless and secure all-Ireland approval for continued British interference — the cause of all the trouble.

Even worse in those circumstances would be an all-Ireland council endowed with some powers of economic decision-making, since in those circumstances, instead of granting any additional say to Dublin, it could constitute nothing else but an extension of direct British political and economic control over the whole of the 32 counties and a grant to the British authorities in Belfast of power over decision-making for the whole country.

On the other hand, of course, an all-Ireland council, if set up under

some arrangement for the withdrawal of British power, and if designed to take over functions of an all-Ireland sovereignty upon the relinquishing by Britain of her part in the ruling of the country, would be a distinctly different proposition. It might, and might not, according to strict terms laid down, provide a practicable transitional instrument or useful interim step towards the achievement of full independence and self-determination.

2. BRITISH POWER AND IRISH DEMOCRACY

Bearing in mind the absolute nature of British power in the six counties, two important observations may be made about the present violent conflict there.

Firstly, it is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a conflict which concerns the British people or British democracy, except insofar as they, too, have been lumbered with it — and would also benefit by getting rid of it.

It is not an internal British conflict at all. It is not typical of any of the disputes which ordinarily affect British politics. It is extraneous to the normal framework within which British democracy operates, and constitutes an alien irritant on the body politic of British democracy.

It is a British problem only so long as the British parliament chooses artificially to extend, and to strain, the framework of British democracy to embrace a totally different set of conditions in another country.

And the fundamental political issue underlying the entire conflict is precisely the question of British involvement.

Secondly, it may safely be said to be a conflict which is not only of considerable concern to all the Irish people but which exercises a direct effect on Irish politics and Irish affairs generally — and increasingly so with every new twist in the crisis.

It is a conflict, the solution of which is vital — internally in the Irish context — for the development of a normal framework within which Irish democracy may operate.

And, again, the fundamental issue in dispute is precisely the old question of Irish politics — the question of achieving full sovereignty and self-determination.

Having made those two, truthful observations, the following conclusion may validly be drawn:—

Because British power in the six counties constitutes in fact a direct denial of sovereignty and democracy to that area (as has been seen); and **because** of Britain's claim to an exclusive sovereignty in imposing her own solution on the conflict there — to the exclusion of the people most vitally and directly affected by it — it therefore follows that the British claim and the British presence in themselves constitute a denial of the right to self-determination over their own affairs to the Irish people as a whole.

The continued extension of British sovereignty to the six counties constitutes an unnatural and extraneous irritant on the body of British democracy. It constitutes an unnatural and extraneous tourniquet on the bloodstream of Irish democracy.

Recognising that, we may further observe simply that the right to self-determination is a highly respectable, internationally recognised right, accepted as fundamental to normal relations between nations. It is also the ultimate democratic demand (at least in a situation where it is absent), since no country can be said to have full democracy if it is in any way denied full control over the running of its own affairs and denied sovereign powers to resolve its own internal problems.

Those who consider self-determination to be not only desirable but necessary, who see it as a valid and legitimate objective, and who seek its attainment, may be broadly included in the political camp of democracy and among those who desire further democratic advance.

Of course, various shades and points of view may be found in that camp. There may be conservative nationalists, or radical or even revolutionary ones. There will be socialist types, and so on. Generally, however, they all favour the advancement of the reasonable, democratic objective of self-government. If the conservative type sometimes shows the least enthusiasm for the cause, it is only because the conservative type is, by tradition, the least enthusiastic about any extension of democracy.

Those who oppose self-determination, who do not think it either desirable or necessary (or at least not necessary even if desirable), who pooh-poo the idea as of no great consequence, and who see no great harm in having a great power direct our affairs, may be called by a variety of names. Imperialists. Collaborators. Or simply the conservative opponents of democratic advance.

Among them, great store is set in shibboleths, and in ignoring the realities of imperial rule. For propaganda purposes they can sometimes even produce psychiatrists to write analytical theses to show that people who believe in self-determination are nut cases. Those people, of course, are beyond the help of their own form of therapy. Had they lived in Hitler's Slovakian "protectorate", for instance, they would undoubtedly have considered it crack-pot and absurd to find any fault with the arrangement.

The Labour Party spokesman, Conor Cruise O'Brien, in a recent broadcast expressed his desire rather "to see the decline of sovereignty as such." The real meaning he was conveying is that he desires no more sovereignty for Ireland.

But for all his desire to see sovereignty "as such" generally reduced, he stops short of suggesting that Britain should reduce the amount of sovereignty which she enjoys — even to the extent, say, of six small counties.

O'Brien is explicit in his demand that the Irish state should abandon its "claim" to sovereignty over the six counties — that it should abandon even that symbol of the Irish people's aspirations to full democratic control over their own affairs.

On the other hand, O'Brien is insistently and emphatically opposed to the very idea that Britain should abandon her claim to "that portion of Ireland within her majesty's jurisdiction" — even though the north's political problem (as we've seen) is totally external and foreign to British democracy, and even though the solution of the problem is demon-

strably unattainable except within the context of an Irish democracy.

For all his pseudo-enlightened posturing, O'Brien, in his strident crusade to preserve the status quo against even the threat of "dangerous talk", has taken up a position as one of the most conservative politicians in Ireland today, and one of the most vocal opponents of further democratic advance.

For all the progressive stances he strikes in his criticisms of the 26-county constitution, his attack upon the one article of that constitution which is of any value in maintaining the ultimate democratic objective stamps him as being objectively reactionary in our present circumstances.

3. SECTARIANISM AND THE CONFLICT ABOUT BRITISH POWER

In political terms, British power in the six counties is what the northern conflict is all about. In practice, it takes the form and appearance locally of a predominantly internal sectarian conflict.

The reason is not hard to find. It is simply because British power, for 150 years and more, has been inseparably associated with a religious ascendancy sectarianism. Increasingly, it came to depend for a measure of local popular support upon the sectarian doctrine that being protestant set a person apart; that being protestant conferred certain favours; that being protestant therefore assumed an obligation to be pro-British; and that protestants, therefore, as protestants, must support British power (i.e., on account of their religion).

The sectarian problem, therefore, in its origin, in its intrinsic nature, in its very essence — and the source of every aspect of it and the root of every off-shoot of it — may be seen to lie exclusively in a pro-British political protestantism.

That political protestantism is in fact the active and aggressive ingredient of the sectarian phenomenon as such may be observed in practice, and may be demonstrated by numerous examples. It may also be seen to be so — by the fact that it is the only aspect of the sectarian problem which is employed to "justify" separatism and division — in order to "justify" continued British control and the denial of self-determination and democracy.

It is necessary to state that bluntly, not merely as an antidote to the shibboleth about bigotry being "the same on both sides" (which serves no purpose except to make shallow-minded liberals feel virtuous), but more urgently to arrive at a correct understanding of the political problems involved and to recognise their actual nature.

It would be stupid to imagine that saying so implies in any way that protestants as such are "worse" than catholics. Only the most superficial type of student debating society quibbler will seize upon that statement to allege that it "insults" the protestant people.

No such thing. It must, indeed, take a shallow, or dishonest, mind to fail to grasp that it is simply an objective observation of a situation in which, by historical accident, the protestant section of the people has

been placed in dependence, or imaginary dependence, on British power, and feelings of aggressive bigotry inflamed to keep them in that position of dependence. Failure to recognise that fact amounts to a refusal to acknowledge one of the most evil effects of imperial rule. Examples of catholic, anti-protestant bigotry can nearly all be ascribed to a reflex action within that divisive, sectarian system which is exclusively linked with the cause of maintaining British power.

In actual practice, and in living experience, the irrational nature of the sectarian doctrine of protestant-Britishness may readily be observed in the permanent distortion of politics in the area of British power — as well as in its frightful products.

A "pure", hysterical and violent anti-catholic bigotry (which has no parallel on the "other side"). An accepted and effective system of systematic religious discrimination. The shooting of Taigs, simply for the sake of shooting Taigs — the most frightful aspect of the galloping, disintegrating disease now associated with the latest crisis of British power. And, most telling of all, the mounting of furious anti-catholic pogroms and the intensification of persecution at any time when events threaten to open up again the political question of maintaining British power.

It is undeniable, therefore, that British power in the six counties finds a local political basis in the sectarian division of the Irish.

And because imperial rule is in fact based upon that self-destructive and divisive factor—which is incompatible with stability in any society—we can be sure that no British system of government in Ireland, however reformed or restructured, or wrapped up in democratic white-papery, will ever work.

Reconciliation and the end of sectarianism will depend ultimately upon a British withdrawal — upon the ending of that extraneous influence whose presence in itself perpetuates the dispute along sectarian lines.

It may be said, however, that the conflict is not entirely around the question of British power, and that the original agitation for civil rights, equal treatment and democratic reform did not raise the famous constitutional question at all.

Those who are in favour of British power are, naturally enough, keen on insisting that the British connection is not seriously at issue — in the hope thereby of leaving it undisturbed and hidden behind the curtains of delusion. Conor Cruise O'Brien is opposed to anything calculated to disturb British power, and he has taken great pains to discover that no one is really seriously opposed to it. He would have you believe that the early civil-righters didn't care who ruled them.

It is quite true, of course, that the original, simple and immediate democratic demands of the civil rights movement did not mention the constitutional question. They did not raise that question at all — at least not directly.

But the point is that those demands were certainly about ASPECTS of British rule. They were ALL about METHODS of British rule. And as soon as the undemocratic practices used to maintain British rule were challenged, the whole question of British rule itself came to the fore, and the old system of British rule began to collapse.

AND BECAUSE THE OUTCOME OF THE AGITATION FOR SIMPLE

AND ELEMENTARY DEMOCRATIC REFORMS HAS NOW BEEN TO DEMONSTRATE THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR BRITAIN TO RULE THE SIX COUNTIES DEMOCRATICALLY, THE CONCLUSION AT WHICH WE MUST ARRIVE IS THAT ANY FURTHER DEMANDS FOR THE EXTENSION OF DEMOCRACY IN THE SIX COUNTIES TODAY MUST SEEK SOME PROVISION FOR ATTAINING THAT FUNDAMENTAL DEMOCRATIC OBJECTIVE OF SELF-DETERMINATION — AN OBJECTIVE WHICH MEANS NOTHING IF IT DOES NOT MEAN THE PREPARATION FOR A DEPARTURE OF BRITISH POWER.

The frantic intensity of the pro-British parties in insisting on the Britishness of the six-county area and on keeping the "British link" is itself an eloquent indication that British power is, indeed, the central issue behind the conflict.

The protestant majority's "wish to remain British" is elevated by unionist leader Brian Faulkner to an utter "determination to remain British". It may be observed that every time Faulkner speaks of the protestant-unionist determination to "remain" British, he is acknowledging the possibility that they may either remain British — or they may not.

It is a sub-conscious recognition that even if they claim to be British by name, they are not, in fact, British by nature. For ultimately, whether they remain British or not is entirely up to Britain to decide. And should Britain decide otherwise, it is difficult to imagine what degree of determination would enable them to remain British in any realistic sense, unless that determination included the ability to row a boat.

That is not to say that the protestant people, once liberated from pro-British sectarianism, either should, or would be likely to want, to depart. There are many of their political leaders, however, who would need an extraordinary mental readjustment to enable them to live in conditions of equality in an independent Ireland.

The point about the fundamentally pro-British nature of the unionist-sectarian position loses none of its validity on account of the current blusterings by the mavericks in the unionist UDI corral and their strange agitation for "independence". These are but the echoes of that contradictory anti-British Britishness which always emerges when unionism takes a fit of sulking. We remember it from the days when they threatened to "kick the British crown into the Boyne" in the cause of maintaining the union with Britain.

When it is asserted that a protestant sectarianism lies behind the pro-British political position, a glib and thoughtless retort may be expected to the effect that a catholic sectarianism must therefore be said to lie behind a pro-Irish political position. That is again the "same-on-both-sides" formula.

It is however, a demonstrably fallacious corollary. Here, in fact, we come to the perfect illustration of the topsy-turvy inversion of the reality which is most commonly practised by bigots themselves as a sort of guilty-conscience alibi for their own attitudes. It is in the tasting of the pudding that the proof of it lies.

Unquestionably, it is unionist-Orange sectarianism alone which insists

on sustaining the religious distinctions for a political purpose — a purpose which serves only partition politics and divisiveness. It is pro-British protestant political sectarianism which sustained the local, six-county administrative system of institutionalised bigotry and discrimination. It is Orange sectarianism which has effectively aligned the protestant masses behind every conservative and reactionary cause at every stage in recent Irish history, and in opposition to every move for democratic reform.

It is pro-British political sectarianism, therefore, which has DETACHED the protestant people from the national democracy. It is absurd to suggest that the catholic people are being equally sectarian for REFUSING to be detached from the democratic cause.

The Northern Ireland Labour party has taken up a topsy-turvy "non-sectarian" political position in defence of the British connection. Being traditionally anti-sectarian in its posturings, it is anxious to clear itself of any sectarian taint ordinarily associated with a pro-partition political position.

So it has evolved a theory which goes like this: "The majority of the six-county people are either protestant or catholic; the majority are also in favour of the link with Britain; therefore, the majority of all the people, both catholic and protestant, taken together, may be said to favour the British connection." This ingenious, if tortured, political logic has become crystallised in a joyous phrase now being repeated in ecstatic delirium by Labour spokesmen: "The massive non-sectarian majority in favour of the British connection."

The NILP, which has taken a stand in defence of the six-county system of institutionalised bigotry, now declares that any move towards dismantling that system would "lead to" something which we have already got — namely, "institutionalised sectarianism".

The NILP, now in favour of the sectarian division of Irishmen, declares that any move to unite them is "divisive" and "sectarian"! Topsy-turvy, indeed. Plagiarising O'Brien and embellishing on his thesis, they hold that even to talk of unity is sectarian! And because the catholic side favours unity, and the protestant side favours division, it is a sign of catholic sectarianism to stand for unity. Topsy-turvy all the way.

As an example of twisted political "thinking", it is not altogether new. It is, rather, the extension to a political level of a doctrine which has had long currency in the six-county labour movement, and under which any criticism of the **practice** of anti-catholic discrimination in workplaces, and any attack on the sectarian system as such, is frowned upon as "introducing sectarian issues."

The NILP, despite the tenuous survival within it of a genuine, old non-sectarian socialist sentiment, and despite the faithfulness to it of a dwindling number of old socialists of the genuine school, is — in its political stance — one of the most sectarian political bodies in the six counties today.

Its leaders consciously follow a purely opportunistic calculation which appears to them, no doubt genuinely within their limited powers of understanding, as a "need" to appeal primarily to Orange-protestant political prejudices. They are therefore not averse at times to beating the

Orange drum if it suits them and indulging in their own little bit of Union Jack waving.

The Alliance party, which also favours British rule, also claims to be non-sectarian. It does so, perhaps, with a little more justification. For it is essentially a conservative party which unites catholic and protestant conservatives in the legitimate conservative cause of maintaining the status quo and seeking to stabilise it.

However, even the Alliance party finds itself in a position of duplicity when it attempts to marry the incompatible — a policy of supporting partition together with a policy of non-sectarianism. One of its spokesmen, in a typical statement, said, "Alliance is determined to create one community out of the warring factions in northern society."

Now, since the divisions which divide the warring factions within the six counties are the same as the divisions which are held to justify the separation of the people by the partition boundary, what extraordinary taboo can it be which inhibits the Alliance party from seeking to create one community out of all the Irish people?

In fact, they seek the impossible — a purely local unity to justify the greater division. It is an absurd contradiction in their own professed objectives.

Because British power, as a matter of fact, is based locally on the sectarian ideology, it is impossible to devise a political policy which combines support for British power with a consistent non-sectarianism.

It is true that the "same-on-both-sides" shibboleth about sectarianism can easily be shown to be false, by practical illustration. The real fault with that shibboleth, however, is not merely that it is untrue or inaccurate. It is quite pointless to argue about it merely to uphold or downgrade the "honour" of one particular religion.

The real fault with it is that it tends to blunt a proper appreciation of the political realities. By ignoring the source and origin of sectarianism in British power, it conceals the object lesson — namely that all efforts to create a "non-sectarian" six-county political system under British rule are doomed to failure.

This may not appear immediately obvious to everyone. But it will be seen to be true as soon as the British government publishes its White Paper. It will be seen even more clearly to be true when that government attempts to implement its White Paper.

4. THE "TWO NATIONS" ALIBI FOR BRITISH POWER

Closely related to the sectarian justification for retaining British power over the six counties is the so-called two-nations "theory".

It is not a "theory" at all. It is just a strange notion, and a self-evident absurdity. It is not seriously believed by anyone in the north — not even by many of those political groups which have embraced it for opportunistic reasons and as an alibi as good as any other to rationalise their pro-British potestant-sectarianism.

It fits in comfortably with Orange prejudices. It has become popular in traditionally pro-imperialist circles in the NILP. It has been adopted by at least one extremely extreme unionist group noted for the virulence

of its incitements to anti-catholic violence. The extreme right-wing Vanguard movement, led by the ultra-British Britisher Bill Craig, even produced a pamphlet entitled, "Ulster — a Nation." The "two nations" notion is another name for "ould bigotry", thinly disguised.

It may be conceded, at the same time, that as one of the curious permutations of confusion produced by the sectarian system, the notion has also found some appeal among a few young left-wing catholics with a university background, to whom it provides an emotionally satisfying means of demonstrating their total rejection of catholic bourgeois nationalism. By catholic workers it is totally scorned.

The "two nations" notion is also an old, familiar imperialist "theory" which has recently been revived and disguised in revolutionary jargon. And in its practical application it serves no other purpose than to DENY nationality to BOTH the alleged nations, and to justify British political control over BOTH of them.

There is no definition of a nation which could be held to grant nationhood status to the northern protestants. The "two nations" notion is a self-evident absurdity because, within the north, there are absolutely no distinguishing characteristics by which the different peoples of the alleged two nations can recognisably be set apart.

Rather, they share a common speech, common physical characteristics and mannerisms, identical behaviour patterns, the same folk memories, basically common economic interests, a common way of life and even a common sense of humour. And they occupy a common territory. The one and only difference to be observed is a difference in religion. Back we come to sectarianism, pure and simple.

However, let's apply the Euclid method of elimination and suppose for a moment that the absurdity is true, and that the northern protestants do constitute a separate nation, and see where it gets us.

What nation is it, then? Is it the British nation? Obviously not, since the part cannot be equal to the whole. We may pass over the claim now being made by some unionist spokesmen that Ulster is, indeed, the "British nation", and that the British themselves are no longer anything but apostate Britishers.

Is it part of the British nation? If so, it is not a nation unto itself. And it has already been demonstrated that it is not, in fact, part of the British nation, even though that is what the majority of its own political leaders assert it to be.

Is it then, simply, the "Ulster protestant nation"? Well, if so, it could then be said to be like the Welsh, the Scotch and the English, who constitute separate nationalities within Britain.

But also, in that case, it must be observed that the "Ulster nation" is indisputably in Ireland. The members of the two alleged nations are so closely and inextricably intermingled on the territory of Ulster itself that it is impossible to sift them, one from another.

On what grounds, therefore, can there be any possible objection to those two Irish nations living together under one Irish sovereignty, just as the three nations in Britain live under one sovereignty?

The point is simply this: Even if there were two nations, the funda-

mental question would still remain. Who should rule those two nations? **THEMSELVES? Or ANOTHER NATION?**

In answer to that, the "two nations" scatterbrains usually echo unionist propaganda (which they imitate wholesale anyway). They declare that it is the "wish" of the Ulster protestant nation to be ruled by Britain, and they demand "recognition" of its "right" to be ruled by Britain.

And thus they arrive at the supreme absurdity inherent in their absurd notion. For no such "right" exists, nor is it possible for any such "right" to be established, let alone recognised.

There is a recognised right of nations to self-determination and to political secession. There cannot possibly exist a right for one nation to claim to be ruled over by another nation — especially if that other nation should decide that it no longer wished to do so.

Verily, it is a strange sort of nation, this Ulster protestant nation. A nation which never fought for self-determination and independence, but which fought against it; a nation which never produced a democratic national movement, but which aligned itself behind every anti-democratic, reactionary and imperialist cause in recent history; a nation which has not got a single national liberation hero of its own, but which adorns its public squares with statues to a foreign queen, to militarists, imperialists and empire-grabbers of another country.

If the Ulster protestants constitute a nation, it may safely be said that there certainly is not, and there never was, any other nation quite like it on the face of the globe. It may safely be concluded that it is not a nation at all. It may also be concluded that the "two nations" notion is a self-evident absurdity.

5. THE TWO "COMMUNITIES" AND BRITISH POWER

As with the "two nations" — similarly with the two "communities". Strictly speaking, the two religions cannot be said even to constitute two distinct "communities" in the sense of closely-knit groups with special characteristics and special, identical interests. Neither of them, indeed, can be said to possess exclusive attributes which cannot be found in the other. Special community interests, rather, are shared along class lines and across the religious division. So if we use the term at all, it is merely for convenience sake.

We have seen that it is over the question of British rule that the sectarian conflict in the north now rages, with a pro-British political protestantism providing local support for British rule. We have also seen that British rule constitutes an absolute denial of democracy. In the light of that we must now consider the validity of any local "democratic" majority whose "wishes" are called upon to perpetuate that state of affairs.

Those who are in favour of preserving British power in the six counties are almost always the most ardent in exaggerating the differences between the two "communities" — basically to sustain a clearly fallacious contention that the **existence** of the differences **requires** the presence of British power.

They may even be heard inventing differences where none actually exist. The supposed differences in culture, traditions, way-of-life, etc., are largely nonsense. They regularly set out to discover new and exclusively distinctive characteristics by virtue of which they hope to reinforce the same fallacious conclusion — that British rule must therefore continue.

Thus we see again, in actual practice, that it is doctrine of divisiveness which, in practical application, serves the one political purpose — that of "justifying" British control.

Even the Alliance party, which makes a veritable fetish of togetherness, is in practice a defender of sectarian separatism, since in its defence of the sectarian, partition boundary it implies a belief in the doctrine that because there are two "communities" they **must** therefore live apart.

Conor Cruise O'Brien, the exaggerator-in-chief, explicitly states the view that, because of their alleged distinctiveness, the two "communities" must, in his own words, "learn to live apart."

That is the great fallacy. It by no means follows from all the efforts of the exaggerators to justify division that the communities must live apart merely because they are different.

The point is that all the exaggerations in the world are irrelevant. Even if the protestants were all black, and the catholics all white, or vice versa, the problem would be precisely the same.

The fundamental question would still be: How can they live together in peace? And still the crucial question therefore is: Under what sovereignty may they be reasonably expected to unite in an equal citizenship and in democratic control of their own destinies?

Clearly it is unreasonable to expect them to unite under an imperial system which has divided them for so long, which was devised to accord with their divisions and designed to perpetuate them.

Even more clearly, they can never expect to secure control over their own affairs while living under a system of totalitarian and absolute imperial rule.

Thus, it can be seen that the sectarian problem itself cannot possibly be cured while the political issue around which the sectarian quarrel itself rages is kept alive — the question of British power. The ending of that power is the key to opening the door to peace and reconciliation on a basis of equality.

Here we come to consider the question of whether or not it is "undemocratic" to disregard the "wishes" of the protestant majority to keep British rule, and to consider whether that majority in fact may be accorded any democratic validity.

AND IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO AVOID THE CONCLUSION THAT NO DEMOCRATIC VALIDITY CAN BE ACCORDED, EVEN TO A LOCAL "MAJORITY", WHEN THAT MAJORITY'S POSITION AMOUNTS TO A DENIAL OF DEMOCRACY BOTH TO THEMSELVES AND TO EVERYBODY ELSE.

The myth of the democratic validity of the six-county majority may be demolished even without reference to the common argument that it is an artificially-created majority. The blunt answer is that it is not democratic. Rather, in its collective political action, because of its position as the political prisoner of the British sectarian system, it is positively anti-

democratic. There are universally-recognised and accepted democratic demands. The six-county majority has consistently been led into taking a reactionary stand in opposition to them.

The intrinsically reactionary character of Orange-protestant sectarianism and unionist bigotry hardly needs to be illustrated. O'Brien himself, in his book, 'States of Ireland', lists the many democratic movements in Irish history which provoked a reactionary Orange hostility and what he calls "protestant fears" — from the United Irishmen's rebellion to simple measures for the extension of the local government franchise, and even the introduction of land reforms.

It is O'Brien's conclusion from his observations which is astounding. He concludes that because moves for democratic advance always provoked a reactionary resistance from unionism, we must therefore make no more demands for democratic advance, so as to avoid provoking reaction.

The contrary conclusion is the more logical. What is necessary now is to push ahead vigorously towards the goal of the ultimate democratic objective — that of sovereignty and self-determination. Then there would be no more democratic demands to frighten the protestants with. They would be released from their perpetual misery and imaginary fears, and would be enabled at last to participate in a free Irish democracy.

O'Brien is merely stating that any move towards a democratic settlement of the Irish question on the basis of self-determination will provoke a violent resistance from the forces of reaction. Of course it will. Progress will always provoke reaction. And reaction will always be content to lie quiescent and undisturbed so long as there is no progress to provoke it. It does not follow that we must accept O'Brien's thesis that we should allow reaction to lie quiescent and undisturbed.

O'Brien, who falsely accuses the republican movement of fascism, is himself nearer to the position of those weak-spirited politicians of the Weimar republic who permitted the growth of nazi-fascism on the grounds that to oppose it too vigorously would only encourage it. Indeed, it is O'Brien's own doctrine.

He now forecasts a holocaust if any steps are taken to undermine the position of anti-democratic, pro-British reaction in the six counties. On the contrary, his is the course more likely to lead to a holocaust — by yielding to and encouraging those malignant forces actually to acquire a "democratic" validity and a quasi-legal status. They will never be happy to consolidate the position which O'Brien offers them without a blood-bath to make their position doubly secure.

And that, indeed, is what they actually have in mind, as has been made quite clear in the calls from their leaders to eradicate "the rebellious minority in our midst" to make "their" Ulster "safe" for ever.

O'Brien has repeatedly stated that it is absolutely dangerous even to talk of Irish unity, and even more dangerous and mischievous to seek a declaration from the external power involved that it might even consider withdrawing and granting democratic self-determination to all the Irish people.

At the time when the most vital objective among democrats must be to obtain some such declaration, O'Brien's ultra-conservative opposition

to that course constitutes a serious obstacle to finding a new political framework within which peace and reconciliation will have a real chance of flourishing.

Of all the dangerous doctrines being propounded in Ireland today, there are few more dangerous than that propounded by Conor Cruise O'Brien, which holds that nothing must be said or done to make things better, lest in doing so we might only make things worse.

The urgent requirement of the present situation is the contrary of O'Brien's fatalistic thesis. The most urgent requirement is to obtain a declaration of intent by the British government that it is prepared to grant self-determination — the ultimate shock of the ultimate democratic demand, to shock the protestant people into the realisation that the least thing they have to fear is joining with their fellow citizens in running their own country, and the greatest thing they have to fear is the continuance over them, and over their fellow citizens, of a British dictatorship.

Jack Bennett, December 1972.

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THE IRISH SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT

OFFICERS :

Chairman : Mícheál S. Ó Loingsigh.

Secretary : Anthony Coughlan.

Treasurer : Jim Barrett.

Press Officer : Dalton Kelly.

OBJECTS :

Our objects are :

- (a) To defend Irish sovereignty and maintain the principle that only bodies elected by and responsible to the Irish people have the right to make laws for the state and that no other legislative authority has that right;
- (b) To develop the political knowledge and awareness of the people, irrespective of party political allegiance, so as to encourage the adoption of the most effective policies for promoting the public welfare at local and national level;
- (c) To work to minimise the adverse effects on Ireland of E.E.C. membership;
- (d) To oppose such measures of the E.E.C. as would obstruct the Irish Government from pursuing policies of full employment in Ireland;
- (e) To maintain and strive to implement the right of the Irish people, through their elected representatives, to the ownership, control and equitable distribution of the nation's wealth, in its land, mines, territorial waters, and other economic assets;
- (f) To foster as wide a degree of unity as possible among Irish people to assert our national independence and to maintain the constitutional claim to the re-unification of the national territory;
- (g) To maintain the constitutional status of the Irish language and to work towards an environment in which the use of Irish will expand and develop;
- (h) To assert the political and military neutrality of Ireland;
- (i) To maintain and extend civil liberties.

METHODS :

The methods used to achieve our objectives are :

- 1. The organisation of branches throughout the country;
- 2. The formation of local study groups;
- 3. The publication of literature;
- 4. The holding of meetings, lectures and seminars;
- 5. The encouragement of members to be active participants in their vocational and community organisations;
- 6. The fostering of joint activities on specific issues with other organisations;
- 7. The use of the Irish language when feasible;
- 8. The lobbying of elected representatives on specific legislative proposals;
- 9. Any other means the association may deem appropriate from time to time.

Title: The Northern Conflict British Power

Organisation: Irish Sovereignty Movement

Author: Jack Bennett

Date: 1973 c.

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