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The Wilson Visit - November, 1971

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A main point in connection with this visit is to try to decide whether Mr. Wilson's purpose is to create a distinctive British Labour policy in regard to the North, which consciously and deliberately breaks the bi-partisan British approach, or to achieve some kind of compromise for which British Labour will have the advantage both of gaining some current credit while at the same time avoiding an accusation of letting down the British Government in a difficult situation.

A second point to consider is which one of these courses would be in our best interest.

Breaking the bi-partisan approach has obvious attractions from our point of view. Principally it would serve notice on Unionism that a new order of things will be enforced on them sooner or later by a British Labour Government. But, whether it would force Heath's hand to change policy now is problematic. His reputation for loathing any Wilson proposals or "gimmickry" is formidable and he might react by increasing military and other pressures on the minority and endorsing Faulkner's ideas of superficial reform. There is also the argument that, in the face of fear of a return to power of a British Labour Party with radically different policies from the ones now pursued by Mr. Heath, the Unionists might throw caution to the winds and prepare the long awaited backlash.

In this tangle of possibilities there could be something to be said for taking a cool look at Wilson's alternative i.e. creating wider options in the situation but without going so far as to break with Heath. Consideration of this involves consideration of the kind of options we would wish to see opened up. Bearing in mind that a basic problem in dealing with Unionism is their conviction that it is in their interest to remain British at all costs the process of weakening this conviction is the most important contribution that we could hope to get from Mr. Wilson. An obvious manner of trying to obtain it is to draw to his attention the Taoiseach's statement in his speech of July 11th, 1971 which asks Britain to state her interest in Irish unity, by agreement, as a respectable and politically desirable goal. This Irish unity, of course, would be in independence and would include, as a matter of course, a special but unformalised relationship between Britain and Ireland. The attempt to formalise the Anglo-Irish relationship in the past, as the Taoiseach has pointed out, has been the cause of much distress; if we now have a common future in Europe that by itself is a sufficient formalisation for the future of Anglo-Irish relations as well.

Unionism is also bound together by the fact of its monopoly of authority in the North. This is a second thing that needs to be broken. John Hume is particularly clear on this subject and the SDLP are adamant about it. Wilson should, therefore, be invited to support the idea of bi-polar government. It is worth noting that the NILP are in favour of what they call Community Government and a few days ago Mr. Brian Walker of the New Ulster Movement indicated his support of the idea that people advocating Irish unity, to be achieved by peaceful means, are entitled to take part in government in the North. Support for the idea by the British Labour Party would make it ineluctable sooner rather than later.

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We have long held that it is not possible for elected representatives of the non-unionist community to take part in government in the North if the accusation could successfully be laid against them that in doing so they are assisting in the perpetuation of partition. A way to solve this problem would be to create an all-Ireland link. Mr. Wilson has himself talked about a Council of Ireland, as has Mr. James Callaghan. We have considered privately the idea of an inter-governmental council, rather than a parliamentary one at this stage, which would have real authority in relation to economic, social and cultural harmonisation. Perhaps the idea could be discussed with Mr. Wilson and his interest in it obtained.

Mr. Wilson considers the Downing Street Declaration to have been a major personal contribution by him in the circumstances of that time. It is now generally regarded by the British Labour Party as played out. The Declaration and the interview on BBC given immediately afterwards by Mr. Wilson laid the groundwork, however, for the elimination of the B-Specials. I understand that Mr. Wilson is quite conscious of the fact that taking away the private army of the unionist state will be seen in a historic context as the beginning of the ending of a Unionist Northern Ireland. He is believed to be aware that possession of a private army by Rhodesia is what wrecked his Rhodesian policy. Bearing this in mind the Taoiseach might wish to make suitable remarks to him about what he accomplished in relation to removing the B-Specials and on the vital importance of seeing to it that they are not brought back in any shape or fashion e.g. a future transfer of the UDR to Stormont control or by the elaboration of an armed RUC Reserve.

This would enable the Taoiseach to go on to the ground that a permanent unionist government in the North is now meaningless as it cannot assert its authority through its own means. At present it is sustained solely by the British Army and the other supports given to it by the British Government. As it would be an incredible blunder, of enormous historic proportions, and would guarantee a war condition in Ireland sooner or later to restore their private army to unionism, Britain is now required to maintain single-minded unionist Government via the British Army. This is obviously an ineffective position, as current conditions in the North show, and there is no use in pretending that it can go on for very long even if ^{it} were a military victory over the Provisional IRA in the near future. Sizeable areas and sizeable populations of the North - Catholic ghetto areas, border areas and some interior towns like Coalisland - are virtually unvisited by security forces except in the course of military activities. That sort of situation will continue indefinitely and cannot be corrected by an army. The writ of Stormont cannot be made to run by the RUC. Nor can it be made to run by any other administrative process so long as the minority refuse their consent to be governed by a solely unionist setup.

The logical consequences, therefore, of Mr. Wilson's decision to take away the unionist private army is to take away the unionist government as well. This issue cannot be shirked. We ourselves detect a number of reasons why Mr. Heath's government refuses to face up to the issue. The most obvious one is the alleged fear of a Protestant backlash. We do not know whether the backlash is a myth or a reality. We ourselves tend to discount its size because of analyses we have made and in which we have some confidence. But even if it is a serious reality it has had the effect of paralysing British policy in relation

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to Ireland for far too long already. It cannot be allowed to go on doing so. If policy is related at all times to the threat of a backlash no useful policy at all can ever emerge.

Another reason for lack of political activity by Mr. Heath's Government is more likely to be fear of the Tory right-wing which it seems that Mr. Heath cannot afford to antagonise on the North as it is also opposed to his EEC policies. This seems to us a more likely reason than the threat of the Protestant backlash for the lack of decision or direction in current British policy in the North. Nevertheless, we doubt very much that Mr. Heath can maintain a "do nothing" policy very much longer. He is, of course, being egged into a policy of massive military repression by some elements among the Tory backbenchers as well as the Unionists and some elements in the British Press, led by the Daily Telegraph. He is hardly likely to be so foolish as to yield to this but does not seem to realise that he is being inexorably driven into a situation where, by giving unreserved support to Mr. Faulkner, he is merely becoming Mr. Faulkner's tool. This would be a dismal contribution not merely to Anglo-Irish relations but also to European fraternal relations as the same problems would continue to recur probably at more frequent intervals and with greater intensity.

It is also possible that Heath, Maudling and Carrington think, or thought, that they could take out the IRA and "free" the minority from IRA influences. Experience to date shows that such thinking is imbecilic. Even if they do succeed in taking out the IRA they will find a 40% minority of the Northern population which will still refuse to deal with a unionist government. And they are likely also to find a majority, or will be told that there is one, that refuse to make any concessions to a defeated minority. In these circumstances the British Government will still have to decide the question they continue to evade - will they enforce their authority on the majority or will they yield it again. The latter is highly likely however much it might be denied. Consequently, by no stretch of imagination can their present policy lead to the implementation in a meaningful way of the Downing Street Declaration, to which the Tories are now also committed, or to the implementation of an active, permanent and guaranteed role for the minority in public affairs in Northern Ireland - the Maudling/Heath formula.

All these considerations lead to the same conclusion i.e. that Stormont must be suspended. A solution will have to be arrived at, so far as the internal administration of the North is concerned in an interim period, by the minority and the majority talking to each other. They will not, of course, reach a solution but at least they should be able to identify what the basic problems are. A solution of these must then be imposed. It is clear that so long as there is a unionist government, which is enabled to carry out internment without trial of their opponents on the other side, brutalise the minority population generally and use all the instruments of government against them, their role will be to prevent the achievement of a situation which diminishes these powers in a significant way. It is a waste of time, therefore, to ask the SDLP to enter into discussions in the present situation. They would lose their authority and influence if they did so; and they know

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in their hearts that they would gain nothing either. Only when unionism is reduced to being an equal partner with the minority in discussions will it become realistic about its position.

The question of Irish unity cannot be evaded either. The minority have a definite aspiration in that direction and nothing has eradicated it at any time in the past 50 years. Their leadership must respond to this. Their leaders cannot enter an administration designed to maintain the division of Ireland in perpetuity. Consequently in settling the terms of a future bi-polar administration of the North we must also open the door to Irish unity. Mr. Wilson has himself referred to the desirability of creating a Council of Ireland. This idea was contained of course in the Government of Ireland Act 1920. If it is to be revived now it must be done in a manner agreed essentially between the Dublin and London Governments. Its functions should be to harmonise economic, social, cultural, and all other matters between North and South that may have grown apart since 1921. These are its functions. Its objective, however, - whether stated or not - must be to prepare for the transfer of sovereignty in the North from London to an all-Ireland Parliament in progressive steps.

There are many other things on which Unionists will have to be satisfied and we recognise this. We are quite prepared to discuss them and to come to agreement on them. There are many disparities, economic and other, which exist at the moment and which we are also prepared to discuss with Britain in a serious and meaningful way. We would wish to see Mr. Wilson endorse this kind of policy.

To summarise it would seem to me that the objective of discussion with Mr. Wilson would be to persuade him of something like the following:

- 1) that Stormont should now be suspended;
- 2) that internment without trial should end;
- 3) that a new form of interim administration be created for the North principally by equal discussion between unionist and non-unionist leaders but with London and Dublin both involved;
- 4) that a Council of Ireland be created between the Irish Government and the new Stormont administration which has specific functions and an understood objective;
- 5) that the economic and similar disparities between North and South should be negotiated simultaneously with the working out of the Council of Ireland; and
- 6) that there be negotiation of unionist demands in the context of an independent Irish state.

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