

BACKBENCHER'S DILEMMA

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Contents

	Introduction	1
One	The Sixty-Nine Rebels	3
Two	Motivation	18
Three	The Red-Brick Revolution at Westminster	34
Four	A New Boy in the Palace of Westminster	41
Five	Short-lived Promotion – Industrial Relations Conflict	56
Six	The Constituency Party and the M.P. Government by Delegate Representation or Referendum?	70
Seven	The Member's Positive Role	89
Eight	M.P. in Athens	110
Nine	The Changing Face of Westminster	128
Ten	Political and Structural Development	140
Eleven	The Fringe, the Fight, the Frustration	159
Twelve	The Northern Ireland Fiasco	178
Thirteen	Enough is Enough	186
	Appendix	194

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Northern Ireland Fiasco

On no topic were my fears more well-founded and my frustrations at being ignored more justified than on Northern Ireland. How I became so involved and why I am now the author of two books on Irish history, one written with Patrick Quinliven (who unlike me is of Irish descent), all resulted originally from a talk on civil liberties to an Irish group in Manchester, in 1962. What I learned there made me resolve to visit the province and when I was asked about Northern Ireland at the 1964 Election I gave a solemn undertaking to do so. A year later I was to found the Campaign of Democracy in Ulster, largely inspired by the Dungannon-based Campaign for Social Justice led by Dr. and Mrs. McCluskey who attended our first meeting at the House of Commons. My principal Parliamentary ally at that time was Stan Orme, my neighbour from Salford who later became a Junior Minister for the province.

A number of M.P.s gradually came to our side, such as Liverpool members Eric Ogden and Eric Heffer, and old campaigners like Lord Brockway and Hugh Delargy. A groundswell of support grew as we achieved the distinction of having a hundred sponsors from both Houses. The Secretary, Paddy Byrne, was always a tower of strength and while many Catholic Members were pleased at our actions, the campaign was led most vocally by non-Catholics within the House. One irritant was the factor of the tiny Labour majority which would have been trebled but for the Ulster

The Northern Ireland Fiasco

Unionists who at that time were an integral part of the Conservative Party.

Our main problem was to penetrate the blank wall of incomprehension and ignorance about Ulster. Members who knew about Saigon or Salisbury seemed to know nothing of Stormont. Others were worried at the delicate problem of religious controversy in their own Constituencies, as the Chief Whip Ted Short told me. Even Roy Jenkins, with his sense of history, accepted that Ireland had been the political graveyard of many a politician. The fact was, there was a Parliamentary convention, erected into holy writ by Speaker after Speaker, that prevented us raising matters of real substance on the floor of the House without being ruled out of order. It prompted Hugh Delargy M.P. to ask whether we could discuss anything besides Harland and Wolff.

When I entered Parliament in 1964 the stirring of the civil rights movement was still below the surface of Northern Ireland politics. Nearly fifteen years and many deaths and maimings later, Westminster was involved in a shabby little deal to give more representation to Northern Ireland in exchange for Unionist votes to keep Jim Callaghan at Number 10. The Irish question has been tossed about by British politicians so cynically that one wonders at the restraint of leading Irish politicians over recent years.

The Northern Ireland issue was the first major cause I espoused following my election to Parliament; and it was on the latest Bill that I made my final speech before deciding to remove myself from the political scene. If ever there was a recurring theme, over nearly two hundred years of Parliamentary struggle, it has been the failure of successive governments to grasp the nettle of Ireland. To the average Englishman, Irishmen are good entertainers and sportsmen and literary figures, but they are often regarded patronizingly where politics are concerned. The sectarian bitterness in Northern Ireland is not seen as a legacy of past British policies but as evidence that Irishmen of whatever persuasion are congenitally unreasonable and should be left to knock hell out of one another.

The more sophisticated view, espoused by the bipartisan

policy of the Front Bench, is that an English presence is necessary for basically the same reason – to prevent such bloodletting. The paucity of initiatives, with the sole exception of the abortive attempt at power-sharing, reflects the fear of getting too involved. The truth, however, is that Ireland suffers from an English problem.

The first Home Secretary I encountered was Sir Frank Soskice. He was clearly out of his depth where Northern Ireland was concerned, but he and his successors could hide behind the conventions of the Government of Ireland Act. The new intake of Labour M.P.s, concerned at this denial of their ideals in their own backyard, tried again and again to raise the real issues. They reflected the new generation in Northern Ireland, now led by men like John Hume and Austin Currie, who are not prepared to knuckle under to the one-party rule of Unionism and the limited patronage of a discredited Nationalist Opposition. In that ferment the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland was the biggest single influence on responsive British M.P.s.

Expatriate Irishmen and the descendants of Irish immigrants have always played a significant role in the British Labour movement. Now they were joined and overtaken by M.P.'s and an increasingly aware rank-and-file, concerned at the grievances of the minority in Northern Ireland. It was in these circumstances that in 1965 I became Chairman of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster and earned myself accolades and death threats, devotion and loathing to such extreme degrees that I could never have conceived of before embarking on the battle.

The highlight of the Campaign for Democracy was a visit to Northern Ireland by Maurice Miller M.P., Stan Orme M.P. and myself in order to speak to leaders of the various political groups. Although only the opposition groups would meet us it was a remarkable tour. In some areas we were met by bands and led to the rostrum set up in the middle of the town like conquering heroes. Even the pubs closed. In Strabane virtually the whole town turned out at eleven at night, and television cameras were thrust upon us at one in the morning. Having been with Barbara Castle at Bristol the

The Northern Ireland Fiasco

previous day and snatched only a few hours sleep before leaving for Manchester Airport at 6 a.m., I then found myself invited to a party just over the border. It proved to be a long journey and an even longer return to our hotel. The owner was still at the Party. Driving was Austin Currie, later a Stormont M.P., and while I have frequently fallen asleep during other people's speeches, I fell asleep in mid-sentence while talking to him.

We were able to meet the Secretary of the Belfast Trades Council, Betty Sinclair, to discuss economic problems. We met a number of persons who came from various groups, from the Northern Ireland Labour Party to the Nationalists, who were commonly termed green Tories. The gathering we had at Derry, whose walls gave us a view of the future spawning ground of violence, was most significant. In effect, it was the embryo from which the Social Democratic and Labour Party was born. The irony of Derry was that by concentrating the Catholics in high rise flats in Bogside, the Unionist majority on the Council could be preserved. It also provided a bastion for violence when ultimately the explosion came.

That night the petrol bombs replaced submission to the provocation of the 'Apprentice Boys' march. I was in my own flat about to leave for a holiday the next day when John Hume rang me in tears to tell me of the eruption of violence. All our friend knew the danger of violence and wanted to see peaceful reforms. They accepted that peaceful reform was the object, not futile arguments about the border. That their pleas and our pressure at Westminster were ignored is another indictment of the inability of an insulated machine to act on time and act correctly or indeed to act at all.

That the Government was forewarned is shown by the contents of the report we made and presented to the Government following that visit.* (See Appendix) Our demand for some time had been a Royal Commission. The very setting up of a Commission would have shown that we were aware of the problem. Instead the Government allowed the traditional, highly provocative Apprentice Boys March to trigger off such opposition that there was the danger of the Ulster Police running riot in Bogside. In that context no one could

blame the Government, for the initial decision to send in troops. And all because they ignored our report.

A further frustration at this time was the blanket denial by men now regarded as Unionist moderates that anything was at all wrong in the six counties. When Alice Bacon was delegated the task of overseeing Northern Ireland affairs, I remember how Kevin McNamara, M.P. and I were horrified at the way in which she swallowed the bait of Terence O'Neill. It was thought then that the best policy was to back these 'moderate' men of the ascendancy, later rejected by the very masses they had misled under the blanket of the Union flag. They represented nobody but the Anglo-Irish dynasty.

When I proposed an Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, the Labour Government was at pains to explain that this could not be done. When Harold Wilson eventually announced the creation of such a post, it was too late. The whole story of 1964-70 was that by acting too late, the majority backlash was allowed to organize and arm itself and draw out of the shadows the gunmen of the Provisional I.R.A.

The refusal of Westminster to ban the flagrantly provocative Apprentice Boys March led to the commitment of British troops to an area where traditional hostility would inevitably override the initial relief with which their presence was greeted. The emergence of the gunmen in the wake of sectarian attacks followed.

The first mistake behind the sympathetic and constructive rhetoric of Harold Wilson was not to grasp the nettle in his first year of office. He said enough to alarm the majority but did insufficient to satisfy the minority. The gerrymandering discrimination and one-party political domination went on unabated. Not even the civil rights marches or violence in Derry or the emergence of such a remarkable phenomenon as Bernadette Devlin disturbed the complacency of politicians lulled into inactivity by the habits of half a century.

Jim Callaghan cut an unflappable and reasonable figure among the crowds in Belfast and left office before blotting his copybook. Willie Whitelaw exuded reasonableness and affability, but the toll in death and destruction increased. Whatever the procrastination and faults of the 1964-70 era, the

The Northern Ireland Fiasco

gravest mistake ever committed was the Conservative decision on internment. That was the equivalent of a recruiting sergeant for the I.R.A.

Merlyn Rees' failure of nerve over the first Ulster workers' strike was not mirrored by Roy Mason, but while Northern Ireland now has no Stormont and no Assembly, it does have a Minister. His role is to prevent the breakdown of administration and uphold the domination of the army. Not a single political initiative has emerged in the wake of Tory failures. Airey Neave, to be viciously assassinated, wooed Unionists while Enoch Powell put his faith in the permanence of the Union direct rule and supported Labour in power.

Meanwhile, beneath the surface, more and more Ulstermen are seeing themselves trapped in the triangle, neither relishing domination from Dublin or witlessness from Westminster. Tough talk from Roy Mason earned him the title of Napoleon. In fact, like his predecessors, his period of stewardship was unproductive. It institutionalized inactivity. If Unionists of the Reverend Ian Paisley's ilk will not accept power-sharing in Northern Ireland, why should they be given increased power at Westminster?

Only acute insensitivity can excuse a Bill which emphasized the integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom. At a time when devolution was being preached from Aberdeen to Aberdeen, the opposite was being proposed for the only part of the United Kingdom which has a historical connection and geographical unity with another nation state.

If one positive and hopeful development has emerged from the successive miscalculations, mistakes and inaction by British Governments it is the beginning of new attitudes among a significant number of Ulstermen. They realize that, whatever their traditional loyalties, they are part of the same community. They have a common interest and exist within a wider economic community to which both Britain and Ireland belong.

If there is to be a new initiative it must have an Irish dimension without causing Unionists a sense of betrayal. It must involve all sections of the community in its institutions while recognizing that historical allegiances and cultural dif-

Backbencher's Dilemma

ferences can exist without accusations of treason and subversion. Within the wider European context and increasing regionalism the old dividing lines may begin to blur at the edges.

To emphasize the Westminster link while taking no initiative to create viable institutions within Ulster that are acceptable to the minority is a recipe for continued bloodshed. Since 1964 successive Ministers seem to have learned nothing and achieved nothing. To make it worse, principle has now been sacrificed on the altar of expediency. No long term strategy exists. The troops remain and the killings continue. The problem is more intractable than in 1964 when decisive action to destroy the tyranny of an entrenched majority might have forestalled the backlash. The bankruptcy of all sides of the House is reflected in a Bill to add a few paltry seats in Westminster to Northern Ireland. The futility of years of action by a few concerned M.P.s is reflected in the small numbers willing to challenge this latest in a line of errors. If they cannot understand the symbolism of the move they will never understand the reality in an area where symbols can be more vital than reality itself.

I may have failed in Parliament to move Ministers but I shall always treasure one letter I received from Mrs. Patricia McCluskey of the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Fiasco

Paul Rose, Esq., M.P.,
House of Commons,
Westminster,
London, S.W.1.

30 March 1973

Dear Mr. Rose,

On behalf of every member of our Committee I want to offer you our warmest thanks for all you have done for us, in the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster.

Your name will always be cherished by Irish people.

Sincerely Yours,

Mrs. P. McCluskey
For the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland.

Appendix

During the 14th, 15th and 16th April, 1967 three Labour Members of Parliament, Dr. Maurice Miller, (Glasgow Kelvingrove), Mr. Stanley Orme, (Salford West) and Mr. Paul Rose, (M/c. Blackley), visited Northern Ireland at the personal invitation of Mr. Gerard Fitt, M.P. Their objectives were to investigate the position in Northern Ireland with regard to discrimination, electoral law and practice, and the general economic situation. A further objective was to inform a wide spectrum of citizens of Northern Ireland of the activities at Westminster of Labour Members interested in Northern Ireland affairs.

They visited Belfast, Coalisland, Dungannon, Strabane and Derry. In Belfast, they met the executive of the Northern

Appendix

Ireland Labour Party, senior shop stewards from Short Bros. and Harland, and the officers of the Belfast Trades Council. They also held a well-attended Press Conference, and gave television and radio interviews.

In Coalisland, they addressed a large public meeting, together with Mr. Fitt, of over a thousand people. The meeting was chaired by the Nationalist Northern Ireland M.P., Mr. Austin Currie. In Dungannon, they met local Independent Councillors, and Dr. and Mrs. McCluskey of the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland. Another public meeting at Strabane was attended by nearly two thousand people. This was followed by personal talks with a widely representative section of the community.

On the Sunday they were met by leading representatives of opposition groups, including Liberal, Labour Rep. Labour, Nat. Democratic Party, and leading independent figures from the city of Derry.

The party visited Derry, where aspects of housing and gerrymandering were examined and discussed. They met and exchanged views with the Derry Labour Party. Later in the afternoon, they had a short meeting, chaired by John Hume, and attended by two hundred representatives of all the aforementioned parties, and one Unionist. The Unionist Party officially refused to attend.

Impressions and Conclusions

1. *The visit* evoked a warm response and intense interest in a large section of the people of Northern Ireland.
2. *Allegations* of discrimination in housing allocations were examined. There can be little doubt that this exists on a wide scale, particularly where a dispersal of the population would result in a changed political balance as, for example, in Derry.
3. *Discrimination* on political and religious grounds is alleged and substantiated by figures previously provided by the Northern Ireland Labour Party, and other sources, and con-

firmed by all those with whom this was discussed. This applies in relation to Government appointments, for example, in the legal profession, in local government, and in sections of industry. In the legal profession, for instance, there are only eleven Catholics holding judicial offices out of a total of 142. In many public bodies, Catholic, Labour and Trade Union representatives are excluded.

4. *In Derry* there is irrefutable evidence of gerrymandering in order to perpetuate minority control, and it is feared that proposed boundary changes may perpetuate this in another form. At present, the Corporation has eight Nationalist members with a 63 per cent majority of the population, whereas the Unionists have twelve representatives with a 37 per cent minority, and therefore control the city.

5. *The electoral* franchise which excludes 250,000 voters from local government elections, and allows business and company votes (up to six) is an anomaly in the U.K.

6. *Electoral malpractices* were alleged by many, including contestants at previous elections. One practice alleged was that postal votes were forged so as to prevent anti-Unionists voting at election time. Another was that polling booths were deliberately situated in Unionist areas to intimidate non-Unionist voters. (The inflammatory nature of some propaganda, e.g. *Protestant Telegraph*, demonstrates how near the surface violence lies in current political life.) Personation is alleged to be widespread.

7. *Unemployment* varies between under two and over thirty percent in various areas. Catholic areas, and more particularly the areas west of the Bann, e.g. Derry and Strabane, are affected most. Urgent help is needed for areas like Strabane where 29½ per cent of the male population is unemployed. There are also pockets like Newry within the more prosperous areas.

8. *Short Bros. and Harland* presents a particular problem. The firm is a modern aircraft firm which is also greatly diversified, but its main product is aircraft. The firm has 65 per cent of public money invested in it. It has the most modern plant and machinery, and its technical and apprentice training is of the first calibre. This produces a technological fall-out vital

Impressions and Conclusions

for British industry. A firm decision should not be taken to obtain suitable long-term aircraft work, and following the Plowden Report, this firm should be brought under full public ownership and developed as a modern science-based industry.

9. *Neglect* of the area west of the Bann is evident. The siting of the University and the New Town, and the run down of industry contribute to a situation where little development is taking place. It is widely considered that the Government of Northern Ireland's decision in favour of the New Town of Craigavon rejected the revitalization of Derry because of political motives. Derry, with its sea port and airport, could be made a new growth centre, acting as a magnet to draw industry and population to the west. On current trends, development will be one-sided, and restricted to the Colrairie triangle.

10. *Small meat* farmers are experiencing difficulties since the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement.

11. *Grants* and loans such as those foreshadowed in the Green Paper on Development Areas, and the Budget proposal to make available £50 million from the Public Works Loans Board (which includes housing development) are welcome, but must be applied in such a manner that there be no discrimination in the application of such sums for development.

12. *Unionist* reaction to the visit was hostile and provocative. The party was described as 'anti-Ulster', and 'interfering and unwelcome'. The Unionists refused to meet the members of the party, although invited to meet them on both the Saturday and Sunday. The pretext that they could not meet on a Sunday was a political manoeuvre intended to raise the sectarian issue and discredit the party in the eyes of devout Protestants. It ignored the fact that they could have met the party on the Saturday, and that all but the Unionists attended the meeting in Derry.

13. *There was* a ready response at all the meetings to the simple statement of principle that the Members of Parliament demanded the same rights and privileges for Northern Ireland as in their own constituencies as an integral part of the United Kingdom. A policy which respects the right of Irishmen un-

Backbencher's Dilemma

timately to decide their constitutional status for themselves, but recognizes Westminster's overriding obligation to ensure democratic government in the province is one which would commend itself to large sections of people, both Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland.

It is therefore considered that the Government should set up a Royal Commission to investigate the operation of the Government of Ireland, and the Ireland Acts.