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The way forward for Northern Ireland

BY JOHN HUME, M.P.

A GREAT DEAL of criticism has been levelled at the attitude of the elected representatives of the Social Democratic and Labour Party for the stand they have taken in relation to withdrawal from the Northern Ireland Parliament and their attitude to non-participation in talks about solutions while internment lasts. In fact, a detailed examination of our policy will reveal that it is the only honest approach to solving the present situation in Northern Ireland.

Our policy, which includes withdrawal of elected representatives at local level and civil disobedience of the mass of the people is designed to produce a complete withdrawal of consent from the system of government in Northern Ireland. This withdrawal has been formally institutionalised by the attendance of withdrawn representatives at an alternative assembly. We believe that any detailed examination of the Northern Ireland problem will reveal that all our problems stem from the system of government itself and that the first step towards any solution must be the end of it.

We are prepared to accept in the short term the charges of creating polarisation, in order to remove the real roots of sectarian discord, with all its consequent evils—the system of government created by the Government of Ireland Act 1920.

Age-old problem

When George V spoke at the opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament exactly 50 years ago, he hoped that the settlement that had then been agreed and the system of government that he came to initiate would bring to an end "the age-old Irish problem, which weighs heavily upon us, as it did upon our forefathers". Today, the age-old Irish problem is 50 years older, is still weighing heavily on the shoulders of British statesmen, and the system of government set up 50 years ago is seen to have been an utter failure.

There is no greater evidence of the failure of the system than the barbed wire barricades and lines of British soldiers that separate citizen from citizen on the streets of Belfast. The polarisation of the community is as great, if not greater, than it was then. Yet, in spite of the evidence of the polarisation and of the mounting death

toll, there does not yet appear to be a full realisation at Westminster that the first step towards a real solution is the acceptance of the failure of the system and of the need to abolish it.

On reflection, its failure was inevitable. The very nature of the Northern Ireland State and the manner of its creation made it so. When the British Parliament, then fully representative of the British and Irish people, decided at the beginning of this century to grant home rule to Ireland under a Dublin parliament, the Ulster Unionists, with the help of the Conservative Party of the day, decided to defy that democratic decision and to take up arms to prevent its implementation.

Their leader, Sir Edward Carson, said in September, 1912: "In the event of this proposed parliament being thrust upon us, we solemnly and mutually pledge ourselves not to recognise its authority. I do not care twopence if it is treason or not". "We will set up a government", he said. "I am told it will be illegal. Of course it will. The volunteers are illegal and the Government knows they are illegal, and the Government does not interfere with them. Don't be afraid of illegalities".

Doomed to failure

The British Government of the day bowed to the threat, and Northern Ireland was set up, based on illegality and treason. As such, it was doomed to failure, for it had within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The rule of law had been broken, but the Ulster Unionists and their Conservative friends. It has never obtained in Ireland since, and from that initial infringement has derived the violence and counter-violence that has periodically scarred the face of modern Ireland.

A State set up on such flimsy and illegal foundations had really little chance of surviving. Democracy had no chance of flourishing in a body politic born of such fundamentally anti-democratic action. In addition, the boundaries of the State were so drawn as to provide a permanent majority for Protestant ascendancy, and the Ulster Volunteers were "legalised" into the B Specials, a guarantee of the continuation of the Right-wing threat which is the basic source of Unionist power. Against such a background, to talk, as present-day Unionists do, of democracy in terms of majority will, is nonsense.

In such a situation, the Westminster Parliamentary system cannot work either, for its very essence is a balanced two-party system, which produces a regular change of government. In Northern Ireland, it produces, as it was designed to do, a permanent one-party State based on sectarian division and which permanently alienates from power and decision-making the permanent minority.

Within such a system, normal non-sectarian politics are impossible. The only honest non-sectarian course of political action is to break the system. In giving to Northern Ireland in 1920 a parliament based on the Westminster model, the British Parliament was only strengthening its original error and creating a situation which could only be maintained by repression and injustices, and which gave rise to permanent instability.

Normal standards

In addition, terms like "Government," "Parliament," "Prime Minister" and "Minister," in relation to the Northern Ireland system, served only to cloud a clear understanding of the nature of Northern Ireland, for it is not and never has been a sovereign State. It is but a local administrative unit within the United Kingdom, and if it is to be maintained as such there is neither justification nor necessity for pretending that control of power should be subject to the normal standards of a sovereign parliamentary democracy.

The standards of a subordinate regional council would be much more accurate and much more applicable, and there is no reason whatsoever why it should not be administered by the community as a whole. This argument is heavily underlined by the fact that the "laws" passed at Stormont are largely an exact replica of those already passed through the Westminster Parliament, and we have had the repeated spectacle of a Tory Unionist "Government" putting through Stormont the Socialist legislation of a British Labour Government without batting an eyelid.

There is one area of significant exception — the field of law and order. It is not without some significance that this is the field which has caused most embarrassment to Britain. It is equally significant that the only other part of the former British colonial empire in addition to Northern Ireland that was allowed to retain its own private army was Rhodesia. Hence the importance of

the demand for a third force or the revival of the B Specials — again evidence of the real source of Unionist power — the threat of armed resistance lest the British Parliament should ever democratically decide to take decisions contrary to the will of Northern Ireland's "democratic and loyalist majority."

It is Unionist power and privilege inextricably bound up with the whole system of government in Northern Ireland that the British Army is defending today. To understand why the Army has come into conflict with the Catholic community one need look no further. Yet this is a complete reversal of the role which the Army came to fulfil. When the British Army arrived in Northern Ireland in August, 1969, they came not only because of the failure of the forces of law and order within Northern Ireland itself to protect Catholic areas, but also because those same forces were in the van of the physical attack on places like the Falls road. Five hundred Catholic families had been burned out of their homes and more people had lost their lives. Yet, today, the British Army finds itself acting as the agents of the political party and the system whose excesses brought about their intervention in the first instance.

Catholic hostility

In that context, it is not difficult to understand Catholic hostility to the British Army. It is this hostility, particularly universal in the ghetto areas, which makes it possible for the I.R.A. to operate. Add to this the fact that it is the Army which has to carry out intensive searches of Catholic homes and areas, and which had to carry out the internment operation in spite of the advice of their leaders against its introduction.

In the two months since imprisonment without trial was introduced, 88 people have met violent deaths in Northern Ireland. In the preceding 10 months, the figure was 28. Disastrous is the only valid description of the present policies and the bitterness is intense and increasing in Catholic areas which have been the victims of this policy and which initially regarded the British Army as liberators from Unionist misrule.

There can be no solution through a continuation of such policy. It will only harden Catholic opinion even further to a point where the emotional fellow feeling of

Southern Irishmen will spill over into their total involvement as well.

British policy in Ireland today is dictated, as it has been since 1912, by the threat of the Right-wing Unionist. It was this threat that created the Northern Ireland State in 1912 and that first introduced the gun into modern Irish politics after an absence of 50 years. It was these same forces that have held the Northern Ireland State by and through injustice ever since under their slogans of "no surrender" and "not an inch." It was these forces that resisted with contempt all the parliamentary and Constitutional attempts at achieving simple social justice, finally driving people onto the streets in October, 1968. It was these forces that met the Civil Rights Movement with violence in Derry, Burntollet, Armagh and elsewhere. It was the violent pogroms of these forces against the people of the Falls that brought the British Army into Northern Ireland and created the Provisional I.R.A. It was these forces that have brought down O'Neill and Chichester-Clark, and which are still resisting change and making any reality of reform under the present system a nonsense.

Real solution

There can be no real solution till the British Government face up squarely to this threat. The remarkable thing is that every possible way has been tried to bring Northern Ireland into the 20th century except this, for when the power of the threat is broken the solution to the Irish Question will be remarkably easy.

The threat of a Right-wing backlash has been the major factor in Unionist policy and their main source of power ever since 1912. They have used it to slow the pace of reform. They are using it again today. Their power was considerably weakened by the removal of the B Specials. Hence the demand for a third force.

The British Government should face up to it in the knowledge that the 1912 situation no longer obtains. Today, there is no Kaiser, no Carson or no Curragh. Neither is there any sympathy anywhere in the world, except perhaps in Rhodesia and South Africa, for the Unionist position. There will be no permanent peace in Ireland until that threat has been faced and its power broken, and to do so is a lot less painful way of solving the Irish problem than the policies of the past or present.

To do so does not require mili-

tary action, but political action. The action that is necessary is the abolition of the system of government to which the threat gave birth and which has since been the underlying cause of so much suffering and death in Ireland. To do so will free all Irish people, both Catholic and Protestant, from the burdens and tensions which the present situation imposes upon them. While it remains, sectarianism will be the major force in Northern Irish politics, since the system of government was designed to give permanent power to one section of the Northern Irish people, based on sectarian domination.

Protestant fears

The stated purpose for the creation and maintenance of this system of government has been Protestant fears of a united Ireland. The price of assuaging these fears seems to far outweigh their reality. The remarkable fact is that, in spite of the enormous price that is being paid by Britain and by the people of Northern Ireland for the assuaging of these fears, they don't seem to have ever been subjected to any serious examination. They should be examined now as part of the entire review of the whole Irish problem that is taking place in Whitehall. The Unionists should be asked to list their objections to a United Ireland. Such objections could be much more easily met than the objections to Northern Ireland.

Most Unionists will admit to the inevitability of a united country. Even Lord Craigavon said in 1938: "In this island we cannot always live separate from one another. We are too small to be apart or for the Border to be there for all time. The change will not come in my time, but it will come." The change should come by agreement, for the only worthwhile unity is unity by agreement. The search for the agreement should begin now. There is little point in evading any further the inevitability on which all are agreed.

The British Government should declare publicly what is the private conviction of all British parties, that Irish unity is inevitable and that it will take all steps necessary to encourage the agreement that will bring it about. With the prospect of European entry and the development of common social and agricultural policies, and the removal of economic frontiers, the difference in living standards will

be erased. In any case, Britain would find little difficulty in guaranteeing present Northern social and welfare standards till equalisation comes about.

The biggest stumbling block would be the old one—the fear of Rome Rule. This need not be one at all, for most Irishmen today would have little difficulty and indeed would be determined that a Constitution of a united Ireland would be a pluralist one and would protect the right of all sections of the Irish people. Such a country could well be dominated by the Northern Protestant, for their qualities would undoubtedly strengthen and flourish, freed from the defensive mentality imposed upon them by the present situation. Churchill put it better in 1912: "It would be a great disaster to Ireland if the Protestant population in the North stood aloof from a national Parliament . . . No man can measure in words, or can tell, the blessing that Ulstermen have in their power to bestow on their fellow countrymen, or the benefits they would confer on the State, or the fame and honour they would reap themselves if they would lead a united Ireland home." He was right then, and history has proved it. He is right now.

First step

The British Government and Parliament should not fear to set in motion the movement towards the inevitable. If they break the power of the Right-wing threat, then such movement presents little or no difficulty. The first and essential step, whatever the agreed solution to emerge from the present situation, must be the abolition of the present system of government.

Carson said in 1912: "The Attorney-General has been giving me a lecture. He says that the course of action that I am taking will lead to anarchy. Does he think that I do not know that?" There is no one who surveys the streets of Northern Ireland today who could question that that is precisely where it did lead. Carson lived to reflect on his mistakes. He said in 1921: "I was in earnest, I was not playing politics. I believed all this. I was only a puppet, and so was Ulster and so was Ireland in the political game that was to get the Conservative Party into power." The victims of that game were the people of Northern Ireland, then and since. Is there a British statesman today with the courage to set the record straight?