

The Irish Question: a British Problem

Sean Lemass Commemorative Lecture

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6 March, 1985
Embargo 8 p.m.

Sean Lemass cared little about history. Resolutely, unceremoniously and relentlessly, he faced the modern Irish State into the future, tearing it from the suffocating embrace of that historical obsession which Joyce had so plaintively described as the nightmare from which he was trying to awake. Lemass succeeded with a whole people where Joyce conceded defeat in his own case. Lemass cared even less about his own place in history. An enemy of the solemn and the rhetorical, he was supremely a man of action, of practical and rigorous action, perfectly content to let future generations judge him not by what he said but on the record of his deeds.

It is right that he should be commemorated by these Sean Lemass Commemorative Lectures at Exeter and I deem it an honour to be asked to contribute to the series. There is an old expression in the Irish language used to honour the dead: "Cloch a chur lena chairn chuimhne": to add a stone to the grave mound of his remembrance. As I add my small pebble to his high and accumulating cairn, I suspect that Lemass himself would wish his monument to be incarnated first and foremost in a dynamic, prosperous, peaceful and stable Ireland living in cooperative harmony with Britain. In that sense his epitaph, like Emmet's in his day, remains to be written. We all have much to learn from him, as the British and Irish Governments and peoples are confronted today with a crisis in Northern Ireland which in Lemass' lifetime would have been unimaginable in its scale, its horror and its apparent intractability.

The lesson of Sean Lemass' life to each of the protagonists of today's misery is simple and compelling: we must each refuse to be the prisoner of our own or anyone else's history. Speaking on Northern Ireland in August 1961, he summed up his feelings with characteristic directness: "I do not believe that any body of reasonable people can be kept inarticulate for ever by the repetition of out-of-date slogans". If together and severally, Margaret Thatcher, Garret FitzGerald, Charles Haughey, Dick Spring, Jim Molyneaux, Ian Paisley and John Hume,

- 2 -

could meditate on the wisdom of that insight and live up to its implications, the way forward for all of us would be clear and irresistible.

As it is, we have until recently for the most part allowed ourselves to be paralysed by competing and irreconcilable out-of-date slogans. I have heard speeches in the House of Commons in language that was used by British Tories in 1912 and abandoned by them, or so it was believed, in 1920. The terms of most unionist orators remain frozen in 1690 - "what we have we hold", "not an inch" - excluding from the minds of their listeners any possibility of generosity or imagination. Nor are nationalists immune from introspective self-incarceration. Yeats, somewhat absurdly and with an offensive arrogance, once asked:

"Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?"

The slaughter of Northern Ireland Protestants and Catholics by the Provisional IRA in recent weeks was caused primarily not by the explosives, bullets and mortars of Derry, Armagh, Pomeroy, Newry and Enniskillen, but by the repetition of out-of-date slogans. In this case, "words alone are certain bad", to paraphrase the poet. But for those words, those slogans, no quantity of gelignite, no arsenal of rocket launchers or armalites, would have killed a single one of those victims.

Lemass was not afraid to jettison out-of-date slogans, however precious they might once have been, or to face up to the uncongenial realities of his day. In negotiating the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement and in pushing the modern Irish State towards full membership of the European Communities, Lemass was blaspheming in the eyes of the sloganeers of his own tradition: he was dishonouring, they would say, the Sinn Fein dead who had fought and died for, among other causes, economic self-sufficiency behind a Berlin

- 3 -

tariff-wall. What his detractors failed to understand was that he was fighting for real self-sufficiency grounded, not in protectionism, but in the self-confidence of bracing competition. In 1963, on his return from Belfast as the first Head of an Irish Government to talk to the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland for many years, he was asked by his aides for a comment for the morning press: "Tell them things will never be the same again" he said with relish.

Lemass tried manfully to improve Anglo-Irish relations, the most intricate and the most complex relationship that exists between any two countries today. His efforts were mainly in the economic sphere and they yielded lasting advantage to both sides. It is all the more depressing today to see British Ministers, including the Prime Minister, hung up on out-of-date symbols and slogans in their approach to the great crisis of Northern Ireland. Instead of seeking a genuine solution in its own right, they are hung up on narrow and unworkable conceptions of sovereignty and self-determination which they have rightly abandoned in many other areas of policy. Mrs. Thatcher thus dismisses the three options in the Forum Report because they would be inconsistent with those particular conceptions of sovereignty and self-determination, but she casts such notions to the winds when it comes to the control of US nuclear weapons in the heart of Great Britain itself, or when it comes to Gibraltar or Britain's obligations in NATO or the European Communities. By contrast the parties to the New Ireland Forum have laid down and accept no preconditions for accommodating the realities that we have identified. In rejecting our three options, Mrs. Thatcher put forward as a monumental precondition her own outdated notion of sovereignty

The Unionists for their part have been allowed by Mrs. Thatcher and her Government to evade the obligation to think, to look for solutions, or even to see the real world in front of their noses, by hunkering down behind their particular Berlin wall, the "guarantee". This, as it has hitherto operated, has been

- 4 -

a guarantee to one particular group of one million people that they alone would determine in every way and at every level their future and the future of over half a million others in Northern Ireland who disagree with them, without reference to the other fifty-four million people in Britain and the other three and a half million people in the island of Ireland. The only certainty that this arrangement now guarantees is permanent division, permanent crisis and, alas, a continuation of the present cycle of instability and violence. Let me be clear: it is not the fault of my unionist neighbours in Northern Ireland that they are blinkered and incapable of any objective assessment of the divided community that is ours: it was the British Government that first put on, and successive British Governments that since kept on, those blinkers and then, donning their own blinkers, persuaded themselves for two generations that the unionist horse did not really exist.

Neither of course did the nationalist jennet exist for either the British or the unionists. Obviously, the problem was and is that we did exist and that we do. By the time this rude discovery was made in the late sixties, a situation had been created and entrenched in Northern Ireland whereby nationalists had no confidence whatever in the capacity of either the British or the unionists to understand our situation or to accommodate our identity or our rights. Systems had been established in the political, security, judicial and economic domains in which our role and our situation were those of an inferior tribe. The feelings of resentment of nationalists at a comprehensive network of injustice are difficult to describe and very difficult for British people, who for centuries have not had the suffocating experience of tyrannical occupation, to understand. Various attempts since the sixties to tackle the crisis have either been inadequate and thereby made matters worse, or have foundered as happened when Harold Wilson surrendered to a political strike of loyalist workers in May 1974. Throughout the years the tendency in London has been to blame the two communities in Northern Ireland for their "tribal

- 5 -

warfare", as though Britain had little or no responsibility for the situation. Britain has and retains the most fundamental responsibility for the existence and continuation of the crisis and the inescapable obligation to resolve it.

Having said that, I repeat that the record of Irish nationalism is far from perfect. In some respects it has been very bad indeed and in the case of the men and women of violence it remains utterly destructive, self-defeating and shameful. On the 11 February 1958, Sean Lemass addressed those on the nationalist side of this issue who failed to face that the reality of division was among the people of Ireland and who preferred to see our problems as involving no more than the removal of an arbitrary line on a map:

"I would be appalled at the prospect for Ireland if an opportunity ever presented itself to us of bringing partition to an end by force, of compelling these people in the North who are now opposed to us against their will. This would lead to a very dangerous situation which would require us to continue to exert force, and to repress hostility in the North. It would mean the creation, virtually, of a police state in the North. This would, I think, be detrimental to both North and South and morally destructive".

Instead he proposed a positive and realistic policy:

"The problem of restoring national unity is, in essence, one of breaking down the barriers of suspicion, antagonism, prejudice and misunderstanding which now divide a minority in the north east from their fellow countrymen. Anything which tends to break or lower these barriers is good; anything which tends to raise or strengthen them is bad. I think it is as simple as that".

It is a pity that we have not always managed on our side of the

- 6 -

argument to live up to Lemass' standards.

The division of Ireland in 1920 was a great human tragedy which diminished the lives of generations of unionists and nationalists since then. On the nationalist side it has, as was inevitable, given rise to a tendency to introspection and to a concentration of emphasis on a narrower view of the nationalist heritage than the broad tradition of true Irish republicanism which had sought to accommodate both Irish traditions. The decision of 1920 raised and strengthened the barriers on both sides that Sean Lemass wanted to lower. On the nationalist side it ironically gave rise to the enduring misconception that, but for partition, there would have been a homogeneous nationalist, separatist Gaelic-speaking Ireland. In other words the formal act of partition obscured and distorted the reality of division among the people of Ireland which ante-dated partition and which it is our responsibility to confront and to accommodate.

Irish nationalism has, however, in the past year made a major and I believe irreversible breakthrough, creating an historic opportunity for all concerned: the British, the Unionists and ourselves. The New Ireland Forum was a remarkable enterprise. All four political parties which constituted the Forum - three of them in one way or another normally in competition - attempted to define the irreducible realities which constitute the basis of the problem of Northern Ireland today and, in doing so, managed in very difficult circumstances corporately to encompass the realism and the self-confidence of Sean Lemass. The result is the Framework for a New Ireland, the Realities and Requirements of Chapter 5 of the Forum Report, summed up by the Forum in the following formula:

"The solution to both the historic problem and the current crisis of Northern Ireland and the continuing problem of relations between Ireland and Britain necessarily requires new structures that will accommodate

- 7 -

together two sets of legitimate rights:

- the right of nationalists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity; and
- the right of unionists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life".

The Forum went on to call on the British Government to enter into discussions with the Irish Government to accommodate the Realities and meet the Requirements defined by the Forum.

The detailed definition of the Realities seen by the Forum as basic, constitutes a fundamental shift on the part of Irish nationalism, breaking the deadlock created over generations by the irreconcilable slogans of the competing protagonists. Thus, if they would but see it, the definition of the unionist identity and ethos, and the acceptance of the right of unionists to the accommodation of their identity and ethos, provide unionists with the first real reassurance of their rights and their future ever offered to them. John Hewitt, the distinguished northern poet, had stated a perennial anxiety on behalf of the entire unionist tradition:

"This is our country also, nowhere else;
and we shall not be outcast on the world".

The Forum has now said "yes" resoundingly to Hewitt's demand, on behalf of those who purportedly threaten the unionist interest, the nationalists of Ireland, and in a way which, unlike the so-called "guarantee", accepts and settles the question rather than making it perpetually uncertain and a source of endless deadlock.

I was profoundly struck, as I did a little reading in

- 8 -

preparation for this talk, by the extent to which Sean Lemass anticipated many of the positions of the Forum Report. The statements I have quoted from him match, I believe, the creative realism of the Forum. What has now been achieved is that those realistic and generous positions have been subscribed to by the entire body of Irish nationalist leadership. As Lemass would undoubtedly have said: "Things will never be the same again".

We, the nationalists of Ireland have presented our analysis. It is now a matter for the British Government and the Unionists to respond. As is known, talks have been taking place for several months between the two Governments. The Irish Government has made it clear that it is approaching these exchanges on the basis of the Forum Report. Despite the extremely insensitive remarks of Mrs. Thatcher after the Chequers Summit, it seems that some common ground may emerge between the two sides. In accepting the need for a new framework which would accommodate the unionist and the nationalist identities, Mrs. Thatcher has begun to approach the analysis of the Forum. What matters of course is the substantive nature of that framework and its constituent structures: that will be the test that Lemass himself would have applied and on which we must insist. As he would say, action is what is what is needed now.

I have tried to get young people in Northern Ireland to take Martin Luther King as a model in their struggle for justice and harmony through non-violent political action. His implacable courage in the face of tyranny and adversity, his vast humanity and his resolute opposition to all violence are the qualities we must call on in our own campaigns. What he said about violence in a divided society has the most direct application to our problems in Northern Ireland and could not be improved upon.

"Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is

- 9 -

a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of any eye for an eye leaves everyone blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers".

I would add the example of Sean Lemass to that of Martin Luther King. We are also in need of the wisdom of the practical, the patriotism of sweat rather than blood and the priceless gifts of humility and good humour which he so magnificently exemplified. I am convinced that, inspired by the record of his deeds, we will yet write for him in this generation the epitaph he would most earnestly have desired: a new Ireland in which the men and women of both traditions live and work harmoniously with each other, retaining their identities and enjoying their rights, and a new Anglo-Irish relationship in which our two countries for the first time cooperate on an agreed basis for the good of all our peoples.