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TALK TO PUBLICITY CLUB OF IRELAND - 30th MARCH, 1978

Some Points on Policy - Senator T.K. Whitaker

An invitation to address the Publicity Club of Ireland would, for some, be an invitation to be mischievous. But as I am not a politician, or an anti-politician, and have other occasions for mischief, I shall resist the temptation and use the occasion to make a few points in two of my special fields of interest - economic planning and Northern Ireland. I shall be quite selective, reserving more general comments for relevant debates in Seanad Eireann, whenever they may occur.

First, about economic planning. It is encouraging that there has been a return to planning, whatever Department may direct it. Planning represents the approach of reason and order as opposed to that of drift and social unrest. It is good that the plan is ambitious in seeking to make big strides towards full employment and courageous (to the point, perhaps, of being over-bold) in its use of financial stimuli. The White Paper is, of course, not beyond criticism nor can serious critics be fairly accused of undermining confidence. The White Paper is a political document, enjoying no infallibility. Its credibility - and, therefore, its claim on our support and confidence - is a function of the reliability of the assumptions underlying it and the Government's capacity to readjust its plans to changing and possibly less favourable circumstances. It is, in my view, unfortunate that only one set of projections - and that the most optimistic - has been put forward as the basis of Government policy and that even on this basis the threads have not been drawn through to ultimate success. Years from now, even if all the assumptions are realised, there will still be large budgetary and external deficits and the Government has not as yet advanced plausible grounds for expecting a convergence, over a reasonable term of years, towards a stable co-existence between full employment and a tolerable external payments position.

These loose-ends obviously must be tied up in the Green Paper and subsequent planning documents if the requisite substratum of confidence is to be firmly laid and the psychological factor - in my view, one of the most powerful factors of production - is to be effectively brought into play. The risks which are being taken - and risks must be taken - should be such as can be widely accepted as well-calculated risks. Failure to achieve ambitious targets can be dispiriting and disruptive of progress. Confidence comes from a conviction that the Government is in control of the evolution of events, or can at least intervene effectively to deal with setbacks and put the economy on course again; in other words, from a conviction that good management will prevail and that Government sees the way towards the eventual solution of our problems.

I would like to see planning shake itself free of the pre-election Manifesto and be more obviously prepared to envisage possibilities other than the very favourable assumptions on which that document was based. One of these, of course, has already been falsified - the expectation of a 5% wage increase. I have often suggested in the past that it would be preferable that two or three scenarios be presented to the social partners, based on different but plausible assumptions, not all at the optimistic end of the scale. Had this been done on the recent occasion, the enormity of the problem of creating a sufficiency of new jobs might have been more evident and there might, perhaps, have been a deeper understanding of the national need for wage restraint as a contribution towards solving this problem. Expectations of big increases in consumption standards, public and private, should be played down. It is surely a loss if the educative value of the consultative part of the planning process - the bringing out of the element of conditionality, the need to choose between one desideratum and another - is neglected. This omission will, I hope, be rectified in the course of the planning cycle from now on.

The White Paper is ambitious and bold in expecting that, as capacity limits are approached, the extra demand generated by borrowing will keep on boosting employment rather than imports. The risk that balance of payments and other problems may be created is frankly recognised by the Government and it is because of the gravity of the possible adverse consequences that the campaign to turn 3% of consumption away from imports is so important and deserving of community support. There is, of course, also the positive reason that the campaign, if successful, would yield about 10,000 badly-needed extra jobs at a time when so many young people cannot find work.

Because of the risks of relying entirely on a general expansion of demand more attention should be given to selective means of creating useful employment which would not involve much extra expenditure. Indeed, this is all the more desirable because, even if the employment objectives of the White Paper are fully realised, there will still be ~~about~~ some 70,000 on the Live Register at the end of 1980. About £110 million will be paid out this year in the form of unemployment benefit and assistance. Apart from the questions of human dignity and community morale, does it make sense to keep paying so many for doing nothing, particularly in a developing country which still so obviously lacks many basic facilities and needs tidying-up in so many ways? The social insurance system works well in a short-term business cycle but is scarcely the appropriate answer to a prolonged period of high unemployment. Apart from those who will be absorbed in building, road making and other normal capital works as a result of the increased provision made in the recent Budget, can we not get more people employed in other useful public works? Would it not be possible, in consultation with local authorities and state bodies, to identify and organise such works, beyond the rather limited financial scope of the Employment Action Team?

Senator T.K. Whitaker.

I now turn to Northern Ireland. A recent wide-ranging and thoughtful leader in the Irish Press concluded with the words "now is the time for the voices of the ordinary decent people to be heard". Whether I qualify in that category or not I most certainly do not want to make any unhelpful comment. I do feel it right, however, to raise a non-political but deeply-interested voice to encourage the politicians in these islands, particularly those in Northern Ireland, to persevere - but not to stay frozen in the old moulds. One must welcome the recent decisions of all three Parties here to re-assess their positions. One must also recognise the special plight of the Northern politicians, with no forum in which to express themselves or advance the welfare of their local community. They must feel deprived and dispirited. They need our encouragement to stay active in the search for a just and lasting peace. We must give them our backing or leave the field to savagery.

At the same time, the politicians must earn our support by being flexible. Intransigence can too often masquerade as defence of principle and obstruct the reasonable compromise which is the only way towards solving any problem as complex and deep as that of Northern Ireland.

It seems to me important not to allow intermediate objectives acquire a permanent aspect. Power-sharing, for instance, that is representative rather than majority rule, is to be seen as a phase in the establishment of a normal democratic system in Northern Ireland. It is a means of alleviating the unfairness and harshness of strict majority rule in an area so carved out originally as to give Unionists a majority for ever and thus in the old days deny any prospect of a change of Government. Majority rule comes close to totalitarianism in such conditions. But, in the new conditions created by Proportional Representation, do we have to envisage power-sharing - admittedly an unusual form of democratic rule, which frustrates the vital role of an opposition - as other than a transitional phase lasting a few years, a phase in which political polarisation might ease? Is not Proportional Representation itself a sounder permanent base for a new Northern Ireland democracy, since, in a less tense situation, it may produce a more realistic and fragmented representation of the community, thus leading to the possibility of various Parliamentary groups coming together, even across the political divide, to form an alternative Government?

I recognise, of course, that this is still a good way off and that power-sharing in some form is probably an essential ingredient for some time in any new constitutional

arrangements. But should we not at least start planning the more permanent safeguards for minorities which would enable majority rule to be restored after some years in relation to a Proportional Representation system of election to a Northern Ireland Assembly or Parliament? Some right of recourse for aggrieved citizens to an international court (e.g. The European Court of Human Rights) may be amongst these safeguards. The need for a particularly large parliamentary majority to change specific rights may be another.

We are rightly being asked, for our part, to reconsider what we mean by our desire for a united Ireland. Too many people in Northern Ireland still think we want to dominate them in a unitary and Catholic republic. I am sure that the aspiration to unity the majority of us cherish would be met by something far short of domination, or jurisdiction, over our fellow-Irishmen. The wording of Article 3 of our Constitution is not the happiest in this respect. But I like the interpretation of Article 2 as being merely a counter to the British claim to part of the island of Ireland. By ruling out the use of force (and small credit to us for that!) we have admitted that any future arrangement between North and South depends on the agreement of the majority in Northern Ireland. Such an arrangement could take various forms, ranging from full political union to a federation of equals, a confederation, or perhaps at the outset just a formal recognition of shared economic and social interest, such as a joint committee for EEC affairs would signify. It is evidently advantageous that economic co-operation and cultural exchanges should be promoted, whatever may be the course of political evolution.

The Sunningdale Council of Ireland, properly regarded, was more a symbol than a threat and it is a pity it was not seen as such by the Unionists. For a great number of Nationalists, North and South, it might well have been a satisfying facade, a quasi-permanent substitute for a unitary republic, or at most a slow-moving vehicle towards an agreed federal solution. Perceptive Unionists should have realised that they could, if they wished, prevent the Council from ever becoming more than a symbol. The extent to which the Council would be given executive functions on an all-Ireland basis would have depended on the agreement of a majority of Protestants. With hindsight one can see that misunderstanding was only too easily generated by the idiotic triumphalism which welcomed the Council as a vehicle for trundling Unionists into a United Ireland and by excessive institutionalisation of the concept of co-operation between North and South. Next time round, let us be content with more informal arrangements. Appropriate institutions will evolve in time in response to organisational needs.

*Extract from
draft speech by
Senator Whiteley
to Publics Club
of Ireland March 1978*

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I now turn to Northern Ireland. I most certainly do not want to make any unhelpful comment but I do feel it right to raise a non-political but deeply-interested voice to encourage the politicians in these islands, particularly those in Northern Ireland, to persevere but not to stay frozen in the old moulds. One must welcome the recent decisions of all three Parties here to re-assess their positions. One must also recognise the special plight of the Northern politicians, with no forum in which to express themselves or advance the welfare of their local community. They must feel deprived and dispirited. They need our encouragement to stay active in the search for peace with justice. We must give them our backing or leave the field to savagery.

At the same time, the politicians must earn our support by being flexible. Intransigence can too often masquerade as defence of principle and obstruct the reasonable compromise which is the only way towards solving any problem as complex and deep as that of Northern Ireland.

It seems to me important not to allow intermediate objectives acquire a permanent aspect. Power-sharing, for instance, that is representative rather than majority rule, is to be seen as a phase in the establishment of a normal democratic system in Northern Ireland. It is a means of alleviating the unfairness and harshness of strict majority rule in an area so carved out originally as to give Unionists a majority for ever and thus in the old days deny any prospect of a change of Government. Majority rule comes close to totalitarianism in such conditions. But, in the new conditions created by Proportional Representation, do we have to envisage power-sharing - admittedly an unusual form of democratic rule, which frustrates the vital role of an opposition - as other than a transitional phase lasting a few years, a phase in which political polarisation might ease? Is not Proportional Representation itself a sounder permanent base for a new Northern Ireland democracy, since, in a less tense situation, it may produce a more realistic and fragmented representation of the community, thus leading to the possibility of various Parliamentary groups coming together, even across the political divide, to form an alternative Government?

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arrangements. But should we not at least start planning the more permanent safeguards for minorities which would enable majority rule to be restored after some years in relation to a P.R. system of election to a N.I. Assembly or Parliament? Some recourse to international (perhaps EEC) protection of civil rights may be amongst these safeguards.

Starbuck book ->

Gand / Europe?

We are rightly being asked, for our part, to reconsider what we mean by our desire for a united Ireland. Too many people in Northern Ireland still think we want to dominate them in a unitary and Catholic republic. I am sure that the aspiration to unity the majority of us cherish could be met by something far short of domination, or jurisdiction, over our fellow-Irishmen. I like the interpretation of Articles 2 and 3 of our Constitution as being merely a counter to the British claim to part of the island of Ireland. By ruling out the use of force (and small credit to us for that!) we have admitted that any future arrangement between North and South depends on the agreement of the majority in Northern Ireland. Such an arrangement could take various forms, ranging from full political union to a federation of equals, a confederation, or just a formal recognition of shared economic and social interest, such as a joint committee for EEC affairs would signify. The possibility of evolution must not be excluded.

** Economic Committee; Gilligan meeting.*

The ill-fated Council of Ireland, properly regarded, was more a symbol than a threat and it is a pity it was not seen as such by the Unionists. For a great number of Nationalists, North and South, it might well have been a satisfying facade, a quasi-permanent substitute for a United Ireland, or at most a slow-moving vehicle towards an agreed federal solution. Perceptive Unionists should have realised that they could, if they wished, prevent the Council from ever becoming more than a symbol. The extent to which the Council would be given executive functions on an all-Ireland basis would have depended on the agreement of a majority of Protestants. With hindsight one can see that misunderstanding was only too easily generated by the idiotic triumphalism which welcomed the Council as a vehicle for trundling Unionists into a United Ireland and by excessive institutionalisation of the concept of co-operation between North and South. Next time round, let us be content with more informal arrangements. Appropriate institutions will evolve in time in response to organisational needs.

1920 Act: Partition

We are interested not in domination but in the positive and peaceful acceptance of a shared habitation, a shared history and culture, a shared destiny in the EEC,

a necessary and potentially productive partnership, and some recognition of our common interests, traditions and background. I have for some time had the feeling that a Northern Ireland of virtually equal status to the Republic might provide the best starting point for progress towards genuine unity in any form. In this age of "women's lib" one has come to recognise that even cohabitation, not to mention marriage, if it is to be tolerable and stable, must be based on equality of status!

For myself, I would be content with the degree of unity afforded by any political arrangement which resulted in Irishmen on their own sharing, in peace and harmony, in managing the affairs of the whole of Ireland within an EEC context. I would, on this basis, like to see Britain leave us all in this island, in the end, to ourselves. But this calls for greater balance in the British stance towards Ireland. It is one thing to say that Northern Ireland will stay in the United Kingdom so long as a majority in Northern Ireland so desires. But benevolent neutrality on the part of Britain - indeed, basic self-interest - should go further. There should be a positive commitment to ease the transition if and when a majority in Northern Ireland prefers to leave the U.K. in favour of some agreed all-Ireland arrangement. Something on these lines was said before but it needs to be repeated, with greater supporting detail, in particular about the financial support it would well pay Britain to maintain over a long term of years in return for getting rid quickly of enormous military and compensation outlay. Otherwise, no real choice is being offered to the inhabitants of Northern Ireland; a feeling of security, on the one hand, is matched only by uncertainty and apprehension as to the implications of the alternative. This is not an even-handed offer of options; nor is it in accord with Britain's own interest to appear unmindful of the gains, economic, financial and political, which would flow from an apparently generous (but really advantageous) approach to the terms of separation. For Britain, no less than for us, it is the free but fully-informed judgment of the people of Northern Ireland about their future which must be sought.

In conclusion, may I add that it is not only Britain but we in the Republic as well who have to give the undertakings and create the conditions favouring the acceptance by a majority in Northern Ireland of an Irish alternative to continued membership of the United Kingdom.

3. Arguments to
undoubtedly for
unity.

1. U.K. division.

2. Political reasons
for presence.