

## POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES FOR THE PEOPLE OF NORTHERN IRELAND.

A talk by Mr. Erskine Holmes, Chairman of the Northern Ireland Labour Party,  
to the Irish Association at Queen's University, Belfast on Wednesday, 23rd Aug. 1972

The people of Northern Ireland are very shortly to be given the opportunity of determining what forms their political procedures and institutions will take. We may have only one brief chance to reach a consensus and freely shape our own destiny. If we fail to agree, the British Government may foist some civil service concept of democracy upon us.

### WHAT KIND OF SETTLEMENT?

Well meaning people within our own community may throw up ideas on our future institutions which could seem suitable to our frustrated British peacemakers. The danger in putting forward models by which power can be shared by all parties in Northern Ireland is that the British Government may give them back to us in that form and our tribal chiefs on both sides may use such institutions to perpetuate their own existence, through continual division.

Our objection to a government chosen by proportional representation may seem odd to those who recall that the Labour Party was perhaps the first to propose Community Government as a means to end the violence and set Northern Ireland on the road to reconstruction. We never proposed institutional changes to bring this about and we were also first to warn of the danger of "institutionalising sectarianism". The dynamic for Community Government was to come from the willingness of all parties to unite on a massive programme of economic reconstruction to achieve not only peace but a just society in which violence could have no possible roots.

At one time community government was as obvious as the need for a war-time coalition, but now the best hope of Northern Ireland politics coming of age is to allow Northern Ireland to have a legislative assembly, within which freely arrived at coalitions are possible.

We had a parliament modelled to the last detail on the Mother of Parliaments at Westminster and we paid lip service to the desirability of having normal British politics with a straight conflict between Labour and Conservative, but we never looked like achieving this except possibly for one brief moment when the Northern Ireland Labour Party made a break through in 1958. Labour came up against the threshold which the X-voting system imposed and it became clear that our electoral system militated against the development of normal politics. The case for elections by P.R. has been proved; we should be willing to accept the freedom which it can give us rather than choke our democracy with institutional arrangements which may inhibit the development of normal right left - politics which we are agreed is so necessary.

A generous system of P.R. will enable us to find our way to a left-right system of political debate as it has in Europe. We should all be looking to the European experience because Northern Ireland is not unique in having people influenced by religion when they cast their votes.

After the second world war a European pattern emerged. Large minorities in most countries were motivated by religion in determining their political allegiance, as was formally recognised by the existence of strong Christian-Democratic parties. These were strongest in Germany, and Italy but were also important in Belgium, France and the Netherlands. Christian Democracy is by no means exclusively Catholic. Both the Netherlands and Norway, two of the countries where Protestantism is strong, having Calvinist political parties.

Since P.R. spells coalition it is only a matter of time before the confessional parties in Northern Ireland, both Catholic and Protestant would find themselves lining up on social issues against a greatly strengthened Socialist representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Socialists will have to consider immediately the implications of working within a coalition with non-socialists.

Those other elements in Northern Ireland politics who could loosely be termed "the centre" must face up to the logic that P.R. spells coalition.



We had a parliament modelled to the last detail on the Mother of Parliaments at Westminster and we paid lip service to the desirability of having normal British politics with a straight conflict between Labour and Conservative, but we never looked like achieving this except possibly for one brief moment when the Northern Ireland Labour Party made a break through in 1958. Labour came up against the threshold which the X-voting system imposed and it became clear that our electoral system militated against the development of normal politics. The case for elections by P.R. has been proved; we should be willing to accept the freedom which it can give us rather than choke our democracy with institutional arrangements which may inhibit the development of normal right left - politics which we are agreed is so necessary.

A generous system of P.R. will enable us to find our way to a left-right system of political debate as it has in Europe. We should all be looking to the European experience because Northern Ireland is not unique in having people influenced by religion when they cast their votes.

After the second world war a European pattern emerged. Large minorities in most countries were motivated by religion in determining their political allegiance, as was formally recognised by the existence of strong Christian-Democratic parties. These were strongest in Germany, and Italy but were also important in Belgium, France and the Netherlands. Christian Democracy is by no means exclusively Catholic. Both the Netherlands and Norway, two of the countries where Protestantism is strong, having Calvinist political parties.

Since P.R. spells coalition it is only a matter of time before the confessional parties in Northern Ireland, both Catholic and Protestant would find themselves lining up on social issues against a greatly strengthened Socialist representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Socialists will have to consider immediately the implications of working within a coalition with non-socialists.

Those other elements in Northern Ireland politics who could loosely be termed "the centre" must face up to the logic that P.R. spells coalition.

### A Northern Ireland Assembly

While we should not have institutions which would 'institutionalise sectarianism' and inhibit the development of left/right politics along European lines, we in the Labour Party are not overly obsessed with the exact details of our institutions. These are matters for negotiation at the conference table. The border question it is a matter for the plebiscite although we do not want to see it become a set piece, like elections every five years. After the first plebiscite it should surely be sufficient to have the machinery in existence for future votes if the people of Northern Ireland desire to have them.

The elected body could be bi-cameral or unicameral. It could be called a parliament or a legislative assembly or any other name. Executive powers could be vested in Ministers or in Chairmen of departmental committees similar to the Greater London Committee system and we could keep or dispense with Black Rods, Sergeants at Arms or even Prime Ministers.

Executive power shared by some system of P.R. or rotating chairmen of departmental committees cuts across the principle of a free democratic system and will certainly inhibit the development of a normal society in Northern Ireland. To adopt the G.L.C committee system exactly as it stands would certainly not interfere with the concept of majority rule. (I would be hopeful that the first majority administration in that assembly would be one arrived at through a free coalition of parties). Those not in the coalition would of course serve on the departmental committees and have free access to all civil service information denied to them under the old ministerial system.

Cross-border institutions could take a number of forms. They should take a form which will bring Irishmen closer together and the powers given should be in those areas which can immediately achieve working arrangements between North and South. Recently a prominent Nationalist politician said he did not want to see the border removed, rather he wanted to see it disappear under a maze of criss-crossing lines of co-operation and communication. It is a goal we can all aspire to share.



The first requirement of the people of Northern Ireland is full parity of representation at Westminster. Full citizenship implies equality of influence in determining the basic terms of citizenship. Northern Ireland's representation at Westminster should therefore be increased to 18 to reinforce the point that even with a regional assembly we are an integral part of the United Kingdom.

To help contribute to the breakdown of sectarianism, to improve the quality of membership and to ensure the return of members to both sides of the House, Northern Ireland's representation at Westminster could be treated as one constituency with election by P.R.

### A BILL OF RIGHTS

An acknowledgement of the Westminster Parliament's role as guarantor of civil, religious and political liberty in Northern Ireland should be contained in a Bill of Rights enacted by the Westminster Parliament. All future legislation in the field of civil and religious liberty should be automatically applicable to Northern Ireland. Within the United Kingdom only one sovereign parliament should have the fundamental power to deprive a citizen of his life or arbitrarily deprive him of his liberty. That power should never again be devolved.

No control of institutions in Northern Ireland should have the effect of permitting "reinforcing measures". The Unionist Party successfully used a measure of power to create more power through changing the electoral system, redrawing boundaries, refusing universal local government franchise, restricting the hours of voting, retaining local government candidate's deposits and in general through their power over the political structure. That power might be used impartially, but in order that justice may be done, and be seen to be done, all powers to make laws relating to the political structures should be reserved to the Westminster Parliament.

"Reinforcing measures" occurred in other spheres. In the siting of council houses, direction of industrial development and, in certain areas, the allocation of employment were all used to maintain a political control. While it is unlikely that estates of houses will be sited in the future in such a way as to perpetrate one political group's power or influence, clearly defined procedures for appeal to the courts to present such excess of powers should exist.

The Commissioner for Complaints and Parliamentary Commissioners should have wider powers (including powers to ask the courts to issue writs of mandamus) and should be appointed by the British government in consultation with Northern Ireland opinion. His office should be financed from London. Local decision making at regional level is already required in a large number of areas, such as education, planning, transport, housing and welfare. Other major services, including electricity, water and sewerage, fire services, and agricultural services will be administered at regional level. Those running these services ought to be democratically accountable to the representatives of the people who use and finance these services.

#### CRIMINAL LAW & LAW ENFORCEMENT

There are clearly questions of division of responsibility in the field of criminal law. It is generally thought this function together with security will revert to Westminster. But a Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland would require powers to create offences in statutory rules and orders (or indeed as in the present Companies Act and jurisdiction in relation to agriculture, commerce etc.). Enabling powers could be given to the Northern Ireland Assembly to create offences in non-controversial fields, leaving the main corpus of criminal law to the Westminster Parliament.

The raising of a police force and legislation dealing with it, as well as all judicial appointments should be a matter for Westminster. An inter-Parliamentary Specialist Committee would ensure that Westminster would remain aware of local needs, urgency and other considerations. Management of the police should be a function of the Northern Ireland Assembly so that there could be effective local machinery for the day-to-day working and conditions of service of the force. There should be accountability for police action to a Minister in the N.I. Assembly, but not to the exclusion of the jurisdiction of the Westminster Parliament.

#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland's record in economic development has been better than other depressed regions of the United Kingdom, because of the ability of Northern Ireland (through the generosity of the British Government) to offer better inducements to industry, to improve its infrastructure and to follow up by a better "after sales service". A degree of devolution provides a community with the kind of leverage which is required in gaining financial concessions from a central government, and this may be even more important once we are inside the Common Market.



Northern Ireland's major problem in the years ahead will be the need to strengthen her economy so it is important to establish institutions which will provide the people of Northern Ireland with the tools to "do it themselves". With Westminster as our political guarantor we need something like Stormont to serve as our economic guarantor. Northern Ireland cannot be allowed to die by neglect as parts of Scotland have done. Conversely, we should not be bullied into thinking that Northern Ireland can, unaided, beat our underlying structural economic problems. The British Government must accept that they have a responsibility to assist us to reach a full stage of economic development. Strong local institutions are important to help exert the necessary pressure on the British Government.

If there is to be sustained economic growth and a lessening of unemployment, Westminster should have a clear and expressed role in this field. This not to abandon the idea that local initiative, such as the N.I. Assembly, should have energetic promotional function and should exercise control on matters such as new towns, development areas etc.

The regional authority to be established in N.I. should be equipped with wide economic powers, but powers of taxation should only be exercised with the approval of the Westminster Parliament the latter having powers of revocation. The challenge which will unite the people of N.I. is to build a prosperous society. A strong regional authority with legislative as well as administrative powers is essential if that is to be achieved.

### SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION

Much time and energy will be required to enable the people of N.I. to live together and appreciate their different cultural backgrounds. Equally, the effort must be made to promote community relations not only in the North but throughout the whole island. Any Northern regional government should be able to negotiate, as an equal, with the government of the Republic. Joint all-Ireland bodies have a useful function to play in the sphere of economic planning, tourism, transport, use of water resources, generation of electricity, etc. Much useful work in cultural areas and education could also be done, any treaty-making powers should be reserved to the Westminster Government.

Northern Ireland should have a substantial degree of self-government. The emphasis of the 1920 experiment in devolution is outdated. A regional government should have substantial economic power and no power in the field of citizens' rights.

## Summary of the discussion following Mr. Holmes's paper.

(The points made under each heading have been listed and then Mr. Holmes's answers and comments given).

### 1. Proportional Representation

- (a) P.R. is not a guarantee against one-party rule as the history of the Republic has shown.
- (b) The size and composition of constituencies under P R. must be examined.  
Constituencies of about seven members would be essential to healthy politics.
- (c) Constituency boundaries should be drawn by impartial persons and there should be arbiters to hear and decide on boundary appeals.

Mr. Holmes agreed that 7 - member constituencies were necessary; in the Republic 3 - member constituencies had left the Labour Party dependent on F.F. second votes and therefore unable to pursue radical politics.

On one party rule he thought - if Opinion Polls were reliable - there was a good chance of a 'centre bloc' emerging, but this would depend on the willingness of moderates to reach agreement across the board.

### 2. Plebiscite

- (a) Too little attention had been given to the form of question - a complex question would be impracticable, one that made for a demonstration of sectarian solidarity would be undesirable.
- (b) It must be stressed that a plebiscite is not for ever. The mechanics of holding another should be considered.
- (c) It would be necessary to have a clear understanding that union with Great Britain would include guarantees to the minority.

Mr. Holmes said he would favour just one question. While he agreed that the forthcoming plebiscite should not be final he would hope that in the future the border would not be made a political bargaining issue.



### 3. The Nature of Democracy

- (a) A solution imposed by Westminster cannot be undemocratic since Westminster is the sovereign parliament.
- (b) Democracy does not necessarily work as a force for radical progress. In Northern Ireland to get some sort of real democracy going it will be necessary to provide written-in safeguards which might, at first appear to be undemocratic. (Example of Manchester Council where for many years the convention existed that majority and minority groups should share Chairmanships and Vice-Chairmanships of committees).
- (c) Participation at all levels is essential to true democracy. Mr. Holmes agreed that for Westminster to impose a solution would not be undemocratic, but Northern Ireland itself would not be operating democratically. He agreed also that participation was necessary. Those who administer services, whether at Parliamentary or Local Government level must be democratically accountable. As an example of good democratic practice he instanced the way the Housing Executive welcomes the ideas of Tenants Associations and almost absorbs them into its structure.

### 4. Rights of Minority

- (a) In order to safeguard minority rights it may be necessary to risk institutionalising sectarianism.
- (b) to avoid continuance of one-party rule some sort of blocking mechanism such as necessity for  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority, could be useful.
- (c) The greatest need is to prevent discrimination in employment.
- (d) Against "c" it was argued that greatest need was employment. Get that right and discrimination would become irrelevant.

Mr. Holmes was doubtful about safeguards such as blocking mechanism which he felt would militate against progress. He felt it would be helpful if those who claimed to be the parliamentary representatives of minority would spell out what they wanted.

### 5. Violence and Social Attitudes.

- (a) 'Just' society will not automatically put an end to violence.
- (b) We need to devise better social attitudes which will result in better social conditions.
- (c) What needs tackling is the point raised by Professor Gibson in previous talks - 'the short-sighted, self-serving evasion of responsibility' by the middle classes. Mr. Holmes, while agreeing that social attitudes needed changing suggested that violence in Ireland had its roots in social injustice and an emotional historic tradition. Violence springing from latter was usually triggered off by some social injustice. Therefore if the 'just' society were created there would be less danger of such a triggering.

N.B Several speakers stressed the need to keep in mind the time scale. If we waited till people's minds were ripe there would be no elections for many years.