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FAIR PLAY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

The people who will be most affected by an Anglo-Irish deal on Northern Ireland will be those British subjects who inhabit the Province. Yet, astonishingly, the one group of people who are completely - and deliberately - excluded from information as to what is being devised by representatives of the British and Irish Governments is the majority unionist community in Ulster. Representatives of the minority community have been briefed regularly by the Dublin Government. Yet the Unionist people of Northern Ireland have been kept in the dark. Why?

The Prime Minister is on record in stating that 'confidentiality' is essential to the talks. She has not adequately explained why this is so. In such an atmosphere of secrecy Unionists can hardly be criticised for concluding that whatever has to be kept under such close wraps until after the deal has been struck (at a summit meeting between Mrs. Thatcher and Dr. Fitzgerald in November) must be profoundly damaging to Unionism.

In spite of the obstacles, Unionists have been able to discover the main component of the likely deal. If they are accused of dealing in rumour and speculation, this is only because it is the position that they have been driven into by the British Government.

ANGLO-IRISH JOINT MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE AND SECRETARIATE.

This is a mechanism to give the Republic of Ireland Government a say in all areas of British policy and administration in Northern Ireland. The

machinery itself could look rather like the EEC Council of Ministers wherein Ministers from each Member state meet to make joint decisions about Community policy. In addition, the Committee would be serviced by a secretariate made up of both British and Irish civil servants. Although designed eventually to be based in Belfast, the secretariate may initially be accommodated in either London or Dublin until (it is hoped) Unionist opposition has subsided. Such machinery would be attractive to Dublin as it could be sold in the Republic as not unlike the "joint authority" option contained in the report of the New Ireland Forum.

BRITISH SOVEREIGNTY OVER NORTHERN IRELAND.

Such joint machinery would constitute a clear infringement of British sovereignty over the Province. It is one thing for a country to discuss its problems with another and there is nothing objectionable in two governments setting up permanent machinery to keep the full spectrum of mutual difficulties under review. But it is quite different for the British Government to separate Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom and give the Republic of Ireland, which claims the territory of Northern Ireland in its constitution, a say on how the Province is run.

If Cornwall were to be claimed by France, no-one in the United Kingdom would have any difficulty in seeing a fundamental infringement of British sovereignty if France were to be granted a right to have a say on how that county was governed. Such a concession would be no less objectionable simply because a minority in Cornwall were to seek union with France, but it would be bitterly resented by British people if it was granted in face of terrorist outrages perpetrated by a Cornish equivalent of the IRA.

A FINAL SOLUTION

It is clear that even though the concession by the British Government of a joint ministerial committee treating Northern Ireland as separate and distinct from the rest of the United Kingdom would be regarded by Unionists as betrayal it would not be accepted as final or definitive by Irish nationalists.

The Irish Republic's Minister for Foreign Affairs has already been recorded as indicating that such an arrangement would simply be one step in the general direction of a United Ireland. The Republic's Government has been at pains to reassure its electorate that the objective of a United Ireland has not been abandoned. On the Irish nationalist side, the current negotiations are described as part of a process which nationalists will insist must continue after a deal is struck at the 1985 summit. Nationalists believe that once the principle of the Republic's intervention in Northern Ireland has been conceded by Britain, the task of having Northern Ireland off from the rest of the U.K. becomes all the easier. On the other hand, many British politicians fail to realise that in terms of the nationalist aspiration for a United Ireland there can be no such thing as a permanent compromise position short of unity.

THE TROJAN HORSE

A subsidiary objection to a joint ministerial committee and secretariate is the scope for mischief inherent in such machinery. For example, if the I.R.A. were to engineer controversial security incidents will the Irish side of the joint machinery accept the British approach?

Or, will the British side be under pressure to react in a particular way to placate the Irish side? How will those charged with the administration of Northern Ireland cope with institutionalised intrusion from people who are from another State and whose declared aim is for the annexation of Northern Ireland by the Republic? Will they feel constrained to make concessions at the expense of the loyal British subjects of the Province?

The Northern Irish judiciary has been the target of a sustained campaign by the present Irish Government. If the 1985 summit deal does not include changes in the Northern Irish judiciary will the Government of the Republic through its side of the joint committee continue its campaign against certain of the Northern Irish judges?

THE VALUE OF A DEAL TO BRITAIN.

Although a deal of the type outlined would be viewed by Unionists as striking at the foundation of their position in the United Kingdom, a deal with the Republic would be of limited value to Britain.

It may be designed to placate vociferous Irish nationalist opinion in the United States. But such opinion will not be content with anything short of a United Ireland.

The Prime Minister herself is on record as putting forward improved security co-operation with the Republic as a major attraction of a deal. This very attraction underlines the unscrupulousness of the Republic's Government. If it can improve security co-operation it should do so to save the lives and property of the people of Northern Ireland - whom it claims the right

to govern - without any quid pro quo from the United Kingdom. To hold back on security co-operation in order to pressurise the British Government into concessions on Northern Ireland is nothing short of disgraceful.

THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY.

Another alleged objective of the planned Anglo-Irish deal is to induce Mr John Hume's S.D.L.P. to participate in the administration of Northern Ireland. His party not only continues to boycott the Northern Ireland Assembly (set up by the present British Government), it also refuses to support the security forces and the judicial system.

The question has to be posed now - for it will certainly arise after the deal is struck - In return for the British Government agreeing to a weakening of Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom, will the Government be certain that the S.D.L.P. will publicly lend its support to the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the British Army and the courts in dealing with terrorism?

THE RIGHT OF SELF-DETERMINATION

Like all free peoples, the citizens of Northern Ireland claim the right of self determination. In a sense this right is reflected in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973. This Act purports to guarantee Northern Ireland's place within the U.K. and permits change only with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a poll. However, it is clearly implicit in a right to remain part of the U.K., that membership is to be enjoyed on a basis of equality with the other countries making up the Union.

There is no such constitutional animal as a second class member.

Unionists contend that if Northern Ireland is separated from the rest of the Kingdom, by giving a foreign state a quite exceptional influence over a part of Her Majesty's dominions then the right of self-determination has been clearly infringed unless this intrusion has the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland.

Such a right to give - or withhold - consent is all the more vital when it is remembered that Article 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland reads:

"The national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and territorial seas".

The removal of this claim to the territory of Northern Ireland has not been stated by the British Government to be a condition precedent to the Republic having a formal say as to how Northern Ireland is to be governed. A country which refuses to withdraw what is tantamount to a claim to annex the Province is to be given a right of interference. How in the name of justice can the people of Northern Ireland be denied the right to have their say on the acceptability of such a deal?

Yet the Prime Minister seems to be determined that the British Parliament alone will decide. The Conservative Party will be required to support the Government. The British Labour Party is already on record as supporting any deal that suits "the Irish" - without knowing what is in the deal and apparently unconscious of the irony that its own definition of "the Irish" includes Unionists whom the deal very definitely will not suit.

There are only fifteen Unionists in a parliament of ^AMembers.

The Government's attitude is in stark contrast to its position on devolved government for Northern Ireland. This, the Prime Minister has said, can only be restored "on a basis that is acceptable to both sides of the Community". Thus, when it comes to a deal with the Irish Republic which Unionists regard as a sell-out, their voice is to be swamped in a decision taken by the British Parliament as a whole. But when it comes to devolved government, Mr John Hume's S.D.L.P. with one member of parliament has a veto. Is the phrase "fair play" still part of the English language?

The people of Northern Ireland have not forgotten that when constitutional changes were proposed for Scotland and Wales in the nineteen seventies, the people of each country were consulted by referendum. In neither case did the changes involve the intrusion of another state. On this basis alone the claim of the people of Northern Ireland to be consulted - by referendum or election - on the acceptability of the Anglo-Irish proposals is surely unanswerable.

And if the deal is, as is argued, innocuous, what has the British Government to fear? If unionist politicians are wrong in alleging that the joint committee of ministers and its secretariate is of no constitutional significance, will it be beyond the resources of the Government to correct this misinterpretation? Or is the reason why no such test is proposed is because Unionist politicians are not wrong?