

Political Possibilities for the People of Northern Ireland

A Talk by Professor Norman Gibson, of the New University of Ulster to the
Irish Association at Park Avenue Hotel, Belfast, Wednesday 26th July 1972.

Factors Constraining our Political Options

The people of Northern Ireland are faced with the heroic and daunting task of determining what is to be their political future and, in particular, what forms their political procedures and institutions shall take. These decisions are obviously of the most far reaching significance for they will help to shape, perhaps for generations to come, the quality of our life in this part of Ireland.

To achieve workable and generally acceptable political procedures and institutions implies agreement or consensus about the methods of acquiring, distributing, exercising and controlling political power. Power is what our present troubles are about and power is the ability, techniques and machinery by which to accomplish or serve certain desired objectives or interests.

To be realistic we must try to understand the objectives and interests of the different parties and groups who hold or are concerned to achieve power in Northern Ireland. Any proposals which emerge must be a compromise between what inevitably will be conflicting objectives and pressures.

The British Government, Parliament and People.

I begin with the British government because it, together with the British Parliament, is the sovereign authority in Northern Ireland.

The chief political aim of the British Government in relation to Northern Ireland is well known; "Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom as long as the majority wish it" (Northern Ireland Office Press Notice 18th July 1972). Another relevant objective of the British government is to remain on good political terms with the Irish Republic.

The British government is obviously experiencing grave domestic and international embarrassment because of the break-down of regional government in Northern Ireland and its consequences. It is therefore extremely anxious to bring the violence to an end and to promote more normal politics.

It should never be forgotten that British governments are subject to the will of Parliament, and that both Government and Parliament are responsive to public opinion. There is little doubt that the British Parliament, and perhaps public opinion even more so, is increasingly disillusioned with events in Northern Ireland and, in due course, would wish to see a progressive disengagement of the British presence in Northern Ireland. This is significant in trying to interpret what may be meant by Northern Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom as long as the majority wish it.

Whatever else is meant by remaining part of the United Kingdom it is unlikely to mean full integration with the rest of the United Kingdom. This suggests that an implicit objective of the British government is the return of some form of regional government in Northern Ireland with powers whose extent will depend upon the degree of consensus obtained.

Finally, the extreme economic and financial dependence of Northern Ireland on Britain should never be forgotten in approaching the question of political procedures and institutions for Northern Ireland.

The Government of the Irish Republic.

Successive governments of the Irish Republic have protested about the "injustice" of the partition of Ireland and have always maintained as an objective the notion of a "united" Ireland. Political realism demands that the objectives of the elected government of the Irish Republic must be taken into account to give any hope of arriving at workable political procedures and institutions for Northern Ireland.

Writing in Foreign Affairs, Vol.50, No. 4, July 1972, Mr. Lynch states:-

"...it should be clear that a united Ireland will not be an Ireland in which the present state in the "South" takes over the "North" and assimilates it into its existing structures. There should be negotiation, but it should be about a new Ireland"

"...the constitution of this new Ireland must reflect the values and meet the legitimate interests of all sections of its population".

"...the constitution of the new Ireland would have to be a written one with firm and explicit guarantees for the rights and liberties of all who live under it."

Mr. Lynch has made it clear that the kind of unity he has in mind is probably years ahead and that in the meantime he would support the return of a regional administration to Northern Ireland.

It seems to me both from a long-term point of view and a short-term one that British objectives and those of the government of the Irish Republic have much in common. Furthermore, I would expect this to be increasingly so in the future. If this is correct then it is of fundamental importance in relation to the creation of political procedures and institutions for the people of Northern Ireland.

The Unionist Position and Public Support.

The Unionist government, before Stormont was prorogued, left a very useful record of its thinking about the political future of Northern Ireland in both a consultative green paper and a white paper. (The future Development of the Parliament and Government of Northern Ireland Cmd.560 and Political Settlement Cmd.568). These documents seem broadly to represent the official Unionist position.

The Unionist party want, first and foremost, the return of a strong regional Parliament and government to Northern Ireland with Northern Ireland remaining an integral part of the United Kingdom. A strong Parliament etc. would seem to be one which, amongst other things, had control over "law and order". The executive would take the form of cabinet government operating on the basis of collective responsibility. This would seem to rule out any notion of community government, "where the parties in Parliament would be represented in the executive in proportion to their strength" (Green Paper, p.11).

None of the foregoing is thought to be incompatible with an enlarged Parliament. It is felt desirable, especially because of the re-organisation of local government to increase the membership of the Commons to about 80 members and the Senate to about 40 members, some of whom would be nominated. The Unionist party also support the re-introduction of proportional representation at Parliamentary elections on the basis of multi-member constituencies and a single-transferrable vote system. Most importantly, the former Unionist government was prepared to support the establishment of "a joint Irish Inter-Governmental Council . . . with equal membership from the Belfast and Dublin Governments, to discuss matters of mutual interest, particularly in the economic and social spheres." (White Paper Cmd.568).

Some Unionists have emphasised that if a "strong" regional Parliament and government is not possible they would prefer full integration with the rest of the United Kingdom. Others, notably Mr. Craig and Mr. Taylor, granted it is legitimate to continue to call them Unionists, would now seem to be thinking in terms of some kind of "independent" Northern Ireland.

Mr. Taylor's alternative to a strong Northern Ireland Parliament within the United Kingdom is a "negotiated independence" which would "include guaranteed civil rights for all citizens". (Reported in Irish Times, 17th July 1972). He is convinced that full integration for Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom is neither likely nor desirable because of the views and attitudes of the British Parliament and people and also of the Irish Republic. However, as far as the Irish Republic is concerned he appears to be somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand he feels the Dublin government is of little or no relevance to his concept of an independent Northern Ireland, but on the other he is prepared to support some form of Council of Ireland, which might include party representatives from both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, not just an Inter-Governmental Council.

S.D.L.P. and Other Groups

Recent pronouncements would seem to suggest that the objectives of the S.D.L.P. have much in common with the views of the Dublin government as expressed by Mr. Lynch. The S.D.L.P. hold the long-term aim of a united Ireland in some form and, in the meantime would wish to see some sort of Parliament or Assembly and government restored in Northern Ireland and no doubt the S D.L.P. would insist that they had an active and executive role in any future government of Northern Ireland.

Other parties and groups such as the Alliance party, the N.I.L.P., the Liberal Party and the civil rights movement also have political objectives for the further of Northern Ireland. In general they would seem to favour the return of regional government to Northern Ireland, possible without regional control of police or security.

Political Objectives of the I.R.A., the U.D.A. and others.

The Provisional I.R.A. want the people of Ireland acting as a unit to decide the future of Ireland. They have talked in terms of an all Ireland federal government with a regional government for the historic counties of Ulster. The major political objective of the Official I.R.A. would seem to be an all-Ireland socialist republic.

The political aims of the U.D.A. are not, as far as I know, well defined but I suspect that they have to do with the maintenance of Protestant dominance within the framework of Northern Ireland, if need be outside the United Kingdom.

Violence and our Political Options.

Violence is, in Ireland, a political instrument and a sign of breakdown of ordinary political processes, as well as being a moral monstrosity, but whether we like it or not we must learn from the fact of violence and its obscenities, in building new political structures for the people of Northern Ireland. If the people of Northern Ireland are to have any sort of tolerable life worthy of human beings they must, on both moral and political grounds, utterly repudiate the use or threat, by self-appointed groups, of violence as a political instrument. Ordinary political processes are completely stultified by the kind of violence we have been experiencing and any political discussions on the future of Northern Ireland can have no prospect of succeeding unless violence is first eliminated or reduced to negligible proportions. The people of Northern Ireland should think very carefully whether or not they should allow any of the men of violence to have an active say in their future. The violence of self-appointed groups must not be made respectable or legitimised.

But in spite of the violence we must try not to allow it to prejudice and distort our approach to creating new political structures. The main lesson is that our new political procedures and institutions must be so self-evidently sensitive, just and equitable that they never again give the slightest excuse for the emergence of violence as a political instrument. This is not in any way to excuse the depraved violence of the I.R.A. and others; nothing in the political set-up in Northern Ireland could justify the barbaric violence that they have perpetrated. Moreover, I am convinced that radical political and social change could have been brought about without the kind of violence we have experienced.

More specifically, both Britain and the Irish Republic, in approaching the political future of Northern Ireland, should be prepared solemnly to agree that no part of their respective territories or the territory of Northern Ireland should be permitted to be used as a refuge for those who would use or threaten violence as a political instrument in relation to the constitutionally established governments in any part of these territories. The use or threat of violence against the constitutionally legitimate government in any part of these islands, if mounted in or supported from another part, should be treated as if it were an attack on the government of that particular part.

The absolutist and authoritarian cast of mind, often but not always religious, has bedevilled our educational system and contributed to the break-down of our society. So has the complacency of the comfortable middle-classes and their short-sighted self-serving evasion of moral and political responsibilities. If these attitudes do not change, no new political structures will save this society from itself.

Can there be Agreed New Political Structures?

If we put aside the political aims of the I.R.A. and all other self-appointed groups or bodies that use or threaten violence, then I believe that new workable political structures are possible. Some may say this is unrealistic; you cannot ignore the I.R.A. etc. This is no doubt true and the inference is that all of those parties, groups and citizens who believe in non-violent political processes must throw their united support behind the present administration in rooting out and eliminating violence and the threat of violence as a political instrument, whether it be from the Catholic or Protestant side.

This brief review of the major political objectives of some of the parties and groups, leaving aside those associated with violence, leads me to believe that they have sufficient in common. They and we should be thinking in terms of the creation of a new Parliament or Assembly and administration in Northern Ireland in which power is shared equitably either continuously or alternatively or some combination of both, by all parties or groups in the Assembly, whilst permitting formal political links with Britain and the Irish Republic; the links being of such a form that they allow and do not stultify political development.

What should be the extent of the powers of a new Northern Ireland Parliament and administration? I believe that the extent of the devolution of powers to Northern Ireland will depend crucially on the willingness of the political parties in Northern Ireland to share executive political power. If they are not prepared to do this then their power will correspondingly be reduced.

As for links with Britain and the Irish Republic, one possibility is a body such as the Inter-Governmental Council suggested by the former Unionist Government. Another, or an additional possibility, would be representation for the people of Northern Ireland in the Dail, similar to that in the British House of Commons, and also representation in the Irish Senate. Clearly the Constitution of the Irish Republic would require radical changes to make this possibility acceptable to the Protestant community in Northern Ireland. But I am convinced we need and must have radical thinking on our future political structures, — nothing else will do. I fervently hope that our people, our political parties and the respective Governments and Parliaments of Britain and the Irish Republic will rise to the challenges with vision, magnanimity and greatness.

Summary of discussion following Professor Gibson's paper.

1. The meaning of 'integration' - Professor Gibson, in answer to a question, said to him it meant the disappearance of a regional parliament. At present neither the British Parliament nor people considered Northern Ireland as totally in the U.K.
2. Regional Assembly - It was pointed out that, while there was some confusion in people's minds as to what the term "sovereign parliament" really meant, direct responsibility had always rested with Westminster: it had been a mere convention that there had been no interference. Direct rule merely changed method of procedure.
3. Safeguards for Minority - Asked how safeguards could be made effective Professor Gibson said that it was essential that the minority be given a specific share in those institutions which determine quality of life (if Government of Northern Ireland has responsibility for "law and order", let S.D.L.P. take charge or share charge).
4. Violence - The following points were made from the floor:-
 - (a) Violence in western society springs from the frustration of those who, because of more education, have aspirations which cannot be fulfilled;
 - (b) Violence in Northern Ireland has merely been a reaction to violence;
 - (c) Present political structures, both North and South, had originally been established through violence or the threat of violence;
 - (d) the I.R.A. had failed to secure major political victory with violence;
 - (e) through violence or the threat of violence I.R.A. and U.D.A. are imposing a fascist-type system on the community;
 - (f) because of a, b and c it was imperative to talk to the men of violence.
 - (g) mechanisms, not available at beginning of century, now existed for the redress of grievances.

In reply Professor Gibson queried the statement that the I.R.A. had scored no political victory, they could be said to have contributed to the dismantling of Stormont, but was it worth the violence? He agreed that violence had been a reaction to violence, nevertheless it was immoral and a danger to the whole civilised conception of life. It might be necessary to talk to men of violence, but it was dangerous because legitimising violence was inherently destructive of society. It was suggested from the floor that at a peace conference the views of the men of violence could be put forward by others as had been done by Edward MacLysaght and George Russell (AE) at the Irish Convention 1917.

5. Council of Ireland - From the floor it was asked:-

(a) could a solution lie in some form of federal government?

(b) could representation of Northern Ireland in the Dail and of the three counties of Ulster (incorporated in the Irish Free State in 1921) in the Northern Parliament be useful?

(c) Could a structure, such as the Council of Ireland, envisaged in the Government of Ireland Act 1920, be revived and, if so, should it function at inter-governmental or at inter-parliamentary level?

Professor Gibson thought that, in the foreseeable future, a Federal Irish State was out of the question. A sizeable number of Northern representatives in the Dail could play a very significant part, but he could see little point in the representation in the Northern Parliament of the 3 Ulster counties, which would raise problems of national sovereignty. He thought that the Council of Ireland should function at both governmental and parliamentary level. A tripartite council, including representatives of the Westminster government or Parliament, might well provide a suitable framework.