

# Comment

As this is being written the Sunningdale 'settlement' of Northern Ireland has just claimed its first victims in Dublin. Mr Cosgrave has said 'Everyone who practised, preached or condoned violence must bear responsibility' for the hideous massacre. This is plainly true but it reveals a disquieting complacency about the more immediate causes of the affair. The Sunningdale agreement provides for power-sharing between Protestants and Catholics in an executive in effect appointed by the British, for *de facto* recognition, by the Republic, of Northern Ireland as a British territory, and for a Council of Ireland with uncertain powers over both territories. The agreement is the result of the British being taken in by their own propaganda; it rests on the assumption that Northern Ireland consists of two equivalent though unequal groups squabbling for obscure religious reasons, and that it is Britain's task to keep the peace between them. The British see themselves as having taken such men of each faction as are willing to work together and given them a chance to co-operate. They were much gratified to find their arrangements accepted by a majority; they took less care to ask just why people voted as they did. Generally speaking the Catholics accepted Sunningdale not because they wanted to co-operate with Protestants, or because they saw the Council of Ireland as a step towards a united Ireland; the Catholics have never been against co-operating with Protestants and are not very interested in an *anschluss* with Dublin; they accepted Sunningdale because it gave them power for the first time in Northern Ireland and perhaps some chance of dealing with the injustices under which they still suffer. Some Protestants accepted Sunningdale because it looked like the best they would be able to get out of Britain. Between them these groups formed a majority.

But something like half the Protestants were very suspicious indeed of Catholics; what the Loyalists fear is not only losing their privileged position as Protestants, but, more importantly, being betrayed by the Catholics into what they see as an impoverished clerico-fascist state in the south. Now whatever the rights or wrongs of all these views, the outstanding fact is that the Loyalists, who form a third of the population are excluded from the settlement. Northern Ireland began its disastrous and violent career by excluding from power a third of its population who were Catholics; London and Dublin now both seem to believe that they have solved the matter by changing the religion of the excluded third. (It is no answer to say that the Loyalists have simply excluded themselves; exactly the same was said in the Twenties about the Nationalist Catholics.) In Northern Ireland, of all places, it ought to be clear that majority acceptance is no guarantee of the stability of a regime; what is needed is unanimous tolerance, and the Loyalists simply will not tolerate being manouvred into a united Ireland.

The Sunningdale settlement is a recipe for violence and just at the moment it looks as though the British may even be about to escalate

the violence by military confrontation with the Loyalists. This would give Loyalist militants the kind of popular support amongst Protestants that the Provisionals acquired under similar circumstances among the Catholics. It almost looks as though the British were *trying* to create the conditions for Conor Cruise O'Brien's more pessimistic scenario before they ultimately withdraw.

In these circumstances, as we see every other plan being tried and found wanting, it is perhaps time to look more seriously at the proposal we have been advocating for the past three years: an independent Northern Ireland. According to a recent poll this commands the least positive support of any 'solution' to the problem. It is not popular with any large grouping in the province, but the important question is how unpopular it is: would it generate, as all other proposals do, the opposition of a large group determined to wreck the constitution? There are two sides to the proposal: in the first place Northern Ireland would cease to be British—this would disappoint the Loyalists but not much, for their talk of being British is largely rhetoric, what they really want is to be safe from the Republic. In the second place *because* the state ceased to be British it could be unequivocally recognised by Dublin as a permanently separate Irish state which in no way infringes the sovereignty of the people of Ireland over the whole geographical area—this might displease some nationalists, but again talk of a united Ireland is largely rhetoric, what they really want is to be rid of Britain. The proposal, in fact, rests on the solid ground of dealing not with what people say they want, but with what they do *not* want; it does not satisfy their aspirations, it removes their fears.

What, though, of the fears of the Catholics, left at the mercy of the Loyalists when the protection of the British Army is withdrawn? Their major safeguards are the recognition by the Republic, the disbandment of the Provisional IRA and their own expressed loyalty to the new Irish state. There are no infallible safeguards; certainly the British Army is not at the moment preventing what the British press politely calls 'sectarian killings'.

Would it be economically viable? Yes, of course it would if Britain, the Common Market and the Republic all thought it should be, and provided the necessary foreign aid. Independence will not, of course, solve Northern Ireland's problems, which are not basically due to the British political presence or to any threat from the Republic, but it will remove an obstacle on the way to a solution. Northern Ireland's problems are, in the end, part of the general problems of the capitalist west, but they will be a little nearer solution when the lines of the class-struggle can be drawn more clearly. Meanwhile everyone has practised, preached, or condoned the Sunningdale settlement must bear the responsibility for the irrelevant and murderous war that is now taking place instead of the class-struggle.

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