



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Symposium
Do we have a file on this Association?
Note: Not same as British-Irish Association

Irish Association Annual Conference

Belfast 4-6 October 1991

Theme: Interpretations of Ireland

Introduction

The Irish Association was founded in 1938 by Major General Hugh Montgomery of Blessingbourne, Co. Tyrone. Its aim was to "to replace passion and prejudice in Ireland with goodwill and understanding". Since 1969 the Association has expanded its activities in the area of political dialogue. It organises meetings and discussions throughout the year involving a broad spectrum of speakers and contributors. It would, in general, attract those of a moderate opinion to its ranks.

The Annual Conference of the Irish Association is a public occasion and is organised in the form of a week-end seminar around a general theme. In 1990 the theme chosen for its Annual Conference held in Malahide was "A Divided Ireland in a United Europe" and involved several leading political speakers including SDLP leader John Hume. This year's theme for the Annual Conference was more academic, entitled: "Interpretations of Ireland". The theme was a deliberate echo of the posthumously published book of John Whyte entitled "Interpreting Northern Ireland". Whyte had been an active member of the Association and in a very real sense the week-end was a tribute to his work and contribution to better understanding of the political issues in Ireland.

In keeping with the theme, most of the invited speakers were academics; very few politicians attended. The most senior politician to attend any of the sessions was Sean Farren of the SDLP.

Unlike the British-Irish Association, the Irish Association's meetings are public and are thus more a platform for ideas than a forum for private discussions.

The schedule of the Conference is attached. It was comprised of four sessions (i) The Current Political Situation; (ii) Church and State in Modern Ireland; (iii) Interpretations of Northern Ireland and (iv) Future Policy on Northern Ireland of the two main British Parties.

(i) The Current Political Situation

This session took the form of an introductory paper by Dr John Bowman followed by a question and comment period. Bowman's paper was more thought provoking than prescriptive. He reflected on issues such as nationalism, self-determination and partition. He suggested that there were several borders some "hard" and some "soft" depending on the issues and organisations involved. However, he felt the campaign of violence over the past twenty years had hardened these borders. If he were attracted to any political solution to the problem it would be in the form of a package along the lines that might have emerged from the recent talks process. Such a package could be put to an all Ireland referendum which he saw as closing a chapter begun with the General Election of 1918.

In response to suggestions from the floor regarding the amendment or repeal of Articles Two and Three of the Constitution, Bowman warned that such a move would seriously split constitutional nationalism and would be counterproductive in advance of a settlement package. He noted that he had concluded from his research that the Articles as formulated were the minimum nationalist expression that de Valera could have put into the Constitution.

(ii) Church and State in Modern Ireland

This Saturday morning session was probably the least successful. It descended from time to time into a re-run of the right to life of the unborn and the divorce referendum campaigns. The focus remained in the main on the South. Professor Cornelius O'Leary of the Political Science Department of Queens University, Belfast, put forward the view that society in the South was more areligious and less willing to accept the authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy than at any time since the establishment of the Catholic Committee in 1813. Referring back to John Whyte's original work on the subject, Professor O'Leary said the Church was now merely one of a number of interest groups or influences in the State. The second panellist Dr Denis Kennedy, former Head of the European Commission office in Belfast saw the situation very differently from Professor O'Leary. While he accepted the individual practice of Roman Catholicism was waning, he believed the Church's influence in the

state was still very strong and special. Looking at the development of sectarian politics and administration in the North Dr Kennedy suggested that the refusal of the Catholic hierarchy to accept the status of Northern Ireland and cooperate at its inception played an important part in the development of such politics. He did not accept that the establishment of Northern Ireland by its very nature was destined to become sectarian and discriminatory.

Mary Holland, Irish Times Columnist, the third panellist, made a somewhat anecdotal contribution. (She had stepped in at the last moment in place of Fintan O'Toole, Irish Times). She disagreed with Professor O'Leary and referred to what she called the "dislocation between aspiration and reality" in Irish politics especially in regard to religion and the Northern Ireland issue. At the same time she did recognise the positive role played by the Church over the years on social economic issues.

In general the debate remained focused on the South. Although one contributor from the floor mentioned that the Protestant churches in the North were not liberal and that liberal legislation had been imposed upon the North by Westminster.

(iii) Interpretations of Northern Ireland

This debate was in effect the centre piece of the week-end as it took its starting point from the late Dr Whyte's analysis in his book "Interpreting Northern Ireland". The three panellists for this session were Dr Brendan O'Leary, Department of Political Science, LSE, Ms Saline Wichert (author of "Northern Ireland since 1945") and Dr Richard English, Department of Political Science, Queen's University Belfast.

Dr Brendan O'Leary based his paper on a critique of Dr Whyte's work to which he paid fulsome tribute. He did, however, take issue with what he saw as Dr Whyte's over-reliance on sociologists such as Bruce Stephens in giving credence to the religious aspect as the defining feature of Unionists as an ethnic group. He viewed the Unionists as more politically than religiously inspired and the conflict within Northern Ireland more linked to the relationship between British and Irish nationalism. He was also unhappy with Dr Whyte's apparent attachment to

the internal conflict paradigm in his work. On recent opinion surveys with which he had been associated and which were published in Fortnight magazine, Dr O' Leary warned that it had been shown before that such surveys seriously overestimated the moderate viewpoint in Northern Ireland politics. If the present talks process came to nothing he felt there would be a "deepening" of the relationship between the two governments.

Ms Saline Wichert sought to put an historical perspective on the present situation criticising what she saw as the excessively contemporary approach of political scientists. In her view, the Unionist identity came from being excluded from being Irish. The discriminatory system which developed in the North might well be seen as a culmination of 19th century patronage.

Dr Richard English pointed to various paradoxes in Irish politics and the positions of its leaders. He referred to his own research on Ernie O'Malley which showed him to be both Anglo-phobic and at the same time a great admirer of English literature and culture. He suggested that while it was generally assumed that the situation in Northern Ireland was dysfunctional it could be argued that it was actually functional allowing for a slow incremental improvement in conditions while a low intensity conflict continued.

- (iv) The final session on Sunday morning was divided time-wise in two to consider both Conservative and Labour Future Policies on Northern Ireland

Future Labour Party Policy on Northern Ireland

Dr Brendan O' Leary of the LSE, who is also a member of the British Labour Party, gave a fairly extensive review of Labour's policy based upon unity by consent, internal reform, increased North/South coordination and cooperation, and, perhaps devolved Government. He accepted that it would take three to four parliaments for Labour to achieve its aim of unity by consent. He gave a comprehensive list of areas Labour would seek to reform from the PTA, Emergency legislation and lethal force to equal funding for all schools and membership of official boards.

Discussion from the floor resulted in a rather lengthy exchange about whether Labour should be organised in the North or not. Contributors from the floor including Graham Gudgin and Mary Holland were very much in favour while O'Leary himself opposed the idea as he said it would interfere with Labour's neutral role in any discussions between the parties in the North.

(Ms Holland, in private, was particularly scathing about Labour's present policy on the North which she saw as cobbled together to appease both wings of the party. Only by having an organisation in the North could there be an input by those most affected by policy.

I also spoke to David Morrison of the campaign for Labour organisation in the North after the debate. He had just returned from what he saw as a successful week's lobbying at the Labour Party Conference. Morrison confidently predicted that it would not be long before Labour would have an organisation in the North.)

In replying to the debate, Dr O'Leary said he believed present Labour policy was sustainable. However, if it were not successful he foresaw a further development of the relationship between the British and Irish Governments leading to some form of joint authority.

Future Conservative Policy on Northern Ireland

Arthur Aughey, of the University of Ulster, presented a paper on Conservative Policy on Northern Ireland. Aughey, the author of "Under Siege: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement", is seen as an academic close to the Unionist viewpoint. He traced the development of Conservative Party policy since direct rule which he saw, with the exception of the period of 1975-79 under Airey Neave, as accepting two distinct communities within Northern Ireland and that any solution would have to involve agreement between those communities. He also detected from conversations with senior Tories and particularly associated academics that the establishment of the party had already in a sense withdrawn from Northern Ireland and did not see a future in the Province. He even suggested a similar attitude towards Scotland as the focus on sovereignty became the relationship between London and

Brussels and not the Union. This had probably contributed to what he put as the abandonment of the "Finchley approach" in favour of the "Gibraltar approach". In effect he saw the acceptance of the internationalisation of the problem by the Conservatives which led to, amongst other things, the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Mr Aughey said he believed Mr Brooke's recent interview with Frank Millar in the Irish Times reinforced his view regarding the development of Conservative policy, although he did allow for the possibility that he might be suffering from "Unionist paranoia". In particular, he saw it as significant that on the question of the Union and of using the Anglo-Irish Agreement to force concessions from Unionists, Mr Brooke spoke only in personal terms and did not commit the Government or Party to the Union or to rejecting the use of the Agreement to lever the Unionists.

On the development of Conservative Associations in Northern Ireland, Aughey noted that Brooke, both as Party Chairman and Secretary of State, had opposed their affiliation. He characterised the Northern Ireland Conservatives as fundamentally a pro-union party; they did not rule out devolution but it was not a priority. The Northern Ireland Conservatives also sought to improve and develop procedures for dealing with Northern Ireland affairs in Westminster, develop local government, defeat terrorism and sectarianism. Aughey understood that such ideas had been put to local Conservative Associations in Britain as part of the Party's internal consultations and that, in general, party activists had responded favourably. However, activists had also expressed admiration for Mr Brooke's efforts suggesting they would support whatever results he might achieve.

The floor discussion was dominated by an intervention by Northern Ireland Conservative North Down Councillor James O'Fee who said his group would be seeking to amend the draft resolution on Northern Ireland at this week's Conservative Party Conference. The present draft recognised the role of the Irish dimension and committed the party to the union as long as the majority in Northern Ireland so wished. The Northern Ireland Conservatives would seek to amend the draft to exclude the "consent clause" and simply commit the party to the Union. (Reports

from Blackpool suggest that the Northern Ireland Tories, in a tactical move, abandoned this amendment in favour of another amendment which commended their own activities.)

General

The week-end saw an amount of lively debate in a public forum. The theme of the conference and the guest speakers involved resulted in a much more academic dominated debate than the previous year's which had been dominated by politicians. While this was stimulating for much of the time, it did at times descend into academic rivalry.

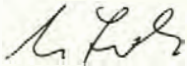
In a private conversation, Sean Farren said he did not expect the talks process to get off the ground again. The time was not right for Unionists. Although the forthcoming British General election appeared the most immediate stumbling bloc, the real problem was lack of agreement and coherence among Unionists as to where they should go from here.

Robin Wilson of Fortnight Magazine was very visible and active during the week-end (he chaired one of the sessions). He spent much time promoting the recent surveys published by Fortnight and its proposal of a grand commission to seek a way forward. In conversation he told me that he felt the talks would not take place as no one on either side really wanted them. He then proceeded forcefully to suggest that if Articles Two and Three were repealed and a Bill of Rights introduced by the British that somehow all the pieces would fall into place and the obstructionists in all parties be over-thrown. He felt that recent survey evidence about attitudes to Articles Two and Three by the nationalist community showed a majority in favour of such a change. Of course, it was pointed out to him the political realities of attempting to make such a change in the absence of any overall political settlement and indeed that the survey question regarding Articles Two and Three was put in the context of other questions on an overall settlement.

I also had the opportunity to speak to Adrian Guelke who seemed to have recovered from the recent attack on him by loyalist paramilitaries. He was fairly satisfied that the loyalists had been put up to the attack by South African security agents whom he said had gone completely out of

control and were seeking revenge. According to him, the loyalists may not have known exactly why they were attacking him. He also felt he was particularly lucky that the attack was mounted by young and inexperienced gunmen who panicked when things went wrong.

The presence of a representative of the Department of Foreign Affairs was, I believe, appreciated by the Conference organisers and Association members. The early sessions were also attended by Messrs Jeremy Thorp and John MacKervill of the British Embassy.



M. Forbes
Anglo-Irish Division
7 October, 1991

c.c. A/Sec O' hUiginn
Counsellors Anglo-Irish
Box

W6694