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cc PS/PUS (B&L)
PS/Sir Ewart Bell ✓
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Dr Quigley
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Mr Dugdale
Mr Merifield
Mr Templeton
Mr Gilliland
Mr Burns

NORTHERN IRELAND'S CULTURAL PROFILE IN THE USA

1. The problems you raise and to which John Parkes sent an interim response on 6 January, deserve the broadest consideration. We all agree it is important to improve US consciousness about Northern Ireland. My proposition is that some new and modest steps could be taken quite easily, but that a serious effort to influence American opinion would involve a combined British/Irish effort and that that, although well worthwhile, would require some exceptional device to ensure accord between the two countries.

2. IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES

The immediate objectives should be to provide outlets for the talents of people from Northern Ireland in ways which will attract Americans to value the day to day life of the Province. The media used should usually be painting, music, dance and sport. All these express the Northern Ireland community as a whole and appeal to all of it. Without some such effort the ordinary American (like the ordinary Englishman) will only learn about the Province through the distorting mirror of television. Government should use the same media to convey a different message, and it should not aim to put any political case at the same time.

To bring about such activity need not be difficult. The Ulster Museum, the Ulster Folk Museum and the Arts Council, not to mention the Northern Ireland Sports Council, are always glad to respond if funds are available, and all are financed by DENI. Actual responsibility for a coherent US programme would need to be allocated, however, and this would require serious consideration. The right patron would be the British Council, probably funded to some special degree by NIO. Alternatively it could be the Northern Ireland Arts Council or the Northern Ireland Information Service. There may well be other possibilities. But the main thing is that there is plenty of talent available and it would be a useful and delightful change if Northern Ireland's US image could include (say) performances by a group from the Ulster Orchestra rather than violence or political intransigence. It would also be important to attract people from the USA to Northern Ireland and the obvious route for this would be by the sponsorship of major sporting events: there has been talk recently of a golf tournament which would be aimed at major players. If others are sympathetic to this general approach I am sure there is a case for discussion between David Gilliland, yourself, this Department and perhaps

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Ken Jamison (NI Arts Council) or George Thompson (Ulster Folk Museum): certainly progress could be made quite easily.

An effort of this kind ignores the difficult issues. For that reason I have not mentioned contributions by poets and writers. It may be that this is too pessimistic, and that there could be enlivening and attractive presentations by non-political writers like (say) Mebh McGuckian or Bernard MacLaverty or Michael Longley. But my suggestion is that non-literary activity would be more certain to attract audiences away from conventional reactions.

3. LONGER TERM OBJECTIVES

However, it may be helpful to sketch the case for a more ambitious (and longer term) approach. This lets me set down some impressions and suggestions based on my year at Harvard, and to go beyond the immediate problem. I hope this will be helpful.

The case for a broader approach starts from the fact that in the USA there are 40m people who identify with their Irish origins and minimise their other origins. To be Irish is also to be All-American. To be British is to be acceptable in select circles on the West and East Coast, but it still carries an aura of Empire and elitism. The immense immigrations from England, Scotland, Wales, not to mention that of the "Scotch/Irish" have a much lower ethnic profile than immigration from Catholic Ireland. These are broad generalities and could be qualified at every point with references (say) to Welsh miners in Pennsylvania or English colonists in Virginia. But in order to define what is involved in presenting Northern Ireland's cultural profile in the USA, it is essential to stress the authenticity and separateness of Ireland's image and to compare it with the weaker image of Scotland, the much weaker image of Wales, and with the ambivalence of feeling about "England" and indeed about Britain. No American can totally support George III, whereas Ulster Unionism is seen to reject the appeal of an Irish nationality which was formed, like the USA's, in opposition to Britain.

Then too the Unionist attitude complicates good relations between the UK and Ireland. For the UK to advocate Ulster Unionism wholeheartedly implies a criticism of the Irish Republic's irredentist claim. In the USA it would lead to tension with the Republic's US representatives, who distance themselves from the American AOH, and from IRA sympathisers but who nevertheless advocate an all-Ireland objective. Correspondingly the Republic has had its own reasons for not pressing republican ideology much beyond the rhetorical level. The result is that both

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sets of representatives in the USA maintain their distance from Northern Ireland and the difficult problems it raises (and in passing I should say that the present Irish Ambassador delivered the most ignorant, pretentious and partisan speech which I heard from any responsible person while in the USA!).

Thus Northern Ireland is seen as a problem external to both states, rather than as a symptom of their relationship. Hence it is convenient to look at Northern Ireland in isolation, so far as it is considered at all. In turn this points towards Dr Mahony's belief, which you discuss, that it is enlightening to present "Catholic" and "Protestant" views, either as an ethnic phenomena, or in the pointless hope of achieving a local synthesis. In reality there are very few such spokesmen and none who could convincingly put the issues in a sealed Northern Ireland context. To do so requires a separatist Ulster view, and this attracts very few people apart from an ex-politician like Paddy Devlin or a low grade intellectual

The nearest approach to an acceptable face for Ulster, taken as an entity in itself, would perhaps be that of John Oliver (retired NICS Permanent Secretary), who could be reft easily from his retirement near Kendal but who is no simple Ulster Nationalist. When George Thompson retires from the Ulster Folk Museum in a couple of years he would provide an even better option.

But a cultural stance centred on Ulster does not appeal to either Irish Nationalists or to Unionists, and provides a very limited platform for UK Government. Distinguished intellectuals from the Ulster Catholic community - say Seamus Heaney or Seamus Deane ('Civilians and Barbarians') - identify most with Ireland in general, even if both have broader sympathies as well: very recently, for instance, Heaney took the trouble to write a long poem about why he should not be in an Oxford Book of British Verse, while Deane, who agrees that neither conventional Irish Nationalist nor conventional Ulster Unionist points of view are satisfactory, has yet argued for a "fifth Irish Province", which is a transcending but wholly Ireland-centred concept. No Ulster Protestants of comparable distinction are expressing Unionist views: their tendency, where they exist, is to identify with some type of secularised Republicanism (like Tom Paulin) or to become mainstream British voices like Derek Mahon, or like Louis MacNeice in an earlier generation. John Hewitt has been something of an exception to this trend but he is now too old to be called upon. It is, however, a counterpoise to this Ulster Protestant weakness that of the best modern Irish writers - Joyce, Yeats, Shaw, Synge, George Moore, Beckett - few were Catholics and none practising Catholics, and that none identified with modern Irish Republicanism.

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Thus it is very difficult to discover a serious Ulster (or Irish) culture to promote. From a Dublin perspective the lacuna is grave, the more so as the Gaelic language revival has failed. Into both parts of the island, in a great voluntary absorption of external cultural forces, has come the ubiquitous mid-Atlantic world. The process is resisted in different ways by Church and State, but it can hardly be stopped by either, or by the eloquence of a Desmond Fennell ('The State of the Nation') or a Terence Brown ('Ireland: A Cultural History'). (At less rarified heights, Rory O'Bradaigh told a friend of mine how depressed he had been to find his son to be a strong Liverpool FC supporter!) Whatever the vulgarity of pop culture, the charismatic movement, or 'Dallas', it is apparent that the attractions they provide are post national and that the regimes established in the twenties in Dublin and Belfast can now each be seen as conservative attempts to shore up ethnic and confessional traditions. The Northern Ireland system was the most vulnerable, and has gone beyond recall, but the Catholic micro nationalism which descended from Pearse has now lost much of its appeal to educated people in Ireland, if not to their cousins in the US.

Thus the proper context for public effort to express Northern Ireland's culture in the USA is not provided by Northern Ireland or Ireland. It involves the British/Irish world or even the English speaking world, and it is difficult to see it being satisfactorily handled by the UK alone. It involves seeing Northern Ireland as part of the Anglo Irish relationship. That relationship is expressed by imaginative writers like William Trevor or Irish Murdoch, who are at home on both sides of the Irish Sea. Brian Friel's excellent play 'Translations', which turns entirely on historic questions of cross-channel communication illustrates the theme from the Irish side.

At a more academic level there are political scientists like Bernard Crick (University of London), Patrick Keatinge (Trinity College, Dublin), John Whyte (soon to be UCD), and Paul Arthur (Ulster Polytechnic). All of them share a view of the islands as a political sub-system. There are also several first class historians. Among the younger generation are Roy Foster (University of London), the biographer of Parnell and Randolph Churchill, and now writing a new Penguin History of Ireland, Tom Garvin (University College, Dublin) who wrote a good study of Irish nationalism, distinguishing it from the Republicanism which he thinks hi-jacked it, Ronan Fanning (University College, Dublin) and Charles Townsend (of Keele) who has written recently on both the British campaign in Ireland after the First World War and about Irish political violence. Other historians would include J C Beckett and A T Q Steward (Queen's University, Belfast).

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Beckett has written sympathetically of the Anglo Irish tradition and Stewart of Ulster Unionist and Protestant history. All these scholars, were there some sort of joint British/Irish effort, could express the connections between Britain and Ireland, and not only reduce the chasm perceived in the USA between the two countries, but also explain the consequent tensions within Northern Ireland. They could add a touch of dignity and credibility to the competing values involved.

Within the USA itself there is a rather small group of academics with an interest in Ireland. This would include David Miller (Pittsburgh) (author of 'The Queen's Rebels'), Emmet Larkin (Chicago) (sceptical historian of the 19th Century Irish Church) and Perry Curtis (Brown) (late 19th Century Historian of Ireland). During my own visit I met John McCarthy and Maurice O'Connell (New York), both attractive exponents of modest old style nationalism. But the most impressive speaker I met was Patrick O'Malley, whose 'Uncivil Wars' was recently published. He values his total independence, and (in my view) has not yet faced up to the depth of the British/Irish relationship, but for the foreseeable future he will be an Irish spokesman in the USA for peace and comprehension. I imagine that if he was available at all under official auspices, it could only be on a joint British/Irish or solely Irish basis.

My information about US academic centres of interest in Ireland is limited. The American Committee for Irish Studies includes most of those I have mentioned, but serious collective activity occurs mainly at a few lesser universities. North-Eastern in Boston, the Catholic University of America in Washington, and the Irish American Cultural Institute in Minneapolis come to mind and I think there are others. At Harvard, which I do not suppose is unique among great American universities, there was only occasional interest, yet during a single year I met Dr F S L Lyons, Mr Harold McCusker, Mr Oliver Napier, and Mr John Hume, and listened to Senator Mary Robinson. Dr Fitzgerald was in Boston at one stage, and there was talk (which I discouraged!) of Sile De Valera being appointed to the CFIA for a few months. On the Faculty is Professor Roger Fisher who specialises in conflict resolution as such, including conflict in Ireland, and whom I probably disappointed and, of course, there were the Celtic experts, the British experts and also the Middle-East experts in search of something easier. From my limited experience I conclude that there is considerable, if occasional, interest to be tapped in American Universities. Equally, from anything I saw of the Irish/American community, I would suppose that the great mass of ordinary feeling which it contains will, for the foreseeable future, also have its incurable xenophobics. More important, because more capable of being countered,

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there is the immense distortion about Northern Ireland which stems from American respect for what is wrongly perceived to be a colonialist issue.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion I draw is that a serious educational campaign would require a joint British/Irish effort and a commitment to the bi-insular perspective. For well known reasons the two Governments find it hard to act jointly, so I think an invitation to the Anglo Irish Encounter Group that they undertake the task should be considered. There is a comparable case of the Encounter Group to act similarly in Britain and Ireland, but that is another story. The Encounter Group could ensure that any programme balanced British and Irish speakers, and avoided mere national propaganda. Such a procedure should come naturally to a body which exists to express the permanent British/Irish relationship; and for all I know it would help in providing it with a long term purpose.

This large proposition is made because I think it is needed. But for immediate purposes there are the much simpler options which this note has also tried to sketch.

Arthur Green

A J Green
25 January 1984

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