


E.R.

Mr Green, DENI

cc: ✓ PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Burns ✓
Mr Parkes
Mr Chesterton
Mr Elliott
Mr Spence
Mr Warburton, DOE
Mr Blackwell
Mr Kirk



IRISH CULTURE (AND LANGUAGE)

Thank you for your minute of 30 December^{*}, and still more for your lengthy 1983 Harvard Paper which our recent Siberian weather gave me the leisure to read at home. If you will permit me to say so, it was one of the most stimulating pieces I have read on Northern Ireland for a long time. I found especially interesting your argument that the conflicts of Northern Ireland cannot be resolved (assuming that they are capable of solution) except within the wider British/Irish context - and, within that framework, some form of continued Direct Rule was the best that we could, or should hope for. Equally I thought your critique of the narrowness and unreality of much even relatively moderate (or "Geraldine") Irish nationalist ideology made a number of points that are not always given sufficient weight on this side of the water. I am only sorry that more urgent, but less important, business has prevented me from replying sooner.

2. But while I sympathise with much of what you have to say, I still have difficulty with important aspects of your major thesis (which underpins the arguments in your shorter minute to me) and its implications for cultural policy. At the risk of simplification, though not of deliberate distortion, you seem to be arguing that the current troubles of Northern Ireland arise from "British/Irish tensions" which the highly politicised efforts to perpetuate or artificially recreate an "Irish" (ie non-Anglo-American) culture and cultural identity in Ireland tend to exacerbate. The sooner, therefore, that all parts of these islands accept they are but parts of that wider

* not to all

E.R.

Anglo-American culture, the happier these islands and Northern Ireland in particular, will be. The sooner, therefore, we forget about the Irish language or "Gaelic" culture the better.

3. Here I cannot follow you. Let us, however, start by assuming for the purpose of argument that, even though relations between Dublin and London have perhaps never been better, the conflicts of Northern Ireland do reflect "British/Irish tensions"; let us also provisionally assume that there is such a thing as Anglo-American culture, and that the USA is not simply a foreign, non-European society, with whom we happen to share much of a language and to whose own, highly individual culture, we are heavily exposed. Even so, I do not believe that the concept of "Anglo-American culture", will do the work we you want it to. That is in part because, at the most basic and uncontroversial level, that culture seems little more than the lowest common denominator of what is shared throughout the English speaking world; Dynasty, IBM, the Royal Family, Big Mac.... I hope, therefore, you are not arguing in favour of submerging what is distinctive of the various national and ethnic cultures of the British Isles in a single, uniform and homogenised culture stretching from Seattle, via Ireland, to Kent. This really does seem a recipe for grave cultural and spiritual impoverishment (and not just for Ireland). However, your enthusiasm for the "mid-Atlantic" and the short shrift you give to the late Provost of Trinity's modest plea in favour of retaining some of Ireland's cultural peculiarities in the face of overseas influences, cannot but make me uneasy.

4. On the other hand, you appear to overlook one of the most distinctive features of modern British (or US culture): its ability to absorb or tolerate remarkably heterogeneous cultural influences, and to accept the existence, with varying degrees of success, of minorities within its borders. This last, in particular, is something for which neither part of Ireland is celebrated. My counterproposal would be that, if we are serious

E.R.

in seeking to resolve peacefully the ancient conflicts of Ireland in an "all archipelago" context (which is at least in part what I take the Anglo-Irish Agreement to be about), and if we are also to take seriously the best traditions of your "Anglo-American" culture, then I wonder whether a more fruitful approach to cultural policy might not lie in attempting a greater comprehensiveness in Northern Ireland (and Great Britain too) rather than in trying to ignore, or let die, any particular aspect of the cultural complex in which we both live? In other words, should we not be trying to be more pluralistic rather than less within a United Kingdom (and a Northern Ireland) which can accommodate peacefully the widest possible range of cultural minorities, be they Afro-Caribbean, Protestant Northern Irish, Indian, Catholic, ^{Irish} or what you will.

5. But there are other reasons for fostering "Irish" culture (including being modestly supportive of the Irish language) than the simple prejudices of a "romantic Englishman" weeping over the ruins of Clonmacnois. They include the facts that many of the surviving aspects of "Irish" culture that have ultimately Celtic rather than Anglo-Saxon roots*, including what is left of the language and its literature, still have an intrinsic value (even in translation) of which no one in Ireland (or Great Britain) should be wilfully deprived. Fortunately, there is some evidence of the ability of the "Irish" strain in Ireland's cultural heritage to rejuvenate and study the modern culture of the island in ways that are not partisan, or necessarily linked to the "nationalist" view of Ireland's destiny: you will, for instance, know the extent to which Celtic Irish mythology in particular has inspired artists from both traditions in Ireland, north and south, to do some of their best work: I think in particular of Kinney's ceramic murals and Le Broquy's illustrations to Kinsella's translation of the Tain, which led in turn to a series of separate paintings and tapestries. These both comprise, I suggest, some of the finest products of the Irish visual imagination in recent years; are specifically Irish; and more readily accessible than

* note that I am not falling into the nationalist trap of defining Irish culture as synonymous with Catholic/Irish culture *Gaelic*

E.R.

the work of some other modern artists to anyone with any interest in the visual arts.

6. Second, even were it not our policy under the Anglo-Irish Agreement to recognise and respect the identities of the two communities, it would still be in our interests to do so. On the one hand, the more we give the impression of being unsympathetic to whatever little is left of "Irish" culture, the more we strengthen Sinn Féin's self-serving claim to be the only true protector of that culture - when our task should be precisely to erode the links between that culture and militant Republicanism. On the other hand, a negative attitude is not likely to reinforce our efforts in other spheres to persuade nationalists that their interests can be adequately catered for, and respected, within a UK (or NI) context. If nationalists are "alienated" from the institutions of Northern Ireland, it is only because in the past I suggest, what differentiates them from the majority - which includes certain vestigial Celtic Irish traditions or more recent renewals of the same - has not been respected. I fear, therefore, that I see no basis for long term peace or stability in Northern Ireland except on a basis of mutual respect. The alternative, which we both deplore, is only too likely to be Dr O'Brien's "Model B".

7. I apologise for writing at such length, and for the inevitable omissions in what, as you have pointed out, is a large subject. But it is important, I think, to try and sketch a reasoned case for cultural pluralism (including, perhaps, a more sympathetic attitude to the Irish language, which has become the unfortunate focus of these wider political and cultural issues). For my greatest fear is that an unintended consequence, outside the Harvard Seminar Room, of some of the arguments you are advancing would be to provide, in unscrupulous hands, a rationale for policies of cultural and more general intolerance - which I do not repeat of describing earlier as "bigotry" - that would, once again, help propel Ireland towards that "Model B".

P N Bell

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13. February 1987

Contd over

CONFIDENTIAL

PERSONAL

E.R.

PS: Incidentally, the reference in my earlier minute to "the other lot" was not meant to denote any particular section of the community. The context was meant, deliberately, to be ambiguous: the "other lot" denoted, in fact, whatever community one was not a member of one's self.