

Comment

The belief is quite widespread in England that Ian Paisley is an evil but magnetic figure who attracts large numbers of incomprehensibly bigoted supporters. This view is quite mistaken. Dr Paisley is, indeed, a nasty piece of work who may or may not believe the rubbish he talks about religious matters, but the massive support for him is perfectly intelligible and, in its own terms, quite rational.

A central fact of life in Northern Ireland is that if you are a working-class Protestant (in the tribal rather than the theological sense of the word) your chances of getting and keeping one of such jobs as there are is nearly four times as good as if you were a Catholic. So it is only common sense, at least in the short term, to support the man who is fighting to preserve your position of privilege, which means your livelihood. There is not, of course, the same imbalance between Protestants and Catholics of the professional classes, and this accounts for middle-class anti-Paisleyites such as join the Alliance Party, who toy with ecumenism and for whom the British connection is a preference. For the Paisleyites it is a necessity.

It is quite useless to blame the Protestant worker for defending his job. He has a family to support and *he* didn't invent Northern Ireland. There is not much point, either, in reproaching him for the ugly sectarian language through which his real concerns are expressed and at the same time fudged. He is a frightened man whose security, it seems, may be swept away by a tide of barbarous priest-worshipping papists unless Dr Paisley can hold back the flood.

The question is not who is to blame, but what is to be done? That question can be answered; but there is a further question. Will it be done? To this the answer (for reasons quite external to Northern Ireland) is fairly certainly: No.

The North was set up because the interests of the capitalists of an industrialised and, then, relatively prosperous area were different from the interests of those in the not yet industrially developed south. As an integral part of the United Kingdom the six counties might for a time have made real economic sense, but there were strong political reasons on both sides of the Irish Sea which ruled this out. Instead was created the political oddity of Northern Ireland (comparable in some respects, perhaps, only to Israel) which could only be maintained by exploiting religious differences, by mobilising a large part of the Protestant population for the repression of Catholics. The problem was, of course, self-fuelling, for as the discrimination, the physical and psychological and economic violence intensified, so did the hostility of Catholics to the statelet itself. Northern Ireland could only be maintained by putting jobs, houses and guns into the hands of the Protestant

tribe as such. It was, and is, an inherently unstable and inherently violent regime preserved by a system of privilege. This is the institution of which the Provisionals and Dr Paisley are both products and symptoms. The British who set it up (admittedly as a temporary measure with the hope and expectation that it would be merged with the then Free State in the south), and who have been helping to maintain it for half a century, are now faced with the task of dismantling it – or rather this is the task that they are failing to face.

The bi-partisan British non-policy on Northern Ireland is to maintain things as they are so long as the majority there wish it. Translated, this means that Britain will back Protestant privilege until the Protestant workers grow tired of it (for adult Catholics will remain a minority so long as they are forced to emigrate for jobs). The more public forms of discrimination have been removed but the basic economic deprivation remains; that is why, generally speaking, the people the Army shoot are Catholics.

The alternative to this is not, as the *Daily Mirror* seems to suppose, that Britain should cut her losses and get out, leaving the Irish to solve their own problems. The answer is to dismantle the system of privilege not by depriving Protestants of their jobs and giving them to Catholics, but by creating a new economy no longer geared to preserving a sectarian state and so no longer based on discrimination. This is what Humphrey Atkins and Michael O'Kennedy, representing the British and Irish governments, should have talked about in New York, for this task, ideally, could be shared between the two countries. (Ireland, with the fastest growing economy in Europe is seeking skilled technicians, and reportedly seeking them amongst the Irish in *Glasgow*. There will be a surplus in Belfast when Sir Keith Joseph and Mrs Thatcher have had their way with industry there.) What the people of Northern Ireland need first of all is a lot more jobs and, ideally, Dublin and London should be able to co-operate in providing for these; then, in wholly different economic conditions the politics of the North may be rethought.

But will this, can this, happen? Perhaps it could have done ten years ago, in that transitory age of affluence, but now it seems too late. The Irish economic boom is, in fact, already faltering while the British are well on the way into depression – enthusiastically assisted by their government. Neither of them is, nor is the EEC, in any position to sustain the economic rebuilding of Northern Ireland on a sensible basis, for the whole capitalist world is sliding deeply into slump. Northern Ireland is just one of the problems that capitalism has set itself and which it cannot solve. The answer can only finally come as part of a more rational, more democratic, ordering of the world economy; until then the violence will remain.

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