

THE BRITISH INITIATIVE IN ULSTER

by Michael McDowell

The British will soon unveil detailed plans to restore devolved government to Northern Ireland.¹ Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, encouraged by her successful efforts in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, is determined to apply the same skills in Ulster. But can she achieve a Rhodesia-type settlement there? The search for agreement in that part of the U.K. officially began on January 7, 1980, when the British convened a conference of the main political parties in Belfast.

One seasoned Ulster politician observed then: "Ulster is more difficult to resolve than Rhodesia, with its own peculiar problems which have existed for centuries. This could be one conflict the Tories can't sort out quickly. And remember that our terrorists, unlike Robert Mugabe's, aren't mollified by free elections — we have those. I am sure of one thing", he went on. "The Tories are going to *act* — to impose some sort of 'solution' whether the local leaders can agree or not. Whether we work that 'solution' is the real test for us and for the British."

The venue for the 1980 talks was the grandiose Parliament building at Stormont, perched high in the hills cradling the city. Much the same cadre of politicians trooped down its ghost-filled corridors to the conference room, situated a tempting few yards away from the old debating chamber which housed previous efforts at devolution — the Northern Ireland Convention of 1976, the Ulster Assembly of 1974 and the old majority-rule parliament prorogued in 1972. The belief that something must, and more importantly, *can* be done now to answer the Irish Question separates the Conservatives from their Labour predecessors who concluded that direct-rule of Ulster from London, with British Ministers in Belfast, was the only acceptable alternative to widening dissent among the sectarian groupings of Northern Ireland.

Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, and his Ulster Secretary, Roy Mason, were faced with Protestant politicians demanding a return to the old majority-rule-minority-exclusion system of government, versus Catholic politicians' insistence on reserved places in any Government with a recognition of, or commitment on all-Ireland links — the so-called "Irish Dimension" of Ulster politics. The Labour Government's reluctance to pursue political movement was encouraged by their minority position in the Westminster Parliament — where the swing-votes of Ulster's Unionist MPs partly held them prisoner.

The Conservatives have adopted a far more activist Ulster policy, abandoning an earlier election manifesto pledge to increase powers of local town councils in Northern Ireland and bring closer integration with the rest of the U.K. The councils, mainly Protestant-dominated, have a record of discrimination in public housing in the past and although they no longer have control of that, several have been charged with sectarian appointments to local government jobs. The Tories' original election pledge was essentially the brainchild of Mrs. Thatcher's then Ulster spokesman, Airey Neave, and designed to placate

Protestant politicians. Neave favoured a tougher security policy and was regarded with considerable suspicion by Catholic and centre leaders. But he was murdered in a skilful IRA car-bomb attack as he drove from the House of Commons in April 1979.

Neave's death — he was a close personal friend of Mrs. Thatcher — hardened her conviction that something had to be done in Ulster, and the murder only four months later in the Irish Republic, of Lord Mountbatten, followed barely hours after that by the killing of eighteen British soldiers in Warrenpoint, Northern Ireland (the biggest single Army fatality in the history of the troubles), added to her determination to deal with the Irish problem, even in the face of local intransigence. She appointed former Chief Whip Humphrey Atkins, a softer, more conciliatory politician than Neave, as Northern Ireland Secretary. Mrs. Thatcher's first priority, however, was a Zimbabwe-Rhodesia settlement, but Lord Carrington's early success there pushed Ulster higher up the political agenda. Anxious to stymie pressure from Catholic Irish-American politicians such as Senators Kennedy and Moynihan, Speaker O'Neill and Governor Carey, who had accused the former Labour administration of "tilt" in favour of the Protestants, Mrs. Thatcher pushed her Ulster Secretary to produce an early initiative timed to precede her first official U.S. visit in early December.

She arrived in the U.S. armed with the Zimbabwe-Rhodesia settlement and able to tell President Carter that her Ulster conference was set to begin with not only the (Catholic) Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), but Ian Paisley's hard-line Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the moderate centre party, Alliance, taking part. The initiative, however, was almost stillborn. Written in haste by civil servants, some of whom had only a few months' service in Ulster, it firmly ruled out any discussion of the "Irish Dimension" — a rebuff for the SDLP.

Although, when the conference working-paper was unveiled in the Commons, SDLP leader Gerry Fitt gave a general welcome to the document, his enthusiasm was not shared by his party colleagues. Just a few days later, they voted to reject the British conference, as it stood. Fitt resigned and was replaced by the less-compromising Euro-MP John Hume, who insisted on an "Irish-Dimension" in any discussions. The initiative seemed doomed to failure, since the main Protestant Party, the Official Unionists, heavily influenced by Enoch Powell (an Englishman who is now an Ulster MP), had already decided to boycott the conference and pressed the Tories to implement their original election pledge to reform local government. They expected Protestant hard-liner, the Reverend Ian Paisley, to boycott too, but Paisley, to everyone's astonishment, and suspicion, announced he would go to the talks.

Ian Paisley, who built his political following and reputation on his uncompromising stands not only against Irish unity but on his adamant rejection of minority politicians in a Northern Ireland administration, had worked to make all previous constitutional talks between the two communities fail. He had, before, stayed *outside* such meetings, attacking them as Trojan horses for Irish unity. Paisley's very involvement in these talks breathed new life into a British initiative which, until then, had been perceived as a cosmetic exercise to lessen pressures for "action" from the Irish Republic and the U.S.A. The talks could

not have gone ahead with both the Official Unionists *and* Paisley refusing to participate — the British had won one party over if not the other. But why was Paisley taking part? One hardened minority politician commented at the start of the talks: “Paisley is a short-term tactician. His whole object is not to achieve agreed government but to outflank his Protestant rivals, the Official Unionists, so ably led astray by Enoch Powell. Paisley’s new image of reconciler will revert to type in a few months. Paisley has achieved quite a coup by being the only significant Protestant leader in these talks and he will increase his electoral support as a result because most Protestants are unhappy with the Official Unionist boycott of this conference.”

Paisley’s huge (30%) vote in the elections to the European Parliament had boosted his political confidence immeasurably and he spoke of himself as the new leader of the Protestant people. His plurality encouraged him to take part in the talks without being in danger of a “sell-out” on unity accusation. And, some optimists argued, his participation really meant he would accept some governmental structure where Catholic politicians would have a significant role. He was convinced, others claimed, that Mrs. Thatcher’s conference would indeed be the last chance, for a long time, to achieve devolution for Northern Ireland.

The (Catholic) SDLP, were eventually persuaded to go to the conference with an assurance from Atkins that the Irish Dimension could be discussible in “parallel talks” where the SDLP could more fully raise the question of Irish unity, through examination of cross-border economic cooperation, European community affairs, etc. Paisley refused to attend these secondary deliberations, but, significantly, did not withdraw from the main conference. John Hume used the conference to ensure SDLP policy was getting clearly through to Mrs. Thatcher, via Atkins, in the main conference and parallel talks. Prior to the conference, the SDLP felt their views were being ignored. Hume sees the present discussions as only one step in a long process to tackle the Northern Ireland problem.

He believes that the “British Guarantee” — stating that Ulster will remain part of the U.K. for as long as a majority there wish to do so (the cornerstone of British policy) — prevents Unionists from having to accept Catholics in government, encourages them to pursue fuller integration with the rest of Britain and prevents dialogue not only in Ulster between the two communities but between Ulster and the Republic. The SDLP ask for the guarantee to be removed and demand the involvement of the Southern-Irish Government in any initiative. Cabinet posts must be reserved for the SDLP in any new Ulster administration, they insist.

Paisley’s stand brought the talks to an earlier adjournment. He refused to consider power-sharing in government with the SDLP, demanding a return to the old majority-rule system which operated in Ulster for fifty years. As a sop, he offered minor safeguards of minority rights and a subordinate committee system with legislative and investigative functions but no reserved places for the Catholics. In an atmosphere of uncompromising finality, Paisley declared: “Power-sharing is out — now, and for all time.” An Alliance party delegate concluded: “At that point, the talks became ‘Supermick’ (the SDLP) versus ‘Superprod’ (Paisley).” During the talks, Paisley had difficulties keeping his

rank and file in line — never a problem in the past. Some critics say he was prepared to concede more to the SDLP but was prevented from doing so by party extremists.

The (centre) Alliance party — which captured a 14 percent moderate Protestant-Catholic vote in the last local government elections — advocated power-sharing in government through executive committees, with party leaders placed in office in proportion to party strengths. They came down against any institutionalised Irish Dimension, while recognising the importance of economic, European Community and other links with the Irish Republic.

“So, now we know,” an SDLP leader said after the adjournment, “there is absolutely no chance of an agreement being thrashed out among us. Paisley has shown that. It’s up to the Brits now. But the talks haven’t been a waste of time — it’s important to influence what the British may come up with. Our positions are clear.” Even before the already fragile talks began there was a further complicating factor — the appointment of a new Southern-Irish premier in succession to moderate Jack Lynch. Charles Haughey — once charged, and later acquitted, of running guns to the IRA only a decade ago — was the new leader of the government party.

Haughey maintained a deafening silence on Northern Ireland and the IRA while he sojourned in the political wilderness — he was dismissed from the 1970 Cabinet and gradually worked his way back into prominence, emerging in December as premier. On the day of his election as party leader and premier, Haughey did however condemn the IRA forthrightly. Lynch had put internal agreement in Ulster as the first priority. Irish unity or commitments on it were secondary. Haughey is more hawklike. He stated at his party conference that Northern Ireland as a political entity had failed and that it was up to the British and Southern-Irish governments to sort out the problem. Agreement in Northern Ireland was only a half-way stage to the “final solution” — Irish unity — and Haughey has asked the British to declare an interest in unity. Importantly, he did not call for British withdrawal and at the moment, his first priority is not Northern Ireland, despite his public statements, but the ailing Irish economy.

Haughey appealed to the Ulster Protestants to consider unity as in their long-term interest but he has not offered one inducement — no mention of such reforms in the Irish Republic as civil divorce (banned under the Southern Constitution), removing severe restrictions on contraceptive services, or dropping a territorial claim to Northern Ireland. He faces a general election in more than a year’s time. If he wins that — the strength of the economy will be the test — Haughey could take a much harder line on Ulster. The British have only that long to move towards an internal settlement without facing his censure.

When the British initiative was first launched on November 20, its purpose was to “find the highest possible level of agreement,” among the parties. It was referred to, at first, by civil servants and the Secretary of State, as the “constitutional conference.” But the word “constitutional” was later dropped. Increasingly, the phrases, “identifying areas of agreement and disagreement,” then, later, “a first step *in search of agreement*” crept into speeches and state-

ments of the British Ministers. The Tories and their civil servants have changed the nomenclature further. They don't talk of "imposed formulas" any longer but of "giving a lead." "The Government used the conference as a listening post," said one participant, "refining down what the different parties would accept or reject and trying to arrive at a middle course system which neither side will like but which most might accept."

Following the adjournment of the conference, a special Cabinet committee comprised of Ulster Secretary Atkins, Defence Secretary Francis Pym (himself briefly Ulster Secretary in a previous administration), Lord Carrington, the Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary Whitelaw (the first Ulster Secretary appointed) and Lord Hailsham, the Lord Chancellor, examined the conference report in detail. They produced proposals narrowing down the options for their report to Parliament. Atkins will then reconvene the Ulster conference, discuss the ideas with the local parties and widen the scope of the discussions to include the smaller parties and groupings such as the trade unions, business community, etc. He is planning on participation again, by Paisley and Alliance. Whether the SDLP or Official Unionists will attend, remains to be seen. After these consultations are complete, the government should unveil its proposals for Ulster devolution by early autumn and prepare legislation for December or January for incorporation in the Queen's Speech to Parliament. The proposals should be enacted by February and a referendum or election prepared for Easter or by June 1981. *But what will those final proposals be?*

It is likely that the British will settle for a middle road between the parties — possibly a committee system of government along the Alliance party's suggestions, with reserved positions in an executive for both the SDLP and Alliance. Government powers would be increasingly given back to local politicians if they showed a willingness to compromise with one another. Whether there will be an Irish Dimension is problematic. If there is, and if, eventually, most of the parties agree to work the system, that Irish Dimension, if present at all, will have to be weak — if the Protestant politicians are not to be driven away. The British could face threatened and actual boycotts of their proposals by the SDLP and the Official Unionists and Paisley. Their dilemma is to get acceptance or tolerance — *not support* — for the system they select.

One way round that dilemma would be to hold a referendum on their proposals, going to the *people* for support. They might be encouraged by polls indicating that 70 percent of Protestants would go for power-sharing with Catholic politicians in government — although those same Protestants would not contemplate a significant Irish Dimension. If the referendum won a Yes-vote, all the politicians would run for the subsequent election. If the British could, instead of removing their guarantee to the majority (a highly dangerous exercise to indulge in which would only inflame Protestant opinion, not moderate it), spell out the *CONDITIONS* of that guarantee, that is, power-sharing with Catholic leaders, they could meet with success. Protestants would probably trust Mrs. Thatcher and the Conservatives more than her Labour predecessors.

But a referendum could backfire on the British. It has often been said that the people vote *against* things in Ulster rather than for them. If Paisley or the Unionists or the SDLP actively campaigned against the British package

labelling it a sell-out to one side or another, the whole initiative could be doomed. The 1974 power-sharing executive was critically weakened by Paisley's campaign against its Irish Dimension, for example. Certainly, Alliance and the British Government, through Mrs. Thatcher and Atkins with his Ministers in Belfast, could campaign *FOR* the measures and try to boost support for them in a referendum — but they could lose against the scare-tactics of the other local politicians.

A referendum may be a gamble the British should not take, and they will probably go for an election instead in Spring, 1981. If devolution for Ulster fails again by 1981, time could run out for the people of Northern Ireland. Direct-rule may be an acceptable alternative to a majority in both communities but it is seen as a short-term operation. Pressure for the British to do something — *however unwise such actions would be* — will build from the Irish Republic, from Britain, from America, from Europe.

By the perceptions of republicans in the Republic and the USA, “doing something” would mean moving to Irish unity and British withdrawal. Pursuing unity against the wishes of the Northern Ireland majority is a sure recipe for a civil war where the death toll would rise well beyond the present 2,000 plus. Attempts to bring about Irish unity under duress can only result in a geographical unity — if not repartition — but the Catholics and Protestants of Ireland would be further apart than ever. And that is why getting devolved government in Ulster between now and 1982 is more than a priority — it is a necessity.

Footnotes

1. A Green (Consultative) Paper was issued by the UK Government on July 2nd 1980.

SOME LIGHT ON OUR DARKNESS

by Dominick Graham

The public was confused by the reaction of Western leaders to the invasion of Afghanistan. For when public figures spoke of raising defence budgets and sending U.S. Marine Corps and carrier units to the Indian Ocean they seemed to be suggesting that war was imminent. Then, as shares on the stock exchanges rose with the new popularity of the President of the United States, the media told the public that the President had been electioneering. And it appeared that the presidential political advisers were right, for the people responded immediately to an issue that they could get their teeth into — a good, old-fashioned case of aggression. The scenery was familiar from 1939, when the Germans marched into Poland, and 1950, when the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel. Those were wars, those were, and easy to understand. Not like this motley, half peace half war, they called *détente*.