

THE ON SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

40 CITY ROAD, LONDON EC1Y 2DB (TELEPHONE 071-253 1222; TELEX 9419611 INDPNT)

The futile search for a compromise in Ulster

CONSIDER how little the IRA has achieved. The terrorists can take, if they will, an angry and perverse pleasure in the number of people they have killed, including two British soldiers on Friday and two Australian tourists last Monday. Should that not make the terrorists feel big enough, they can also relish the thought that they have frightened millions. But their aim of a united Ireland is further from being realised than it was two decades ago, at the beginning of their present campaign. It will not be promoted by such desperate expedients as sending gunmen, one apparently no more than a teenager, to commit murder on the platform of Lichfield station, as happened on Friday. Such stunts do not persuade the British people of anything, except that the terrorists are disgusting and evil men to whom we shall not yield.

The idea that the IRA has been wasting its time may strike some readers as surprising. On examination, however, the facts confirm that the terrorists' efforts have been, in their own terms, counter-productive. The support which their political wing, Sinn Féin, receives in elections in the Irish Republic is negligible. Most people in the Republic treasure the aspiration of a united Ireland, but would be appalled if in present circumstances it showed any sign of being realised. There are several reasons for this practical aversion to unity. The economic difficulties caused by the withdrawal of British support for the North would be considerable, and the predominant role which the Roman Catholic church plays in the Republic would have to end, if the Protestant people of Ulster were to be added to the state. But above all, it is the IRA which has killed any general desire for unity in the foreseeable future. Most citizens of the Republic are just as appalled by events in the North, and just as keen to keep the place at arm's length, as people in England are. In both cases, the dominant impression of the province is drawn from television pictures shown after terrorist atrocities. Thus does the IRA give a false idea of the province, tarnishing the name of Ireland and making it far harder to obtain foreign investment.

In Northern Ireland itself, the terrorists have made no more headway. Their political allies do rather better, but still gain only a small proportion of the vote, smaller than that won by the party of the constitutional nationalists, the SDLP, itself a minority group. Members of the Roman Catholic middle class are often far less attracted by the idea of unity with the rest of Ireland than might be assumed. As for the unionist parties, which represent the majority of the population, their sense of being besieged has been further strengthened by the IRA. Only after a very long period of peace and security might unionists be brought to accept a united Ireland.

That leaves the rest of Britain as a area where the IRA may hope to influence public opinion.

Here it can try to capitalise on most people's profound ignorance of Ulster. If all one knows about somewhere is that it contains a group of thugs called the IRA, which from time to time murders not only other Irishmen but people from elsewhere in the British Isles, Australia etc, it is easy to conclude that we would be better off without it.

Many of the politicians, usually English, who have been made Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, begin their terms of office with this general feeling about the province. But on studying the problem, they soon realise that there is no way of driving Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom against its will, without in all probability precipitating a civil war from which every part of these islands would suffer more grievously than from the present conflict. Hence the undertaking given by both the British and Irish governments that there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority.

Yet having grasped the reality that Northern Ireland is going to remain part of the United Kingdom — or, to put it another way, that the IRA is going to go on losing — the typical Secretary of State fails to think the subject through with as much rigour as is desirable, especially when people are being murdered. The need in Northern Ireland is to convince the IRA that it has lost. Though this cannot be done quickly, the British Government could, by a judicious series of reforms leading to the closer integration of the province into the United Kingdom, encourage the terrorists to realise the hopelessness of their cause. The IRA is accorded excessive respect. It is a small organisation which has set itself an impossible task. The job of politicians should be to make this impossibility evident, so that the terrorists cannot sustain themselves on the deluded hope that one day the British Government will give in.

Instead, alas, the typical Secretary of State for Northern Ireland tries to reach a compromise. For much of the last 20 years, British ministers have attempted to gratify the aspirations of both sides in the province, by splitting the differences between them. This is an unrealistic project. Nobody can tell when the attempt by the present Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, to achieve it will break down, but break down it will. Disraeli remarked that England does not love coalitions. This is doubly true of Ulster, where the prospects for some form of power-sharing, devolved government are as bad as anywhere in the UK. All Mr Brooke's emollient skills will not change this truth. Good men before him have failed. Mr Brooke will fail too. His foolishness will lead, extra murders apart, to no irretrievable catastrophe. When the smoke clears, Northern Ireland will still be part of the UK. But if this wild goose chase is the best policy Mr Brooke can think of, he would do better to spend the summer watching cricket.



23/7/90
Mo (FNU)

POL35/442(2)



Mr. Brendan Duddy Senr.