

Mary Holland

Waiting for the War

This week a series of Loyalist rallies starts in the small country towns and villages of Northern Ireland. It will culminate in the last week in February – which is, coincidentally, the last week of the recalled Convention – in one of those tribal gatherings in the Ulster Hall in Belfast, with its faded murals of past Protestant victories and the hosts of Carson and Craigavon whispering in the wings. It is fairly safe to predict that, as the Rev. Ian Paisley leads the crowd in belting out *O God Our Help in Ages Past*, the mood will not be one of conciliation.

If it was Merlyn Rees's hope that, by giving the Ulster Unionist politicians six weeks to think over the terms on which the British Government would be prepared to hand back a devolved government, he might wonderfully focus their minds on the realities of their situation, then he must have been disappointed by reactions in Belfast this week. Far from softening attitudes, the fact that there is only a matter of some weeks to go before the constitutional ball is squarely back in the British Government's court makes it easier for the Loyalist leaders to hold the line absolutely solid.

No Loyalist politician is going to risk breaking ranks during this limited breathing space when no one knows what Westminster plans to do next.

The hard fact is that the only thing which could swing the Loyalist coalition towards power-sharing (or participation, or partnership – the euphemisms are endless but the reality remains wholly, horribly intractable) at least during the month of the recalled Convention, would be some dramatic move by Dr Paisley. Even British Government officials admit that any solution which does not include him is just not on. Within the Northern Irish context, more moderate politicians are trapped by the man's atavistic bulk, terrified that if they seem to make any move forward from complete intransigence they will be abused as traitors to the Protestant cause, isolated from their own followers and destroyed.

Even the one or two Unionist politicians of sufficient independent stature to present some challenge to Dr Paisley have only to look at Mr William Craig for any ideas of argument to falter. For Craig, breathing the desperate professional optimism one

remembers so well from Faulkner and O'Neill, has never looked lonelier. Last week he was abandoned by the leadership of the UDA, which had originally supported his idea of an emergency coalition government but have now swung to support the Unionist majority. Even para-military leaders must have a realistic regard for the hearts and minds of their rank and file.

Yet, talking to Loyalist politicians this past week, the main impression is one of considerable confusion. They keep saying, as though murmuring some magic spell, that the British Government has approved 75 per cent of their Convention report and that if they stand firm they'll get the other 25 per cent: i.e. a return of majority government with no power-sharing. But, being realists, they admit, when pressed, that they know they are not going to get this. They accept the inevitability of reimposed direct rule and say, along with everyone else in the province: 'It's up to the British, isn't it?' A senior civil servant at Stormont told me he'd noticed an odd thing, that Protestants have now begun to talk about 'the Brits' in exactly the way the Provos do.

Everyone agrees that more direct rule will be a disaster, yet for all that there is surprisingly little in the way of alarmist threats to resist it, possibly because the realities of death and violent retribution are now so palpable that the striking of theatrical postures has become superfluous. Although there is talk of civil disobedience on the Protestant side there is very little heart for

it. Rent and rate strikes don't exactly fit easily into the Protestant's image of himself as a law-abiding citizen supporting the state. It's more a rebel (i.e. Catholic) tactic. Loyalist leaders admit that it would probably be impossible for them to mount another Ulster workers' strike. The recession has hit Northern Ireland very hard, and with unemployment threatening to hit 20 per cent by the summer, people are loth to risk their jobs, even for Ulster. Hence the irony.

Even hardline Loyalists know that if a referendum were taken in the province a majority would almost certainly vote for coalition government, for anything which might offer even a slender hope of bringing a peace which might in time heal the wounds that have been sustained. Equally, they point out, such a referendum taken on one issue would solve nothing. It would have to be followed by a general election in which the two communities would revert to their tribal allegiances on all the old tribal issues. Some Loyalists say this with a kind of regret - simply pointing out the eternal, unchanging facts of life.

It would be foolish to assume that Mr Rees and his civil servants have reached the end of the road, or of their own ingenuity in Ulster. On the contrary, the danger is that there is a plethora of options, all of which are currently being discussed in Ulster, albeit in a rather unnerving way. People of all sorts and conditions will tell you the kinds of things the Secretary of State might do next, and they do so in an almost academic fashion, interested as observers rather than as participants whose lives are going to be affected by whatever he decides. It is as though they believe that nothing can now halt the disaster which is looming, but in the meantime talking about politics is as good a way of passing the time as any other.

Mr Rees, they say will probably hold a referendum which, as noted above, will not work. He could resurrect Mr Whitelaw's 1973 blueprint and appoint another power-sharing executive, which would fail for the same reasons that the first one did. He could return a lot more power to local authorities, which would be resisted fiercely by Catholics, since it was Unionist domination of local government and the discrimination which resulted from it which caused them to take to the streets in 1968. He could set up a sort of advisory committee with all the members appointed by Westminster. He might even make Mr Craig and Mr Fitt ministers of state to give the two communities some representation at government level, although this of course would not satisfy everyone, except possibly the gentlemen concerned. Some people in Northern Ireland believe that Mr Rees may even do most of these things in turn, buying a few weeks here and a few months there. No one believes any of them will work.

Through all this there is at once the demand that the province is now so battered that Britain must 'do something', coupled with the growing conviction that the British Government has lost all will to do anything at all. So, people wait helplessly for what everyone regards as inevitable: the further escalation of sectarian killings, the almost certain resumption of a full-scale bombing

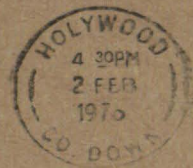
campaign by the Provisional IRA, followed by the inevitable retaliation of the Loyalist para-military groups. They look to the next few weeks, wonder whether the British

Government or the gunmen will take next initiative and what that will mean. What point all this becomes civil war, one dares to think.

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