

## Troubles of a divided island

*Irish politicians have not risen to the challenge of charting a future for Ireland. The time has come for the intellectual community to take charge of events.*

FOR the umpteenth time in 350 years, a British government is in a pickle about Ireland. The latest conundrum thrown at Westminster is last week's report of the New Ireland Forum, the rump of what was conceived in 1982, by the British and Irish governments, as a means of shaming Irish politicians into some kind of agreement among themselves about the future constitution of Ireland and in particular that of Ulster, the still-British north-east corner of what is otherwise Irish Ireland. After more than fifteen years of urban and rural violence by an organization illegal on both sides of the border, the hope behind the forum was that Irish politicians would be able to conjure from their despair some goal at which, collectively, to aim.

Hope was from the outset dimmed by the refusal of the political parties in Ulster bent on preserving the link with Great Britain to participate in the proceedings of the forum. Now, hope has predictably been dashed by what the forum has to say — that the ideal solution for Ireland is that the two parts should be one, but that partial (or temporary?) solutions might be found in a federal constitution or in an arrangement under which the British and Irish governments would have shared responsibility for the administration of Ulster. The result will be that attitudes on each side of the border will be further hardened: the Protestant part of Ulster will be confirmed in its belief that any change must be unwelcome, the Roman Catholic half and the Republic to the south persuaded that republican nationalism is respectable. And the gunmen will say that their actions have been justified.

### Not unique

Readers, quite properly, do not give journals such as this a licence to take on issues complicated, like that in Ulster, by political and sectarian problems. Nor is one sought. But it is noticeable, and a little strange, that most of the opinions offered on the problem of Ulster start from the assumption that the problem is unique — and uniquely Irish. Can that be so? Has not Belgium been riven for decades by similarly founded if less violent tensions between linguistic and religious communities? What about the problem of the Sikhs in India's Punjab? Or the Tamil community of Sri Lanka? And the East African community of Indian origin, mostly expelled in the past fifteen years to the great profit of the English, the nation of shopkeepers which now at least, has efficient shopkeepers? Ireland cannot be as different as it seems. Is it too much to ask that the politicians always earnestly seeking solutions on a different tack should look at the sorry record of what has happened elsewhere?

What might be learned? Two principles emerge from the few illustrations of how communal divisions can be successfully accommodated (Belgium now, Switzerland a few centuries ago). First, palpable injustice sensed by the members of one community must be removed, if necessary by law. Second, all those concerned must have the patience to persist with the remedies they consider wise. The first condition is well on the way to being met in Ulster. The trouble is that the two governments concerned have not been able to wait long enough to allow even sensible reforms to work their way through the societies affected.

A decade ago, in Ulster, when Mr John DeLorean set up shop to manufacture sports cars for a non-existent market, the British government was wedded to the notion that industrial investment would eventually heal the wounds in Ulster. Four years ago, both

the British and the Irish governments were earnestly seeking bridges to build between north and south — increasing the exchange of electricity, for example, joint planning on environmental matters and the exchange of police intelligence (about the gunmen operating on each side of the border). More recently, with the ins and outs of governments in the Republic, attention seems to have shifted to the search for constitutional innovations.

For the intellectual communities both of Britain and Ireland, the consequences of these shifting strategies are, or should be, intolerable. In many ways, the two countries are virtually indistinguishable. They are not even divided from each other by language — Ireland is a disproportionately rich contributor to English literature (as well as to British television). Are there not ways in which these intelligent people could, without waiting for the politicians, create bridges that would last?

### Education

The obvious place to start is in higher education. As things are, there is a trickle of students from the Republic to British universities, where they are treated on an equal footing with students from elsewhere in the European Community — they pay the same low fees as British students, but receive no help with maintenance from either government. There is a more substantial movement of students from Ulster to the Republic, mostly of Roman Catholics seeking an education at the National University of Ireland (a federal institution with separate institutions in Dublin, Cork and Galway). Why, to begin with, should not those who manage the two university systems work out an equitable basis for running them as if they were one? There is every reason to expect that if the British and Irish universities were satisfied with some joint plan of action, the two governments would jump at the chance of meeting the trivial costs entailed. And the same is true of graduate education — the British research councils, for a start, should go back on their decision of a few years ago that they would not thereafter treat graduate students from the Republic on an equal footing with their British equivalents.

There is no obvious end to the opportunities which thus suggest themselves. Why maintain in each of these two similar countries quite separate organizations for supporting agricultural research (on which both halves of Ireland are largely dependent?) Why have two weather forecasting services, one of which (the British) solemnly puts out daily weather forecasts from which projections for the area of the Republic are solemnly omitted? And since there are no restrictions on the movement of people between Britain and Ireland, why not go the whole hog and regard the two research enterprises as parts of the same whole?

The obvious objection, that such arrangements would somehow diminish the national identity of the two partners, cuts no ice, while the observation that the forum's preferred solution is a united Ireland is irrelevant. Fears that, in such arrangements, one partner or the other would win unfair advantages, financial or otherwise, are more real but should not be beyond the wit of intelligent people who speak the same language. The objection that people whose chief interest is not politics but education and research should be indifferent to political opportunities is often heard, and might in normal circumstances be valid. But these, as the weeks ahead will show, are not normal but desperate times. □