

Ulster: A Different View

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The article by Lester and McDonagh ('The Ulster Nation: Troops Out-Market In', Free Life Vol. 4 No. 3) is a strange concoction. Most of the time it seems to be arguing for Ulster Unionism (the continuing political unity of Ulster with Britain) but it comes down heavily for Ulster Separatism or Ulsternationalism (a new independent state in Northern Ireland). The ambivalence of Lester and McDonagh is illustrated in this passage:

"People in the UK have been taken in by Catholic propaganda and desire to be rid of Ulster. They would probably vote to kick it out in a referendum. Would that be bad? Not necessarily..."

So the dupes of Catholic propaganda want to expel Ulster from the UK, and the dupes are actually right, though being dupes, they can't understand the real reasons why they are right. These are supplied by Lester and McDonagh.

McDonagh's Switch

One of the authors, David McDonagh, changed his mind before writing this piece. Back in FL Vol. 3 No. 4, he co-authored a piece with Stephen Berry in which they defended the right of the Falkland Islanders to self-determination, that is, to remain governed politically by Britain. As they stated at the time:

"If the issue is not national self-determination versus anarchism, rather competing claims between national groups, should not the solution which is in accordance with the wishes of the people concerned prevail?"

Since David McDonagh now wants the British government to withdraw from Ulster, may we conclude that he now wants Britain to withdraw from the Falklands, causing the Islanders to be taken over by the Argentinian government? Is every govern-

ment in the world, for that matter, to withdraw from any and every territory that any other government lays claim to?

McDonagh does not give any reasons for his change of mind. The idea that "the solution which is in accordance with the wishes of the people concerned" should prevail, which he considered all-important in the case of the Falklands, he now considers of no importance in the case of Ulster.

The Ulster Question

In most ways, the war in Ulster is a very ordinary national struggle - especially in its use of religion as a spiritual uniform of nationhood. But in one respect the situation is quite extraordinary. Two-thirds of the Ulster population regard themselves as British and firmly desire to remain part of the British national entity. The remaining third varies, with a fairly large number being not especially averse to remaining part of the British entity, but with most of that third having some degree of attachment to the ideal of a 'United Ireland', independent of Britain and militantly Roman Catholic. The government of the Republic of Ireland desires to detach Ulster from Britain and govern Ulster from Dublin. or at least, is compelled by tradition to say that it so desires. The British state is enormously more powerful than the Southern Irish state, and could settle the question once and for all, almost overnight, by exerting one percent of its influence. All that is needed is a convincing declaration that henceforth Ulster will stand in an administrative political relationship to Westminster somewhere between that of Wales and that of Humber-side. Within a year of that declaration, the war in Ulster would be over, and the much-celebrated 'sectarian bigotry' would be permanently on the wane. Roman Catholics with Gaelic antecedents in Belfast or Londonderry would be as British (or not) as Roman Catholics with Gaelic antecedents in Liverpool or Glasgow. The peculiarity of the Ulster situation is that the British state refrains from making such a declaration, and is more inclined to try to nudge the stubborn Ulster people into the Republic.

This is a situation unprecedented in historical discussions of the rights and wrongs of national borders. It is usually assumed that a nation will want to absorb an adjacent territory if the population of that territory heartily wishes to be absorbed, and is culturally extremely close, and has for centuries been under the same government.

'National self-determination' refers to the right of a population to decide which government it shall have - to be free to secede, to become an independent state, or attach itself to another nation-state. The case of a population which emphatically does not wish to secede possibly being made to secede, so to speak, is certainly unusual, and it is perhaps understandable that Missouri resident Terry Inman (Letters, FL Vol. 5 No. 2) hasn't quite caught on.

For an American to comprehend the Ulster situation, it may be helpful to suppose that, 50 years from now, Mexico is pressing its historical claim to California, that the Mexican-descended population of California has risen to one-third, that among this Mexican-descended population there are varying degrees of sympathy with the Mexican government claim, that there is virtually no sympathy with that claim among the remaining two-thirds of Californians, and that a small minority of the Mexican-descended population is maiming and killing people daily in pursuit of Mexican rule of California, and that the United Nations, Soviet Union, and other respected authorities on international justice, are pressing for the US to 'withdraw from Mexico'. Under these pressures, Washington would rather like to withdraw, that is, to expel the Californians from the US against the wishes of the Californians, but feels constrained to dither, to denounce 'senseless terrorism' (which is really sensible and rational terrorism), to stab the Californians in the back at every opportunity, and to set up various quasi-governmental consultative committees with representatives of the Mexican government and various Californians. Terry Inman's remarks about the nature of Irish society prior to the English conquest seem to be irrelevant, since presumably not even he is claiming that such a social formation has survived in Ireland today, North or South. It would be about as helpful to refer to the

libertarian features of English society prior to the Norman conquest.

One-Year Ultimatum

Lester and McDonagh believe that a UK referendum would probably vote to expel Ulster. But they do not accept such an outcome reluctantly, they relish it. An independent Ulster "is a more liberal solution all round than would be rule from either Westminster or Dublin." Since rule of Ulster by Dublin is about as feasible as rule of Ulster by Kuala Lumpur, they mean that an independent Ulster is more liberal than rule by Westminster. The Ulster people don't know what's good for them, but luckily the majority of the British electorate, duped by Catholic propaganda, do know what's good for them.

According to Lester and McDonagh, Ulster should be given a one-year ultimatum "to marshal their defences". A "small border war" would then ensue and Ulster's borders would be redefined. What reasons do Lester and McDonagh give for viewing this prospect with such approval?

1. The South would come to terms with their inability to subjugate and independent Ulster.
2. "Ulster alone is far better able to take care of terrorism."
3. Ulster might reduce taxation and state intervention, and become a haven of affluence.
4. Ulster is heavily subsidised by the British taxpayers.

In response to 1. it's not explained why the South would more readily appreciate that they cannot defeat little Ulster than big Britain. It is true that they work with Britain to try to manipulate Ulster into a United Ireland, but they should be able to see, and many of them do see, that this is moonshine. At any rate, this could be taken care of just as easily by a policy of integration of Ulster into Britain.

The Lester-McDonagh "small border war" scenario may be over-sanguine. The Ulster government would be strongly tempted to treat every Catholic as a potential enemy,

and to move Catholic populations in order to secure territory.

On 2., it is not clear why Ulster alone should be so much better at fighting the IRA, unless by moving whole Catholic populations.

As for 3, independence doesn't automatically lead to deregulation or liberalisation. Explaining, as Lester and McDonagh do, that this would be beneficial does not demonstrate that it would occur. The Republic of Ireland, for instance seems to be no less interventionist than Britain.

The simple answer to 4. is to abolish the subsidies. It is not made clear whether Lester McDonagh also think the one-year ultimatum should be given to Liverpool, Glasgow, Lambeth, Cornwall, and so forth. Should the British state expel every district which receives subsidies? Or is this to happen only when the district in question is claimed by a foreign power? (Perhaps Gorbachov should take an interest in Liverpool. It has possibilities.) What about the prosperous areas of Ulster which are paying for subsidies to South London?

I am not sure whether Lester and McDonagh have really done their sums. Does Ulster receive net subsidies - after subtracting all the taxes Ulster pays to Westminster?

The Integrationist Alternative

There are two main reasons why a policy of integration within the UK, treating Ulster as just another part of Britain, is far superior to a policy of expulsion:

1. It is broadly in line with what a substantial majority of people in Ulster want whereas an independent Ulster is wanted by almost no one.
2. It would tend to improve community relations in Ulster, whereas an Ulster nation would make every Catholic suspect, as a likely agent of a malevolent foreign power. There is, ultimately, one simple reason why relations between Catholics and Protestants in Liverpool (even when they have just come over from Northern Ireland) are a lot better than relations between Catholics and

Protestants in Ulster: the Dublin government does not lay claim to Liverpool, and if it did, there is no probability that the British government would hand it to them.

Unionism Not Dead

If the Conservative Party, as well as the Labour Party, is to be viewed as committed to contriving the expulsion of Ulster, then perhaps it is necessary to do what Lester and McDonagh are doing: preparing people for something horrible, though there is no need to delude ourselves that it is going to be an improvement

But despite the pummelling it has taken at the hands of Thatcher, the Unionist cause still appears most likely to succeed eventually. With the abolition of Stormont and increased Ulster representation at Westminster, Ulster is more tightly bound within the UK than it used to be. I am not even sure that a British referendum on expulsion would have the result that Lester and McDonagh anticipate. Before the referendum comes a referendum campaign, a debate. The recent referendum in the Irish Republic shows what can happen during a referendum debate. People can discover what they really think, and this can be a big surprise to them and to everyone else.