

Ulster: Cut the Apron Strings

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The article on Ulster ('Ulster: Troops Out - Market In', FL Vol. 4, No. 3) might look confused especially if taken with McDonagh's and Berry's article on the Falklands as background. Part of the apparent confusion is because McDonagh's name appears mainly as a result of his contribution of the sections on historical outline ('The Two Irish Nations in Context', 'How Eire was Born', and 'The Irish Question'), though he did make critical contributions to the rest of the piece. The signing of the piece is there to show authorship, not to guarantee sincerity. Neither author can honestly say that he fervently believes everything in the article. The authors beliefs are irrelevant to the value of what is written. But we do happen to believe that the arguments put down are worth considering or we should not have written them. Thus some of the charges Steele makes against McDonagh for signing inconsistent theses seem misconceived. But the remaining criticisms will be dealt with here.

Ambivalent to the Orthodox

There is no basic ambivalence in the thesis of the essay. The argument is against Irish Nationalism and Ulster Unionism; and in favour of Ulster Nationalism. On an orthodox nationalistic outlook it must look odd to assert that Ulster is really culturally British but then claim that it ought to be jettisoned from the UK. Why argue for Britishness if only to go on to argue for separation? Because even a non-nationalist can use nationalist arguments to reduce the Irish Nationalists claims to absurdity. The first thesis - as argued for mainly in McDonagh's sections - is intended to do just that. The Irish Nationalist case is self-undermining. Ulster is culturally British, and that prevents them being identified as one nation with Eire (as we called the South). Some libertarians are content to let the matter stop there. But this hardly seems a very libertarian answer to the 'Irish Question'. Of course Ulster National-

ism is not a completely libertarian answer either, but it was argued that it would be more liberal than having Ulster live off external taxpayers whilst being forced to tolerate chronic terrorism.

Bye Bye Falklands

Yes, with the Falklands a similar pull-out policy to that advocated for Ulster should eventually be possible and desirable. It is currently even less politically acceptable and desirable than trying this with Ulster, but by propaganda it might eventually become so. If we deny this then we seem to be committed to saying that taxpayers in Britain must be obliged to pay to defend anywhere British in perpetuity as long as the people there demand it.

It is not suggested that Falklands or Ulster should be given up just because there is a foreign claim on them. Nor is it suggested that they should end up in the hands of those who claim them. It would be good to see Britain push out all subsidised regions were that possible (bye bye Liverpool, bye bye Scotland ...) with a view to the eventual complete dismantling of the British nation-state. True, we (the LA) are aiming to change society to libertarianism by converting the majority in the long run; but some self-perceived state beneficiaries are bound to be pushed out before they get around to seeing the virtue of leaving.

This is not suggested in the belief that foreign powers would simply take over, but in the belief that the subsidies are uneconomic and that efficient voluntary, free-market defence would replace state provision. The small size of the areas need be no obstacle to provision of defence. It is not suggested that only the indigenous populations with self-sufficient resources must be allowed to defend themselves. It is quite libertarian to opt for alliances of regional defence companies, global defence companies, or simply insurance with these. There is no reason why a given area need provide any of its own defence services; it might well prove economic for smaller areas like the Falklands to be insured with entirely external defence agencies; these might eventually include privatised armed forces in

Britain (though these would not be 'British' in the statist sense).

Berry and McDonagh in their Falkland's piece (FL Vol. 3 No. 4) seem to be attempting to give the most practical liberal advice for the immediate future. They certainly demonstrate deep confusion and illiberal views in Rothbard's 'radical libertarian' position on the Falklands. Perhaps the alternatives here look just as bad as Rothbard. But when asked what the specifically libertarian solutions to certain political problems are, one is often forced to paint a distant picture. Only by doing so will the picture ever stand a chance of getting nearer and eventually becoming realised. So 'the solution that is in accordance with the wishes of the people concerned (what of the taxpayers concerned who are against it?) certainly ought not to prevail forever if this means the unnecessary continuance of involuntary subsidised inefficiency. Yet it has to be admitted that the above views might be being so far-sighted that they fail to convince by omitting sufficiently detailed directions on how to get there from here.

Overnight Solution?

But what of Steele's proposed solution to the Irish question? This looks immediately impracticable. Steele suggests that the "British state ... could settle the whole question once and for all, almost overnight ... 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 Humberside." This seems incredible. The IRA are ideologues motivated by a fervent moral-political vision. It is as though a conservative had suggested that the way to deal with libertarians once and for all is simply for the British State to issue a "convincing declaration" that it has no intention of ever dissolving itself.

Steele does not even concede that terrorism could be combatted better in the short-run by a stronger deterrence in the form of the death sentence. The long-run campaign against the IRA has to be to convince them -or potential members - that they do not have right on their side, even in their own nationalistic terms. Another one of the ways of

undermining their case is for Ulster to be clearly independent of Britain. Even the British State seems to see the ideological nature of the terrorism more clearly than does Steele.

A Statist Slogan

Appeal is made to "national self-determination". In itself this concept should not cut too much ice with a libertarian (Berry and McDonagh recognise many of the problems with this idea in their Falklands essay). For one thing, it is a slogan designed to legitimise nation-states. But if an external power really does make a society more liberal, then hurrah for that example of imperialism. In any case, whether national self-determination is achieved or not depends on where one draws the boundaries of the nation. The IRA can make out a good case that this is just the principle that they are fighting for. 'Ireland for the Irish. "And surely national self-determination does not allow a population "to attach itself to another nation-state" if that state does not want it; as is currently the case with Ulster and Britain.

Steele's California analogy seems an excellent one and it should help many people understand the situation better. There are two important factors missing in it though, which are chief culprits in causing the confusion: that there is a single island of Ireland (but not California), and that everyone on it describes themselves as Irish (but they do not all call themselves Mexican in California). Of course there is no more precise analogy around, so this cannot be helped. So the irrelevance of these factors has to be argued separately: there are, for instance, three nations on the island adjacent to the island of Ireland, and that is not considered a problem; so one can be English-British, Welsh-British, Scottish-British-and Irish-British.

Reasons to be Sanguine

Steele lists the reasons given for advocating a one year ultimatum of withdrawal from Ulster. But he misses the most important reason: the lack of British intervention would be crucial in undermining the ideological case of the IRA. Ireland would be for the Irish and the whole world would be able to see it. This would undermine the IRA's (and

potential new recruit's) sense of righteous struggle. And to the extent that they still continued they would be increasingly seen by the rest of the world as themselves as an 'imperialistic' force. External material and moral support for the IRA would dry up considerably.

In response to criticisms of the idea that the South would come to terms with their inability to subjugate an independent Ulster:

1. The main reason is the above mentioned undermining of the ideological position.
2. A considerable factor would also be that an armed and marshalled Ulster would be a much more vigorous and ready opponent than is Britain.
3. Steele mentions another reason only to dismiss it: the hope that Britain can help manipulate Ulster into a United Ireland. Steele is right to say that they ought to be able to see that this is not on the cards. Ulster shall not allow it. He is right to say that many must be able to see this. But presumably IRA bombings are due to those members who cannot see this or they would not engage in them. It does not look on the face of it as though these acts of terrorism are working. Many IRA members must see the Anglo-Irish agreement as a concession in part brought about by the Brighton bombing - and they would be right. (Oddly, Steele himself calls this terrorism "sensible and rational" in his California analogy.) The integration alternative that Steele suggests would strengthen their resolve and increase sympathy and assistance to them.

Many Catholics do not want integration with the South. They are not a threat now and need not be if an Ulster state is set up. Those who are currently a threat would be less troublesome given the harsher treatment that terrorists are bound to receive. If these populations looked as though they might be a problem one solution might well be to cede certain territory rather than kick out the occupants. This might be a considerable sweetener for the South. It would also (as

stated in the original essay) help them save face. But even if we suppose that Catholic populations were to be moved, it is not clear why this would make the small border war scenario "over-sanguine". If the Catholics really are a threat then moving them would bring a more stable peace that much sooner (the process of forcibly moving them would be highly undesirable from from a libertarian viewpoint, but many might accept compensation if it were to be offered).

In response to criticism of the idea that an Ulster government can better deal with terrorism. Ulster alone would be better at fighting the IRA not by moving whole Catholic populations, but because they would rigorously seek out and execute terrorists. Despite the ideological fervour of the IRA this is bound to make the game a lot less attractive (especially to those not yet committed who would otherwise become the next generation of terrorists).

In response to criticism that independence need not lead to deregulation:

1. Ulster is not a cultural island. It shares most aspects of culture with the mainland. One of these is the new movement to liberalism (though this is more or less a world-wide phenomenon). So there is a good reason for thinking that Ulster would not introduce extreme state-intervention.
2. There has been talk of liberalisation if they do split off from Britain. Paisley, in particular, has made such remarks.
3. They shall be forced to liberalise to some extent in any case for they do not have the wealth to continue the level of state spending that they currently suffer.
4. Once they see the benefits--thanks to these new, liberal spectacles--they might well decide to have more of the same.

In response to the idea that it would be easier to abolish subsidies than eject Ulster:

One answer to the problem of subsidies to Ulster is to abolish all subsidies. But this looks much less likely than merely abolish-

ing Ulster's subsidies because Ulster has become independent. The abolition of all state subsidies would be tantamount to the complete abolition of the state. State-subsidies are a major factor in giving the the modern state moral legitimacy. A one-year ultimatum to Ulster is a far greater possibility than similar ultimata to "Liverpool, Glasgow, Lambeth, Cornwall, and so forth." But given that libertarian anarchy requires the eventual dismantling of the nation-state then such ultimata ought not to be ruled out in principle as potential good routes in some cases.

Ulster as a whole is a drain on the resources of the mainland according to all reports at the time of the Anglo-Irish agreement. An initial figure of 4 billion pounds turned out to be 1.4 billion net. Given the high levels of unemployment, council housing, state employment, policing, and army requirements - in addition to all the usual state consumption - a net subsidy hardly seems remarkable.

Death to the Union

Steele gives two reasons why a policy of integration with the UK is superior to expulsion. First he claims that the bulk of Ulster citizens want it and almost none of them want independence. But this is to neglect what is wanted by the majority of people they wish to impose it on. Then he claims that integration would improve community relations whereas an Ulster nation would make every Catholic suspect. This is to fail to see that far from being stamped out and undermined (as would be the case with separation) Irish nationalism would be fuelled for many years to come.

The expulsion of Ulster is described as "something horrible". But the alternative that Steele prescribes looks worse. We know what the horrors of terrorism are like, and we can expect a lot more of them if there are any moves towards full Ulster integration with the UK. Mainland bombings decreased after the Anglo-Irish agreement; they can be expected to increase dramatically at any sign of a reverse; but if Britain were out of the problem there would be no incentive to attack the mainland and decreased incentives to attack Ulster itself

The abolition of Stormont and increased Ulster representation in Westminster has to be weighed against the Anglo-Irish agreement and any further plans that the British politicians have in mind if we wish to see whether Ulster is more firmly within the UK than ever. The people of Ulster probably doubt an increase in the security of the Union.

A Referendum about 'The Irish'

A referendum is bound to change some people's minds about Ulster, but the situation is probably too complicated for a relatively uninterested majority to get to grips with. The 'Irish Question' would not be perceived to be about the British. The easy and popular ideas are that Ireland should be for the 'Irish', and that 'the Irish are a thorn in our side': 'costing us money, bombing us, killing our boys'. These ideas would take a lot to be refuted. There is little sympathy for the Unionist case outside fringe Conservative groups. Paisley himself is something of a hate figure among media people and they seem typical in this. The final attitude is likely to be that it is far easier to 'give the elbow to the lot of them'.

But even if the majority of Brits wanted to keep Ulster in the UK what right would they have to impose this cost even on a minority who do not want to support them? Such democratic arguments ought not to carry much weight with a libertarian. The majority of Brits want the NHS but that does not make it right that, the minority who do not want it are forced to contribute.

This contribution of nationalistic and democratic arguments sound very odd in the mouths of libertarians. Perhaps they would make a better case if they could come up with more libertarian arguments (but the idea of increased British-state involvement with a subsidised, under-protected Ulster has an anti-liberal ring to it). Part of the problem seems to be an ideological myopia: the best way forward is to offer immediate political policies rather than say where you really want to get to. The Adam Smith Institute is founded on this error - although it is not thereby utterly useless - but the LA usually takes a wiser long-sighted and frank approach.) But perhaps what has really

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happened is that some LA members have swallowed whole the British and Irish Communist Organisation's - admittedly superior - analysis. They ought to allow a little libertarian digestion to take place.

Free Life