

Lester on Ulster – Sanguine or Sanguinary

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Jan Lester's reply on the Ulster question (FL Vol. 5, No. 3) somewhat misjudges my position. I accept that UK electors are entitled to insist upon the expulsion of Ulster or any other part of the UK. The issue is whether we ought to urge this course upon them, as Lester and McDonagh did in their article, or whether we ought to oppose it (or, a third possibility, with which I have much sympathy but which I cannot quite swallow, whether we ought to stand aside and say that the whole question is largely a matter of indifference).

I agree that executing IRA killers would be a help in combating IRA killing, but it would not be satisfactory to execute IRA murderers whilst not executing other murderers. Indeed, a case could be made that presumptive IRA killers should be immune to the death penalty even if it were re-introduced, since some normal procedures, such as trial by jury, have had to be suspended in dealing with terrorist murders in Northern Ireland. (The term "IRA" here stands for all Catholic Nationalist terrorist groups in Ireland. Naturally, if the death penalty were introduced for the murders committed by them, it should also be applied to the much smaller number of murders committed in retaliation by Protestant Unionists.)

The Almost Overnight Solution

Lester says that my statement about a "convincing declaration" appears "incredible". He compares it to a declaration by the state that it will not dissolve itself, as a way to deal with libertarians, and he asserts that the IRA are "ideologues motivated by a fervent moral political vision". Of course they are. But they are also influenced in their actions by what they think will have the practical outcome of advancing their aims. Libertarians are a small minority trying to change people's ideas by argument. If some "libertarians" were to adopt the strategy of killing and maiming people every week or

so, with the announced objective of getting the state to announce its own dissolution, and if, say, 10% of the population were sympathetic enough to these "libertarian" murderers to give them some degree of at least tacit, passive aid, and if politicians were running around saying that the root cause of these killings consisted of "genuine grievances" and that the solution lay in removing the source of the grievances by taking some "initiative" which would at least look at the prospect of some degree of phased or partial self-dissolution by the state, and if it were considered in bad taste to suggest that the state was not about to announce its own dissolution - then, yes, it would be appropriate to urge that the state make a convincing declaration that it had no intention of dissolving itself. To make the Ulster Unionist declaration convincing would require broad popular support for it. Such a degree of support admittedly doesn't exist, but at least support for Unionism is much greater than support for expulsion. Lester may believe that the potential exists for expulsion to be made popular, but at present support in Britain for Unionism completely dwarfs support for expulsion. (There is a great deal of support for pulling the troops out, but this is a matter of tactics which would be quite compatible with a Unionist policy.)

In its history, the IRA has known periods of comparative quiescence and periods of heightened virulence. One of the main influences on this level of activity has been the perceived likelihood of success - not necessarily complete success, but some crumbling of the enemy defences, some sign that the IRA could make an impact on events. After all, the Hillsborough agreement is an IRA achievement. In its own tiny way, the Lester-McDonagh article in FL Vol. 4 No. 3 is an IRA achievement. From an IRA point of view these are not wholly satisfactory, but they have distinct possibilities. They send out an unmistakable signal: "Dear IRA, Here is something on account. Keep up the killing and who knows what you will be offered next?" What fans the flames of IRA fanaticism is anything done by the British government to encourage speculation that Ulster's position within the UK may be in question. Libertarianism is a

political doctrine spreading among all classes and all nations by peaceful argument. It makes little sense to think of libertarianism being implemented by legal enactment while support for libertarian ideas is miniscule. The position of Ulster is quite different: the IRA never wasted much time trying to convince the Protestant majority that they would really like to be ruled by Dublin. Nor does the IRA concern itself with trying to persuade the population of Britain or Ireland that it is good to bomb the Ulster majority into a United Ireland. But the IRA sees that the British government can be persuaded to try to manipulate the Ulster people into a United Ireland. And if this manipulation is going on simultaneously with IRA bombing, well, ... something tasty may turn up. In the libertarian example, almost nothing depends upon what the British or any other government declares, however convincingly. In the Ulster example, almost everything of any consequence depends upon the stance of the British government.

Lester believes that independence for Ulster would undermine the ideological position of the IRA, because Ulster would no longer be British. This is simple-minded. The IRA specializes in killing Irish people rather than Brits. In their formative period they were on the losing side of the Southern Irish civil war. It would be easy to present an independent Ulster as a cloak for British intrusion (as the successful use of the hoax of "neo-colonialism" by the running dogs of the Russian empire illustrates). And all the easier if, as Lester hazards, Ulster were involved in "alliances of regional defence companies" that is, if British resources continued to be used to defend Ulster. In the imagination of an Irish Republican, the festering sore of partition would persist, though the forces in its favour would appear weakened and confused. Furthermore, the IRA would be flushed with its victory in achieving the expulsion of Ulster. Any diminishment in the extent of the sacrilege against the Catholic Nation would be far outweighed by this palpable proof that the way to get ahead in Irish politics is to carry on killing and maiming Irish people. Lester finds it odd that I consider IRA terrorism to be "sensible and rational". It is sensible and rational in the sense that it is well adapted to the goals of Catholic Irish Nationalism:

persuading people of a different nationality into accepting the inevitability of a Dublin rule which they dread. Terrorism is the means objectively best suited to attaining the goals which a wide spectrum of Republican opinion claims to want to attain. (Of course, for best results the IRA needs to work in tandem with a peaceful negotiating wing of Republicanism; each wing capitalizes on the work of the other whilst sincerely deploring the activities of the other. If the Palestinians had mastered this trick, they would be in better shape.)

How to Cut Subsidies

Lester argues that "One answer to the problem of subsidies to Ulster is to abolish all subsidies. But this looks much less likely than merely abolishing Ulster's subsidies because Ulster has become independent." Yes! But let's suppose that Ulster receives five percent of UK subsidies. The pertinent question is: Which is the most efficient and "likely" way to cut UK subsidies by five percent - eliminating all Ulster subsidies by expelling Ulster from the UK, or cutting general UK subsidies by five percent? Obviously, the latter is immensely more likely, as well as being achievable without thousands of deaths. ("The appropriate comparison with "abolishing all subsidies" by political reform is abolishing all subsidies by getting Westminster to expel every portion of the UK. While the former is extremely unlikely within the next 50 years, the latter is forever fantastic.) There is another aspect to the subsidies question: a large element of these subsidies consists of payments to unemployed Southern Irish who have moved into Ulster. If Ulster were expelled from the UK, and if, as Lester presumably surmises, the new Ulster state were to cut these benefits, then unemployed Southern Irish would switch from Ulster to Britain. In fact, if we imagine this happening all at once, a large number of them would move from Ulster to Britain within a few months. So the saving might not be as great as Lester supposes.

The Consequences of Expulsion

Lester can offer very little evidence for his repeated contention that an independent Ulster would be comparatively non-

interventionist. A few remarks by Paisley are not much to go on. Paisley is a colourful media character who does not typify Protestant Ulster, but if we are going to hang upon his words we should remember such episodes as his powerful opposition to bringing Ulster law into conformity with UK law by legalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults. Few would dispute that interventionist sentiment is stronger, *laissez-faire* sentiment weaker, in Scotland than in England. An independent Scotland would probably be much more interventionist than Scotland is as part of the present UK. Ulster only superficially seems different, because of the historical accident that the Conservative Party became Unionist while the Labour Party inherited Gladstone's bonnet with the Home Rule bee in it. The commonsense notion is that free market ideas are now being radiated from the Southeast of England to the rest of the British Isles and beyond. That commonsense theory may be wrong, but it is a good place to start, and Lester does not really try to refute it.

Jan Lester's reply introduces a new idea which was not explicitly present in his earlier article (with David McDonagh, FL Vol. 4, No. 3) - the idea that there is in principle something peculiarly "libertarian" about supporting the break-up of one nation-state into several smaller nation-states.

It is possible that society could move into a libertarian system by the gradual and piecemeal elimination of government interventions. I cannot conceive of any other feasible route. This would not entail any diminution in the size of the state territories. The idea that we could get a libertarian society by persuading each state to expel parts of its territory, until, presumably, every other individual is expelled from each two-person state, does not seem practicable to me. States survive in part because of the perceived need for defence or protection, mainly against other states. In the competition among states, there is some advantage to having a large territory. In the Second World War, for instance, Britain gained some benefit from its inclusion of Ulster. If Britain expelled Ulster, there would be two nation-states where there had been one. Lester hasn't made much of a case, either 1. that this is invariably a good

outcome which libertarians ought always to welcome, or 2. that it would be a good outcome in this particular case. Generally, however, he seems to confuse contexts. Thus, there are at present virtually no "alliances of regional defence companies" or "global defence companies". Such imaginary entities have no bearing on what would happen to a newly-independent Ulster in the next few decades. There remains the problem that, as long as Ulster is permitted to remain in the UK, or California in the US, taxpayers in Britain, or in the other 49 states, are being coerced into supporting it. How then can any libertarian fail to support immediate expulsion of any part of any national territory whenever it arises? ("Whenever it arises" meaning: when a very liberal regime is confronted by vicious annexationist demands from a markedly less liberal regime, for this is the only circumstance in which it even could arise.) In passing, I would observe that since we should take consequences into account, so, in a world of nation-states, libertarians may have to support some instances of government coercion under the immediate circumstances, whilst simultaneously working for the ultimate abolition of all government coercion. (There are many circumstances in which libertarians would call a government policeman to the scene of a crime, and it is but a short step from that to demanding more police patrols in one's neighbourhood, for instance.) It is unwise to suppose that one can always best attain one's objectives by behaving as one would were it already obtained.

However, I don't think I have to appeal to that principle in the present case, although the consequences of expelling Ulster would indeed be gruesome. The point rather is that there are alternative ways of attacking the tax burden. One could insist that Ulster or California pay for its own policing, one could try to introduce more voluntary elements into the legal system and into the taxation system. It is a matter of tactical judgement, outside the scope of the present discussion, which precise measures would be best: a voucher system for police protection; a conscientious objection clause in taxation; the contracting out of police and legal services, and so forth. There are several lines of attack. No one should be forced to pay for

defence against the IRA, but equally, no one should be forced to pay for the Whitehall bureaucracy, for Concorde or the Channel Tunnel, for the building of roads or hospitals, or for the salaries of schoolteachers. Although it might be difficult to fine-tune one's tax-limitation measures so that mainland Brits could get out of paying for the troops in Ulster, there is no need to do so, since all those other examples are equally iniquitous, and a measure of progress in all of them might be more liberating than complete success in just one of them.

Finally, Lester makes light of the hazards of a Catholic-Protestant war in the event of expulsion. He states correctly that many Catholics do not support annexation by the South and "are not a threat". Apparently the Protestants are supposed to keep this in mind while their families are being blasted to pieces by Catholic terrorists based and succoured in Catholic neighbourhoods. Lester's attitude here is amazing. There are (at least) two religious and ethnic communities in Ulster, and there is much suspicion between them. It is true that many Northern Ireland Catholics do not want Ulster to be immediately incorporated into the Republic, but that is while the alternative is the UK. In a separate Ulster, these Catholics might reconsider. Varying degrees of support for Republicanism are interwoven with the traditions and outlook of the Catholic community. The IRA has substantial support among Catholics, and is especially prone to brutality against signs of deviation from Irish Nationalism among Catholics. In the Protestant camp, generalized anti-Catholic anger (once endemic throughout most of Britain) has been kept alive by the annexationist threat from Dublin and the IRA. The removal of British rule would make many Catholics feel that they were at the mercy of crazed Orangemen, and possibly that their only credible defence was the IRA. Independence would mean the displacement of British liberalism by a militantly anti-Catholic Ulster Nationalist ideology embittered by many betrayals, including the final one of expulsion. Most Protestants and most Catholics are far more at home with Britishness than they are with the menacingly alien rituals and emblems of the opposite community. Independence is very

unlikely, but even serious talk of independence would gravely worsen community relations in Ulster.

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