

## THE BRITISH WHITE PAPER ON NORTHERN IRELAND - A NEW SITUATION

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In 1920 a province, within the United Kingdom was created by the British Government out of the six north eastern counties of Ireland. The creation of this province was decided on so as to stem the democratic tide which was surging towards national independence. The six counties in question were chosen according to the gerrymander criterion that they comprised the maximum area within which pro-British supporters could outvote nationalists. This arrangement was accepted and implemented locally by Orange landlords and businessmen. It was made practicable through the backing given it by Protestant workers and small farmers which was itself the result of sectarian division and fear carefully fostered by Ulster bigots and British Tories during the previous century.

In order to contain democratic national protest within this province and award varying degrees of privilege to the Unionist alliance, civil rights were denied nationalists and many forms of material discrimination practised against them.

At the back of all this Britain kept a firm grip on the province she had instituted to defend her interests in Ireland. This is demonstrated in Section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act (1920) — "Notwithstanding the establishment of the Parliament of Northern Ireland or anything contained in this Act, the supreme authority of the Parliament of the United Kingdom shall remain unaffected and undiminished over all persons, matters and things in Northern Ireland and every part thereof."

This is the authority which made possible the prorogation of Stormont in March 1972 and it unambiguously indicates Britain's responsibility for what has been happening in Northern Ireland for the past half century. It explodes the myth of what the "Financial Times" recently dubbed "Northern Ireland's mystique of independence."

For any proposed solution of the present crisis to have a chance of success it must go to the roots of the problem which involves Britain dismantling the entire discriminatory edifice which she constructed over half a century ago.

What is specifically required is the acknowledgement by Britain of Irish national integrity and the right of self-determination which goes with it, the immediate ending of anti-democratic and discriminatory measures in the North, and the introduction of an interim governmental arrangement which does not obstruct but encourages the peaceful reunification of Ireland.

It is in so far as these requirements are met that the White Paper must be judged a success or failure.

### THE FIRST REQUIREMENT - ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF IRISH NATIONAL INTEGRITY

In the White Paper there is no admission of Irish national integrity and therefore no declaration of intent to encourage Irish unity and prepare for political and military withdrawal. The change which Britain has decided on is not that which brings the Six Counties close to the rest of Ireland but rather that which binds them more strongly to her. Here are the key passages of the White Paper which indicate this.

Paragraph 2(b) of the White Paper (reiterating the Green Paper) states:

"As long as Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom the sovereignty of the United Kingdom Parliament must be acknowledged..."

Paragraph 11 states:

"It is the responsibility of the United Kingdom Parliament, to determine how Northern Ireland shall be governed as part of the United Kingdom."

Paragraph 54 states:

"Whatever powers to legislate may be devolved upon a regional law-making authority in Northern Ireland, it must and will be made clear that such devolution does not diminish in any way the right of the United Kingdom Parliament to legislate for Northern Ireland, as for any other part of the United Kingdom, in relation to any matter whatever."

Paragraph 54 continues that devolved powers will only be interfered with in exceptional circumstances "but there can be no room for ambiguity about the right to do so."

Paragraph 81 states:

"There will be no weakening whatever in Northern Ireland's links with the Crown. All executive power in Northern Ireland as in Great Britain will continue to flow from Her Majesty the Queen."

Paragraph 88 states:

"Moreover the United Kingdom Government cannot abrogate responsibility for the application in Northern Ireland of regional policies which will be the subject of negotiation with the European Economic Community in their application to the United Kingdom as a whole."

It is not surprising that the "Financial Times" article already referred to should sum up the White Paper as follows:

"The essence of the White Paper is that it asserts the sovereignty of Westminster over Northern Ireland more firmly than at any time (with the exception of the 12 months of direct rule) since Ireland was divided."

#### Rationalisations in the White Paper.

There are a number of rationalisations which are used in the White Paper to justify the failure to acknowledge Irish nationality. Firstly, paragraph 10 restates the result of the Border Poll carried out in the North in March, 1973. Calmly ignored is what even the "Sunday Times" Insight team had to admit in their book 'Ulster', namely that "The border was itself the first and biggest gerrymander...."

Secondly, paragraph 15 refers to "the clash of national aspirations" implying that one of these aspirations is the desire to remain British and to stay in the United Kingdom. Again, the "Financial Times" spoke more bluntly for the British establishment when it characterised the clash with greater accuracy as coming from the Orangemen who "turn out to be interested mainly in power within Northern Ireland -- and no British guarantees will ever compensate for its loss".

Thirdly, there is the tacit defence, that, after all, those delegated powers which are now returned to Westminster have been shifted away from the Unionists. True, but this argument is used to disguise the fact that they have been shifted to those who created and backed unionism for 50 years. They have not been taken away from Unionists pending their cession, along with sovereignty, to an all-Ireland Government and Assembly.

The failure of the British Government to logically follow through its concessions on individual human rights by recognising national rights can only encourage, and already is only encouraging, the unionists to seek the restoration of their privileged position. For them there is no point in being separate from the rest of Ireland if this does not ensure their traditional privileged status.

### Consent and Irish Unity

Here it is important to refer to the matter of consent in achieving Irish unity. Such consent is not to be confused with a right of self-determination for the Six Counties. Its artificially constructed nature designed as it was to serve the ends of a local supremacist elite awards it no such right. On the other hand the real and longterm interests of Irish Protestants can best be achieved in a United Ireland. They will form a significant portion of the overall population and the classical Protestant traditions of civil liberties and individual freedom will benefit Irish Society as a whole. The struggle for civil rights has been to wean the Northern Protestants away from defensive privilege to full democracy and participation. The national majority recognise the desirability of achieving this objective with as little rancour and bloodshed as possible. Therefore, they prefer persuasion to force. This politic and humane choice of means has been deliberately caricatured as the concession of a right of self-determination which is at present being used to secure acquiescence in the North's membership of the United Kingdom.

### A Council of Ireland

It has been shown above that Britain has not revealed the least desire to face up to Irish national integrity nor to declare her willingness to surrender sovereignty over Northern Ireland. Her references to a 'Council of Ireland' when examined critically underline this attitude. Such a Council would deal chiefly with "tourism, regional development, electricity and transport" (paragraph 110). It might also, however provide "a firm basis for concerted governmental and community action against terrorist organisations" (paragraph 112). In the latter instance two sovereign governments would be involved — London and Dublin. The British response to that problem is not to cede her powers in the matter to a Council of Ireland but to call for "consideration as to how the United Kingdom authorities can best be associated with discussion of these subjects either within a Council of Ireland concept or otherwise". In other words, how can Britain be given a new political say throughout the whole of Ireland.

In return for the possible inauguration of an All-Ireland consultative body concerning itself with tourism etc. and its possible extension to include Britain on matters like security, the Irish Government is expected to render "acceptance of the present status of Northern Ireland" (paragraph 112) This implies deletion of Article 3 from the 1937 Constitution which claims rightful jurisdiction over the whole national territory.

If the British can pull this off it will be the neatest imperialist trick in a long time. It would involve at the least the creation of a meaningless Council of Ireland, at most the extension of British political influence over the South and the recognition of British Sovereignty over the North — in gratitude! In other words the co-operation of the Irish Government is being sought by the British so that they may govern the North in their own interests.

### THE SECOND REQUIREMENT — DEMOCRACY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Some of the old means by which partition was maintained have suffered a blow in the White Paper in the Section which deals with Human Rights.

The Special Powers Act is to be ended. No oaths or tests are to be required of public representatives where they would not be required in similar circumstances in Britain. Discrimination in private employment is to be outlawed.

About these provisions two things must be said. Firstly, there are signal omissions from the list of proposals. The Flags' and Emblems' Act, Public Order Act and its Amendment and Criminal Justice Act are not to be repealed. Secondly, it will be

necessary to see the draft legislation before accepting that the concessions which have been proposed are real.

Above all, however, is the unsatisfactoriness of the continuance of internment under the new name of detention according to the Diplock proposals. This must be remedied quickly.

The electoral and governmental arrangements also show welcome concessions. The introduction of PR and proportionately structured committees are an advance on the present situation.

### THE NEW SITUATION

While being fully aware of the shortcomings of the White Paper, it is also necessary to appreciate that a new political situation has been created and any opportunities it presents must be used to the maximum advantage. The concessions on Human Rights, with all their limitations, and PR elections to an assembly have yet again thrown the former Unionist Alliance into disarray. Yet another opportunity has been offered republican, national and democratic forces to co-operate so as to further the achievement of national independence by presenting a strong united front to Orange and British intransigence. There is no question of pretending that political differences do not exist among the anti-Unionist forces. They do but all must recognise that the one point on which they do agree — the necessity for national independence and democracy — happens to be the fundamental issue at the moment. Britain does not want to recognise this issue but she must be made to. Co-operation requires not only the recognition of the basic issue, however, but also requires an appreciation that any working together must be genuine and fair. It must not be deliberately used to any one party's or group's advantage. If such co-operation can be effected then it is possible that two sets of demands could be realised. Firstly, human rights could be extended to include the abolition of detention. Secondly, and most importantly an impressive demand could be made of Britain to declare her willingness to withdraw politically and militarily from Ireland and begin the necessary steps towards that end. In the light of Unionist attempts to sabotage the White Paper this will become a more immediately realisable demand than it now appears.

Opportunities are worthless, however, if people are not prepared and organised to exploit them. What opposition politicians in the North must ask today is — are they ready to take up the real advantages of the new situation?