Fighting With Shadows

Three years ago, on November 15, 1985, the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed at Hillsborough Castle. At the time many nationalists saw the Agreement as a fundamental turning-point and the beginning of the end of British involvement in Northern Ireland. Most unionists read the same implications into the Agreement, and considered it to be nothing less than a British betrayal of the majority in the North. Since then the Agreement has dominated the political agenda in Northern Ireland, with unionist opposition to the Agreement standing in the way of any prospect of political progress, and with the nationalist SDLP testing complacency on the laurels of the Agreement.

The shared fantasies of Orange and Green seem increasingly threadbare now, as the two governments embark on their scheduled review of the Agreement. The Agreement is not the first step on the road to a United Ireland; but if it is even a solution to the problems of the nationalist community in the North. The reality of the Agreement is so much more modest than the extraordinary spectre which unionists and nationalist politicians alike have whipped up; it is simply a declaration of good intentions and a commitment to co-operation between two governments.

As such it should be welcomed, and built on, but there should not be any illusion that the Northern Ireland problem can be solved by the two governments in London and Dublin—or by all the governments in the world for that matter. The problem lies in the conflict between the divided communities of Northern Ireland, and in the final analysis the problem can only be solved in Northern Ireland, by agreement amongst the people of Northern Ireland. There is no alternative to that, and any other initiative can only be judged by its effect on the possibility of dialogue and co-operation amongst the Northern Irish people.

JUSTICE

The reality, the rather dismal reality, of the Agreement could hardly be more clearly shown than in respect of civil liberties and security issues. Tackling problems in the administration of justice, and reducing nationalist alienation from the courts and the security forces, was one of the explicit purposes of the Agreement. And what will the two governments be looking at when they consider their review? On the plus side at new anti-discrimination legislation, or at least the promise of such legislation; at a new police complaints system which fell far short of what was being sought, at some minor tinkering with the Emergency Provisions Act; at minor changes in legislation in respect of the right to bear arms; and, in fairness, at the RUC's good record of conspicuous impartiality in the face of loyalist protests against the Agreement.

On the negative side? Well, where do we begin? With the abolition of the right to silence, since it has just come into force. The banning of Sinn Fein TV and radio. The imposition of a requirement that candidates for election sign an oath renouncing violence. Changes in the ordinary process of criminal justice which in Northern Ireland go far beyond those introduced in Britain. Reducing the possibility of remission of prison sentences. Making permanent the Prevention of Terrorism Act, complete with its absurd and appalling power to ban British citizens from Britain without trial, and adding a new power to inspect bank accounts for good measure. And that just the last few weeks.

Before that we had the shambles of the Strabane affair, the Gibraltar shootings and other similar incidents, and the continuing failure to clarify the law of the use of force by the security forces or to increase the powers of coroner's courts to investigate deaths caused by the security forces. And though it is as unfair to blame the British government for the decisions of British courts as it is unfair to blame the Republic's government for decisions in extradition cases, the fact is that the decision on the Birmingham Six case and the failure to review other cases have not helped.

Some of these things are perhaps as bad as we may be inclined to paint them. The antiterrorist measures, for example, are a modest intrusion on civil liberties which may have considerable effect in undermining terrorist groups, and deserves support. And the serious escalation of the terrorist threat in the last year, from both sides of the division, undoubtedly demands some kind of response from government. But the overall picture is grim, and it is little comfort that the British government is very nearly as contemptuous of civil liberties in Britain as it is in Northern Ireland.

EXPECTATIONS

So much for tackling problems in the administration of justice. So much for reducing alienation. And so much, frankly, for the Agreement, which has conspicuously failed to live up either to the expectations of its most enthusiastic supporters or to the nightmares of its opponents. The question now is what the Agreement can achieve but how we can move on from the Agreement into a situation in which the modest gains in co-operation between the two governments which the Agreement has brought about can be expanded to include significant co-operation between the communities in Northern Ireland.

In that respect the failures of the Agreement are as important, and in the final analysis perhaps as positive, as its successes. It has failed miserably to satisfy the hopes of the SDLP who have based their strategy on relying on Washington, Dublin and London, rather than on dialogue with other legitimate Northern Ireland parties. And if it has not quite confirmed the fear of Unionists its creation and implementation have only made those fears stronger. The Irish government in power has not been able to act with any real purpose to the very real demands of Northern Ireland. The Loyalist guerrilla groups have not been asked to reorganise, and the British government in power has not been able to act in a way that would confirm the authorities of the SDLP to the people of Northern Ireland. As long as the British government in power has not been able to act in a way that would confirm the authorities of the SDLP to the people of Northern Ireland, the Northern Irish community will continue to see the British government as the enemy, and the SDLP as the protectors of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland.

Steve McBride

Wilson Freebairn, Adrian McKinney and Simon Schofield at Peace People Assembly