

## 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 resting complacently 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, nor is it 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 unionist 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 conduct their review? On the plus side at new anti-discrimination legislation, or at least at 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 incitement to hatred and processions; 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 from 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 Stalker 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 coroners' 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 not as bad as we may be inclined to paint them. The anti-racketerring measures, for example, are a modest intrusion on civil liberties which may have considerable effect in undermining terrorist groups, and deserve 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 not 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 fears of Unionists its creation finally shattered their belief that they could resist concessions to nationalists and rely on London to protect their interests. Neither group should be under any illusion now about their need to live with one another and to make concessions for the common good.

In many ways the present situation in Northern Ireland is deeply worrying. The Provos are vastly better armed than ever before, thanks to Libyan intervention, and it seems clear now that their political side will never be more than a mouthpiece for the gunmen. The Loyalist terrorist groups have also reorganised, and though they have not yet become active, the capture of Loyalist arms dumps and factories indicates that they are well equipped to do a great deal of damage should they choose to do so. The Irish government continues to hanker after the fantasy of some kind of broader all-Ireland solution, and resists attempts to promote internal dialogue in Northern Ireland. The British government has lost interest again, and is content to enact even more draconian security measures; containment rather than solution is now once again their watchword.

But the situation is not hopeless, not even after twenty years of violence. There are signs amongst some Unionist leaders of a willingness to seek some kind of accommodation with the nationalist minority. Those feelers have not yet had any kind of positive response from the SDLP, but the continuing failure of the Agreement to deliver must eventually persuade even the SDLP that a solution to the Northern Ireland problem will have to be found in Northern Ireland. Sooner or later there will have to be dialogue, negotiation and concession, and it is clear enough what form the final compromise will have to take. A devolved parliament for Northern Ireland, with effective participation in government for all sections of the community, and with some form of Anglo-Irish framework to ensure co-operation between the governments and guarantee respect for both historic traditions in Northern Ireland. That is where we are going, and while the elected leaders of the sectarian camps dither the rest of us must go on working to create a Northern Ireland in which it will no longer be necessary to seek uneasy compromises between warring factions.

Steve McBride



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