

The Art of Political Double-talk

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" . . . dominance of a majority does not in itself constitute an acceptable socio-political system."



HISTORY, when it comes to be written for Ulster, will have to vindicate the tactics of her murdering gunman. For it was his methods that wrung the following declaration out of the British government:

"A Northern Ireland assembly or authority must be capable of involving all its members constructively in ways which satisfy them and those they represent that the whole community has a part to play in the government of the Province. As a minimum this would involve assuring minority groups of an effective voice and a real influence; but there are strong arguments that the objective of real participation should be achieved by giving minority interests a share in the exercise of executive power if this can be achieved by means which are not unduly complex or artificial, and which do not represent an obstacle to effective government."

This criterion of good democratic government is enshrined as paragraph 79(f) of the government's discussion paper *The Future of Northern Ireland*. But the words now, it seems, are to be backed by institutional reforms, and these reforms, which Prime Minister Edward Heath has shown himself willing to accept, expose in classic form the art of political double-talk.

Let's begin with the electoral system. Most of the parties of Northern Ireland are urging the Single Transferable Vote form of proportional representation. This would ensure that groups in a permanent minority had a fair share in the running of democratic political institutions. Heath and Wilson are disposed to this.

As a result, however, the permanent majority would lose some of its formerly impregnable authority, and it comes as no surprise that the Ulster Unionist Party, which has run what has effectively been a one-party state for the past fifty years, is demanding the retention of the simple majority vote method of election.

The Unionists, by sheer weight of numbers, have had a natural majority since the 1920 Government of Ireland Act established the province with its own parliament. That Act provided for proportional rep-

resentation, but the Protestant majority abandoned it after the 1925 election.

The refusal of the Conservative and Labour parties of Great Britain to accept PR for the rest of the Kingdom is a contradiction of the political philosophy which they profess to support.

Our system is based on the traditions of classical liberal democratic theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and best associated with the Utilitarians. Liberal democracy is founded on an anti-dogmatic creed. Among its prime virtues is toleration of, and indeed encouragement for, freedom for diversity of individual and group development. Why else have freedom of speech and of assembly? Compressing people's thoughts and behaviour into a stereo-typed pattern is anathema to the liberal democrat. And yet the British electoral system is frankly opposed to this classical tradition.

PR, so strongly urged by John Stuart Mill - whom contemporary politicians love to quote - allows for democratic representation of minority groups in parliament: simple majority voting crushes the chances of minorities to gain admission to the halls of power.

PR is no constraint on the evolution of new ideas, and provides part of the necessary framework within which these can be brought into the public domain. Simple majority voting compels consensus politics - or what's known as the "art of the possible," which is a kind way of saying "the art of compromising the minority to suit the needs of the majority."

Next, we turn to the use of plebiscites. On November 15 last year, Heath said at the Mansion House in London that it was legitimate for some Ulster Catholics to want unification with the Republic of Ireland.

He continued: "If at some future date the majority of the people in Northern Ireland want unification and express that desire in the appropriate constitutional manner, I do not believe any British Government would stand in the way."

Heath's Government, it seems, thinks that the "appropriate constitutional manner" is through a plebiscite, to be held early in the New Year. To

sanctify this interpretation of the British constitution, the Government has just introduced the Northern Ireland (Border Poll) Bill in the House of Commons. The voter will be told to put an X against the question of whether he wishes Ulster to remain in the UK, or to join the Republic. Such an act on the part of the Conservative government would, at first glance, suggest an admirable dedication to the principles of democracy.

Accuse me of being a cynic if you wish, but I don't share this view, and for two reasons.

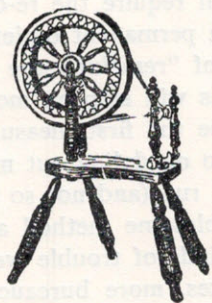
The first is that Heath knows the result is a foregone conclusion. In the same speech at the Mansion House, he boldly declared that he did not believe that the majority wanted to join the Republic. There's nothing lost, therefore, in holding a plebiscite: hardly a genuine example of leaders democratically consulting the electorate, in order to fulfil their wishes.

Secondly, Heath holds the view that plebiscites are *not* a part of the British constitutional way of life when it comes to demands for consulting the people on another border issue - that of the EEC. Why?

Well, the result of a plebiscite on the EEC cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, opinion polls suggest the result would probably be the opposite to that which Heath requires. So - no plebiscite! And the reason offered: it's not a legitimate instrument in the British constitution.

Now there's a fine piece of Irish blarney for you.

The Utilitarians were undoubtedly elitist in their outlook, which may seem to be anti-democratic. But because they were in a minority, they were quick to see that the mere dominance of a majority does not in itself constitute an acceptable socio-political system. There can, after all, be tyranny of the majority over the minority. And that, effectively, is what the Catholic has suffered in the last half-century in Ulster. The Cameron Commission in 1969 adequately documents the evidence in support of claims of unequal treatment of the minority by the majority.



This unhealthy system arose out of the continued domination of the one political party. And, as the discussion paper on Ulster rightly observes: "the

relationship between the parties was not fluctuating and uncertain, but virtually fixed from one election to another. Such a situation was unlikely to foster either sensitivity on the part of the permanent majority, or a sense of responsibility on the part of the permanent minority."

We are asked to believe that the possibility of parties changing seats at Westminster constitutes an effective check on insensitivity by the Government, irresponsibility by the governed. But the Westminster game of musical chairs is being increasingly viewed as that of a one-party system. Despite the pre-election differences in manifestos nobody believes that there is any difference in either the ends or the means of the two leading contenders for office. Mr. Heath has done nothing to question this interpretation. The net result is a disturbing growth in insensitivity on the part of the comfortably entrenched politicians; and of irresponsibility at street level. Even elected representatives in town halls are now urging citizens to ignore laws of Parliament (witness the row over the so-called Fair Rents Act).

A growing number of people, representing minority groups, feel that the only way to further their ends is outside the orthodox political system. They are, consequently, being pushed into the realms of the irresponsible, if by that notion we mean that they are under no obligation to show allegiance to a wider group and therefore are free to act in a seemingly selfish way.

The politicians, for their part, happily ignore what they can dismiss as "freak elements": that is because their Westminster seats are secured by an appeal to a comparatively few known as "floating voters." And this is a result of the present electoral system.

It's difficult to say that the Welshman or Scotsman or disenfranchised Liberal will take the path of the Irish rioter. But what cannot be questioned is the groundswell of cynicism and consequent apathy among the British electorate. This attitude breeds contempt among the leaders, who ignoring the cause, point to the symptoms as evidence supporting their belief that they have a superior right to direct rather than act on behalf of the people.

Only by involving the citizen in the processes of civic life can the politician head off the future consequences of instability in British society. And that entails reform of our institutions. Is it too much to expect that sometime in the near future the Scotsman, Welshman and Englishman will be given political parity with the Ulsterman?

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The heading reading "£4 million an acre" on page 106 of our last issue should have read "£12 million an acre."