

A Hegelian inspects the Lager

UNDER SIEGE: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. By Arthur Aughey. Blackstaff. 214 pp. £18.50 in UK.

By Brendan O'Leary

ARTHUR Aughey has broken three of the traditional rules of Ulster Unionism: (1) don't think; (2) if you do think, don't speak; and (3) if you must think and speak, don't write. He has written an eloquent, angry, backbiting and often very intelligent book describing the Unionist reaction to the Hillsborough Accord. He has a fine line in abuse, whether berating "academic minions" who support the Anglo-Irish Agreement, or suggesting that "Malton's honest spleen is the perfect antidote to Hume's bilious benevolence". More significantly, Aughey tries to develop a political philosophy of Unionism.

He argues that Unionism embraces the "State" rather than the "nation" as its central political concept. The key (Hegelian) idea of the Union is the idea of the British State as the embodiment of pluralism and liberal individualism; it is to this notion that Unionism, correctly construed, is normatively committed. Moreover, he asserts that Unionism, unlike Irish nationalism, is a genuinely modern philosophy, because it is not predicated upon an ethnically, culturally or religiously defined nation. Aughey recognises the embarrassing fact that "Unionist politics, for all its parochial stupidities, [has] identified itself with the inherited if not always the current values of the British State", but he would have us believe that underneath the

provincial backwardness and secondary prejudices of his constitutionalist lurks the philosophy of modernity — the idea of the liberal State.

Given these philosophical ruminations, it is hardly surprising that Aughey comes clean as an "integrationist". He surveys, with a mixture of disdain and curiously English snobbery, the other varieties of Unionist politics currently on offer. He attacks devolutionists, in the DUP and elsewhere, as victims of "the Stormont virus", suggests that those committed to power-sharing will institutionalise sectarianism; and contends that the Alliance Party "has always shown an excessively slavish submission to the dictates of British policy." He is much gentler on Molyneux and the UUP than the other Unionists.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement itself is condemned as a "constitutional monstrosity" which "resembles more than anything else a land deal between two feudal dynasties". Since it does not rest on the consent of the citizens of Northern Ireland, it is a denial of the principles of the modern State.

There are three key errors in Aughey's arguments. First, his belief that power-sharing — or consociation — institutionalises sectarianism is fallacious, short-sighted and betrays the intellectual provincialism of his political science. Power-sharing aims to achieve equality and proportionality between deeply divided groups, i.e. to erode discrimination and untrammelled majority control. It also aims to permit cultural autonomy, i.e. to inhibit sectarian domination or forced integration.

Second, Aughey assumes that all Irish nationalists are Gaelic romantics with no commitment to

the philosophy of the modern liberal State. There is in fact a long-standing Irish Enlightenment tradition, as suggested by Roman Fanning, Tom Garvin and Jeffrey Prager, which is not sectarian in either the Gaelic or Catholic modes.

Finally, Aughey assumes that the complete integration of Northern Ireland into Britain — administrative, legislative and electoral — is both feasible and desirable. If this strategy was tried now, however, it would require the unilateral abandonment of the Agreement by the British, lead to a breakdown in Anglo-Irish relations, compel the SDLP to become more nationalist, and produce a negative international reaction, especially in the United States but also among European Community members.

Aughey believes that the failure of the British parties to organise in Northern Ireland has perpetuated sectarian divisions. This argument rests on proving the brittle nature of the subculture in Northern Ireland. He cites polls which show that a significant proportion of the electorate want British parties to contest elections in the North and would be prepared to vote for them. However, the claim that the organisation of the British parties in Northern Ireland would break down sectarian politics is valid only if those prepared to vote for the British parties have non-sectarian motives. As Labour is committed to a united Ireland by consent, and as the Conservatives support the union between Britain and Northern Ireland, Aughey's claims are less convincing.

A *Belfast Telegraph* poll of October 1988, which broke down party preference and religious affiliation, was very revealing. It showed that 21 per cent of Catholics would support Labour but

only six per cent of Protestants would do so. Moreover, 24 per cent of Protestants would vote Conservative but only six per cent of Catholics would do so. In the event of British parties organising in Northern Ireland, 70 per cent of Catholics would continue to vote for parties advocating a united Ireland (the SDLP, Sinn Féin, and Labour), while 81 per cent of Protestants would continue to vote for parties which are broadly supportive of the union (UUP, DUP, Alliance, and Conservative).

It is therefore wishful thinking to claim that the organisation of British parties in Northern Ireland will result in the Northern Irish adopting the political culture of the British State.

It is evident in any case that the British do not regard Northern Ireland as an integral part of the UK State, let alone the British nation, and are unlikely to abandon the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

The recent conversion of many Unionists to integrationist philosophies smacks of a Hillsborough-induced conversion rather than principled philosophy. The character of recent support for electoral integration suggests a widespread desire on the part of Protestant Unionists to follow any course which enables them to avoid having to accommodate their Catholic Nationalist minority. In this sense, and many others, Aughey's book is profoundly representative of the state of Unionists after the Anglo-Irish agreement, and therefore deserves to be read.

Hegel said that the owl of Minerva set flight at dusk, i.e. that wisdom comes with hindsight after the day of conflict is over. However, the dusk has not yet fallen in Arthur Aughey's world.