

# 38 Guiltless passions of a Unionist liberal

TOM Wilson, born in 1916 in what later became Northern Ireland, is a former Oxford don and Glaswegian professor of political economy. In 1955 he edited a complacent book, *Ulster Under Home Rule*, in which he suggested that Northern Catholic grievances were more spiritual than "real". "They have less to complain about than the US negroes, and their lot is a very pleasant one as compared with the nationalists in," say, the Ukraine." He also held that "(Catholics) were made to feel inferior (in the past), and to make matters worse they often were inferior, if only in those personal qualities that make for success in competitive economic life" (author's italics). Wilson went on to become a key economic adviser to the Unionist governments of the 1960s, and authored the controversial Wilson Plan of 1964.

*Ulster: Conflict and Consent* suggests that slightly greater political tact and broader intellectual acumen than he displayed in 1955. His new book is part history, part analysis, part prescription. In some respects it is a plausible contemporary defence of a liberal Unionist position, and doubtless will be cited as such. It therefore merits attention, even if it too often reads like an *apologia pro vita sua* or indeed as an apology for his fatherland.

The book has four parts. The first is an historical introduction to Ulster questions. Wilson argues that the responsibility for partition lay not with the British government but with the historically developed ethnic and religious cleavages in the island, and in the sectarian pattern of mobilisation of Irish nationalism.

However, even if partition of some sort was inevitable, the partition of 1920 was dramatically imperfect — as Wilson subsequently concedes.

If Wilson's historical resumé is otherwise more competent its deficiencies are nonetheless revealing. His account of the Irish Famine is Malthusian; he neglects to emphasise that Irish Home Rulers sought devolution within the UK rather than complete independence; and given his subsequent emphasis upon the merits of constitutionalism he is unduly sympathetic to Unionist illegality and armed defiance before 1914. His ethnic empathies also presumably explain why he anachronistically talks of a Northern majority before it became a majority in the newly-created territory of Northern Ireland.

Wilson is keen to emphasise that Unionist dominance was not established by a police state or electoral malpractices, but rather that support for the Stormont government rested upon the will of a large majority. Nobody denies this fact; what critics suggest is that the police state features and electoral malpractices reinforced Unionist dominance within the boundaries of a governmental system which automatically guaranteed them an in-built majority.

Part II, the analytical core of the book, is a detailed examination of politics and policies in Northern Ireland from 1920 until 1972, with some further analysis of public policies up until the present day. In his overview of the period of devolved government Wilson presents a very solid discussion of the fiscal constraints facing the Belfast government, and the minutiae of the British subvention. His analysis of eco-

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economic progress and development in the province is also good, although his discussion of the industrial location policies of the 1960s read like special pleading. He contends that discrimination in housing policy was confined to councils west of the Bann, but fails to underline that these were the areas in which Catholics were more likely to be in local majorities which had been gerrymandered into pseudo-minorities. He favours integrated education, but is less than warmly sympathetic or liberal to the demand for equal funding of Catholic schools.

However, where Wilson shows himself to be a guiltless liberal is in his discussion of discrimination and unemployment. For him, like most neo-classically trained economists, the free market is touchingly colour-blind, and discrimination must normally be intentional — although he does concede the possibility that the prevalence of informal employment networks might produce a sectarian bias of a "thoughtless" kind.

He challenges the research conducted for the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights, which suggested that much of the differential between Catholic and Protestant unem-

ployment levels could only be explained by intentional and indirect discrimination, and which lay behind the recently passed Fair Employment Act. His methodological quibbles are unpersuasive and suggest unwillingness to accommodate reality.

Though Wilson bends over backwards to appear reasonable to the non-Ulster reader, the effect is spoiled when he tells us that "in preferring Protestants to Catholics many employers may well have believed that, apart altogether from satisfying any religious or political preferences, they were likely, as a rule, to be employing the more efficient workers."

He seems to have retained two habits from the 1950s, when engaged in apologising for "Ulster", meaning the Protestants of Northern Ireland; he is liberal in his use of italics, and deficient in his citation of evidence. He is not denying the existence of discrimination any longer, just denying its scale, and although in favour of legislation to outlaw discrimination he is hostile to affirmative action, and admonishes the (now deceased) Fair Employment Agency not to harass managers. Would that the FEA could have been guilty of such charges! He complains elsewhere that "when Catholics are bigoted, they usually manage to be so in a better tone of voice." If so, he might benefit from elocution lessons.

Part III of the book is a survey of the last twenty years, culminating with the impasse before and after the Anglo-Irish Agreement — which Wilson dislikes because of the lack of symmetry that allegedly works to the advantage of Unionists. Nonetheless clearly distances himself from

DUP-style opposition, to the Agreement, but without recommending what should be done about it.

Part IV is an analysis of key issues affecting the Northern Ireland conflict — religion, the nature of the Irish Republic, and the questions of violence and security — all as a prelude to Wilson's prognosis and prescriptions. He rightly berates the inhospitable nature of the Republic's constitution as regards Ulster Protestants, but erroneously suggests the Republic is inadequately policed. He is apparently unaware that the per capita costs of security of Northern Ireland are three times higher for Irish as opposed to British citizens. However, it is his discussion of violence, security and the administration of justice which is likely to be most tedious for Irish Times readers.

He believes that the defeat of terrorism, which he understands as primarily a policing cum military activity, is the most urgent task for public policy makers. He asserts that the use of Diplock courts is reasonable, and that the Republic's request for three-judge courts is both unnecessary and impractical. He also advocates "quasi-judicial detention" — judicial as opposed to executive internment — in tandem with increased jail sentences and the removal of the right to silence.

His discussions of a range of controversial incidents and episodes — from Bloody Sunday through the Stalker Affair to the killing of Aidan MacAnaspie — run true to sectarian expectations, and one passage of the book seems to suggest a liberal attitude towards a policy of shoot-to-kill. Finally, he repeats the canard that

the SDLP do not back the police. The evidence? The fact that the SDLP do not endorse everything the police do and their insistence that the RUC act impartially in upholding the law. Apparently nothing less than a blank cheque endorsement of the actions of the RUC, the UDR and the Northern Irish courts would satisfy Wilson.

What then is Wilson's answer to Lenin's question: *What is to be done?* It is very unclear, even after 330 large pages, but if one brings together various parts of the book the answer seems to be as follows:

First, the Republic must abandon its irredentist claims while Britain must commit itself unconditionally to Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK, complete with the organisation of British parties in the province. Second, devolution is a sensible proposal, but need not necessarily rest upon power-sharing nor an Irish dimension, and if it can't work then administrative devolution along current Scottish lines is a good idea. Finally, a security offensive, North and South, incorporating a modified mode of internment, is necessary before further political progress can be made. If this resumé sounds desparately familiar it is because it is so conventionally Unionist.

The Bourbons were said to have learned nothing and to have forgotten nothing. Professor Wilson is not a Bourbon, but despite his education and skill as an economist, he has learned nothing important about his homeland while managing to forget a great deal under the pressure of wishful thinking. His book will be remembered because of what it exemplifies, not because of its intellectual powers.