

Through the telescope

THE IRA enjoys one key advantage in its self-styled "war of national liberation". Internationally, Northern Ireland is illegitimate. Outside the British Isles the Ulster conflict is perceived in the IRA's terms, as Britain's last colonial war. When outsiders know anything about Northern Ireland then they know that the creation of Northern Ireland denied the Irish people their right to "self determination". They know that until the 1960s Unionists acted as a tyrannous local majority, controlling the natives through political, economic and cultural domination, and making a mockery of British democracy.

The consequence of this pattern of international public opinion is the focus of Adrian Guelke's original and well-written book. The international illegitimacy of Northern Ireland sustains the IRA's belief that it can embarrass Britain into withdrawal.

Simultaneously, it constrains the scale of repression which British policy-makers can contemplate without international embarrassment (in Europe or America). And, of course, it reinforces the *langer* mentality of Ulster Protestants.

Much of the political science literature on Northern Ireland is microscopic, focusing on actors and relationships within the province. It has usually been left to historians, politicians, journalists, clerics and even less intelligent people to explore the international context in which the conflict takes place. Moreover, most of the previous literature in this vein has generally focused on Anglo-Irish relations, rather than upon broader topics in international relations. Guelke's book is thus pathbreaking because it is the first work of political science to try to concentrate on the broader international dimensions of the conflict. It attempts to give us a view of Northern Ireland through the telescope.

The book has two key theses. The first, as mentioned, is the central idea that the status of Northern Ireland is universally illegitimate outside of the British Isles. The second is that the overall impact of international public opinion has been to make the conflict significantly more intractable. While the first thesis is correct, and well-presented, the second is much less convincing.

It is immediately apparent from the structure of his own book that the international perspective cannot be too illuminating if Guelke devotes five of his ten chapters to the politics of the Northern Ireland question in Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and the province itself. He also devotes another chapter to comparing the conflict with others elsewhere around the globe (those in Lebanon, Cyprus, Palestine, Puerto Rico and Corsica).

Moreover, these comparisons demonstrate how relatively unimportant the international context has been in making the Northern Ireland conflict seen intractable. Unlike the states of the Middle East, Northern Ireland is not, thankfully, a site for geopolitical rivalries between the superpowers. It would become so only if the Republic's government were to invite the Soviet Union to establish naval bases in Donegal,

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"pending the re-integration of the national territory"! This event is not likely to materialise.

The interests of states outside the British Isles are not materially affected by events in Northern Ireland. The United Nations and the European Community have not played important roles in managing, or exacerbating, the conflict. Moreover, the two states with most at stake, Britain and Ireland, have, since 1969, increasingly co-operated to contain the conflict, to promote power-sharing, and to arbitrate between the rival claims of nationalists and unionists.

The Libyan, American, NATO and the European connections all turn out, on the basis of Guelke's sober analyses, to be minor external irritants, rather than serious barriers to an accommodation or power-sharing settlement between Nationalists and Unionists within Northern Ireland. Therefore, most readers will conclude that the internationalisation of the conflict has in fact been minimal, and that this fact has lowered the potential for more bloody conflict. The "troubles" have remained stubbornly localised amongst the key actors, the inhabitants of the British Isles.

The reason Guelke's second thesis is at variance with the evidence of his own book is that he thinks that the root of the Northern Ireland conflict "lies in the conditional nature of Northern Ireland's membership of the United Kingdom." If it were unconditionally recognised as part of Britain there would not be a problem. He is not persuasive on this score. The conflict does not have one essential root; it has many, which I cannot elaborate on here (and which *Irish Times* readers do not need lectures upon).

Moreover, the author's formulation, in the above quotation, is no more than the statement that "if there were no international debate over whether Northern Ireland is British or Irish then there would be no Northern Ireland conflict." Put this way the thesis is both less impressive and also false (as religious prejudice, sectarian conflict and discrimination would still exist on a serious scale if the national question were resolved).

Guelke is more insightful when he suggests that "Viewed from a British Isles perspective, the price of stability in Britain and the Republic is instability in Northern Ireland." There are many other rewarding insights in his stimulating and provocative essays which will provoke readers to join the best kind of conflict: reasoned intellectual debate. If Adrian Guelke offers no solutions, he frames good questions, and puzzles over them with considerable acuity, clarity and literary grace.

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