



THE INVISIBLE MAN

LETTERS

What shared sovereignty offers Northern Ireland

From Dr John McGarry and Dr Brendan O'Leary

Sir: Richard English ("Shared sovereignty over Northern Ireland", Letters, 2 February) complains that we have changed our minds: we were once sceptical about sharing sovereignty as a way of resolving Northern Ireland, but are now in favour. He is right that we have changed our minds, but that is not a significant point. What matters is why.

One reason is that we want to resolve the "uncertainty and insecurity" which worries Mr English. Sharing sovereignty offers a just resolution, making Northern Ireland both British and Irish, and one that can be made stable. Naturally, the loyalist paramilitaries will oppose it; so will the republican paramilitaries. So what? The threat of paramilitary violence and insecurity applies to all ways of managing Northern Ireland, including the status quo. This threat should not be used to paralyse thought about what a just settlement requires.

Moreover, part of our argument is that although sharing sovereignty might lead to a short-term rise in paramilitary violence, in the longer run it could offer improvements in security for all through the joint co-operation of British and Irish security forces.

What alternative forms of "certainty" and "security" are on offer? We infer from Mr English's argument that he thinks British sovereignty over Northern Ireland must be declared permanent or

that conditional British sovereignty over Northern Ireland must be recognised by the Republic of Ireland. Sadly, these brands of "certainty" will not prompt either set of paramilitaries to say, "It's all over now", and wholly switch their resources into managing drinking clubs and taxis.

Leonard Jarvis (Letters, 2 February) has a different objection. He notes that Northern Ireland's census did not ask people their political opinions. He also declares that "anybody who knows Northern Ireland would be aware that religious denomination does not equate accurately with constitutional aspiration". Here he is at best a wishful thinker, and at worst misleading. The correlation between religion, national identity and voting preference in Northern Ireland has been demonstrated in several analyses to be the highest in the liberal democratic world. One more reason for supporting sharing sovereignty is that it might help to weaken that correlation, and stop a Northern Ireland election from being a census.

Mr Jarvis should also recognise that the threat that the Unionists' political position will be eroded is real, not an academic fiction based on sectarian stereotyping. We have shown that the proportion of voters supporting nationalist candidates in Northern Ireland elections has almost doubled since the late Sixties. The census data support the inference that this long-term rising nationalist vote is likely to continue, at least until

there is a just and stable resolution of the present conflict.

Yours sincerely,

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