

WEEKEND 8: Books

Exploring the roads to consensus

CONSENSUS IN IRELAND: Approaches and Recessions.

Edited by Charles Townshend, with a foreword by Brian Farrell. Clarendon Press, Oxford. £22.50 in UK.

By Brendan O'Leary

Nationalists, Unionists and Marxists share the defect of locating the prime mover of the conflict in external causes (whether it be British imperialism or the Republic's irredentism). In contrast, Whyte argues that the best research shows the dominant undercurrents in the conflict are internal to Northern Ireland. He also notes that the triumph of the internal conflict perspective amongst academics has been transferred into the minds of policy-makers, no mean achievement given that "There can be no agreement on the solution until there is agreement on where the problem lies."

There are three flaws in Whyte's essay, but these do not detract from its overall merits. First, he understates the extent of inequality in Northern Ireland, both in Catholics' employment opportunities and their access to impartial judicial administration. Second, the Catholic experience of Northern Ireland as "majority tyranny" is not given the attention it deserves. Third, Whyte's analysis underplays the extent to which the internal conflict is shaped by past and present Anglo-Irish conflicts.

The pursuit of power-sharing within Northern Ireland is one by-product of intellectual convergence on the internal-conflict perspective. John Darby's essay on power-sharing examines some of the reasons why it has failed so far, but still holds out some hopes for its future success.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement must

be understood partly as an attempt to coerce power-sharing to create the conditions under which an internal accommodation will be more feasible and endurable. The Agreement aimed at pushing elites towards sharing power by changing the balance of incentives within Northern Ireland. Article 4 was designed to make Protestants choose power-sharing in preference to giving Dublin a major role in policy formation in the North. It was also hoped that the SDLP would be free to choose power-sharing, as they were being strengthened against competition from Sinn Féin by the existence of the Irish dimension which was entrenched in the Hillsborough Accord.

Trying to coerce the participants to the conflict to share power has so far proven unsuccessful, as we all know. Insufficient Unionists are willing to bargain for power-sharing within the framework of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The SDLP are not prepared to discuss power-sharing before Unionists accept the Agreement. These apparently non-negotiable positions describe the current impasse. They are more important in accounting for the failure of the agreement to create significant political progress than the multiple fiascos, imbroglios and dubious activities which have characterised British policy-making since November, 1985. The internal impasse has also been more significant than the Fianna Fáil Government's pointed coolness towards promot-

ing agreed devolution since February, 1987.

The most sanguine of the contributors to this book, Martin Dent, believes he has the solution. His essay, "The Feasibility of Shared Sovereignty (And Shared Authority)" discusses how the British and Irish States might jointly govern Northern Ireland, preferably in conjunction with a power-sharing legislature within Northern Ireland. He recommends that both governments appoint a PAPOPA (Pure Administrator and Political Officer with Power of Attorney) to act as an autonomous conflict-regulator, and engagingly speculates on further ways of building co-operative institutions.

However, those prepared to persuade us that joint authority is the best mechanism for creating consensus in Ireland will have to provide more compelling feasibility-studies than this one, which unfortunately is rather disorganised and lacking in detailed background knowledge.

Consensus in Northern Ireland is not going to be achieved through academic policy analysis, although it has a fundamental and important role in explaining why agreement is so difficult to obtain. We know, especially after reading these essays, why certain simple solutions (a united Ireland, joint authority, voluntary power-sharing) are not likely to work, and productive of more violence at worst. What else do we know?

British and Irish policy-makers now face three realistic options. First, they can persist with the Anglo-Irish Agreement in its current mode of operation, i.e. as a counter-insurgency mechanism. This road will become increasingly less attractive to Irish nationalists, north and south, and eventually produce worsening

Anglo-Irish relations. Second, both governments might work an agreement more creatively: reform Northern Ireland, implement far more radical programmes of affirmative action than those currently envisaged, and create the administration of justice. If this road is followed, power-sharing just might emerge on the agenda as Northern Catholics win confidence in British government and as Unionists realise that the Agreement is not going to disappear.

Finally, policy-makers might consider a more drastic option: the great "unthinkable" of the past twenty years: repartition. This "solution" could take a major or a minor form. A major repartition would extend the Irish Republic to approximately 20 counties, leaving north-east Ireland under British rule. It would make consensus possible within each territory after the repartition (and funded population-transfers had been carried out. It would be a final solution, very risky and difficult to implement. It may nevertheless become increasingly attractive to impatient British governments.

However, in the immediate future, policy-makers might do well to consider a minor repartition, say the transfer of Crossmaglen to the Republic, in order to concentrate minds. Such a transfer would indicate both governments' willingness to contemplate a more drastic repartition in the future. And if the British and Irish governments were to declare that a major repartition would follow the failure to achieve power-sharing under Article 4 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, it might have salutary effects on the political attitudes of Unionists in western Northern Ireland and nationalists in west Belfast.

JUST as articles entitled "Is Switzerland becoming ungovernable?" or "Decentralisation under Mrs Thatcher" provoked immediate scepticism, so does a book on Northern Ireland called "Consensus in Ireland". However, this collection of essays by British and Irish academic authors deserves attention, despite its strange title.

It consists of papers presented to the British and Irish Studies Association Conference, held at Keele University in April, 1986. The long delay before their publication, presumably attributable to the publishers, has not diminished their topicality. Indeed, with the exception of the editor's opening essay, which consists of a few good phrases thrown into an otherwise meandering contribution, all the essays merit critical examination by concerned citizens and policy-makers.

Paul Arthur's discussion of minority perceptions, David Trimble's description of mainstream Unionist perspectives and Tom Garvin's resumé of attitudes in the Republic towards Northern Ireland are all clear and well-informed presentations. Bernard Crick's probing of the concept of consent is imaginative, but, as is his, wont in other writings, he moves on to new issues just when matters are becoming difficult. James O'Connell's comparative essay, which examines conflict and conflict-regulation in Belgium, Nigeria and Northern Ireland, is also highly stimulating, even if the author's conclusions are elusive and indeterminate.

John Whyte's survey article, "Interpretations of the Northern Ireland Problem", is undoubtedly the jewel in the collection. Anyone seeking a crisp digest of all the significant writing and research on Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1986 should start here. He identifies four schools of

interpretation (nationalist, Unionist, Marxist and internal-conflict theorists). He judiciously appraises the merits and defects of each before firmly commending the merits of the internal-conflict perspective.

As he points out, the traditional nationalist perspective has dwindled to minority status amongst serious researchers, even if it remains firmly embedded in the rhetoric of Sinn Féin and some quarters of Fianna Fáil. Traditional nationalism has a mental block over the causes of Protestant hostility to a united Ireland, and fails to explain adequately Britain's current role in Northern Ireland.

In contrast, the Unionist perspective wholly fails to explain why Catholics in Northern Ireland regarded the Stormont regime as illegitimate. Unionists still practise a rhetoric of denial which bypasses Catholic grievances: whatever discrimination Catholics suffer, if any, is held to be the inevitable consequence of their own "disloyalty".

Marxist analyses, popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, have failed to provide convincing historical materialist explanations of a conflict centred on rival ethnic identities. Moreover, Marxist thinking on Ireland has gradually degenerated into critical supporters' clubs for traditional sectarian alignments. This trend is sadly demonstrated on the one hand in Paul Bew and Henry Patterson's Orange "Marxist" book *The British State and the Ulster Crisis* (1985), and on the other hand in the recently published Green "Marxist" tract of Bob Rowthorn and Naomi Wayne, *Northern Ireland: The Political Economy of Conflict* (1988), which provides a thin veneer of intellectual rationalisation for the Troops Out Movement.