

Northern Ireland: the Integrationist Approach

Background to integrationism: lessons of the Stormont legislature experience

1. Supporters of integration believe that a devolved legislative assembly in Northern Ireland inevitably gives rise to dispute over "the irreconcilable ultimate objectives" of the majority and minority communities. Even if it so desired, a devolved legislative assembly (such as the Stormont one) in Northern Ireland cannot therefore operate as "an essential guarantee of good government for the whole population." At best, in the integrationist view, Stormont was "an instrument which... could not be used against Unionists". (Emphasis added.)
2. In this regard, integrationists claim that the danger always existed that a devolved legislative assembly would launch Northern Ireland "on the slippery slope towards separation." Latter day prime ministers in Stormont had made the mistake of "imagining that they were involved in a fellow sovereign government" along side Westminster. They had in this way drawn attention to the negative aspects of Unionism, such as its sense of dominant exclusiveness, which were unacceptable to mainstream British opinion. Thus, Powell stated in the early 1970s: "Stormont itself is a threat to the so-called link with Britain because it is an assertion of separateness." (The "link" with Britain is "so called" as, for Powell, the Union is integral and complete: "linkage" would imply separate parts. This idea is perhaps best captured in Mrs. Thatcher's words: "Ulster is as British as Finchley.")
3. Integrationists point out that, under Stormont, Westminster always remained effectively the sovereign parliament. Furthermore, integrationists believe evidence exists of overwhelming acceptance within both communities of

the laws passed by the Westminster parliament. In addition, integrationists point out that proponents of devolved government in Northern Ireland themselves "envisage Westminster as a guarantor of minority rights and fair play" - available to act as a type of final arbiter.

Constitutional approach of integrationists:

4. Nevertheless, despite the integrationists appeal to the alleged attractions of their approach, it is clear that they are primarily motivated by a desire to preserve (or perhaps recover) some sense of "the union" which provides purpose and security to their cause. A critical factor is their belief that the integrationist policy provides "constitutional certainty". If introduced fully, it would transfer the constitutional debate "to a more realistic plane, since ultimately the decision rests with the sovereign Parliament at Westminster." A decision to treat Northern Ireland in the same way as other parts of Britain would further remove any ambiguity in the constitutional situation - the British government would no longer be tempted to embark on unpredictable and adventurous experiments.

5. With regard to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, there would at most be need to make provision for periodic referenda on the question of the border to ascertain the wishes of the majority of the population. In addition, integrationists appear to believe that there would be little incentive for the British government to reopen a pro-integration decision once it had been taken. In summary, integration would supposedly end the constitutional debate. In doing so, it would allow Unionists to avoid any searching examination of their attitudes and approach. Submerged within the wider Westminster context, the danger of any sustained outside focus on Unionism, such as Stormont brought upon

itself, would be dissipated.

6. In more specific terms, integrationists claim that the effective closure of the constitutional debate would undermine the IRA's campaign of violence, in particular by removing the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present position.

Furthermore, there seems an implied belief that experience of Westminster "fair play", applied as elsewhere in the United Kingdom in a just and equal way, would progressively remove any sense of substantive grievance in the nationalist community.

Current objectives of integrationists:

7. It is clear that integrationists prefer the application of direct rule to a devolved Northern legislative assembly. At the same time, the present system of direct rule is seen as unfair and discriminatory. Integrationists point out that the system was introduced in 1972 on a "temporary basis" pending the restoration of a devolved legislature and government for Northern Ireland. They argue that all Secretaries of State appointed since 1972 have given a high priority to replacing the direct rule system of government. In integrationist eyes, the initiatives undertaken to achieve this end have all failed. They believe that the obvious conclusion is that effort should now be devoted to removing the shortcomings in the direct rule system as it presently operates.

Shortcomings in present operation of direct rule

8. The uncertainty and ambiguity resulting from the recourse to annual renewals of direct rule are regarded by integrationists as primary causes of the instability of the past twenty years. As noted earlier, the IRA campaign is believed to feed on this uncertainty. In this context, Powell has argued that the existing system of direct rule served to

mark "in a special and unique way, the separateness of the Six Counties from the rest of the United Kingdom and not their unity with them." In addition integrationists (and, to an extent, successive British governments) argue that the present system of direct rule is "undemocratic" in that it does not allow the level of parliamentary and other consultation normal on the mainland.

9. Integrationists therefore argue that direct rule should be fully harmonised with the system of government applied elsewhere in Britain. To remove existing "undemocratic" discrepancies from the Northern Ireland system, two overall reforms are advocated: the establishment of an elected system of devolved administration and provision at Westminster for a select committee to deal with NI issues.

Regional councils

10. In their 1979 manifesto, the Conservative party undertook to "seek to establish one or more elected regional councils with a wide range of powers over local services." The manifesto was intended to respond to Molyneaux' call for the establishment of a devolved administrative body to supervise the operation of what were supposedly non-contentious local government powers. In this regard, integrationists often cited the Scottish model as applicable to Northern Ireland. In Scotland, there is a "two tier" system composed of nine regional and fifty three district councils.

11. The Scottish regional councils, which are the major authorities in the local government system, "are endowed with powers and resources to provide the large-scale services in their area such as transport, education, police and fire services, and strategic planning. The boundaries of the regions have been created to enable the administration of

these services over wide areas which have natural links and where there is an interdependence between the main centres of population and their surrounding areas." Between the regional councils, geographical size varies from seven hundred to just under ten thousand square miles, with populations ranging from just over one hundred thousand to about two million three hundred thousand. For his part, Molyneaux has consistently pushed for the establishment of one "Grand Council" which would have an overseeing role throughout Northern Ireland. (Clearly, such a body would have an in-built Unionist majority.)

Westminster parliamentary scrutiny of legislation affecting Northern Ireland:

12. The second major change sought by integrationists in the present system of direct rule is the establishment of a Select Committee for Northern Ireland. Under the present system, much legislation for Northern Ireland takes the form of "affirmative" Orders in Council which correspond to Statutory Instruments here. These Orders are "unamendable" in that they can only be accepted or rejected in their totality. In addition, debate on these orders is generally restricted to the late evening (although for sufficiently important legislation the NIO usually arranges a half day debate.) The affirmative Orders are made by the Secretary of State in his areas of responsibility. In addition, there are also "negative" Orders which involve the insertion of a clause in a Bill stipulating that the provisions apply to Northern Ireland. The draft Orders are usually circulated six weeks in advance to allow consultation and possible revision.

13. A Select Committee is "composed of a number of members....to consider, inquire into, or deal with particular matters or bills." It is normally given authority to call

witnesses. It is also entitled to issue reports or resolutions which can be debated on the floor of the House of Commons. In general, a Select Committee allows intensive examination of the subject matter assigned it and would normally have considerable influence on the approach of the government to legislation. In particular, then, a Select Committee procedure allows for parliamentary amendment of government proposals unlike the Order in Council procedure.

14. Consistent with the whole thrust of the integrationist position in support of the extension of "normal" Westminster practice, Molyneux has not pressed for the establishment of a Select Committee with powers to examine all aspects of legislation affecting Northern Ireland. He has indicated that, for example, the fourteen existing departmentally related Select Committees are the correct fora for examining the implications of proposed legislation on Northern Ireland. (He has however requested that more advance notice be given of proposed deliberations by individual Select Committees.)

15. Instead, he proposes that a Northern Ireland select committee should deal with "those matters for which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is responsible, but for which there is no counterpart in great Britain." Molyneux instanced in this regard "the implementation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the political direction of security" as examples of such powers. Consideration at Westminster regarding the establishment of a Select Committee is on hold ostensibly pending the outcome of the present talks initiative. However, the Committee on Procedure recently stated it is "anomalous from a practical point of view that no separate Select Committee exists to oversee the affairs of Northern Ireland...we consider that the Government cannot postpone dealing with this matter for very much longer and we

will keep the position under review."

Evolution of integrationists approach at Westminster

16. Molyneaux's approach was clearly shaped by the experience of the 1970s in Westminster when, on three occasions, there were governments with very either slim majorities or requiring outside support to survive. Much of his approach seems to be to await a constellation of events in Westminster where, in return for Unionist support, he could extract from the Conservative or Labour parties a commitment to meet one or other of the deliberately circumscribed Unionist demands. In this way, it is argued, the minority Labour government's agreement to increase the number of Northern Ireland members in Westminster was obtained in the late 1970s. For many years, integrationists had argued that such an increase was justified to bring about equivalence of representation between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain. However, they claim, the objective proved achievable only in the context of a minority Labour government in need of Unionist goodwill to survive.

17. Implicit also in his approach is a degree of scepticism regarding the degree of sustained commitment of any British government to any risky or novel policy approach in Northern Ireland. This sense of scepticism may be evident in the development of the integrationists' attitude to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. While initially trenchantly denouncing the signing of the Agreement as treachery, Molyneaux has argued for some time that the extent of Unionist opposition "prevented the implementation and the extension of the original plans which were in the minds of the draftsmen in Whitehall and Dublin." He believes that the patient opposition of Unionists to the Agreement, rather than dramatic gestures, has achieved this objective. Taken all together, there is then ample evidence that, despite the professed

desire to be treated like the mainland, the Molyneaux approach to integration is based on a very pronounced sense of the separateness of Northern Ireland.

Integration and the UUP

18. Very serious differences of approach appear to exist within the UUP between the so-called devolution and integrationist wings of the party. In an August, 1986 interview, Harold McCusker spoke candidly about the integration/devolution tension in the party. "We're incapable of resolving it. We cannot resolve it short of splitting, or short of tearing [the party] itself apart in the process, which is even worse than splitting. We would rip ourselves apart. We've run away from it and we won't resolve it." It has been suggested that the Unionist coalition against the Agreement has served to mask in recent years the extent of the disunity between and within the parties on ultimate objectives which Unionists should pursue.