

Civil Rights outlook

IT WOULD be a brave man who would attempt to forecast the future direction of events in Northern Ireland. In a community where four action-packed months have produced more change than 50 years of political activity, there are so many forces at work at the present time that the only positive statement that can be made at present is a cliché — the Northern community stand at the crossroads.

However, it is possible to see clearly the choices that face the North and, in analysing them, one can point some direction not only for this community as a whole but for the different forces at work at the moment.

There are two courses open to the Northern Ireland community, depending upon actions and reactions both of the Stormont Government and the Civil Rights movements. If the former adopts a course of repression or the latter one of escalation and confrontation, the only result can be the downfall of O'Neill, followed by serious civil strife.

The British Government would have no alternative but to intervene immediately, and the whole future of the North would then be in the melting-pot. The damage to relations between Catholic and Protestant would be lasting, for in such a situation the struggle would inevitably and unfortunately harden along the old lines.

There are no victors in a civil war. The whole community is the loser. The prospect of a religious war is even more horrifying.

The most amazing and, indeed, ironic point is that those who are most likely to bring about this position are those who shout loudest about the maintenance of the Northern Ireland Constitution — the right-wingers of the Unionist Party. They foolishly hold to the notion that one can repress a mass movement of the people which has its roots in genuine complaint.

The results of such an attitude can only earn an explosion of British sympathy on the side of the minority. Blind escalation by the Civil Rights movement could produce the same results with sympathy for the Unionist position.

The alternative route is a more difficult and thorny one. It

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requires statesmanship and leadership of the type that has been little known in Northern Ireland. It will require deep heart-searching on the part of many in the community, and a faith in their fellow-citizens that for many may have to be blind. If successful it will mean a quiet revolution in the policies of Northern Ireland for, for the first time, it will have a healthy political climate.

To achieve this situation, all that is required to be done is to grant the remaining demands of the Civil Rights movement — democratic representation in local government and an end to the Special Powers Act.

The importance of granting them urgently is too great to be ignored. It must be clear to everyone involved by now that the civil rights campaign will and must continue until its demands have been met. The North has gone through a convulsion that few people wish to see repeated. It would be a waste if all the major injustices were not to be removed now.

The main obstacle to a swift solution and to the granting of these demands is undoubtedly the right wing of the Unionist Party. Their folly, given what they claim to be their principle, is unbelievable. They are, in fact, the greatest enemies to the stability and future of Northern Ireland.

The civil rights movement, while continuing its absolute commitment to achieving its goals, must at this point deal with certain problems of its own if it is to succeed and to retain its respect and integrity. Some form of centralisation is essential, or, at least, some form of structure that will ensure uniformity of action.

There must also be a pause in mass marches as a means of protest. Of late these marches have been counter productive: distracting attention from the very problems that they were designed to spotlight. How many are aware, for example, that the people of Strabane want to march because 27.7% of the townspeople are unemployed?

The movement must attempt

to win back some of the valuable ground lost recently, particularly among the Protestant community. It must be clearly restated what the civil rights movement really stands for: that ulterior motives do not exist; its platform must be kept completely free of sectional political uses. This is not a denial of the rights of others to promote their political viewpoint. If they wish to do so they must create their own platform.

There has been a serious heightening of sectarian feeling in the North in recent times. It is the duty of the civil rights movement to do what it can towards improving this position, for a community where all divisions are strengthened has little future. It must be recognised that fears and prejudices still run close to the surface in the North. People must be reassured that it is not the purpose of the civil rights movement to destroy their traditions, to create Catholic domination or to drag them into a reunited Ireland against their will.

A successful conclusion to the civil rights campaign based on the second course must mean major political change in the North. The removal of inequalities should mean the beginning of normal political opposition and, coupled with the lessons of the civil rights movement, should undoubtedly create a united left of centre opposition.

Indeed, the only obstacle to the achievement of this situation at the moment seems to be the personalities of individual leaders. Yet even they must see that the people whom they represent want an end to a splintered opposition and they must be prepared to sink their individuality for the good of the community as a whole.

The North can take two paths: we can either return to the 1920's or can offer real hope of involvement in decision-making to the whole community. The burden of those who must make the decisions is a heavy one.

It is to be hoped that they will decide their course of action based on principles of justice and peace and on the need to remove the cancer that has destroyed the North — sectarian division.