

included in 'Guilty Parties' J. Hume
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Q&A following 1985 address at Milltown Institute of Theology

What side would you have taken if you had been born in the early years of this century? What view would you have taken of the 1916 Rising?

The truth to those two questions is that I don't know. But as a historian by training I believe that the great fundamental error in Irish history happened in 1912 when the majority of the people of this island voted for Home Rule and the majority of the British Parliament voted for it too. It was overthrown by a minority who threatened violence. The sovereignty of the Parliament, the rule of law was overthrown

What happened in 1912 taught the Unionists that they could defy any decisions they did not like by threatening violence. And it taught the Nationalists that when they won by democratic methods they did not really win. This injustice was repeated in 1974, in the Ulster Workers' Strike, when we had a settlement that was endorsed by both the British Parliament and the Parliament of the Republic of Ireland. And again, the same two lessons were learnt.

I don't take the view that one act of violence justifies another. I recognise what has happened in this country. Have seen it happen. I have seen what British troops have done on our streets and what policemen have done in Northern Ireland but I don't believe in retaliation. Two wrongs never made a right. I don't believe we should take our standards from the British. We should have our own standards which are based on our own assessment of a problem. Violence committed against us has always won more for the Irish people than violence committed by us. Even if you look at 1916 itself you will recognise that the violence done to the men of 1916 awakened the conscience of this country and of the world. Violence committed against them was what mattered; not the violence committed by them.

The same thing happened in 1968 and 1969 in the streets of the North. In every decade of this and were met by violence century there has been a campaign of violence in the North, all of which had failed. But when the people went out in a totally non-violent manner to seek basic equality and Civil Rights and were met with violence, the sympathy of the whole world was awakened and the beginnings of the end of that corrupt statelet in the North were evident.

Violence from Republican element, of course, is just as bad as any other and indeed it has made Unionism more and more respectable. Certainly my assessment from being in Parliament in London and in Europe is that violence committed by "republican" elements has given greater respectability to the Unionist case.

What was your reaction when the British rejected the Forum Report?

Just because the BPM said "out, out, out", that did not mean that I was going to walk away. Political development would never take place anywhere if you took "no" for an answer to a political demand. There was deep and justifiable anger in Ireland following the PM's triple negative. I believe that that anger (and the strength of it) had an effect on Britain and on the ruling party in particular. It was noticeable that comments from that direction became a lot more conciliatory thereafter. My own reply in a nutshell, was, "O.K., you've rejected the three main options that were put forward. What about the fourth one? We are open to any suggestion that anybody else has to bring forward". It was that kind of response from others as well as myself that led to the "Anglo-Irish" talks between the governments at Westminster and Dublin and to subsequent developments.

What did you think you could achieve by meeting the PIRA Army Council?

Well, we are used to taking risks in our part of the world. The matter arose when I was taking part in a discussion on B.B.C. radio with the leader of Sinn Féin. It was he who extended the invitation. I thought to myself, well, he expects me to say no, and he will then, rightly, attack me for saying no, because I am going to talk to Ian Paisley, who had a record of dealing with violent organisations in one way or another. That is why I agreed to meet the leaders of the Provisional Republican Movement. I hoped it would give me the chance to talk to the people who take the real decisions in that movement, to the men who literally call the shots. I wanted to talk to them about their campaign of violence, and especially about my belief that (it) is destroying the country, north and south.

My agreeing to meet the Ps was heavily criticised by the British and Irish governments and by Unionists in the North. But it was very popular 'on the ground', among people where I live. I cannot see that there is anything to be lost by dialogue because, in essence, if I were to refuse to talk to anybody in the North who is either engaged in violence or who has been engaged in violence, or who has used violent organisations, or has talked to violent organisations, I'd be talking to myself.

You spoke about Christianity and about politics. From the political point of view, could you say something about the role that you see for the Church in an ideal Ireland.

I think and believe that there should be a complete separation between Church and State in any country. If we are talking purely and constitutionally, the only democracy in Western Europe, at the moment, where there is not complete separation between Church and State is the United Kingdom. It is the only country where the head of Church is head of State, where there are seats (as of right) in the national parliament for bishops of a particular church.

I do not believe that it benefits any country or people when the attitudes of a particular Church are legislated into the law of that country. If you go down that road, you come to extreme examples, such as Iran and Iraq, where the private morality of an individual Church becomes the total legislation of the country. That sort of identity is not necessary. I believe if you are a Catholic, you do not need acts of parliament to make you a better Catholic. The day you need an act of parliament to make you a better Catholic, your lack of faith in your own Faith becomes self-evident.

There needs to be a wide-ranging debate Church and State, so that people know exactly where they stand. It should be made clear, for example, that the Church must preach the ideal. Nobody should ask the Church to weaken her teaching on any issue. That is the basic role of the Church: to preach the ideal. The role of the State is quite different. The State has to deal with the real. Real things happen with legal consequences. Marriages break down. There are legal consequences to that and the state must face to them. Meanwhile the Church must continue to preach the ideal. At the end of the day there will be only one judge. God Almighty. God will judge us on what we have done, not on what an act of parliament has made us do.

Would you say that the PIRA have achieved nothing at all over the last number of years?

If you look at the situation in the north of Ireland today, where the bitterness and the divisions between the different sections of the community are deeper than ever, where unemployment is far higher than it has ever been, where there are more people in jail than in any other country in Western Europe, then you see the tangible results of the PIRA's campaign of violence. I believe that if that campaign ended, we would be in a position to really challenge the British government and the Unionists. The reason given for emergency legislation is the existence of a campaign of violence. The

excuse for having British soldiers and the U.D.R. on the streets is the existence of a campaign of violence. Take away the excuse (and this is what I have to say to those who lead the PIRA), and then there will be a situation where real political challenge can be mounted. What is happening now is that the I.R.A. campaign is being seen more and more as an Irish problem or a symptom of that problem. Defeating the I.R.A. will not solve the problem: it will only cloud the issue.