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MR THOMAS - B

- cc PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B
- PS/Michael Ancram (L&B) - B
- PS/Sir John Wheeler (L&B) - B
- PS/PUS (L&B) - B
- PS/Sir David Fell - B
- Mr Legge - B
- Mr Bell - B
- Mr ~~Watkins~~ - B
- Mr Steele - B
- Mr Leach - B
- Mr Wood (L&B) - B
- Mr Maccabe - B
- Mr Brooker - B
- Mr Beeton - B
- Ms Checksfield - B
- Mr Dew, Dublin - B

1. cc Mr ~~Legge~~ S.1

2. Mr ~~Thomas~~

*A truly fascinating
+ shrewd account.*

*MS
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FRIENDS OF THE UNION: PROFESSOR PAUL BEW

I attended the Friends of the Union's Fifth Ian Gow Memorial Lecture given by Professor Bew at St Stephens Constitutional Club on 20 December.

2. The talk was well attended, including a front row of Trimble, John D Taylor and David Burnside. Robert McCartney was also present. Bew tailored his speech nicely to the audience, with vigorous nodding from the front row suddenly frozen on occasion as Bew switched from rousing the troops to slipping in some rather more heretical thoughts instead.

3. Bew concentrated on the decline in the British Establishment's interest in the Union and the quality of its thinking on the subject. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, thinkers had grappled with the issues with real commitment, and not only in the political area. Newman's attempt to extend his thinking on the university to Ireland and Mill's deep engagement with Irish land issues were just two examples, however questionable the results.

4. The decline of the establishment's interest started at Partition, and was hastened by the insular development of the Free State, its neutrality in the war, and the "lack of generosity" of the Stormont regime in the North. Since then, the "only news the British wanted to hear of Ireland was no news".

5. Bew saw this spirit underlying the entire approach to political strategy since the Troubles, which had as its main aim to insulate the problems of Ireland from the mainland. He saw it epitomised in Frameworks for the Future "its turgid prose so different from that written by any educated Englishman in the nineteenth century". He added here that he did not mean to accuse senior officials of not being educated, but rather that "their heart was not in the business".

6. The practical consequences of this was a set of proposals which the Government did not even attempt to justify on their merits, but which had the sole intention of creating balance, and thus keeping the natives quiet - "beads for the natives" which was "profoundly shaming for any patriotic Irishman (sic)". A good example was the obsession with harmonisation, whether this had any intrinsic merits or not. Harmonising two "third rate" education systems in North and South was an example how "Government policy has officially connived at a culture of correctness rather than excellence in Northern Ireland".

7. This obsession with balance between the two communities was vulnerable to manipulation from parts of the SDLP and the "Ribbentropp protocols" emanating from the DFA. He took particular exception to elements of the demands for "parity of esteem". Everyone accepted the need to respect fellow citizen's aspirations, and it was clearly wrong to force union jacks down the minority community's throats. But sometimes the demand for parity of esteem was interpreted so aggressively it began to look like a recipe for an unstable form of joint authority. He cited here Bruton's

reference in the Math association to the "design of official publications" as a problem for Nationalists. He then compared some of the sort of language coming from the SDLP and DFA with the 1938 Karlsbad Programme. Rejecting Czech offers of a minority protection statute, Germany demanded instead a programme including "full liberty for Germans to proclaim their Germanism and their adhesion to the ideology of Germans", and a denial that the Sudeten Germans constituted a minority in another State (I am grateful to John Dew for the background on this).

8. The audience laughed, at which point Bew noted that the British Government had signed up to this programme and more in 1938 - while adding that he was slightly reassured by the Secretary of State's comments in Cambridge that Britain had learned the lessons from appeasement.

9. The arrogance and radical nature of these demands suggested that important players had no realistic conception of a durable settlement. The inflexibility and untrustworthiness of the Irish Government in particular were a consistent theme in the speech. They had held out on the territorial claim in the negotiations leading up to Frameworks, and had not conceded fully, promising only to remove the jurisdictional claim, and that only after negotiations were completed. This was a major failure of the British negotiators.

10. Faced with an untrustworthy Dublin and a British side determined to live a quiet life, Bew argued that the Times leak had been valuable in forcing a more robust line from the British. He pointed out however the suspicions and ambiguities that remained in the document, particularly about the north-south element. For example, the list of possible functions in para 33 of the document could not be inclusive as it failed to mention any areas in the field of social welfare which the Body might deal with, despite this field being mentioned in the previous paragraph. The two

governments would do better coming into the open with what functions they thought the body might have, rather than allowing suspicions to fester.

11. The final piece of perfidy was the Irish Government's climb down on decommissioning. Quoting the Irish Times interview and the Spring speech in the ~~F~~^Dail, Bew claimed the British Government had remained firm, while the Irish had caved in to the sort of pressure which everyone knew the IRA was exerting. Giving credit where it is due, he challenged any member of the audience whether they had believed the British Government would hold the line on decommissioning as long as they had.

12. Indeed, Bew's speech was by no means simply repeating well worn Unionist themes. For one thing, he challenged the audience to accept the basic truth that Frameworks or something like it was not going to go away. Much of this had been accepted in principle by the Unionist parties in 1992. And Nationalists were simply not going to sign up to an internal settlement.

13. Similarly, having run through the suspicions about the north-south element, Bew argued that he believed the actual role of the Body would be close to the highly minimalist tasks set out in para 33. Ministers in the Stormont Government had said that co-operation in many of these areas had been on their own agendas too, so arguably Unionists should be able to live with them. Even on decommissioning, Bew floated the idea that if actual decommissioning were genuinely^{ly} possible, Unionists ought to consider whether they could accept a different outcome -providing the tangible sense of threat Sinn Fein were exploiting at present could be removed.

14. And for all his suspicions of the Irish Government, Bew argued that in Bruton, Unionists had an interlocutor who neither wanted a united Ireland or even some form of joint Authority. He stressed the pressures Bruton was under, which might explain aberrations

like the Meath speech in London, and laying on the flattery with a trowel, and saw the simultaneous emergence of realistic, effective new leaders North and South as a good omen for creating a "culture of civility" within Ireland which could foster mutually advantageous north-south contact. The core advantage for Unionists was the acceptance of the principle of consent. This meant they could afford to take some risks. But a culture of civility did not mean a culture of servility. The atmosphere of threat on the ground was palpable, and had to be faced down.

15. The audience clearly enjoyed the speech, and there were few testing questions. Robert McCartney asked whether, if the British really wanted to hear as little as possible from Ulster, this implied their preferred option would be to see the Province collapse into a united Ireland. Bew commented that British officials' preferences were by no means monolithic. And the principle of consent meant that officials' views were less important than people feared, provided people were convinced the Government meant to stand by this principle. He personally did so.

16. David Burnside thanked Professor Bew for the speech. His contribution was short and triumphalistic, mainly drawing attention to the increase in intellectual prestige Unionism had won since the dark days of 1985, when the Friends had been established.

Commentary

17. This was an impressive plea for liberal unionism, which gave the impression of being aimed at one person - Trimble in the front row. Trimble himself was giving nothing away, either in his reaction to the speech or in conversations afterwards.

18. Whatever Bew might say about the opportunity presented by Trimble's election, he personally would have preferred a Taylor victory. He feels that while Trimble would be the best man if there were a deal to be cut, the current situation requires someone

better able to create an "era of good feelings". The speech itself was an elegant attempt to prod things in this direction, combining assurances that the Unionists were actually in a strong position with a very clear warning that they should abandon unrealistic dreams of what Nationalists might ultimately be prepared to accept.

Signed

STEPHEN WEBB

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