Comment:

Good Friday 1998

Good Friday 1998 joins the list of significant dates in the history of Ireland. Nobody would have predicted, two or three years ago, that the prime ministers of the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom would have been shaking hands in front of the world media on a cold April day on a deal that proposes how to secure peace in Northern Ireland. Nobody could have expected David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionists, and Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein, to endorse the deal — not that they shook hands, it is said that Mr Trimble has not yet met Mr Adams' eyes. At the very last moment, President Clinton had to be called in, to twist arms on the telephone. It was his friend and nominee George Mitchell who brokered the deal, after years of negotiation.

The recent precedents are said to be the agreements at Dayton, to bring peace in the former Yugoslavia, and in Oslo, to inaugurate the Middle East peace process. Dayton certainly brought an end to the ethnic cleansing and atrocities, though the hatreds of history remain, temporarily restrained, far more vicious than anything in Irish/British relations, and without much yet established in the way of constitutional arrangements to maintain peace once the peace-keeping troops withdraw. Palestinians, by all accounts, are now far worse off, whether in Israel or in the enclaves controlled by Yasser Arafat, than they were before, though there are public commitments to institutional changes which perhaps could eventually be resuscitated by different leaderships.

Each 'peace process' is evidently unique. For all the appalling legacies of hatred and killing, it is hard to see that the conflict in the North of Ireland is anything like as intractable as that either in Bosnia or in Israel. But the understandable euphoria among the politicians at Stormont seems to have been accompanied, just as understandably, by a good deal of caution and even scepticism on the streets. After all, the Sunningdale Agreement of 1974 established a Northern Ireland assembly with in-built power-sharing arrangements and some cross-Border institutions and that was brought down quickly enough by the Protestant workers' strike that paralyzed the province and frightened the British government. Are people, more than twenty years on, just so weary of the killing that, this time, there will be acquiescence? In the referendum, when the proposals are put to the electorate in the North as well as in the Republic, the Unionists will know that the entire Northern

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Ireland office publicity machine will be working all out to marginalize both Republican and Loyalist ultras who equate this, or *any*, deal with 'betrayal'. In the Republic, certainly, there will be an overwhelming endorsement of the agreement. But, however massive the majorities, Mr Blair's warning to all parties needs to be remembered — that the agreement will not work 'unless you extend the hand of friendship to those who once were foes'. Is that realistic, in this generation or in the next?

As one Unionist delegate at the talks explained, when asked how he defended the change in the Union which cross-Border institutions would introduce: 'The United Kingdom is changing.

Look at what is happening in Scotland'. In the long term, that is surely the best hope. The Assembly may work, in fits and starts and acrimoniously; the North-South ministerial council may work, perhaps acquiring the authority that Unionists fear; the Republic will amend the articles of its constitution which lay claim to the territory of Ulster and the United Kingdom will repeal the Government of Ireland Act of 1920. The prisoners convicted, in the jargon, of 'terrorist-type offences', will be released and there might even be a report on the future of policing in Northern Ireland by summer 1999. Whether the paramilitaries will 'decommission' all their weapons in the time envisaged must remain very unlikely. None of that can settle the deepest issue. Sinn Fein will cling to its belief that the island of Ireland will one day be united, while Unionists will continue to insist on being 'British'. The proposed British-Irish Council, which Mr Blair spoke of, a little strangely, as 'an assembly for the good governance of Ireland', is no doubt a way of strengthening the east-west links which matter so desperately to the Unionists, to counter balance Sinn Fein's north-south connections. With members drawn from the administrations in Belfast, London and Dublin, but also from the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly, not forgetting representatives of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, this 'Council of the Isles' may, in the context of the European Union and in a post-devolution United Kingdom, one day finesse what seem permanently incompatible aspirations — but that is a long way down the road.

F.K.

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