

TO THOSE of us who observe the Northern Ireland tragedy from this side of the Larne-Stranraer ferry, the grimmest disappointment for a long time was contained in the results of the recent General Election.

Having watched, for more than a decade, an instalment of Irish "troubles" far bloodier than any that have gone before, it was to be hoped that the end would soon be in sight.

Sadly, the election indicated that enthusiasm in Ulster for the men of violence, far from being on the wane, is probably as strong and defiant today as it has been at any time these past fourteen years.

It is true that the election of Sinn Fein's Mr. Gerry Adams in Belfast was achieved on a split vote under an electoral system that, were it used by a trade union to elect an Arthur Scargill, would have the government calling "foul" on all four TV channels at once.

But the facts are there: in taking 53 per cent of the nationalist vote in the four Belfast constituencies, Sinn Fein demonstrated that, certainly in the Ulster capital, support for the men who come with "an Armalite in one hand and a vote in the other" is surprisingly, and disturbingly, strong.

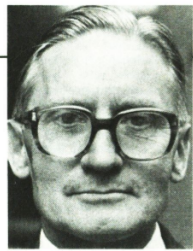
Just what there is in the policies of Sinn Fein that enables it to hold so many northern Catholics in thrall is far from clear. A united Ireland; rule from Dublin instead of from London or Stormont; these things tug more at the heart than the head. The achievement of national identity is a powerful human aspiration, but alone it will not provide the groceries. Many an Irishman, in the past, has exchanged it for the greater personal freedom, the lower level of taxes or the higher standards of living on offer in other countries.

So the question inevitably arises: what practical benefits would northern Catholics gain from union with the South?

There seems no easy answer to this question. Indeed, the fact that the Republic's workers periodically take to the streets to protest at the crushing weight of taxation¹ hardly suggests that rule from Dublin would, at a stroke, transform Ulster into a sub-branch of the new Jerusalem. On the contrary, it indicates that the Ulster Catholics would be better off keeping out of the Republic rather than using the violence of the IRA as a battering ram to force their way in.

MR. GERRY Adams would no doubt retort that the policies of neither Garret Fitzgerald nor Charles Haughey are those of Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein is a socialist party. In

Sinn Fein and the land of Ireland



By Bert Brookes
in London

power in a united Ireland, the party would claim, it would so order the affairs of the new State, so comprehensively apply the principles of socialism, as to make it a Mecca to which Irishmen everywhere would strive to return.

But good intentions do not necessarily produce success in government as Labour politicians in Britain have discovered in the years since 1945. Sinn Fein's ideals and intentions would need to be backed by policies for action, practical enough to convince the people that their quality of life can, and will, be sensibly improved.

So what are Sinn Fein's policies, apart from getting shot of the British?

In one sphere of government, a sphere which profoundly affects the condition of the working people, Sinn Fein has long since declared its hand. This is in its policy towards land. The party's ideas were laid bare in a pamphlet "The Land for the People"² in 1981.

In 58 pages of narrative, the pamphlet surveys the history of Ireland's peasantry from feudal times to the present, recalling the Stuart and Cromwell "plantations" and the Great Famine of 1845-49.

Its lip noticeably curls when it mentions the present system of land tenure with its "capitalist landowners", speculators and absentee landlords.

Those who inherit property, it asserts, "feel that they are marked out by Providence; that they can use what was grabbed by their forefathers to exploit their neighbours to-day."

It continues: "The land of Ireland belongs to all the people of Ireland... to factory workers in Ballyfermot and office workers in Tralee."

Unfortunately, after these promising beginnings, it falls into the elementary error of equating "land" with "agriculture". ("The land of Ireland is clearly a resource that feeds our people.") But worse, it puts forward proposals that are mutually incompatible.

● In Chapter 8 it undertakes to "bring all land in Ireland into public ownership."

● In Chapter 11, after quoting Henry George ("Those who thus hold land shall pay to the community a fair rent for the exclusive privilege they enjoy") it proposes to tax it.

SINCE the task of nationalising the land and organising its use would require an administering bureaucracy so costly as to render the whole process uneconomic in any society this side of the Iron Curtain, we can, perhaps, ignore that hackneyed nostrum and concentrate on the proposed land tax.

Here, however, it seems that the ability to quote Henry George is no guarantee of having understood him. The kind of land tax advocated in the pamphlet would not be a tax on land value but a flat-rate tax per acre which would be levied mainly on the 100,000 "farmers" who control 12 million acres. Lamely, the authors insist that "this tax must not be passed on to the consumer", being apparently quite unaware that a tax at a flat rate per acre is exactly the type of land tax that can, and certainly would, be passed on.

Regretfully, we must conclude that Sinn Fein's policy in the basic sphere of land holds out no hope for northern Catholics that a United Ireland, in the image conceived by the party, would provide enough of a Utopia to make the past 14 years of turmoil worth while.

● The land would still be in the hands of private owners, whether they be Irish "capitalists" or English "colonialists".

● These owners would continue to take, as land rent, the lion's share of the wealth produced in Ireland, whether it be produced on the land or in the factories.

● The amount left to capital and

● Turn to P.19

Don't speak too soon!

Sir: The incipient euphoria evident in the editorial and the 'Insite' analysis (Sept.-Oct. 1983 issue) brought on by Mrs. Thatcher's reported breaking of the landowners' grip is surely a wee bit premature.

Certainly nothing is more urgent than a complete change of heart where the land is concerned. I live on an island where the abuse and circumscription and dereliction of thousands of acres of land is morally criminal – but care must be taken not to be misled, literally. Any change of heart in the current political elite of any party must be treated with the utmost caution.

There are two extremes of assessment of modern politics. It might be argued, sympathetically, that our democratically-elected leaders are doing the best they can for the welfare of British citizens but are hampered by world recession not of their own making. Or, cynically, you might believe that politicians are in it for the money – mere instruments of the commercial system. There is some evidence for the latter view.

It might be hypothesized that modern government is the science of monetary deliquescence – the process of becoming liquid.

It first gets money into the exchequer, mainly by taxation, and then gets it out, legally, and disburses it in ways which some thinking people find difficult to understand – agricultural subsidies, nuclear power and armaments,

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motorway building, compensation under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, etc – but which inevitably results in someone becoming very rich.

If you accept this latter, admittedly cynical, assessment as providing the 'worst case scenario', do you also feel that these people who have come to power via the existing tortuous electoral channels and the supra-histrionic arts of Messrs Saatchi and Saatchi and their ilk, are the best, the desirable, even the likely people to lead us all into the sort of land reform that is probably our only chance of true civilisation? There is at least the possibility that any government move toward reform of taxation in any way is merely an attempt to increase the level of exchequer revenue.

I feel that there is some way to go yet before some form of 'land value taxation' becomes even a popular ideal. We must beware of squandering what credibility we have in endorsing the misleading and discrediting policies of the wrong leaders.

Donald Boardman
Islay, Argyll,
Scotland

A relief against inflation

Sir: Professor Cord's article (*Land & Liberty*, May-June 1983) presented six ways of protecting homeowners when land value taxation is introduced. I would add a seventh: *Inflation Allowance*.

One reason why Proposition 13 passed in California was that inflation had made taxes go up faster than pensions. Therefore when a homeowner has lost 40 per cent or more of his buying power through inflation, he should qualify for land-tax relief equal to half his inflationary rate of loss. Thus if his pension or other income rose only 20 per cent while taxes rose 80 per cent, he would pay only 50 per cent more, not 80 per cent.

Tertius Chandler
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SINN FEIN

● From back page

labour – to those who provide the capital equipment and the human muscle and brain of farming and industry – would be no greater than it is today.

So where do Sinn Fein supporters go from here? Do they continue to support a mean and furtive armed struggle which, after more than a decade, can clearly never succeed and which, even if it did, would yield no spoils of war worth having? Do they continue to condemn innocent people, of all religions and of none, to maiming or slaughter while the Six Counties slide steadily down the road to impoverishment?

All rational signals point to the wisdom of calling a halt to the killing and the bombing; of turning back to the arena of peaceful politics and adopting policies – such as taking the rent of land into the public treasury – which, while not needing the gun to implement them, would do more for the workers of Ireland than all the violence of the past 14 years.

REFERENCES

1. *Land & Liberty*, July/Aug. 1983, pp. 62-63.
2. *The Land for the People*, published by the Research Section, Department of Economic Affairs, Sinn Fein The Workers Party, £1.50.

It's nothing personal . . .

Sir: One has to be careful about the use of the word "speculation". Strictly, it should not be used in a personal sense.

It is derived from the term "speculative rent". This describes the situation when landowners have seen their land increasing in value as the community progresses.

Say a landowner had held his land for 8 years. Assume too – as would most likely be the case – that there had been steady increase in prices over the years. Then, in the present – year 8 – the question of disposal arises. The natural value reflecting present demand, etc., would be represented by £x. In the present knowledge of the near certainty of future increase, he would not part with the land at £x – he would want £x plus 2 or more years' increase. Thus he takes from current production not only economic rent but the speculative 2 years, leaving even less for labour and capital by way of wages and interest respectively, making it difficult, if not impossible, for those elements to prosper.

Speculative rent has been defined as "demanding a part of tomorrow's output today", which puts it rather well.

Sometimes this process has been lost sight of when one speaks of "a speculator" as one who buys land today and tries to sell it later – possibly, in these days, organising planning permission in the process.

In a long legal career I have seen as many casualties as successes, for usually the speculators borrow to buy and then have to wait (without income in the meantime to meet the high loan interest) to put a development scheme together and effect a sale. Many of them failed. Fringe banks were caught in this way and huge losses were suffered with resulting bankruptcies of the speculators and failure of the banks too.

In one sense, the "speculators" were providing a public service by bringing into use land that had been held out of use while seeking the increased price. The parasite was the traditional, usually large landowner who sold land at the speculative price. He was away with the spoils without any risk, and with no publicity or acrimony directed towards him.

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