

The Ground of Conflict

JOHN HUME has distinguished himself by his initiatives in bringing about the ceasefire in Northern Ireland. He is a Catholic Member of Parliament who wants to unite the warring factions and restore peace to the troubled province after 25 years of murderous conflict.

And yet, the extremist wings of both the Catholic and Protestant populations remain as deeply entrenched as ever behind their original demands. Republicans want the British out of Ulster; unionists are determined to continue flying the Union Jack.

So what makes John Hume think that there is any prospect of compromise? I fear that his hopes are built on an unrealistic view of what can be achieved by contemporary political philosophy. There is a high risk of failure unless someone can pull off a miracle at the negotiating table.

MR. HUME argues that we are in the era of post-nationalism. It is irrelevant whether the six counties are part of the UK or the Republic of Ireland, because both of them are members of the European Union.

Mr. Hume places his hopes on being able to adapt Europe's post-World War Two philosophy to solve the little local difficulty at the top end of Ireland. A difficulty that has raged, on and off, for 400 years. A difficulty which, he believes, could evaporate, if men of goodwill come to terms with the fact that rights inhere in people, not territory.

And that, unfortunately, is where Mr. Hume has got it wrong. He is correct to believe that rights ought to be associated with people, not land; alas, the problem in Ulster - as elsewhere - is that the dispute over the territory was and remains at the heart of the problem.

Talk of religious differences merely distracts from the problem. The brutal facts are that the mainland Protestants arrived in Ireland a few centuries ago, stole the land of the tribes, destroyed the cultural cohesion of the village communities and enserfed the population. Thus began the Celtic diaspora.

There is no mystery about why, following the abandonment of British sovereignty over Ireland (apart from Ulster), the displacement of people from their homeland continued apace to this day. Ireland remains a Third World economy. Its citizens

are not able to earn a living, so they are forced to emigrate. Post-independence Ireland failed because it failed to match political rights with equivalent economic rights.

Ireland's politicians failed to understand that, without an appropriate philosophy of land tenure and public finance, there can be no prosperity (a fact most fully documented in the works of the late Raymond Crotty).

Therein lies the reason for being pessimistic about the prospects of longterm peace in Ulster. Protestant farmers and entrepreneurs will continue to enjoy a living standard well above the Catholic population, because their lifestyles are built on a privilege: a disproportionate control over the territory that is divided into six counties.

POLITICIANS can appear to remove the anomalies generated by the wrong tax-and-tenure arrangements. They can do so only by imposing a level of taxation that is self-defeating.

Economically, Ulster is surviving because of heavy subsidies from UK taxpayers. A UK pull-out would leave the province high-and-dry. Dublin could not come to the rescue, because it is constrained by a crippling level of debt. Will Euro-taxpayers bail out the Ulster economy and so defuse the ethnic conflict?

This could happen, given Europe's crazy fiscal philosophy. This is illustrated by the Common Agricultural Policy, which now costs the average household an extra ú28 a week on the food bill. But who benefits? Not the agricultural workers. No, it is the rental value of farmland that has risen to soak up the CAP subsidies. Who, in Ulster, would benefit from these subsidies? Protestant landowners!

It really does all come back to the land, in the end. Mr. Hume needs to appreciate this. For then he can make a truly remarkable contribution to peace in his province, by explaining to the people of Ulster that permanent peace is contingent on a fair share-out of the rental value of the land and natural resources of their territory.

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