The Hillsborough Deal and the Lessons of Sunningdale

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THE LESSONS OF SUNNINGDALE

JAMES CRIMMINS and JOHN McGARRY write that the lessons of Sunningdale have contributed to the present deadlock over the Anglo-Irish Agreement. But they say the "external character" of the Intergovernmental Conference helps explain the confusion in the Unionists' campaign.

THERE are many similarities between the recent Anglo–Irish Accord and the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973–74, not least the vehemence of the Protestant reaction to both. And some lessons of the latter have not been lost on the various parties that both oppose and support the present accord. Unfortunately, other lessons, which may well have increased Hillsborough's chances of acceptance, are still to be learnt.

The collapse of Sunningdale, however, did not force the British to reconsider the central thrust of their Northern Ireland policy. It continued to rest on two pillars. First, any devolved government would have to be acceptable to both communities. Secondly, the aspirations of both communities should be capable of being expressed through constitutional channels. This was an approach which commanded the almost unanimous support of her predecessors (and certainly not Harold Wilson in 1974) could muster.

The second necessary ingredient was a Fine Gael/Labour Coalition in the South. It is one of the ironies of Irish history that the so-called Republican party Fianna Fail, has been completely incapable of initiating a settlement acceptable to the British government. Charles Haughey's government, for both personal and political reasons, was incapable of negotiating a Hillsborough-type agreement with Margaret Thatcher. Garret FitzGerald, a man who through family connections and the insights of a historian has shown a certain sensitivity to at least some of the Unionist fears, is much better qualified for the task at hand.

PROTESTS DIFFICULT

Given these necessary preconditions, the job was then to rebuild the consensus temporarily reached at Sunningdale, but avoid its vulnerabilities. The answer was an external solution which was not dependent on Unionist compliance, at least in the short term, and which would not easily succumb to the tactics of disruption. This was the solution brought to fruition at Hillsborough.

In 1974 it was extremely difficult, and in the end impossible, for Brian Faulkner to resist the express will of the Unionists. Today it is not nearly so difficult for Thatcher and FitzGerald to ignore such opposition. Loyalists are finding that the Intergovernmental Conference is not a Stormont Assembly which can be boycotted. Only since the recent one-day strike have some loyalists begun to appreciate this fact. It is the "external" character of the present arrangements which helps to explain some of the confusion in the Unionist leadership on what steps to take next.

If the strikes escalate, one would presume that the British Government would draw on another lesson of the Sunningdale experience and this time use army expertise to keep essential services running. Alternatively, they might well allow a rundown of the province's services and let the perpetrators take the consequences. Anyone who feels that Mrs. Thatcher would not allow this to happen should recall the considerable hardships experienced in several villages during last winter's miners' strike. And these villages were on the British mainland!

SMASHING UNITY

The success of the Anglo–Irish initiative in the long-term, however, depends on breaking the Unionist pact possibly along OUP/DUP lines, with the former accepting the basic tenets of the Agreement. But here the lessons of 1974 mitigate against compromise. Unionists are keenly aware of the dangers of being "outranked" by extreme elements if they betray the slightest willingness to compromise while the strong Irish dimension remains in place. They know that the political future of continued overleaf

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It was recognised by those who devised the present arrangements that there were certain fundamental weaknesses in the Sunningdale Agreement. The most basic of these was that it depended on a high level of internal consensus in a society renowned for political and religious intolerance. The White Paper that paved the way for the 1973–74 power-sharing executive insisted that it should be based on widespread consent from both communities in the province. The removal of this consent by the Protestant community, clearly demonstrated in the elections of February 1974 and in the degree of passive support for the UWC strike in May of that year, made the position of the Faulkner Unionists on the Executive untenable.

the House of Commons. The British plan became, therefore, to fashion a similar arrangement which would not be as vulnerable as Sunningdale.

The timing of the implementation of such a plan demanded a particular combination of political factors. The most essential requirement was a British prime minister possessing not only the desire to see his or her name in the history books as the leader who solved the Irish question, but also the will to take the risks associated with the inevitable Protestant backlash. Margaret Thatcher fits this role. Indeed, she appears to thrive on the prospect of confrontation. Her handling of the hunger strikers, the Argentine junta and the British coal-miners indicate a resolve few of

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Former PM Harold Wilson and former Secretary of State Merlyn Rees outside Stormont during the Sunningdale period in 1974.
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Brian Faulkner and the other power-sharing Unionists were destroyed by their participation in Sunningdale.

The spectre of Lundy means that even if Official Unionists do see the possibility of reaching an understanding with the South, they are reluctant to say so in public. James Molyneaux and Ian Paisley, of all people, were given an abrupt reminder of this after their talks with Mrs Thatcher in late February. In this respect the lessons of Sunningdale have contributed to a political stalemate. This explains why the Unionist leaders are unwilling to accept the dubious carrot of devolution offered them by the Hillsborough Agreement. They have been forced to insist that the Intergovernmental Conference be scrapped as a precondition to any talks on the subject. Given Faulkner’s fate in 1974 there is no other way it could be.

SDLP VETO

Nor have the lessons of Sunningdale been lost on the SDLP. Hillsborough has placed the constitutional nationalists in a very strong position. Unlike the Unionist parties, they have a direct line into the Intergovernmental Conference via the Southern government. They have already drawn considerable electoral benefits from the Agreement, doubling their representation at Westminster and drawing off the moderate fringe of Sinn Fein support. This puts the SDLP in a powerful bargaining position should negotiations for a devolved government get underway. Effectively they have a veto over future developments.

Aware of what happened in 1974, the SDLP would not risk abolishing an Agreement which, so far as they are concerned, is now carved in stone, in return for some dubious power-sharing arrangement which might collapse a year from now leaving them with nothing. Nor are there any guarantees that a future British Government would be willing to reloat the initiative if it is abandoned now. The SDLP, acutely aware of the internal pressure to which the 1974 executive succumbed, will insist that the Intergovernmental Conference remains intact.

In the present impasse the prospects for a tripartite conference taking place are bleak. But should it come to pass its success may well be dependent upon two other lessons to be acquired from Sunningdale, this time by the Republic.

OFFENSIVE AGAINST IRA

First, there is the question of security. Much depends on whether the Republic has the will to follow through with its expressed intentions to take effective action against the IRA. Faulkner’s fragile position among the loyalist community after the Sunningdale Agreement, was undermined by the failure of the South to agree to extradition or to mount a strong security offensive against the Provisionals. This fueled suspicion among northern Protestants that the southern government was sympathetic to the IRA.

In 1986 with relations between the two governments considerably improved there are prospects that this deadlock can be resolved. The Republic has signed the European Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism but loyalists say this should have been done years ago. And they have used the recent release of Evelyn Glenholmes, due to faulty British warrants, as proof that the South is still a ‘safe haven’ for the IRA.

Secondly, Sunningdale, like Hillsborough, included the acceptance by the Republic that the status of Northern Ireland would only change with the consent of the majority. On both occasions this has failed to impress those loyalists convinced that such professions are nothing more than subtle vehicles for steering them into a united Ireland. Part of the reason for this, as is so often pointed out by Unionist leaders, is that the Republic’s Constitution still claims jurisdiction over the North. Sunningdale may well have been saved by a timely constitutional amendment to the offending agreement. It is a consideration which would greatly facilitate the acceptance of the present accord.

Even if these lessons were learnt by the Republic, they would probably not satisfy the more extreme loyalists, those who unrealistically call for UDI or a return to Stormont. Nonetheless, the acceptance of these lessons are essential preconditions for breaking the stalemate that now exists.