

### Northern Ireland

Whatever else happens by the time she leaves No 10 Mrs Thatcher will have a pretty deep hatred for the problems of Northern Ireland. They are one of those things in the life of any British government that simple wishing cannot resolve.

Sitting in a cabinet committee and dreaming up possible alternative systems of rule for the Six Counties is easy. Getting any system off the ground in Belfast is another matter altogether. The first paragraph of the Government's November working paper for its postponed constitutional conference may bravely announce that the transfer of power from Westminster back to Northern Ireland 'cannot and must not be frustrated by terrorism', but anyone even with very blue tinted spectacles can see immediately that it has.

What is more the sudden atmosphere of urgency the Tory ministers in London and their direct rule team in Stormont Castle tried to generate a month or so ago was totally

absent when Mr Atkins slipped behind the desk from which Roy Mason had spent three years sending his 'there is no torture here' memos. Then things were to be taken at a leisured pace. No one on the government side protested when Unionist leader James Molyneux speculated that direct rule would be around for five years more. Indeed the election manifesto had played down the idea of any assembly or other top level move for the North. 'The defeat of terrorism and the restoration of law and order' were, the Tories said before May 3, things they would give 'the highest priority'. The only other idea on offer was that 'in the absence of devolved government, we will seek to establish one or more elected regional councils with a wide range of powers over local services'.

As the November working paper points out at the moment 'no significant responsibilities are discharged by locally elected bodies' in Northern Ireland. The manifesto proposal has become 'Model F: A system of government with executive but no legislative powers exercised by one or more local authorities'. The paper says that the conference Mr Atkins had called had as its task 'to establish the highest level of agreement on how' to transfer powers 'in ways which will best meet the needs of Northern Ireland'. Model F is not a new idea — but in the past Tory politicians were not so keen.

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Back in October 1972 William Whitelaw — then, too, sitting behind that desk at Stormont Castle — published another 'paper for discussion' entitled *The Future of Northern Ireland*. He too spoke of 'further discussions which I now propose immediately to put in hand. These must go ahead with the utmost urgency'.

But for Model F his views were briskly put and short and sharp to say the least.

Under the heading 'Total Integration' he observed that 'the majority of parties in Northern Ireland are opposed to it . . . it would represent a complete reversal of the traditions of half a century . . . it would impose a substantial new legislative burden on the Westminster Parliament, and it would be unacceptable to the Republic of Ireland and would make co-operation with the Republic more difficult'.

His 98 page document was careful to state in one section headed 'The Irish Dimension' that 'A settlement must also recognise Northern Ireland's position within Ireland as a whole'. Something that this time round Mr Atkins suggested the talks would 'not be concerned with'. After all only one of the parties he and Mrs Thatcher had earmarked for the conference was interested in the Irish dimension — and two of the others said they would not turn up if it was. The difficulty, as the Westminster duo quickly discovered was that the one party concerned said it would not come unless the topic was down on the agenda.

Using the horribly symbolic occasion of an announcement of a new bridge in Derry — SDLP leader John Hume's home town neatly split by the River Foyle into Catholic and Protestant halves — Mr Atkins let slip carefully calculated remarks designed to assure Mr Hume that the SDLP could indeed raise what Mr Atkins had earlier assured the Paisleyite right they could not.

What agreement he expects to get out of a conference that no one will agree to attend with out the most amazing degree of acrobatics by its chair is a question most avoided putting. Was that out of politeness or out of understanding that in fact Mr Atkins and Mrs Thatcher expected no agreement — so opening the door to Model F, their intended solution all along?

Building bridges between politicians whose basic beliefs, indeed whose reasons for political existence are diametrically opposed is an impossible business. One other 'discussion paper' on the 'Government of Northern Ireland', this time turned out by a Labour boss in Stormont Castle, Merlyn Rees, made the only worthwhile point that 'it is the nature of the division in the community which has caused the failure in Northern

Ireland of institutions based on the British pattern'. That was in February 1975. It is as true today as it was then. If you try to base government institutions on a sectarian base then either one side holds permanent power or else — well ten years have shown the answer is a vacuum.

Communists in Belfast have repeatedly stressed the issue is not seeking to juggle some constitutional house out of the existing political bricks, but rather to lay a whole new ground plan for new, uniting political forces to come into play.

One Tory who served in the direct rule team under Ted Heath's government —

spent a whole chapter on the idea of 'A Charter of Human Rights'. Mr Atkin's working paper throws in the idea that 'existing safeguards should be at least maintained, and, if possible, improved'. His Model A solution even suggests a Belfast assembly for which 'a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland might be enacted'. The trouble is the facts of life experienced by bruised heads and battered bellies in Castle-reagh shows that six years of such speculation has not altered the facts of military repression. Back in 1973 Mr Whitelaw had also taken on board the 'broad objective' of the need 'to work progressively towards the



Lord Windlesham — was one of the few who rushed his views into print once pushed into opposition. He wrote of the 'stubbornly enduring character of the problem' — something Mrs Thatcher needs to reflect on a while.

In his day, he argued, 'it can reasonably be claimed that Westminster did not ignore its responsibilities towards Ulster'. His proof? Two hundred hours of debate, 1,884 parliamentary questions answered and 26 statements from government ministers or Private Notice Questions replied to. If only the politically intractable Gordian Knots of this world could be so easily spirited away, he must now think. On the two key areas that count 'Westministers responsibilities' were hypocritically shouldered and cynically dumped.

In 1972 Mr Whitelaw said there was 'much to commend' the idea of Bill of Rights. In March 1973 he published proposals which

achievement in Northern Ireland of those standards of living, employment and social conditions which prevail in Great Britain'. Yet the day or so after Mr Atkins issued his working paper the Supplementary Benefits Commission in Northern Ireland published statistics indicating that 14.4% of the local population relied for their living on supplementary benefits.

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