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## Back to the drawing board

"IT IS increasingly difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Agreement is in danger of becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution."

So said a recent leader in the *Independent*, bemoaning the "nagging interference" of Dublin in affairs such as the Birmingham Six. The accord, said the editorial, was "fundamentally unbalanced: it gives one party, the Irish Republic, the unilateral right to involve itself in the development of policing, security and the administration of justice."

In the *Telegraph*, or perhaps the Murdoch press, such views would have been unsurprising—though it is worth recalling just how few doubters there were even within the Thatcherite bloc at the time the Agreement was signed. For almost everyone, up to the PM, Hillsborough was A Good Thing.

Not so now. For not only has the 'rabid right' rump of the Conservative party been up in arms—marked by only thinly veiled racist sentiments against the Irish and all their works, A growing number of Tory MPs, the *Independent* elsewhere reported, believe the accord should be ended when it comes up for review in November. One, Michael Latham, complained in the *Irish Times* of Mr Haughey's "continual aggravation" on a host of issues. Aother, Nicholas Soames, protested: "The Irish must stop being so chippy ... People here are very irritated."

Then came Norman Tebbit's broadside. Mr Tebbit has, of course, personal reasons for disliking the IRA, but his attack on the Taoiseach for allegedly being soft on terrorism was characteristically robust: he had had a "bellyful" of the man. And, if Mr Haughey was not able to assure him of his anti-Provo credentials, he said, it would not be just—just!—the Anglo-Irish Agreement that would "die".

Mr Tebbit is—or rather was—close to the

prime minister, and may be expected to reflect accurately her instincts. And a clear signal of those visceral opinions emerged from one of her characteristically authoritative Commons replies. "Justice north of the border," Mrs Thatcher declared baldly, "is a matter for the UK government." So much for article eight of the accord, which said that "substantial expression" would be given to measures to secure confidence in the administration of justice.

Let's call a spade a spade. Sinn Féin was wrong to see in the Agreement some grand conspiracy to keep Northern Ireland a British 'colony'. (As Owen Dudley Edwards once said: 'British occupied Ireland'? The 'Brits' couldn't be less occupied with Ireland.) But SF was right to see the concern of the British side beginning and ending with security. True, there had to be commitments—some vague, some informal—to judicial reform, to secure Garret's signature to the accord. The last six months would suggest there was never the faintest intention these were to be honoured.

One might have thought that the pressure would be on Whitehall to begin to deliver—indeed that that pressure would build inexorably with each new disappointment, as each excuse for prevarication lost its currency. On the contrary, each plaintive cry from Iveagh House paradoxically contributes to quite a different view at Westminster—or, at least, within the Conservative bloc there, which is all that matters—that here once more are these 'nagging, interfering' Irish, second-guessing the common battle against terrorism.

It is precisely because the Agreement—stripped of fine words that butter no parsnips—is merely a modification of direct rule to embrace security co-operation that this opinion is now gathering ground in British establishment circles. For if that is all it is then it is a 'fundamentally unbalanced' deal—if in quite a different sense than the *Independent* implied. For such co-operation is, in the nature of things, inevitably one-way: the south gives, Britain takes. The success of the deal becomes measured entirely by how far Dublin is prepared to endorse every action against the Provos—however much the rule of law is bent, however often its reformist urgings are rebuffed.

Why, then, does Charles Haughey put up with it? Two reasons, really. First, while 'Fianna Fail—the republican party' must continue to make the relevant historical genuflections on the right ritual occasions, the reality is that 30 years ago it stopped wrapping itself in the green flag and donned the mohair suit. For those who have an interest in Northern Ireland, but not too much of an interest, the Agreement is intellectually and politically ideal.

Mr Haughey's residual anti-partitionism should not be misrepresented as interest in the north at all; on the contrary, as Fintan O'Toole so excellently shows in *The Southern Question*, it's all about constructing an image of 'Ireland' which can smooth the transition between old and new to Fianna Fail's advantage. (Indeed, the traditionally more moderately nationalist Fine Gael, alongside the Progressive Democrats, have been berating Mr Haughey for his alleged unconcern about the north ever since he returned power.) And it is precisely those southern politicians, particularly those on the left, who have least investment in 26-county nationalism—one thinks particularly of Mary Robinson or Jim Kenny—and most real interest in, and understanding of, the north who have been most circumspect about the Agreement from the

outset.

The second, and related, factor in Mr Haughey's calculations is that he is now satisfied that the Agreement will leave the north in 'failed political entity' suspended animation. The accord had, after all, aired the prospect of devolution—a dangerously successful future for the 'entity' was thus held out—but the ditching of the Task Force report, plus the drift of unionist opinion towards integrationism, has pushed devolution over the horizon. It is of little consequence to the Taoiseach how perfunctory the meetings of the Anglo-Irish Conference might be, how little there may be to show, how wide the smiles yet how bland the communiqués. It is the symbolism of the 'two sovereign governments' meeting that is all-important—and that while they are meeting no one is queering the northern end of the pitch.

What, then, of the speculation about the unionists smuggling up to Charlie, following Mr Molyneaux's 'totality of relationships' speech? For those—and there were many commentators—who misread Mr Molyneaux's comments, the OUP leader clarified them a few weeks ago. He agreed with Mr Haughey on a 'totality of relationships' framework, of course, because he agreed with Mr Haughey on the undesirability of devolution. The integrationist Molyneaux and the republican Haughey have a surprising amount in common.

Anyway, Mr Haughey's was a barbed overture. He wanted to hear the views of the unionists "at first hand", he said. But he linked the invitation to a suggestion that they too were recognising that the north—as an 'entity'—had 'failed'. No unionist could possibly accept Mr Haughey's outstretched hand against that background. No doubt the Taoiseach knows that. He might be worried if they did.

But what of Tom King's invitation to John Hume, to talk about devolution? By linking that to the 'talks about talks', wasn't Mr King indicating that the unionists had moved? The unionists leaders protested—and, since standing absolutely stock still even as the world moves on is their self-proclaimed forte, one tends to believe them. And Mr Hume's response was something less than tepid. Just—just!—to have power-sharing "for its own sake" would not be worthwhile, he said.

In the absence of movement, generating the appearance of movement is a strong temptation. Mr King, who earnestly wishes to turn an idea into reality—as indicated by the rumpus he created after the last meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference, when he prematurely forecast the agenda for the next one—should resist it.

Perhaps the most significant comment of the many on the Agreement last month came from the respected *Irish Times* commentator, Mary Holland—an assiduous supporter of the accord from the outset. In the wake of Gibraltar, she wrote: "Those who framed it hoped it would bring substantial benefits to the nationalist minority in the north and peace and stability to both communities. Increasingly it is coming to seem that those hopes cannot be fulfilled within the framework envisaged by the Agreement and that new structures will have to be devised to enable all the parties involved to sit down together to negotiate a lasting settlement."

It's high time we went back to the policy drawing board—and removed the distracting outlines of an Agreement which has merely acted to excuse inertia and distort debate on what that 'lasting settlement' might entail.