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The Quest of an Irish Settlement

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THE
IRISH CHURCH QUARTERLY.

OCTOBER, 1916.

THE QUEST OF AN IRISH SETTLEMENT.

THE party truce which came into operation at the beginning of the war has, in one respect, proved singularly ineffective. It has not to any great extent hindered the re-opening of those political questions which were agitating the country before the war, and were supposed to be shelved till after it. Tariff questions, trade union questions, problems of state ownership and control, problems of the franchise, all have again forced themselves into notice, and must be dealt with. Though not realized at first, this was certain to occur, for it is an impossibility to separate into completely different spheres the internal and external affairs of any country. A country at war can no more afford to neglect its domestic concerns than an athlete can expect success if he pays no regard to the condition of his heart and lungs. Indeed, far from it being the case that during war internal affairs may be left untouched, it would probably be found from an historical survey that in any country the most far-reaching and deepest changes have been made during war and under stress of war.

But while the war has not shelved our political problems, it has given us a new perspective with regard to them. We no longer look on them from a purely party point of view, but in relation to something greater. We

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now can see that a political, or as we tend to call it, a national problem, is not intended to be wrangled over, but to be solved. As a result of this, several difficulties which had engendered much heat when considered only from the party standpoint seem now to be on a fair road to amicable settlement.

Of all the pre-war difficulties, the "Irish question" was that which had aroused most passion, and its emergence again into view took the form of an armed rebellion. Into the causes or course of the rebellion it is not the purpose of this article to enter. I intend rather to trace the consequences of the rebellion, especially the political consequences, and the negotiations to which they gave rise, and to see what we can learn from them as to the attainment of that settlement which still lies in the future. It will be sufficient to go back to the time when we were at least partially recovered from the shock of the outbreak, and with eyes still half-dazed began to consider what effect the catastrophe might have on the future of our country.

The effect of the new perspective given by the war was noticeable immediately after the rebellion. Remarkably little attempt was made by either side to turn the event to party purposes. To realize this we have simply to imagine what would have occurred supposing such a rebellion had taken place before August, 1914, how high party passions would have risen, and how each side would have found in it a new and conclusive argument, and a new reproach to opponents. But now little of this occurred. There was a welcome absence of recriminations. The better men on all sides saw that what was needed was not further strife, but a settlement.

On returning from his visit to Ireland, Mr. Asquith declared in the House of Commons on May 25th that "two dominant impressions" had been left on his mind. The first was "the break-down of the existing

machinery of Irish government." The second was, "the strength and depth, and, I may almost say without exaggeration, the universality of the feeling in Ireland that we have now a unique opportunity for a new departure for the settlement of outstanding problems, and for a general and combined effort to obtain agreement as to the way in which the government of Ireland should in the future be carried on." With the first of these opinions, strongly enforced later by the Hardinge Commission, nearly all Irishmen were agreed, for no one had a good word to say for the Irish Government. It had not commanded the confidence, or even the respect, of any section of the community, Unionist, Nationalist, or Sinn Fein, and in the crisis it had proved hopelessly weak and incompetent. With Mr. Asquith's second proposition there was more disagreement, but on the whole it was sound. We had all been swept away from our old prepossessions, and were ready to join in changes which would give us a prospect of order and good government. Perhaps the best suggestion was that first made, a small council of representative Irishmen to administer the country till the end of the war. But the suggestion was let slip, and a more ambitious plan was adopted.

To work the transformation the Cabinet, as always when in a difficulty, applied to its *Deus ex machina* from Wales, and his appointment as mediator was greeted with joy on all sides. Certainly if any other than an Irishman was to effect a settlement that man appeared to be Mr. Lloyd-George, who entered on his task with widespread sympathy and support.

From that time forward, however, the history of the negotiations is a history of mistakes. The first mistake, though not generally recognized, was a confusion of thought as regards the problem to be solved. In reality there were two nearly-related, but yet distinct problems, first to establish an administration in Ireland which

would command confidence and restore order, and second, to find a settlement of the constitutional difficulties involved in the position of Home Rule, and to establish a permanent system of government. The first of these was an administrative problem, the second a constitutional problem. The one was an immediate necessity; the other more important but not so pressing, and likely to be rendered more difficult by hasty action. Mr. Lloyd-George ignored the relative urgency of the two, and made a bold attack on the larger question, hoping that by settling it he would also settle the smaller. What Ireland needed at the moment was not a Legislature, but an Executive. Mr. Lloyd-George proposed to give us a Legislature, and to allow it, after how many months' interval one knows not, to evolve its own Executive. This may have been an excellent plan in constitutional theory, but in practise it simply meant delay, and it ignored the real facts of the situation.

If, however, the re-opening of the constitutional question was necessary, solution was not sought along likely lines. The scheme put forward (which need not be recalled in detail here) was, in fact, entirely a politicians' solution, seeking to satisfy, not the Irish people, but the two Irish Parties represented at Westminster. Moreover, it took as its basis the results reached before the war at the time of the Buckingham Palace Conference; that is to say, it ignored altogether the new spirit which the war, and even the rebellion, had brought about, and harked back to those bad days of long ago which most of us thought we had outlived. It would be equally reasonable to attempt now to adjust the relations of Capital and Labour by taking into consideration only pre-war disputes, and ignoring entirely the changes which have transformed the whole question. Finally, the settlement was propounded, not in Ireland, but in London, and even there the Irishmen, the parties most deeply concerned, were never brought into personal contact with each other.

Such were some of the initial imperfections in Mr. Lloyd-George's scheme. As an offset to them he had two chief weapons to rely on. The first was the general impression that something had to be done, which made men less impatient than usual of proposals which they disliked. The second was a strange intangible thing known as the "Imperial necessity." What exactly this "Imperial necessity" was no one ever explained, though it was understood to have some connexion with international relations with the United States of America. The phrase was always uttered darkly with bated breath, as something not to be inquired into but to be obeyed. One cannot help wondering what has happened to the Imperial necessity since the negotiations broke down. At times one is tempted to wonder whether it had any tangible existence apart from its use as a weapon to compel agreement, a very powerful weapon when wielded by a born negotiator.

Thus armed, Mr. Lloyd-George advanced to the attack, and with comparative ease captured the first-line trenches, consisting of the members of Parliament of the two main Irish parties, whose positions were already considerably shattered by the effects of the rebellion. A further advance was the winning over, however unwillingly, of the Ulster Unionist Council by Sir Edward Carson, and the Ulster Nationalists mainly by Mr. Devlin. It was, however, very soon apparent that the offensive had taken place on too narrow a front, and the position so far gained was at once attacked on all sides. The Irish Unionists continued their resistance in front; many Nationalists and the machine-guns of the *Irish Independent* opened an enfilading fire; the *Morning Post* carried on its bomb-dropping on the lines of communication; and eventually the complete break-down came with a split in the attacking force itself, disagreement in the Cabinet as to the terms of settlement. With this final blow there was no other course open but a retreat to the original position.

Thus came the anti-climax. The machinery of Castle government, which had been so hopelessly broken in pieces, was picked up and carefully put together again; the Imperial necessity vanished away; all seemed to be as before.

It would nevertheless be a mistake to suppose that the weeks spent in negotiation were entirely wasted, for though no settlement was reached, the situation is now clearly defined as it never had been before. This in itself is an exceedingly important result, for up to now one of the most difficult features of the situation was that no party seemed to see clearly where it stood.

It is, first of all, plain that, apart from a possible rejection by Nationalist Ireland, Home Rule in some shape or form for twenty-six counties is bound to come. This has been expressly admitted by nearly all the Unionist leaders, including Sir Edward Carson. In England it has been recognized by practically all the important newspapers, with the exception of the *Morning Post*. Such declarations cannot possibly be retracted without such a breach of faith as would be almost inconceivable.

It is, at the same time, equally evident that the six Ulster counties have established their claim to exclusion if they desire it. This claim has received equally definite recognition from the Liberal and Nationalist leaders, and notwithstanding the attitude of some Nationalists who deny the claim (corresponding to the rigid position of the extremer Unionists on the other side) Ulster can now feel secure against any attempt or even threat of coercion.

The *locus standi* of the two main parties is thus at last clearly defined. But as well as this, the negotiations have revealed the opinions of the country on several other points. They have shown the widespread and vehement feeling against a policy of partition, a feeling universal among Nationalists, almost universal among

Southern Unionists, widespread among Ulster Unionists. Indeed, it is a remarkable fact how frequently Ulster Unionists, after expressing their detestation of the whole plan of Home Rule, go on in the next breath to declare that if it proves to be a success in the twenty-six counties, they hope to join with them later on. Even in Ulster partition is looked upon merely as a makeshift.

A factor which may be of even greater importance for the future is the mutual respect which, during the negotiations, has been manifestly growing between the two sides. Even if we feel that Sir Edward Carson and Mr. Redmond sought a settlement along wrong lines, yet we all admit that they showed great courage, and a readiness to sacrifice personal feelings for the sake of peace, which is of very happy augury for the future.

But the fact most obvious of all is that sooner or later the whole question of the future government of our country must be settled, and settled by agreement. It is impossible for either side to carry through its complete policy. A General Election on Home Rule is now seen to be an absurdity, even if we suppose that after the war a British election could be fought on Home Rule, which is quite impossible. An agreed settlement is the only possible settlement.

There are, roughly, three ways in which agreement can be sought. The first is through negotiations among the leaders of the English parties, in consultation, of course, with their Irish allies. It may be admitted that this is the correct constitutional procedure, and in a normal case would probably be successful. The case, however, is not normal, for the real power lies not with Parliament, but with the Irish Nationalists and the Ulster Unionists, and these are the parties who must be satisfied. It is also more apparent now than ever that English statesmen do not (perhaps cannot) grasp the Irish situation, and we have every reason to believe

that English negotiations will prove as futile as they have always done before.

The second avenue towards agreement came prominently into notice in Mr. Lloyd-George's proposal of an Imperial Conference. We may take it that an Imperial Conference is a definite part of Cabinet policy. The prospect appeals with great force to the imagination, and as it affects Ireland, has one overwhelming merit in that it will lift the "Irish question" from being a mere domestic concern of the United Kingdom to the status of an Imperial problem, which it undoubtedly is. To bring the fresh minds of Colonial statesmen to bear on Ireland is a vast gain. Perhaps the most valuable of all will be the opinions of General Botha and General Smuts, who had to deal, and dealt successfully, with very similar difficulties in South Africa. Nevertheless, we must beware of placing too implicit reliance on an Imperial Conference. The mere introduction of Colonial statesmen will hardly prove a panacea. It is hardly to be supposed that General Botha or Mr. Hughes will have either the time or the inclination to undertake a very detailed study of internal Irish affairs, or of possible amendments to the Home Rule Act. The Conference, it must be remembered, will rank among events of the very first importance in the history of the Empire. It will have questions to settle of overwhelming magnitude affecting peoples in every quarter of the globe. Can such a Conference devote any great portion of its time to one particular section of the Empire?

For us, Irishmen, there is a further consideration. It is certain that the delegates from every other part of the Empire will come well primed and instructed as to the attitude which they are to take up on those matters which will come under consideration, and the points on which they are to press. Ireland, however, is apparently to give the Conference *carte blanche* as to how it is to

settle our affairs. Such a situation, as well as being degrading to us, would probably result in many things being overlooked, and many things done which we would afterwards regret. It is absolutely essential that Irish concerns should be previously thought out from the Irish point of view, so that there should be a definite case to lay before the Conference.

This brings us to the third possible avenue of agreement, negotiations among Irishmen in Ireland. To judge from many indications, opinion both in England and Ireland has been steadily shaping in this direction. If settlement is essential it would appear most likely to be gained among those who will suffer most grievously from unsettlement. We Irishmen well know how the long dispute over this problem has injured us and our country, and it requires little imagination to picture the results if no agreement is reached at the end of the war. Whatever way we look it would be sheer chaos, whether the result was a Unionist victory or a Nationalist victory, or a miserable compromise on partition. All of us in Ireland have been far too ready to let our problems be solved for us in England; but in the last resort our salvation lies in our own hands. Into our own hands we ought now to take our fortunes.

The call to Irish statesmen to take the settlement into their own hands, the call for an Irish Conference, has been repeated many times during the last four months with ever-increasing insistence. The argument in favour of a Conference is now overwhelmingly strong. Here is a perfectly feasible course of action which can do no harm and which may do untold good; and now, indeed, it appears to be the only course, for no other is so much as suggested which will adequately square with the needs of the situation with which we are faced. Even supposing that a policy of partition is inevitable, consultation between the two sides would be of the greatest value, so as to make the arrangement as little

intolerable as may be. But it is to be hoped that a Conference might secure a greater thing, a united Ireland.

This article is not a suitable place to put forward any possible lines of settlement which may be acceptable both to Ulster and Nationalist Ireland, but it is well to point out that the possibilities in this direction have been by no means exhausted. Up to the present only one solution—the exclusion of Ulster—has received serious attention, and that solution nearly all Irishmen have from the first looked on as inherently bad. Other plans, some of them considerably better, have been suggested from time to time, but laid aside. It is by no means impossible that if our best brains are brought to bear, some really satisfactory solution may come to light.

Needless to say, if agreement is to be reached, it can only be by a new spirit of readiness to see the point of view and meet the claims of opponents, and to make some personal and party sacrifices in the interests of all. We need to get away so far as may be from the region of party moves and stratagems, to get rid of the canker of suspicion, and to be ready to forgive and to make allowances. There is no party in Ireland which can look back on the past with entire satisfaction and no self-reproaches. That repentance and forgiveness, which we would regard as such a sign of grace in our opponents, we ought each to be ready to exemplify in ourselves. The real honour and credit will lie with that party or that man who is the first to make advances, and is ready to admit his faults. It is probably the most galling of all things to a politician to admit that he has been in any degree in the wrong. He who does admit it may not be the best politician, but he will certainly be the best Irishman.

The spirit of agreement is already abroad, and more widespread than is shown on the surface. It is plain that we have to deal with an entirely new situation, that reliance on our former policies has carried us into an impasse from which we can escape only by the discovery

of a new policy. Disintegration of political thought has proceeded with great rapidity since the rebellion, but disintegration is only the necessary preliminary to new combinations. It is now, while political opinions are plastic, that there is an opportunity to form a comprehensive policy based on agreement. That such a policy is possible is shown by the many hints made in speeches, articles, and so forth, sometimes by men who would scarcely have been expected to express such hopes of agreement. The next need is to focus this "spirit of agreement," as I have called it, into a definite policy. The time has come, or is at hand, when some man or men whose names will carry weight should speak out clear and plain, and summon their fellow-countrymen to undertake a new task of settlement.

It remains to say a little as to the position and policy of the Church of Ireland during this critical time. The one official declaration on behalf of the Church has been the Resolution adopted by the House of Bishops on the eve of the meeting of the Synod, a Resolution which *undoubtedly expressed the opinion of the vast majority of Church members*. It was, in the main, a protest against a hasty settlement in general and a "policy of dismemberment" in particular. It also expressed readiness "to make great sacrifices in favour of any scheme for the future government of Ireland calculated to unite our fellow-countrymen, and to secure the blessings of law and peace for them all." The protest against a hasty settlement has prevailed; the other two points in the Resolution deserve close consideration.

There is probably no institution which is likely to suffer more severely by a policy of partition than the Church of Ireland. On a basis of population it would divide our Church into two nearly equal sections. I have been unable to ascertain the exact figures, but roughly speaking, 300,000 of our Church members would be in the six excluded counties, and 250,000 in the rest of Ireland. Three dioceses would be partly on

one side of the border and partly on the other. As differences of laws and administration gradually developed, complications of all kinds would come into matters of Church administration and policy, especially with regard to such concerns as education and Church property. At first such complications might be merely irritating, but the inevitable result would be an ever widening cleavage between the northern and southern sections of the Church. Ecclesiastical divisions very frequently follow political divisions, and in Ireland the positions of the two Archbishoprics might well lend themselves to widening the gap. The fear is by no means groundless that after a time we would find the northern section of the Church looking only to Armagh, and the southern section gravitating towards Dublin, with the very gravest results for the unity of the Church as a whole.

At present the Church of Ireland is a standing witness to Irish unity. She is the Church of Ireland, not the Church of any section. Her members come from every part of the country, and we embrace among us every political point of view. In fact, the two-nation theory goes to pieces on the question, "What is a South of Ireland Protestant?" He is certainly not an Ulsterman, though he has much in common with Ulster. Equally certainly he does not belong to the majority of the population of the South, though he has much in common with them also. The Southern Protestant is, in fact, the link between the two larger sections of the community. It may perhaps be the task of our Church and her members—the grandest task of all—to be the bond which will bring all together into a truly united Ireland.

This brings us to the remaining declaration in the Bishops' resolution, readiness to make sacrifices in the interests of unity. The Church as a body cannot, and ought not, to take definite political action (though her members, and especially her lay members, can), but she can do very much to create and foster the "spirit of

agreement." During and since the negotiations three of our Bishops have spoken out very clearly on this matter, and it is by speeches such as theirs, and by striving to follow such advice as they have given, that the Church can rise to the height of her great opportunity.

The desire for peace in Ireland is now to be found everywhere among the members of our Church. This is particularly the case among the younger men and women. If one were to take the real opinions of any chance collection of the young men of our Church (at any rate, of those with education), I believe the result would be something as follows. A few would be strong Unionists; a few, probably fewer, would be convinced Nationalists; the majority would declare that they had no political opinions, or else, while expressing vaguely Unionist views, would declare that they were weary of the subject. Practically all would say that the country had spent far too long over this great controversy, and that it was time it was ended. We who have our lives still in front of us do not want to find ourselves thwarted at every step by the evil results of continual party strife.

The attainment of a settlement and peace in Ireland is far more than a mere political question. It means the rooting out of a canker which pervades every portion of our national life. It is a religious question in a larger sense than is usually meant by that expression, for it must be plain that the Home Rule dispute has engendered among us all a spirit of strife and bitterness which is in many ways at variance with Christianity, and which has quite prevented us from obeying the injunction to "Live peaceably with all men." And if our disputes have been the cause of an un-Christian spirit, the settlement of them must be a thing in accordance with the teaching of Christianity. In the settlement of our conflict the very honour of Ireland as a Christian nation is at stake.

UNIFICUS.