

Ulster Unionist: Don't split us from Albion

by William C. Jones

David Trimble, the head of the Ulster Unionist Party, presented "The Unionist Case" at a forum at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. on Feb. 12. He angrily denied that the British had ever mistreated Ireland, and denounced the Sinn Fein, a political party committed to a sovereign Ireland, as "a political dinosaur."

"The British date their history from 1066, whereas we date our history from 1177 when John DeCourcy conquered Ulster for the British," Trimble said. "We are part of one political culture with the British. Ireland can't be separated from Albion," he said, referring to the island that comprises England, Scotland, and Wales. He went on to explain how Ulster (Northern Ireland) was the only part of Ireland that experienced the Industrial Revolution, something that he tried to explain by the Protestant ethic. "All attempts at government sponsorship of industrial development failed," Trimble said, "but in Ulster, there was a spontaneous development of a limited industrialization" which occurred primarily in the Protestant areas. "Ireland has always been dependent on England," Trimble said. "It has always been a part of British society and of the British State."

While admitting that "parts of Ireland were never successfully integrated" into British culture, "the failure was not solely a British one," he claimed. He said that the nationalism that began only in the 19th century was always religious in character, and that there was "never a basis for including Northern Ireland in that nationalism." "We are part of the United Kingdom because the majority see themselves as British," Trimble said, indicating, however, that a number of people there support the Union largely for economic reasons, rather than for cultural or political reasons.

An Anglophile view of history

This correspondent challenged Trimble, pointing out that England had never treated Ireland as a part of the "British nation," but rather as a colony, much as they treated India, Malaysia, and other parts of the Empire. "Ireland has remained undeveloped during the entire British period for obvious political reasons," I said.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," Trimble replied, "but that is total nonsense."

"It wasn't by chance that just Ireland was hit by a famine,"

I said, referring to the potato famine of the 1840s.

"It was a potato blight," Trimble retorted. "It was a fungus that attacked the potatoes, not Englishmen going around destroying potatoes. There were famines going on in Europe at the same time. There was nothing unique about that famine."

"It was unique," I continued, "to the extent that the Irish had been deprived of the infrastructure that would have allowed them to deal with such natural catastrophes without losing half their population, because Ireland was treated essentially as a British colony. There was only industrialization, to the extent that it suited British political machinations."

"To say that the industrial development in Northern Ireland was the result of British political machinations, is buncombe," Trimble interjected. "Ireland was not a colony. Ireland was an integral part of the United Kingdom on an equal footing as every other part. You have a very distorted view of history."

The peace process

As for the current political situation, I asked Trimble if his party's demands for elections in Northern Ireland, prior to all-party talks, didn't knock the peace process off track, and if the Unionists would be willing to compromise on that demand, other conditions being met.

"I would disagree entirely with your characterization of the proposal for elections," Trimble answered, "because the proposal for elections *was* progress. It was the only way in which progress could be achieved. We were laying out the only proposal that had any prospect for bringing all the parties together. And there has been no other proposal whatsoever that has had any success of bringing about all-party talks. We indicated—and [British Prime Minister] John Major agreed with us—that we would drop the requirement for prior de-commissioning. Various politicians in Dublin, however, didn't recognize or acknowledge what we did. It was in fact a major concession on our part to reach all-party talks. And the Irish government tried to characterize it as a trick or something. . . . If it hadn't been for [the bombing in London] last Friday, things would have been moving along quite well at this point."

Trimble indicated that the Clinton administration was favorable to the idea, and that there was "no reasonable objection" to the proposal. He tried to paint a picture that only the Sinn Fein objected to the proposal (and, "for reasons of personal pique," the Irish government), because Sinn Fein had a "culture of violence" and would never win anything in open elections.

Trimble denounced the Sinn Fein as "out of tune with any form of democratic spirit." It is "a political dinosaur and it is heading for the graveyard," he said. "It had an opportunity to leave violence. The problem is that if it does, it will never achieve its object [union with Ireland]. . . . That's the reason why there is a culture of violence in Sinn Fein," Trimble charged.