

# *Enoch Powell and Ulster*

Alistair Cooke

A story used to be told in Ulster Unionist circles about one of Enoch Powell's first visits to the province in the 1950s. He was collected at the airport by a staunch Unionist and driven to Portrush in County Antrim, where he was to address a large and enthusiastic meeting. His driver prattled away merrily about a variety of subjects. Eliciting no response, however, he eventually fell silent. As they approached their destination Powell suddenly spoke. 'Tell me,' he said, 'what is the latitude and what is the longitude of this place?' No one could then have foreseen that this distinctly unusual and perplexing Englishman would become one of the greatest of all champions of Northern Ireland's union with Great Britain, inviting comparison with Ulster's most famous hero, Sir Edward Carson himself.

It was Ulster's sudden and unexpected descent into crisis in 1968 which brought the province prominently and permanently into Powell's life. He fell quickly into the habit of making frequent visits to and speeches in Northern Ireland. In June 1972 he reflected on his new-found preoccupation with the province in a speech to Unionists in East Belfast. It had, he said, transformed the life of an English Tory who had 'no ties or connections' with either Ulster or any other part of Ireland:

I would have been astonished if someone, three years ago, had told me that my thoughts and energies would today be directed to the affairs of this province, beyond almost any other political subject. Yet so it is – so much so that often, at the end of a parliamentary week, it strikes me as somehow incongruous that I do not return, like my Ulster Unionist colleagues, to a constituency in these six counties.

Just over two years later, he *would* find himself returning to an Ulster

constituency. Many people in England were greatly taken aback when he decided to re-enter Parliament as MP for South Down in October 1974. In fact it was an entirely unsurprising, though not inevitable, consequence of his absorption in Northern Ireland affairs after 1968, which, he said, led him to feel closer to the Ulster Unionists than to his own party during the course of the Heath government, whose principal Northern Ireland policies he opposed in their company.

The tragic crisis that unfolded in Ulster bore directly and intimately on the fundamental issues of nationhood and identity about which he was then thinking deeply, convinced of their overriding importance in political affairs: everything else was wholly subordinate and secondary. Just before the start of the Ulster crisis he set out the principal results of his prolonged deliberations in a remarkable speech on nationhood at Prestatyn in September 1968 – a speech which no other contemporary Conservative politician could have produced, for it followed in the tradition of the great scholar-statesman Lord Salisbury, of whom Powell was the one remaining powerfully articulate legatee in Tory parliamentary politics. Like Salisbury, he had no easy answers.

Nationhood is a baffling thing: for it is wholly subjective. They are a nation who think they are: there is no other definition. You cannot discover nations by poring over atlases: for though geography influences nationhood, it does not determine it in any specific way ... Nor will history do your business for you: nations merge with others in the passage of time, while others emerge or re-emerge. Nor again will language or ethnography help: for though, like geography and history, language and race are relevant to nationhood, they are not determinants of it: adjacent nations may speak the same language, yet be fiercely separate, while undoubted nations can comprise those who speak different languages. As for the slippery concept of race, all attempts to match it with nationality are foredoomed to failure.

Nationhood, he continued, was an absolute, indivisible and irreducible:

There is no such thing as semi-nationhood or semi-nationalism. You cannot try 10 per cent nationhood, and see how you like it ... Nationalism, if it is real, cannot be bought off with less than the

complete article. This is not because the nationalist is less reasonable or more greedy than his fellow men: it is because nationhood is the complete article.

In the United Kingdom, it was through Parliament that British nationhood gained expression, enabling the country to be 'governed and administered as one nation'. 'The essence of a nation is that the parts instinctively view themselves as subordinate to the whole and regard the interest and well-being of the whole as supreme over the interest and well-being of any of the parts.' The establishment of separate, elected law-making institutions in Scotland or Wales would change everything. 'It would be the watershed, the parting of the ways, the sign that a separate nation had been consciously, deliberately and once-for-all admitted to be there.' Only in Ulster was internal self-government compatible with British nationhood, 'for Ulster self-government was the outcome not of nationalism but of the very opposite, of Ulster Unionism ... [which] accepted only with reluctance the unique form of autonomy which emerged [there] ... The motivation of Ulster has remained not nationalist, not separatist, but the opposite.' This view of Ulster's exclusively British nationhood could be maintained only by leaving out of consideration the substantial minority in the province who were motivated by Irish, not British, nationalism.

That is exactly what Powell did in his speech at Prestatyn, delivered a few weeks before the first serious outbreak of violence in Ulster in October 1968. British nationhood in Ulster could not be qualified or diminished by permitting its Irish counterpart (and rival) to occupy a place alongside it. Two diametrically opposed nationalisms could not both be satisfied: one or other of them must prevail. Everywhere nationhood was an absolute.

As Ulster's violence mounted after 1969, Powell took upon himself unhesitatingly the task of defending the province's place in the British nation, of which it was an integral element. It was as if he felt that he had no alternative but to respond repeatedly and forcefully to this severe challenge to British nationhood, on whose preservation the future of his country depended. He became the first senior Westminster politician of Privy Council rank since Andrew Bonar Law in 1911-14 to speak frequently and passionately

in the Ulster Unionist cause in and outside Parliament (and he was almost certainly the last such person to do so).

At a time when it became commonplace to insist that Ulster was an immensely complicated subject which few could understand, Powell proclaimed that in essence it was clear to the point of simplicity. The province was the scene of a violent assault on the British nation as a whole which had to be defeated completely. There were other assaults on the nation, no less deadly for being (thus far) largely peaceful in character, from which the struggle in Ulster could not be separated. The British nation must overcome all of them. These were the cardinal points to which he returned repeatedly in speeches in Ulster itself and throughout the rest of the country. He told an audience in Londonderry in January 1971 that 'the issues which have affected the life of Northern Ireland in the last two years are part and parcel of the same great issues which confront the whole of the United Kingdom.' Addressing Conservative women in Beaconsfield two months later, he said:

A part of the United Kingdom has been under attack from an external enemy assisted by detachments operating inside. In Buckinghamshire you have neither seen nor heard: it requires an effort both of understanding and of imagination to realise the fact. Yet it is a fact which concerns Buckinghamshire as it concerns Cornwall or Aberdeenshire or County Down. For when one part of a nation is under attack, the whole is under attack.

In September 1971 he told the Unionists of Omagh that they should harbour no doubts about their British identity: "The people of this province are part of the British nation, and the soil of the province is British soil, because the great majority of its inhabitants are so minded. As Pericles taught the Athenians, "A nation is not ships nor walls, but people."

For Powell this was the supreme, all-important fact: he reiterated it continually. But it occupied no place in the lexicon that was used almost universally to depict Ulster's travails. As a result gross error passed as truth – and violence was succoured. He denounced this state of affairs in his Beaconsfield speech of March 1971:

Vocabulary is one of the principal weapons in the enemy's armoury. The campaign in which the British army is engaged, and in which the integrity of this country and the life and liberty of our fellow citizens are at stake, is obligatorily described, reported and discussed in terms designed to deny its real character. The object is to persuade the people of Great Britain that the inhabitants of Ulster are quarrelling among themselves and, unable to refrain from sectarian and internecine violence, are involving in yet another of their everlasting broils the innocent British forces, which are simply attempting to keep the peace between the contending sides and protect them from irreparably damaging themselves. The British public are intended in due course to exclaim: 'If they want to fight, let us leave them to it; Britain never had anything but trouble out of Ireland.' It is the sort of foolish, misguided talk and thought which does the enemy's work for him ...

Overshadowing all the other misconceptions sedulously propagated by skilful choice of language is that of 'grievance', 'reform', 'discrimination', 'civil rights'. These terms, which have passed into the orthodox Westminster vocabulary, have turned reality on its head, first by reinterpreting deliberate acts of war as violence provoked by injustice, and then by importing ready made the whole paraphernalia of the 'oppressed minority'. Thus has been built up in the public imagination on this side of St George's Channel the picture of a large and growing (which it is not), oppressed (which it is not), disloyal (which it is not) religious minority in Northern Ireland, whose existence is evidenced by the campaign of violence and thus brings down a deserved retribution on the majority. The propaganda success of the enemy has been brilliant.

If this brilliant and dangerous propaganda was to be effectively combated, Ulster needed to assert its cause and proclaim the truth about its politics and community relations in the assembly of the British nation, the Westminster parliament. In his great speech on nationhood in September 1968, Powell had not suggested that the Stormont regime should be dismantled. But Home Rule had failed to equip Ulster with the means of repelling the furious assault which it faced during its ever-deepening crisis after 1968. It needed to be fully incorporated in the nation as a whole in order to ensure

that it had the resources and manpower that could restore its stability and preserve its security in future.

The existence of Stormont also created a dangerously false impression of Northern Ireland's constitutional status, which assisted the advocates of Irish unity. As Powell put it in his Beaconsfield speech:

The whole vocabulary of three governments, Westminster, Belfast and Dublin, implants the notion that there are somehow three co-ordinate states, and that as two of them are geographically on the same island, Westminster is the 'third man out' ... It ought to be the object of Her Majesty's Government to convey, by deed as well as word, the identification of Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom.

As for reforms to Northern Ireland's institutions, they should never be regarded as providing a basis for the defeat of terrorism:

I desire no man, if it can be avoided, to be dealt with unfairly or unjustly by the law and public authorities. I hold no brief, on either side of St George's Channel, for injustice. But to imagine that the fixed and settled interest of those whose purpose is to use violence and terror to annex Northern Ireland [to the Irish Republic] could be deflected or appeased by 'reforms' was from the start a belief so patently childish as to raise doubts whether those who professed it could really be in earnest.

Though Powell took strong exception to the way it was done, the summary removal of the Stormont parliament by the Heath government in March 1972 created the opportunity to draw Ulster into the centre of the nation's political life. There, in Powell's view, it should remain for ever represented by its full tally of MPs (up to twenty), which had been reduced to twelve under Home Rule. It was to secure for Ulster such a future that Powell now directed all his efforts on the province's behalf. He explained how it would benefit from a new Unionist constitutional mould in his speech on the legislation which swept Stormont away. He predicted that full participation at Westminster would reorder politics in the province along much the same lines as those elsewhere in the nation:

I have for years advocated the genuine embodiment and parliamentary reunification of the six counties of Northern Ireland with Great Britain, believing that the separate administration and parliament which originally was forced upon the majority in Northern Ireland over fifty years ago, but which over the years they have come to see as a symbol not so much of their independence as of their union with the rest of the United Kingdom ... has nevertheless, in the last three or four years, turned to the opposite effect and become for them a cause of danger and a source of division.

I believe, too, that such true reunification must eventually be the means of healing many of the underlying divisions in the six counties. Mr Callaghan [the future Labour Prime Minister] has often argued that it is essential for Northern Ireland that its people, claiming as they do to belong to the United Kingdom, should participate in the politics of the United Kingdom, and that we are all looking for some way to escape from the exclusive concentration of the politics of the six counties upon the question of union or non-union.

In the greater whole of the parliament of the United Kingdom many of the other political differences which divide citizens in Northern Ireland, as they divide them here, might well come to the surface and gain expression and thus be the means – differences though they are – of nevertheless neutralising the profounder and more irreconcilable antagonisms.

Powell was the first leading British politician to assert that the whole character of Ulster politics would be changed if all the province's affairs were the direct responsibility of the Westminster parliament. He believed that the issues which decided elections in Great Britain would come increasingly to decide them in Ulster too. His conviction would influence a significant body of opinion in the Conservative Party in the years ahead.

'Parliamentary reunification', however, would still leave untouched the greatest source of danger that Ulster faced: the refusal of successive governments since the 1920s, Labour and Conservative alike, to defend its essential interests firmly and unequivocally within the nation of which it was part. British governments had betrayed their duty by treating the citizens of the Irish Republic who resided in the United Kingdom as if they were British, conferring on them the

full benefits of that status.<sup>†</sup> This involved denying what the Republic itself had declared. Nothing could be clearer, Powell said in his 1971 Londonderry speech:

The inhabitants of the remainder of this island have long ago resolved the question of their national identity to, so far as one can judge, their entire satisfaction: they are not, repeat not, part of the nation which inhabits the rest of the British Isles, nor is the territory which they inhabit part of its national territory. They are Irish, and the rest of the world and its peoples are non-Irish, or, in another word, foreign.

Worse still, the self-declared foreigners who enjoyed wholly unwarranted privileges in Britain belonged to a country which wanted to annex Northern Ireland. 'It is the consistent and settled view and policy of the Irish Republic that this province ought not to be part of the national territory of the United Kingdom but ought to be part of the national territory of the republic.'

Nevertheless, in flagrant breach of their responsibilities to Ulster and the British nation, from 1971 onwards the Heath government and its successors involved the Republic's government in discussions about the future of the province it sought to acquire. That could only have one result, Powell said in his 1971 Omagh speech:

When the British government is seen taking counsel about peace and security in a part of the United Kingdom with the Prime Minister of the very country which is dedicated to the annexation of that part and cannot fail to approve the objects and consequences of the disorder, what must people think? I will tell you. They think: 'Oho, so the British are wobbling and preparing to get out: else why would they be parleying with the residual beneficiary of their embarrassment?'

It was a line of argument that brought Powell to a remarkable conclusion: that the United Kingdom's government and parliament

---

<sup>†</sup> Powell was not always opposed to this special treatment. In an interview which he gave in October 1968, he said: 'I just do not think it would be worth the trouble involved to treat the Irish as aliens though that is what they really are. It's not logical, I agree, but then it's Irish.' I am indebted for this reference to David Clarke Shiels of Peterhouse, Cambridge.



bore an even greater share of the responsibility for Ulster's suffering than the terrorists who actually committed it.

Violence begins, grows and gathers momentum because it is fed by hope of success. It is not, as some foolishly allege, purposeless: alas, it is very purposeful ... Up to the present moment its hope has grown. That hope has been fostered and raised by the actions of the British government, which, in the deeds that speak louder than words, affords encouragement to the enemies of Ulster. The truest, deepest responsibility for the deeds of violence in Ulster does not lie in the back streets of Belfast or Dublin; it does not lie in Northern Ireland, nor in the Republic. It lies at Westminster, it lies with Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and with the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Only when their policies and actions, as well as their professions, bring conviction to friend and foe alike that the realities of this province are understood and that the unity of the realm will be maintained, will the guilt of innocent blood depart from Westminster.

A few years later Powell took his charge against the British government to a final, sensational stage. In its betrayal of British nationhood in Ulster it had not merely been guilty of encouraging violence by giving it hope of success; it had actively conspired to assist progress towards the terrorists' goal, the creation of a united Ireland. Murder was committed along the way in the course of that conspiracy. I found myself numbered among those who were supposed to have knowledge of this conspiracy to destroy Ulster's place in the British nation.

The political crisis which first drew Enoch Powell into Ulster's affairs in 1968 intensified rapidly. The Ulster Unionist Party, which had dominated the province's politics since the 1880s, plunged into turmoil as violence mounted. Personal animosities and disputes exacerbated divisions over policy on security and institutional reform as Northern Ireland's last three Prime Ministers – Terence O'Neill, James Chichester-Clark and Brian Faulkner – strove valiantly, but vainly, to restore peace and stability. The removal of Stormont in March 1972 reunited the Ulster Unionists briefly in

protest against the Conservative government's misdeed, as they saw it. Large numbers of them remained implacable in their hostility to Edward Heath and his diligent, newly created Northern Ireland Secretary, Willie Whitelaw, who brimmed with goodwill towards everyone (including, for a few days in June 1972, the IRA).

Whitelaw managed to persuade many moderate Unionists to co-operate with him in his pursuit of a new constitutional order which would create a permanent and guaranteed role in the province's government for the non-Unionist minority (firmly excluding those linked to violence) and would establish a cross-border institution designed to enable Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic to pursue their common interests in close partnership. This was inevitably seen – and not just by diehard Unionists – as a staging post on the road to a united Ireland, which, as Powell continually pointed out, was the declared objective of the Irish Republic, as well as of the IRA. Because of this issue the entire strategy of the British government failed in 1974 – and deserved to fail.

In the summer of 1973 Faulkner, ex-premier but still the Unionist leader, took the fateful decision to share power with elected representatives of the minority, as long as their primary aim was to serve Northern Ireland, not to work for a united Ireland. Miscalculating badly, he also agreed to accept the creation of a Council of Ireland, which would bring together ministers from North and South with a tier composed of members of their two legislatures. The scene was set for a remarkable constitutional experiment: Northern Ireland's first power-sharing executive. It held office for a few short months at the beginning of 1974 before being overthrown by a Province-wide strike organised by 'loyalist' militants with widespread support in the Unionist community as a whole. Faulkner acted in reluctant deference to the fundamental principle that decisions taken by the country's sovereign body, the Crown in Parliament, must ultimately be obeyed. It was a principle which Powell enunciated frequently,<sup>†</sup> but not on this occasion.

---

<sup>†</sup> For example, in a speech at Killeel, County Down, on 6 July 1975, he said: 'To be loyal is, for the Unionist, to accept the will of Parliament as expressed in the law of the land, which is made by the Crown in Parliament ... What, however, no person who calls himself a Unionist can do, without self-contradiction, is to place limits or conditions upon his obedience to the Crown in Parliament.'

Powell denounced these far-reaching initiatives with predictable ferocity. They were designed, he said in June 1973, 'to render the constitution acceptable not to those who accept the Union, but to those who fundamentally reject the Union'. Power-sharing was intolerable: it rested on a 'principle totally adverse to any conception of parliamentary or representative government with which we are familiar'. Those who were ill disposed to all or part of Ulster's new constitutional dispensation sought to enlist him prominently in their cause. The group of seven Westminster Ulster Unionist MPs with whom he had acted in close concert for several years wanted him at their helm. In October 1973 it emerged that 'Powell had received, and refused, an offer to become leader of the Ulster Unionists at Westminster.'<sup>†</sup> It was a wise decision since most of the little band ended up standing as pro-Faulkner candidates at the February 1974 general election – and losing ignominiously.

It was at this juncture that Powell first indicated that he had serious leadership ambitions. Faulkner parted company with his deeply divided party at the start of 1974. Powell was available to fill the vacant leadership, having just given up both the Conservative Party and his Wolverhampton seat in sensational circumstances. His closest Ulster Unionist associate, Jim Molyneaux, telephoned him on 10 February 1974. Powell made a note of their conversation. Molyneaux was authorised 'confidentially to state on my behalf in response to enquiries from authoritative sources that only if the "loyal" [i.e. anti-Faulkner] Ulster Unionists invited me to be their leader and to represent them at Westminster, would I be prepared to consider any approach from Northern Ireland', though that should not be taken to imply that 'I would necessarily accept'. He added that he would 'need to be in personal control of the grounds and policy'<sup>‡</sup> on which he sought election. That would be assured if he became party leader. Nothing, however, came of these manoeuvres.

---

He cannot say: "If Parliament makes laws I do not like, I will not obey them."  
This roused the furious anger of other Unionist leaders who insisted that their loyalty was to the Crown alone.

† Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p. 680.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 702.

Between then and his adoption for South Down later in 1974, he was sedulously courted by the Unionists. Molyneaux offered to hand over his seat, the safest in the kingdom, and Harry West, the new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, from which Faulkner's supporters had departed, coupled an offer of his very unsafe seat with an announcement that 'he would willingly give up the leadership of the Unionists to Powell if he wanted it.'<sup>†</sup> Again, talk was not followed by action.

There was, however, action immediately after Powell's election for South Down in October 1974. West lost his very unsafe seat, and a new leader had to be found for the Unionist contingent at Westminster while West remained in overall charge not just of his own party, but of the United Ulster Unionist Coalition, formed the previous year to secure rejection of power-sharing and the Council of Ireland – a coalition which included the Democratic Unionist leader, Ian Paisley. Powell sought the Westminster post, and lost. Molyneaux later described what happened:

I wanted Enoch for leader ... he had much more experience than any of us, he knew much more about the way government – not just the House of Commons – worked. I thought he would be the right man for our cause. But, when we all got together to talk about it, they decided on me.<sup>‡</sup>

It was an unexpected defeat. 'Powell's closest friends believe he was disappointed not to have become leader.'<sup>§</sup> If he had been chosen, he would almost certainly have gone on to become overall party leader when West's political career ended in failure five years later – as Molyneaux, the Westminster incumbent, then did – as long as adequate trust had been reposed in him by the party as a whole. But he always found that trust difficult to acquire because of the party's strong enduring support for the re-establishment of a devolved parliament, shorn of power-sharing, to which Powell was utterly opposed.

---

<sup>†</sup> Heffer, *Like the Roman*, p. 718.

<sup>‡</sup> Patrick Cosgrave, *The Lives of Enoch Powell* (London: Bodley Head, 1989), p. 368.

<sup>§</sup> Heffer, *Like the Roman*, p. 738.

If Powell's failure to become the leader of the Unionists at Westminster in 1974 deprived him of a post he wanted to hold, it made absolutely no difference to the policies that were adopted by the group of ten Unionist MPs during the tumultuous years of Labour government that lay ahead. All of the key decisions taken by the Unionists at Westminster bore a firm Powellite stamp. At the time it was widely held that Powell was leader in all but name, imposing his ideas on Molyneaux, who tamely did the bidding of a master of the political craft. There was hardly a journalist or civil servant in the land who did not subscribe to this view. In fact the two men worked together as full political partners; their relationship was based on deep mutual understanding and respect.

For his part Molyneaux was determined that the Unionists should draw fully on Powell's immense political talents. In return 'Powell made it his business to support Molyneaux with utter loyalty, even to the extent of addressing him as "Sir" when a third party was present.'<sup>†</sup> Nevertheless, it was Powell who ensured that their joint endeavours enjoyed great parliamentary success. Without him and his mastery of the political craft the Unionists would not have secured the progress which made this period so significant in their history. This was Powell's finest hour in Ulster politics.

It was made possible by unique parliamentary circumstances. The October 1974 general election gave the Labour Party a slim overall majority which by-election losses and defecting MPs removed within two years. Thereafter, the balance of power lay unprecedentedly not with one minority party, but with three of them: the Liberals, the Scottish Nationalists and the Ulster Unionists – and with a scattering of other MPs unattached to them complicating matters even further. The manner in which they used (or did not use) their votes in parliamentary divisions made the Labour government, of which Jim Callaghan became leader in 1976, one of the most precarious in modern British history.

Under Powell and Molyneaux the Ulster Unionists became Callaghan's most reliable source of support among the minor parties. Expressing great satisfaction in March 1977 that 'he had done a deal with the Ulster Unionists,' Callaghan said he 'could

---

<sup>†</sup> Ibid.

talk to the Ulster Unionists: they were serious men. He found it difficult to talk to the Liberals. [David] Steel was very adolescent.' He took to the Unionists at once 'because they were his kind of straight, tough old-fashioned conservative people'.<sup>†</sup> In a remarkable political realignment a Party which for nearly a century had acted at Westminster as an appendage to the Tories moved into an alliance with Labour. It was a bold assertion of political independence for which Powell was almost entirely responsible. He alone saw the inestimable value of working with the Party that had for so long supported Irish unity. It too would change its ways. At a secret meeting with Harold Wilson in November 1974 shortly after his election for South Down, Powell confided his view that the 'pacification' of Ulster under a Labour government would bring 'a more secure result' than a settlement reached under the Tories.<sup>‡</sup> Having tasted political freedom, the Ulster Unionists at Westminster were never subsequently tempted to return to their old relationship with the Tories, who had taken them for granted for so long. Powell taught them to decide where their interests lay – and to act accordingly.

Ulster Unionist support for Callaghan was provided through a judicious combination of votes for the government on crucial economic issues, like taxation and public spending, and abstentions on key confidence motions, through which the Conservative Party, under its new leader, Margaret Thatcher, sought to bring down the government and force a general election. Through such adroit tactics, Powell at last overcame Westminster's reluctance to give serious attention to the one policy which in his view (as he had made plain for years) could restore peace and stability: the full integration of the province into the constitutional and political arrangements by which the rest of the nation was governed.

He forced integration on to the political agenda. This was the great prize that he secured from the Unionist alliance with Callaghan. The terms of the alliance were settled at a meeting at 10 Downing Street on 21 March 1977. Callaghan's senior policy adviser, Bernard Donoughue, recorded the event in his diary:

<sup>†</sup> Bernard Donoughue, *Downing Street Diary: With James Callaghan in No. 10* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p. 168.

<sup>‡</sup> Heffer, *Like the Roman*, p. 743.

At 2.30 the PM saw the Ulster Unionists who were represented by Molyneux and Enoch Powell (looking as always like a prosperous barrister) and it went very well. They agreed to support the government *until the end of this Parliament* provided we put Ulster representation at Westminster to a Speaker's Conference and 'consider' giving a new tier of local government to Ulster. On this basis they could offer six abstentions on Wednesday [when a crucial confidence motion was to be debated] and afterwards.<sup>†</sup>

Four years earlier in September 1973 Powell had demanded vainly from the Heath government 'full representation, equal representation, exclusive and sovereign representation – one nation, one parliament'. Now under Callaghan's Labour government he was able to attain his objective. The Speaker's Conference, established by the government, readily accepted Powell's case for full representation. Northern Ireland gained five additional seats, increasing the total number of its MPs from twelve to seventeen, under legislation passed in early 1979. This was Powell's greatest achievement for Ulster.

He was no less determined to secure acceptance of his second principal demand: the creation of a system of local government on the model that existed elsewhere in the country. Callaghan agreed in March 1977 to consider the issue. Having considered it, he showed no willingness to take action. Molyneux and Powell did what an effective and powerful minority party in highly advantageous parliamentary circumstances should do: they took their demands to the government's main opponent, the Conservative Party. Initially the Tories were far from pleased to hear from them. Thatcher was furious that the Ulster Unionists, once the Tories' most loyal ally, had agreed a pact with Callaghan that blocked her path to power. The imperative need to try and end that pact, however, swiftly overcame her distaste for negotiations with the Unionists, though not her fury at their support for Callaghan.

Powell played no direct part in the discussions that followed. He did not want to exchange views with Thatcher, of whom he had a low opinion before 1979, and she expressed no wish to see him. The secret negotiations were handled with consummate skill by

---

<sup>†</sup> Donoghue, *Downing Street Diary*, p. 167.

Molyneaux, who loved conspiratorial activity. He was charmed by Thatcher both then and during her premiership, relishing even the shortest of conversations with her: 'I had a great wee chat with Margaret as we walked back from the Cenotaph,' he would say. Molyneaux also got on well with Airey Neave, who had asked for, and been given, responsibility for Northern Ireland in the shadow Cabinet which Thatcher formed after Neave had masterminded her election as Conservative leader in 1975. Neave, a war hero who always cultivated close contacts in the intelligence services, shared Molyneaux's taste for the cloak and dagger.

Their discussions prospered. In the spring of 1978 Neave publicly repudiated the principle of power-sharing as it had operated in 1973-4, and committed the Conservative Party to put all the principal local government services, such as education, health and social services, under the control of one or more elected councils in the province. Thatcher endorsed the new policy on a visit to Northern Ireland in June 1978. Powell seemed to have achieved his second main objective. Devolution would not return. The scene was set for the severance of the Unionists' ties with Callaghan as soon as the legislation to provide for Ulster's extra parliamentary seats had passed (though when the moment came in March 1979, Powell argued strongly that the Unionists should dally a little longer with Callaghan in the (unlikely) hope of getting a gas pipeline linking the province to Britain, but Molyneaux overruled him).

The Tory local government plans, which I helped to devise as Neave's political adviser, were highly controversial. Neave was determined that they should be effectively implemented. He chose as his chief lieutenant Ian Gow, who subsequently made his name as Thatcher's brilliant PPS. Neave constantly told me of his regard for the then rising Tory backbencher, praising his eloquence, vigour and total commitment to the cause of carrying forward Northern Ireland's integration with the rest of the country. Neave's protégé, who was also an ardent Powellite, was earmarked for appointment as minister of state at the Northern Ireland Office under Neave as Secretary of State in a new Conservative government. They would be joined by John Biggs-Davison, a long-standing expert on Ulster who was equally committed to the new policy, and others of like mind. On them now rested Powell's hopes of advancing his cause.



The Tory plans to strengthen the Union had no friends among the Whitehall officials who administered Northern Ireland's affairs. There were sceptics within the Conservative Party itself. Republicans in Ulster had alerted their supporters in Dublin and Washington, who deluged Neave with endless complaints about his policy. He and his group of close colleagues knew they would need resolution, fortitude and a lot of luck if the Conservative Party won power.

It won power in 1979, without Neave. His murder on the eve of the general election campaign changed the course of Conservative Northern Ireland policy. The Heathite principles that Powell detested – power-sharing and all-Ireland institutions – resumed their sway, and the Ulster Unionists, facing a comfortable Tory majority at Westminster, lacked the power to frustrate them.

They appealed to the one person who could rescue their hopes: Margaret Thatcher. At times during the years ahead Powell and Molyneux convinced themselves that she would eventually insist that a resolute Unionist policy must be followed. No one (not even Powell) felt more strongly than she did that Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom. But she turned aside from the intellectual challenge of thinking about how that principle might best be put into effect. She devolved policy – first to Neave and after 1979 to a succession of Northern Ireland ministers and officials cast mostly in the completely different mould fashioned in the Heath years.

It has been said that Powell should have directed all his energies to persuading her of the merits of his policy of integration. The opportunity was not missed because of Powell's failure to court her; it never existed. She always refused to devote time to examining and discussing in detail how Northern Ireland should be governed. Powell could not have secured her firm commitment to integration. Another great champion of the cause and ally of Powell, T. E. Utey, tried hard to do so, but she always changed the subject ('I could smack that girl's bottom,' the great Tory journalist said roguishly of the Iron Lady). As Prime Minister she sought policies that would diminish violence swiftly and reduce the often intense international pressure that she faced to ensure that the interests of the non-Unionist minority were fully safeguarded. Powellite integration offered no ready answers to these problems. On the contrary, it could be expected to increase instability in the short

term since it aroused widespread opposition beyond (and, to some extent, even within) the ranks of the Ulster Unionists. To succeed, Powellite integration required an absolute conviction that Ulster's future in the British nation could be secured in no other way. There was never any possibility that Thatcher would come to share Powell's conviction.

The Tories' *volte-face* over integration after 1979 intensified Powell's long-standing suspicion that the means might be found to remove Ulster from the British nation against its will. He became convinced that devious officials in Whitehall were working tirelessly to create a united Ireland, while Parliament was being lulled into believing that the wishes of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland would always be respected. Treacherous civil servants thrived above all in the Foreign Office, which he denounced memorably as 'a nest of vipers', and in the Northern Ireland Office, which had charge of all policy relating to the domestic affairs of the province. 'Successive secretaries of state and the Prime Minister herself', he said in Belfast in September 1982, 'had been and were the witting or unwitting executants, stage by stage, of a consistent and continuing process devised by officials, which was designed to result in an all-Ireland state embracing Ulster ... concealing from Parliament and the public the true nature of the policies on which they are engaged.'

He adduced two pieces of evidence in support of his allegations. The first was a printed briefing note which I had circulated to Conservative candidates during the 1979 election campaign. It stated that 'the next Government will come under considerable pressure to launch a new, high-powered initiative on Northern Ireland, with the object of establishing another "power-sharing" government in the Province, which could pave the way for a federal constitution linking Ulster to the Irish Republic.' These 'remarkable' words, Powell claimed in October 1983, foretold with uncanny accuracy what was to come. But the note actually repudiated that view of the future. It said that Conservatives would not bow to the pressure for progress towards Irish unity, and concluded by quoting the 1979 manifesto pledge 'to establish one or more regional councils'. Powell ignored these statements and so created an inaccurate impression of the note's character and purpose. He became deeply attached to his

misinterpretation. (He may not have seen the full text of the note. Its two paragraphs appeared on separate pages, and it is possible that only the first of them reached him in photocopied form.)

The second document used by Powell to bear out his claims was altogether more significant. It contained an account of two interviews given in 1981 to Geoffrey Sloan, a research student at Keele University, by a knowledgeable, self-confident youngish civil servant at the Northern Ireland Office, Clive Abbott, whom I knew quite well. The document was written by Sloan; Abbott's version of what passed between them never emerged. Sloan's account seemed to provide ample confirmation that a plot was afoot to remove Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom. His document quoted Abbott as saying that the Neave plan for greater integration 'was just not on ... We couldn't break certain undertakings we have given to the Irish government over the constitutional future of Northern Ireland.' Eventually, he predicted, an independent 'confederal Ireland' linking North and South would emerge in which 'Protestant rights would be guaranteed ... A defence agreement would also be made,' bringing the new state into NATO to the great satisfaction of the United States, which had long wanted such a development. Striking a characteristic note of high drama, Powell disclosed the existence of the document and gave an indication of its sensational contents during a Commons debate on legislation to establish a new Northern Ireland assembly, to which he was totally opposed, in 1982.

The government managed to brush these serious allegations aside. Sloan's plausibility was damaged when it emerged that this diligent academic enquirer was also an habitué of the Ulster Unionists' Westminster offices. His document was found to contain factual errors (though this did not impede his career, which has taken him to a post at Reading University and the publication of a study of the geopolitics of Anglo-Irish relations, which omits all reference to these events). The then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robert (now Lord) Armstrong, was called upon to investigate Powell's claims. His report, written after what Powell regarded as the most perfunctory enquiries, largely exonerated the incautious Northern Ireland civil servant. Yet, years later, Whitehall still remains extremely sensitive about this extraordinary episode. An attempt to elicit the truth in 2004 found that 'serving and retired senior civil servants are

edgy about the Sloan–Abbott correspondence, refusing either to talk about it, or claiming that they cannot remember the details.<sup>†</sup> The full extent to which Abbott’s interviews with Sloan reflected official thinking will become clear only when all the relevant confidential government records for this period have been released.

This still unresolved controversy dominated Powell’s final years as Ulster’s great Unionist champion at Westminster. He quoted repeatedly from Sloan’s document and from my 1979 briefing note. In his view they showed conclusively that Thatcher’s government looked favourably on Ulster’s enemies. Ever greater stress was placed on the unwavering, malign influence exerted by the United States, which, he said at Epsom in October 1982, felt entitled ‘to manipulate the internal affairs of the United Kingdom with a view to bringing the island of Ireland within the ambit of the American alliance’, overcoming the Irish Republic’s commitment to neutrality by presenting it with the territory of Ulster. ‘The Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign Office, with American encouragement and connivance, worked unceasingly’ to secure their objective, he maintained in a speech at Broughshane, County Antrim, in May 1983.

Two years later in November 1985 the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed by Margaret Thatcher at Hillsborough, County Down. It gave the Irish Republic a permanent right to express views on some of the main areas of Northern Ireland policy, including the law and the administration of justice. Powell regarded it as a spectacular victory for those engaged in the conspiracy against Ulster. ‘This has been done’, he said in the Commons, ‘because the United States insisted that it should be done.’

Powell came to believe that there were no lengths to which America would not go to achieve its ends. In January 1984 he asserted that the CIA had been responsible for killing the two most important victims of terrorism: Airey Neave, whose support for integration would have thwarted American plans, and Lord Mountbatten, who opposed their nuclear strategy (though two years later, in October 1986, he was to attribute Neave’s murder to

---

† Dean Godson, *Himself Alone: David Trimble and the Ordeal of Unionism* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. 73–4.

'MI6 and their friends').<sup>†</sup> Speaking at Coleraine in November 1985, he denounced 'the course of treachery, punctuated by the murders of Neave and Mountbatten, along which the British government's civil service, in collusion with those of the United States and the Irish Republic, have propelled it from stage to stage to the capitulation at Hillsborough'.

Ulster Unionists had every reason to feel profound gloom in the aftermath of these events. 'It is a fearful predicament', he said at Newcastle, County Down, in February 1987 in one of his last speeches as an Ulster MP, 'when our own country is our enemy and in league against us with the most powerful and unscrupulous nation on the face of the earth.' But, he went on, as he surveyed the period of his life in which Ulster had played so great a part, he was still not without hope that the policy which he had espoused since the 1970s would eventually triumph:

What the terms are I have defined to you before, and I am not afraid to repeat the definition now. They are the Union, the whole Union and nothing but the Union – that is to say, the same rights, civil and political, individual and collective, for all in Northern Ireland, irrespective of politics or religion, as they would possess in any other part of the United Kingdom: British rights for British citizens, under British law made by the British Parliament and administered by British courts. With that programme you are safe.

That was Powell's Ulster creed, from which he never departed – and it remains always his advice to the people he loved so well.

Enoch Powell set out to overturn the assumptions on which British policy towards Ulster rested from the early 1970s onwards. Successive governments insisted, after the removal of Stormont, that the province could be governed successfully only on the basis of power-sharing devolution and a close relationship with the Irish Republic even though it claimed sovereignty over Northern Ireland. This became the firm, unyielding Westminster orthodoxy, the much-vaunted bipartisan approach to Ulster which all

---

<sup>†</sup> Heffer, *Like the Roman*, p. 906.

politicians were expected to embrace. Powell rejected it completely. He never deviated from the view that Ulster would enjoy peace and prosperity only if its affairs were settled entirely by the parliament of the nation of which it was part. He gave that alternative policy the name by which it became universally known – integration.

Powell succeeded in halting the onward march of the Westminster orthodoxy in the late 1970s under a minority Labour government. He had the great satisfaction of securing what he described as Ulster's full parliamentary integration through the increase in its representation from twelve seats to seventeen in 1979. If Margaret Thatcher had won only a small majority in 1979 – or been denied an overall majority – Powell might well have changed the course of Ulster's history by securing further integrationist measures.

Through his success in the late 1970s Powell gave fresh heart to the demoralised Unionist people of Ulster, who had been mocked and reviled since the onset of the province's crisis in 1968. He undoubtedly stabilised Unionism at a dangerous moment in its history. A paramilitary force, some 40,000 strong, had come into existence in the early 1970s prepared to defend the interests that Unionist politicians seemed unable to protect. The formidable partnership between Powell and Jim Molyneux at Westminster restored Unionist faith in constitutional politics. 'The most loyal and least understood' subjects of Her Majesty felt more secure, thanks to them.

The 1980s brought Powell little except setbacks and reverses. He was no longer able to challenge the entrenched Westminster orthodoxy successfully. He looked to Thatcher to keep the pretensions of the Dublin government in check. She failed him, signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. That was the nadir of his career in Ulster politics. He was criticised by his colleagues for misreading all the signs, insisting until the last that Thatcher, whom he had come to admire, would not let him down. His influence waned. He did himself no good by dwelling at great length on conspiracy theories which gave bitter expression to his deep-seated anti-Americanism.

Northern Ireland today is governed by an extraordinary ramshackle coalition of opposites which Powell would never have expected to survive for more than a few weeks. It was made possible by his old political foe, Ian Paisley, whom he once described 'as

the most resourceful, inveterate and powerful enemy of the Union' which he professed to support. But the end of the Union is not firmly in sight. Rather Ulster's latest political dispensation appears to indicate that within the Union a *modus vivendi* has been reached between the two starkly opposed nationhoods that exist on Ulster's narrow ground. In 1968 Powell warned that the people of Ulster 'cannot forever like the Laodiceans halt between two opinions'. It seems after all that they can, at least for now if not for ever.

### **Note on sources and acknowledgements**

Powell's speeches have provided the principal source material used here – as published in two collected editions, *Still to Decide* (1972) and *A Nation or No Nation? Six Years in British Politics* (1978) for the period before 1979, and as preserved in the Powell Archive for subsequent years. I have drawn extensively on Simon Heffer's monumental biography and on other books about Powell. My own substantial records on Ulster, including a large file on Powell, were destroyed after I left the Conservative Research Department in 1997. I have relied chiefly on memory for the accounts of events in which I was personally involved. I have learnt much from my conversations over the years with Frank Millar, a leading commentator and writer on Ulster affairs. Grateful thanks are due to David Clarke Shiels of Peterhouse, Cambridge for kindly allowing the relevant sections of his forthcoming Ph.D. thesis on Powell to be consulted.