

The Tillsonburg News

Viewpoints

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Ireland - A tragic history

North Americans strongly condemn the violence that frequently raises its ugly spectre in Northern Ireland. The blame is generally placed on the Irish Republican Army for trying to impose its will on the Protestant majority and that democratic rights must be upheld. Violence must be condemned, and it comes in many forms, but in respect to Northern Ireland it does not help to clarify the issues, but only to obscure them. Superficially the argument to uphold democratic rights makes sense, but it ignores the decades of denial of democratic rights and the tragic history that England has inflicted upon the Irish people. The current problems that exist are the result of that tragic history and are the legacy of oppression.

Democracy can and has been subverted by Britain in Ireland. For over a hundred years it was perfectly "democratic" for the Irish majority in Ireland to be a powerless "minority" in the Parliament of Great Britain. In fact Catholics were not granted democratic rights until 1829 with the passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act. At this same time, however, the property qualification was raised, and in effect prevented the largely poor Catholic population from participating in the "democratic" process. Today, however, it is now "democratic" to suggest that a "majority" in a small region has the right to define its own boundaries and subvert traditional and natural boundaries in the name of political expediency. This is properly called gerrymandering and is a corruption of the democratic process.

If democratic rights had been upheld, Britain never would have invaded Ireland. If democratic rights would have existed for the Irish, Ireland would have been both free and united many years ago. For example, in the 1910 Election over 80 per cent of Ireland's elected representatives supported Irish Home Rule, including a majority from the province of Ulster. In the 1918 Election over 70 per cent of Irish voters supported Sinn Fein which called for the establishment of an Irish Republic and refused to recognize the authority of the British Parliament (as opposed to 20 per cent that supported continued Union with Britain and 10 per cent who favored Irish Home Rule).

Ireland consisted of 32 counties, 28 of which had Irish Catholic majorities, only four did not, and in those cases large minorities of Irish Catholics existed. Ulster consisted of nine counties, five of which had Irish Catholic majorities. Irish Nationalist majorities existed both in Ireland and in Ulster province. Under the 1921 Partition Agreement even county majorities were not respected.

England had promised Home Rule for Ireland in 1910 but used the excuse of the First World War to continue to deny Ireland her National rights. This led to the formation of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and resulted in the 1916 Easter Rising. After a six-year war England finally conceded to Ireland its freedom, but not in the six counties where Unionists held a slim majority overall and a real majority in only four counties as two had Irish Catholic and Nationalist majorities. These six were separated from the other 26 counties that made up Ireland and the three counties that properly belonged to Ulster. By themselves the four Unionist counties were not considered viable as a separate political entity. The Unionists, who were

overwhelmingly Protestant, were bitterly opposed to being part of a United Ireland with a Catholic majority.

Ulster originally had been the strongest centre of Irish National resistance and Britain savagely suppressed the population, executed and deported thousands and in the late 1890's installed a "Protestant Garrison" population to control and exploit the original inhabitants, and it is this system that continues to this very day.

Despite having a much higher birth rate, Catholics were still a minority because many were driven away due to racial and religious discrimination that denied them any economic opportunity. This policy was deliberate, for, if natural demographic trends were allowed to continue, an Irish Catholic majority would eventually exist. Therefore a systematic policy of discrimination "encouraged" Irish Catholic emigration and thereby maintained a Protestant majority in Northern Ireland.

It was this economic inequality and accompanying political discrimination (a property qualification was used to exclude a majority of Catholic voters) which led to the Catholic Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's and a Protestant backlash that included assassination of Catholics. These

Death Squads led to both a rejuvenation of the IRA and in 1969 the intervention of the British Army to protect the Catholic minority. Britain also abolished the Ulster Stormont Government because it discriminated against Catholics and was anything but democratic. However, in a short time a transformation occurred and the Protestant community viewed the British soldiers as a support for the status quo and the Army began to treat the Catholic community as the "Enemy."

As long as discrimination continues, the massive disparities in economic status not redressed, this crisis will continue to fester. The strife in Ireland is the result of subverting democracy and the denial of democratic and human rights. Tensions only exist in the North and discrimination against the Protestant minority in Southern Ireland is totally absent. While some legislation exists that is of a religious nature, the Irish Parliament has recently removed a portion of it and this trend will continue and eliminate an obstacle to reunification. It will be only after democratic rights are recognized and minority rights protected that peace will finally come to Ireland.

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