

### **A very curious measure: the Disqualifications Bill**

The main effect of the Disqualifications Bill is to amend existing legislation to allow members of the Irish legislature to sit in the House of Commons. Why should a member of the Irish legislature wish to sit in the House of Commons? Conversely, why should a British constituency wish to elect as its representative in the Westminster Parliament a member of the Irish legislature?

Some newspapers have suggested that this is a complex plot to further the political career of Mr Gerry Adams. Such a quaint notion was never hinted at by the Government spokespersons on the Bill. We know what Mr Adams, elected to Westminster in the last general election, thinks about taking the oath of allegiance which is a necessary prelude to assuming his seat. He refuses to do it, thus disenfranchising every one of his constituents in West Belfast. Would not Mr Blair be better engaged in presenting a Bill which dealt with that anomaly rather than creating a fresh one?

In a mere two days (January 24 and 25) the Bill was put through all its stages in the House of Commons, a haste usually reserved for dealing with dramatic emergencies. Douglas Hogg for the Conservatives complained that the junior minister deputed by Mr Blair to rush it through had failed to give the motive behind the Bill. His questions carried a note of peevish incredulity. Why are we being asked to address this matter now? Where does the pressure come from? Why are we being asked to do it?

Answer came there none, though the junior minister did mention some factors which, he said, were *not* the reasons behind the measure. It was not part of the Good Friday agreement. There was no question of it being the means to achieving Irish unification by the back door; that was not its objective, nor would it be its consequence. The nearest the minister came to anything positive was the following.

“We have now, as a result of the changes that have taken place and the relationship that has developed over recent years, been able to put behind us, to some extent, some of the difficulties that had arisen between the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom. It is time to build a sounder basis to our institutional relationships and to provide a basis on which we can proceed, as two islands just off the mainland of Europe, with many common links, historical and otherwise, between the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic - a basis for ensuring that those closer links are given some institutional background. I believe that that explains this fairly modest Bill, and I hope that honourable Members will find it satisfactory.” Honourable Members did not find it satisfactory.

**Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot):** The Minister seeks to draw a parallel between the Republic of Ireland and Commonwealth countries, but Commonwealth countries have Her Majesty the Queen as their head of state. An honourable Member in this House is required to take the Oath of Allegiance. The Bill covers people who, being representatives of foreign countries, cannot take the Oath of Allegiance to the Queen. Moreover, the south of Ireland is a republic. Is not the Bill therefore creating a huge anomaly?

**Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone):** Since [the minister] predicates his argument on the relationship between the Irish Government and this Government, I wonder whether he has had any representations from the Fianna Fail party, Fine Gael, the Irish Labour party or the Democratic Left, expressing an ambition to have a dual mandate? Or is this

measure purely a concession to be enamelled on the side of the Good Friday agreement and to facilitate only and exclusively Sinn Fein-IRA?

**Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire):** There are only two sovereign institutions in these islands - the Parliament here and the Parliament in Dublin. The others are subordinate to one of those sovereign Parliaments. By changing that rule, the hon. Gentleman is allowing people to join two different sovereign Parliaments with two different aims in mind, so there is a major conflict of loyalty.

The minister failed to deal with any of that. What he said in conclusion was: "Over many years, we have developed close working relationships with the Irish Government, but with agreement now in force between us on constitutional issues, the way is clear for the formalisation of that relationship. To some extent, the Bill provides some basis for that." To some extent, the Commons debate provides some basis for saying this is just another British Government fudge on Ireland.

As I write (February 4), devolution in Northern Ireland may be about to be shipwrecked on the rock of IRA intransigence over the decommissioning of their weapons. Whether the Disqualifications Bill will also be lost in that shipwreck remains to be seen.

**Francis Bennion**

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