

PRIORITY FOR IRELAND

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(By *ERSKINE CHILDERS*.)

Would that Irish affairs were foreign affairs!

What I wish to suggest in this journal is that until the mind and conscience of the British people can admit the conception of an independent Ireland, Great Britain cannot be a force for good in international matters. If it be objected that she now is, relatively, a force for good, I venture to contest the point. Let us put aside her undisputed primacy in the conquest and exploitation of the inferior races—the root cause of all wars—and in the tortuous statecraft which pursues this aim under cover of an unselfish solicitude for human freedom. Ireland is another matter. It is a white nation, and the fate of the colored nations depends upon that of the white. Humanity is stumbling forward: out of the chaos and misery of the war there emerges one good result—accidental and precarious, but good—the emancipation of the white subject nations, with one conspicuous exception, Ireland. In maintaining that exception, with a greater display of brute force than ever, Great Britain deliberately throws her vast strength and influence into the scale of reaction, at a time too when the temptation to do wrong has disappeared, when her power to do right is absolute, and the effect of doing right would be incalculable. She prefers to set an example corrupting alike the new nations and old empires. She is, I submit, pre-eminently a force for evil.

It is useless to challenge Imperialists in this matter. They are for the time being too strong, and, now that they have dropped the cant of high war-motives, too honestly militarist. My challenge is to the idealists, to the men who have labored against heavy odds and at heavy sacrifice to stem the torrent of cant and hatred, purify war-aims, and revolutionise international relations. It is surely only in the sardonic jargon of the militarists that Ireland is "a domestic question." In such domestic questions all wars originate or end. Ireland is a nation. Her repression by military force is a war, and I suggest that those who seek in all sincerity to replace war by international guarantees should endeavor to make the right of self-determination for Ireland the first international questions.

Why do they shrink from doing so? Why does even the Labor Party, after pronouncing for Irish self-determination at Amsterdam, disclaim even the rudiments of an Irish policy at home? Why will earnest men go to the stake for a Polish Poland, a German Germany, a Czecho-Slovakian Czecho-Slovakia, and not lift a finger for an Irish Ireland? Let us analyse quietly. In the first place, no doubt, the old formula "Home Rule" has still a strong effect on the English mind—as it had on the Austrian mind. But can it be revitalised? Is it not deservedly obsolete? It seems impossible to deny that the independence movement in Ireland is not merely the legitimate but the inevitable result of fifty years of sullenly thwarted constitutional effort, culminating in the series of blunders, insults, and betrayals perpetrated by the British Government from 1914 onwards. Even if it were not so, the idea of Home Rule, or limited autonomy, for a white subject nation is discredited everywhere. No example of it, in fact, exists. Morally it has rested on distrust and suspicion. Constitutionally, it has owed what vitality it possessed to a false analogy with the status of the self-governing colonies. A federation arises centripetally from the voluntary union of hitherto sovereign States, or of States at any rate completely independent of one another, and approximately equal to one another in size and resources. No such conditions exist in the case of Ireland and Great Britain, and attempts to base schemes on the fiction that they do exist are doomed in the future, as in the past, to sterility. The Dominion status, on the other hand, derives centrifugally from the complete separation of Parliaments and the absence of all colonial representation at Westminster, proceeding inevitably from the basic arrangement to complete or disguised independence. Even the loosest application of the democratic theory demands some organic electoral link between controller and controlled. Where there is none, control lapses.

How hard a false analogy can die, nevertheless, is shown by the few proposals for "Dominion Home Rule" for Ireland. This is a hybrid scheme, departing from the Dominion model in a vital particular, the "strategic unity" of the United Kingdom, in plain language the continued military control of Ireland by Great Britain, whereas the strategic independence of the Dominions—their unfettered control of their own forces and therefore, in the last resort, of their own policy—is secured not merely by unwritten convention but by the written agreements

of 1911, recognising the right of Canada and Australia to determine whether or not to place their naval forces at the disposal of the Empire in time of war. These agreements were in effect treaties with foreign Powers, and the virtual, if not the titular independence of the Dominions dates from their signature.

Sincerely and generously meant, "Dominion Home Rule" is based on a confusion of thought due to the ineradicable reluctance to give Ireland the substance as well as the appearance of freedom. The time is passed, I fear, for these evasive compromises. They are not even practical politics, because, though Ireland might acquiesce without abandoning her larger aim, they become indefensible under British criticism, as long as their advocates refuse to appeal to a first principle of right like self-determination, but must expand their energy in endeavoring to prove that it is "safe" to do what is partly right. They leave Ireland cold and England unmoved.

I pass to the next obstacle—North-East Ulster—with a curious sense of grappling with an elusive pretext, behind which lurks another and a far more formidable enemy. The feeling comes, I suppose, from seeing so many earnest Englishmen altruistically absorbed in the racial complexities of Eastern Europe and willing there to give recognition to new nations of composite construction, with arbitrary land frontiers and diversities of race, language, and national tradition, and yet indifferent to the fact that in Ireland, which is their own urgent responsibility, they have under their eyes the simplest of national problems; an island, with a frontier beyond controversy, and an uninterrupted historical identity; a nation which, with a 75 per cent. nationalist majority, comes nearer unanimity than any of those of Eastern Europe, as near unanimity indeed as any conquered and colonised country can expect to come; a nation which surely has the right, if any nation ever had it, to claim that the descendants of colonists "planted" on it by external military force should accept, after liberation, as before it, the citizenship, laws, and government of their adopted country.

Again, I am not challenging Imperialists, but only those who, while professing to believe in the principle of self-determination, say that they hesitate on Ulster's account to apply it to Ireland as a whole. To these I propose two tests. Supposing first that the argument for a united Ireland fails to convince them, will they concede self-determination to each of two Irelands and respect the decision of the greater, should it be even for independence? I think not. Faced with a grotesque practical outcome of their policy, they would revert to a very limited form of Home Rule, with Ulster excluded, justifying the limitations by arguments which a moment before they had rejected in favor of the view that Ireland is a nation. This is the line Mr. Asquith took when he surrendered to the partitionists in 1914. The "reserved services," he blandly remarked, under the original unitary Bill would greatly simplify partition. Of course they would.

Supposing, on the other hand, that the case for a united Ireland is proved, would that really turn the scale with those whom I am addressing? Would they then declare unreservedly for self-determination for the Irish people? A few, perhaps. But observation seems to show that when we get down to the bedrock of the controversy, even in this era of revolution when new republics are legion, and a League to protect them, and to protect the racial minorities within them, is actually in existence, the English idealists themselves join hands with the old school of the immutable principle that Great Britain cannot tolerate a republic on her flank. The old school candidly and publicly says why; the idealists are uncomfortably silent. But the reason is the same. Great Britain's "safety," in other words, her military necessities, require a subject Ireland. Germany's argument with Belgium; Austria's with Serbia. Ordinary nations must submit to the indignity and peril of having independent neighbors; but the chosen people—no; for them not even an island neighbor, however weak and isolated. Although obvious dictates of prudence have prevented Great Britain, herself an island Power, relying for expansion mainly on naval strength, from extending this doctrine of proximity to the patient and systematic conquest of Europe, its slow but inexorable application to the continents of Asia and Africa, and to the ocean routes and strategic points which connect them with Europe, is manifest from a glance at the post-war map. Observe what the "safety" of India has come to involve in the slow acquisition by war of physically contiguous countries, buttressed by vast outlying suzerainties and "spheres," between Siam on the east and the Tripoli border on the west, with the great branch chains radiating from Egypt to the Cape and Nigeria.

Ireland takes her natural place in this scheme of illimitable and insatiable egotism. She is regarded as, by divine right, the strategic outwork of Great Britain and her tragic history is the outcome of that inhuman view.