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Memoirs of a Statesman

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Chapter 21: Reflections

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The British establishment is to blame for its wilful ignorance about Irish affairs, in spite of the central role Britain has played, and will continue to play, in them. Distaste has too often been disguised under the old cliché. 'The English can never really understand the Irish,' which is in any case totally untrue. They are to blame for combining this attitude in what might be thought a 'typically Irish' fashion, with easy assumptions of superior knowledge about what ought to be done after only the briefest acquaintance with the Irish problem. They are to blame for their inconsistent policies during a terrorist campaign in which consistency was vital, and for their persistent ambiguity about their ultimate intentions. Ambiguity has fed insecurity, which in turn has fed violence.

I believe the suspension of the Stormont Parliament to have been a fundamental error in the handling of the Northern Ireland situation. One cannot simply sweep away at the stroke of a pen a system of government which has existed for over half a century without causing very deep political upheaval, particularly if this is done in the middle of a savage terrorist campaign. Given consistent backing Stormont could have evolved a system of community government without arousing the deep fears among Unionists and the quite fantastic hopes among Nationalists that Britain was on the verge of adopting a policy of 'uniting Ireland'. Political and social systems are living organisms which cannot be changed simply by adopting constitutional blueprints and panaceas. They need tending and developing within a stable framework.

Unionists are to blame for their lack of generosity when it lay in their power to be generous, for being frightened and negative in their politics when a positive approach could have tapped the potential of the whole Ulster community. We too easily allowed sectarian traditions to hem us in and dictate what was politically possible. We failed to make the effort to understand the aspirations and the frustrations of the Nationalist community, and the need to make them feel involved in the running of the State and confident of receiving their share of its benefits. We allowed provincialism and small-mindedness to go unchallenged for too long, so that people became almost incapable of looking ahead when it was vital that they should do so.

In the pages of this book I have tried to relate as accurately as memory and inadequate records will allow my role in the post-war political history of Northern Ireland. I have not tried to reinterpret everything I did in the light of the views I now hold. It has seemed more valuable to set out my reasoning at the time for taking particular actions, whether or not I would now go along with that reasoning. We are all politicians particularly children of our time. My account of events is by no means comprehensive: it omits aspects of Ulster politics which other people are better qualified to explain.

Looking back on events I feel now that in my early political career I did not question sufficiently the traditional religious divisions in Ulster affairs. I and my colleagues accepted far too readily the advice of those who said 'Don't stir things up'. We knew there were many things wrong with our society, but we had a deep sense of the need to give our relatively young state a period of stability which would allow the evolution of more ideal conditions. We made a pragmatic assessment of the political limitations on us and got on with the job of trying to govern as well as possible. If I had had a more rebellious youth I might have questioned the old dogmas more readily, but the Unionist politicians I met through family and friends seemed a civilized group of men from whom I was inheriting an honourable tradition.

I regret now that when Unionists of vision, such as Brian Maginnes M P, and Sir Clarence Graham tried to stimulate new thinking and broaden the appeal of Unionism in the 1950s and early 1960s I did not come out in support of them. I did not think they were achieving anything useful and I preferred then, as I have always done, to aim for the possible. But we should have spent more time watering the roots of tolerance. We did not take the initiative in reforming our society until events forced change on us. Politically, though not industrially, the 1960s were a wasted decade for the Ulster Unionist Party. I allowed myself to become too compartmentalized at the Ministry of Commerce and did not pay enough attention to the wider political perspective. Whether I could have done any better had I become Premier in 1963, or even in 1969, I do not know. But by 1971 we were reacting to events rather than controlling them and one was always conscious of running very fast merely to make up lost ground.

It is hard to evaluate one's own political career, with its weaknesses and strengths, its sins of omission and commission. Ulster politics is a harsh school and one has to be prepared to take a lot of hard knocks. That has never worried me greatly. In fact one of the things I enjoy about politics is a good hot political meeting where quick thinking and giving as good as you get can carry the day. I do not think I bore any grudges against opponents, and when I attacked them it was for what they did rather than who they were. Issues are always more important than personalities.

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baron_Faulkner_of_Downpatrick