

# WOULD THE 'HUNGARIAN POLICY' WORK?

By Thomas Kettle.

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For ten years we have had no political movement in Ireland, no movement, that is to say, that drew its energy from the idea of political autonomy. The imagination of a people is tidal and periodic; and the debacle of '93 was succeeded, as by a natural law, by the dreariness of retreating waves. Home Rule was not, of course, abandoned. It held its ground in resolutions, but during the whole decade down to this actual moment it has been no more than an ineffectual 'aspiration.' The Parliamentary Party has kept pecking away most patiently at agrarian questions, fiscal questions, educational questions, but the question of political autonomy, as such, it has been compelled through mere lack of motive-power to adjourn.

The Extreme Right of Nationalism, the Separatists, find themselves for other reasons in the same case. Through their journal, the *United Irishman*, and through their various societies, they have been doing excellent work in promoting language, literature, and industries, and still more excellent work in keeping alive the idea of absolute independence. But *political* policy – if I may use such a combination – they have none, or, at, at least, had none till the publication of the articles on Hungary, gathered together in the brilliant pamphlet before us.<sup>1</sup> A policy is something that we can begin to put in force at once; and, as things stand, the doctrine of physical force is no more than a piece of *blague*, and not very amusing *blague* at that. In the early days of the paper, the pre-Mayo-election days, there were indications of wider views, and a more acute sense of the concrete. There was hinted a readiness to treat the so-called 'Constitutionalists' with the same wise tolerance that Kossuth's party

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<sup>1</sup> *The Resurrection of Hungary; a parallel for Ireland*. Messrs. Duffy and Co., one penny.

exercised towards that great Constitutionalist, Deak. Nor does it seem wildly unreasonable that such relations should exist between two parties which are certainly going the same road if they are not ostensibly going the same length of it. But then came South Mayo! and another opportunity of showing that we have not mastered the great art of politics, the art of forgetting the stupidities of our friends.

For ten years, then, both sections of Nationalism have been, in relation to their central object, futile and fruitless; the one having a political ideal, but no policy; the other a policy indeed, and an indeterminate ideal, but insufficient enthusiasm and driving force to make it work. Such a condition of things is so unnatural that it cannot be permanent. A political revival and re-union there must be; a dissipation of that crude unbelief which has been mistaken by some for common-sense politics, and a fusion of all Nationalist groups, unless the country is to perish of its own ill-temper. This feeling is beginning to take captive a larger and larger number of people in Ireland. They want a movement that will march, that will justify enthusiasm, and their desire for it will soon be so great as to incapacitate them for quarrelling with those who are their natural allies. They want a movement that will knit together in a national synthesis the ideas re-discovered and re-vitalised in the last ten years; and if the 'Hungarian Policy,' the policy, that is, of withdrawal from Westminster, is capable of doing this, it certainly comes in its hour.

The pamphlet seems to me open to two criticisms. In the first place it is too well written. It reads like a fairy tale or, rather like an epic, spacious and rapid; and by his over-idealisation and dramatization the author has put himself in this difficulty that he cannot know how many of his fifteen thousand readers have bought the pamphlet for the policy and how many for the style. My second objection is that the writer hardly realises the magnitude of his suggestion, and does not develop it in sufficient detail to justify a prudent man either in accepting or in rejecting it. We are not told clearly enough what it is; the policy is, as the pamphlet itself says, only 'roughly indicated.' This is, perhaps, natural enough if the publication is regarded as merely the inauguration of a campaign in the course of which every aspect of the new policy will be expounded and discussed.

But the writer seems to regard it as something very much more, and shows extreme impatience with those who are unwilling forthwith to abandon the traditions of a century in favour of a new adventure, the details of which have not yet been put before them. I hope this will not be taken as merely captious criticism. It is conceived in a very different spirit; and unless the advocates of the 'Hungarian Policy' realise the vastness of their project, the need for exact designs, and the natural inertia of established methods, their campaign will produce nothing but anger and hard words.

Briefly and broadly the 'Hungarian Policy' is, in the words of Lord John Russell, in 1844, 'to wrest the power and functions of Government from the hands of the English.' It is proposed that we should withdraw our Parliamentary Party from Westminster, and associating them with other popular delegates, erect a National Assembly in Dublin. The functions of this body would be – first, to direct and unify the popular agitation (somewhat after the fashion of the Volunteer Convention); and secondly, and chiefly, to adopt public measures. To such pseudo-legislation, or rather, legislation carried in contempt of the pseudo-government at present established, vigour and fruitfulness would be given by the sheer weight of the national will. As administrative machinery, the pamphlet suggests the present network of County and District Councils; but I take it as part of the plan that this should be reinforced by a popular organization. Otherwise, what is to be done when the British Government suspends – as, of course, it all but certainly will suspend – the Local Government Act? On the whole question of how far these local bodies can be employed for such a purpose, within the limits of the statutes constituting them (for that is distinctly specified in the plan), I offer some very obvious criticism later in this article. But the idea includes even more than legislation and execution; it aims at a full-facultied State, and that means, of course, the erection of a judicial system. This the pamphlet provides in the shape of arbitration courts. To put the whole matter in a word. The author of 'The Resurrection of Hungary' says substantially: 'We desire political autonomy; we demand it as our right. I propose that we take it.'

It is a fascinating enterprise, this political architecture. Of course the comfortable and conservative part, the Sancho Panza in us all, rises in protest against it as merely a counsel of heroism, impossible to ordinary mortals. But if there is one thing certain in our present sorry condition, it is that a policy, to be of any service whatever, must be virile even to heroism. There has been going forward among us a cult of mean ideas; but we really must not be afraid of ideas because they happen to be great. It is no blemish of the 'Hungarian Policy' that it makes exceptional demands on us all; it is, on the contrary, its highest merit. The only question that can relevantly be asked is – Would the 'Hungarian Policy' work? Or is it merely a paper-policy, a harmful distraction?

I do not think that we have data enough at present to decide; for, up to the present, no one experienced in the actual conduct of agitation has spoken. Mr. Davitt has, indeed, expressed approval, but he did not enter into detail, and, in this connection, detail is everything. As yet, no one can honestly do more than take the project into his mind, and endeavour to think out its ramifications as lucidly as he can. What Davis wrote as one of the promoters of a similar proposal in 1844 is just as true to-day:

'We must not push it too quickly, for the country, so far as I can see, is not braced up to any emergency. *Ours is a tremendous responsibility*, politically and personally, and, *we must see where we are going.*'

One of the few things is that the parallel with Hungary does not hold without important qualifications. What above all else must decide a nation's policy is its fighting strength, and ours compared with that of Great Britain is simply not in the same plane with Hungary's compared with that of Austria. The area of Hungary is larger than that of Austria proper, and, of course, the efficiency of coercion is in inverse ratio to the field over which it is exercised. Hungary occupies a square on the Continental chess-board and profited by every complication, by every Magonta and Keoniggratz; but what of that kind have we to hope for, enveloped as we are by the naval predominance of England? Hungary is naturally wealthier than Austria, and when she began her 'constitutional' struggle in 1850 her

population, compared with that of Austria, must have been not less than three to five. Our population is one-eighth that of Great Britain, our capital resources approximately one-thirtieth. Further, the Imperial Parliaments which Hungary paralysed by abstention from 1860-7 were vague, experimental Parliaments, erected for the first time in an attempt to satisfy the demand throughout the whole empire for liberal institutions. The Parliament we have to confront is not precisely a novice, and it would be little hampered by internal divisions; for no one has so much to lose by the withdrawal of the Irish members from Westminster as the Radical and Labour section, which might otherwise support us. There are further points of difference at least as important. To move the mass of the people anywhere there is needed some living, concrete idea. Hungary had such in the Constitution of '48, wrested with the strong hand from Austria, and bloodily baptised in the streets and beside the doors of those who afterwards fought for its restoration. But is the Renunciation Act of 1783 as capable of inflaming enthusiasm? And, if there is one thing drubbed into us in the pamphlet it is the perfect internal unity of Hungary. And Ireland! I do not insist on this defect, because it is in our own power to remedy it. There is nothing in the nature of things to prevent our Separatists and 'Constitutionalists,' our *Nationalists* and *Nationists* – if I may invent a word – from co-operating as Kossuth co-operated with Szechenyi and Deak, as Davis with O'Connell. (There will, of course, always be Ulster, and Hungary had no Ulster. Into this notable difference the pamphlet does not enter. But it is precisely what has suggested to so many people that Bohemia is the better analogy. The Germans in Bohemia are two-fifths of the population, and control most of the wealth and offices, or at least did when the Czechs began their abstention. It was found in the course of a couple of years that the presence of the German element, the absence of unity, made it impossible to continue this policy. The Czechs then fell back on our tactics, went to Vienna, and have there been strikingly successful. Nor do I think that any responsible leader of theirs has proposed a return to the 'Hungarian Policy.')

If now we turn from the question of political fighting-weight to that of tactics we find a difference so cardinal as to vitiate in this

respect the whole parallel. What everybody interested in making agitation fruitful has long been seeking in Ireland is a direct, imperial tax. Were there such a tax which we could conscientiously withhold till we obtained justice, we should have a short and ready way to settle Irish questions. But none exists – the income tax being plainly unsuitable. Now it seems that Austria was not as cunning in her tyranny as England, and the Hungarians actually found a tax of this kind lying ready to hand. Says the author of the pamphlet (page 47): -

‘The County Councils were re-established. Their first act was to dismiss the Austrian officials... *their second to strike out the rule for supporting the Austrian Army*, their third to order the tax-collectors to collect no taxes unless levied by authority of the Hungarian Parliament.’

Need it be said that such proceedings by our County Councils would be quite impossible? The least of these three things would be beyond them, for they had not even by statute a free hand in the dismissal of officials bequeathed by the Grand Juries. As for control of fiscal matters, or power to deprive the British Army of its means of maintenance, no one is likely to find such faculties in the Local Government Statutes. Power the Councils undoubtedly have to ‘make monetary grants and levy rates for desirable purposes.’ Unfortunately this must be done at the exclusive expense of their own constituents, and in addition to, not in substitution for, Imperial taxes. Indeed, the pamphlet has introduced utterly mistaken ideas by its application to Hungary of the term ‘County Council.’ It is plain that the bodies in question were very much more in the nature of Provincial Diets.

In the discussion of the ‘Hungarian Policy,’ as adapted to Ireland, much stress is laid on legal questions. The writer insists on the illegality of the Act of Union – not its immorality, but its contravention of established law. He maintains that the relation between the Irish and English Parliaments was determined, as it would seem, for all time, by the Renunciation Act of 1783, which provided that ‘the right of Ireland to be governed by her own Kings, Lords, and Commons, shall never hereafter be questioned or questionable;’ and that the Act of Union was clearly *ultra vires*, and legally null and void. But surely he is wrong; if the Irish Parliament was a sovereign Parliament it was tied by no past Acts, but could

abrogate any of them. And if it did not possess this degree of power how can a Separatist call for its restoration? The Act of Union was not, of course, legal in the sense of being as provided by law, for no constitution provides for its own repeal. But neither was it in the narrow sense illegal. To put a concrete test-case. Suppose the Constitution of 1783 were restored, and at any future date it seemed for the national welfare to adopt the Republican form of government, would the author of the pamphlet consider the country tied to monarchy by the words quoted above? Surely not, and surely it is better to base our condemnation of the so-called Act of Union, and our claim to political independence, on broad moral grounds and not on mere constitutional controversies. The unsoundness of the writer's position is shown by his own inconsequences. He denounces the Parliamentary Party as breakers of the Constitution, because they attend at Westminster, but himself recommends the employment of Local Government machinery, created by this same Constitution-breaking Parliament at Westminster. And his strongest recommendation of the proposed Arbitration Courts – surely a mere encumbrance on the scheme – is that their decrees will 'have the force of law,' that is of the illegal law which he so vigorously repudiates. Of course, in both cases, practical necessity is master of the situation; and neither line of action any more ratifies the present system of government than the acceptance of food by a captive ratifies his imprisonment. But the strumming on this string reveals the one great fault of the pamphlet – its injustice towards Parliamentarianism. Such criticism will not help forward the Hungarian Policy. Its promoters must not say to the 'Constitutional' movement, 'You have done nothing but compromise Constitutionalism,' because both assertions are so plainly false that only a disputant soaked through with prejudice could make them. It will be both fairer and wiser to say: - 'You have done something, but have not overcome the forces of decay. Here is a better plan of agitation, and we will stand in to help in realising it.'

I have taken the liberty of suggesting a want of thoroughness in the parallel, and certain flaws in the arguments by which the new departure is backed. These vices do not, however, go to the essence of the policy; it may on its own merits be workable. But if we are to arrive

at the truth of the matter we must not confuse ourselves with a too extensive divagation in Hungarian history. We must think the policy out, clearly and exhaustively, in terms of Irish politics. We do not, of course, demand the gift of prophecy from the framers of the 'Hungarian Policy.' Such a vast enterprise must necessarily be to some extent 'a blind experiment.' And, for the matter of that, who can prophesy the fortunes and immediate future of our present tactics? We *do* demand, however, a more exhaustive plan than the author of 'The Resurrection of Hungary' gives us. It is a duty to the public which he has incurred by the issue of this pamphlet; he is pledged to a propagandist campaign; and, as has been suggested, his methods and temper can easily be improved. It is somewhat unfortunate that the proposal should come prominently before the country on the eve of a General Election. To abandon the old methods at the precise moment when they may begin to bear fruit is a project that can hardly be seriously proposed. In all likelihood it is not in the minds of the promoters, but standing by itself the coincidence is open to misinterpretation. The new policy too, must be prepared to fight its way to acceptance; and, undoubtedly, the inertia of tradition will be hard to overcome. But Mr. Davitt's expression of opinion shows that among the much-abused Parliamentarians there is to be found an admirable openness of mind. And, when all the objections have been stated, the 'Hungarian Policy' does retain an immense fascination. Whether after due thinking-out it will be found acceptable, in the sole sense of being workable, I confess I am not wise enough to say. But it is certainly the largest idea contributed to Irish politics for a generation. It tends in the right direction, towards national unity; and whatever be the policy finally ratified by the voice of the country, this pamphlet will have justified its existence if only it leads up to a working alliance between the two sections of Nationalism, now standing deplorably apart.

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