THE ANSWER TO TERRORISM

THE achievement so far of the terrorists in Northern Ireland does not consist in the murder of innocent soldiers, the random explosion which kills and maims innocent civilians, the tarring and feathering or torturing of young men and women suspected of treating with what the IRA regards as its enemy. The real achievement is the murder of reputations, the destruction of civil conduct, a tarring and feathering of the body politic in a deliberate attempt to disfigure it and bring it into mockery and contempt. The terrorists' success in this area has been so far considerable. It has extended to the disfigurement of religion and the distorting of truth so that the very words "Catholic" and "Protestant" have come to stand no longer for spiritual values but for a bitter and absolute hatred.

How is this progress to the pit of hatred to be stopped? Increasingly the people of this country want to wash their hands of the guerrilla warfare, to call the troops home and let the Irish fight it out on their own. But this is a counsel of despair which would lead to human suffering on a scale a thousand times greater than what we are witnessing today. Force and more force, say some, will eventually smoke out the terrorists and bring back the rule of law, by which is often meant the status quo. Despite some temporary success, we believe that this is a counsel of false hope, wholly deceptive and dangerous. What is common to both attitudes is that they are irrational and have been contaminated by the enemy.

There are those who would impose a censorship on the mass media, but this is an attempt to smother what seems to be one redeeming feature in the whole ghastly prospect that lies before us. It is haunting indeed when television brings violence into every home and when press and radio have almost nothing to report but man-made tragedy. But at least it may be said that there is no country in the world which can hold a candle to this one for its candour. The Compton Report may be accused of semantics in seeking to distinguish ill-treatment from brutality, but when elsewhere in living memory has anything like this committee been set up by a Government to consider its own alleged misdemeanours? We can only regret that for spurious reasons a number of witnesses refused to help it in its task. Where else has a subsequent committee been set up to remedy possible excesses in the repression of violence?

The three-hour debate fell far short of our Parliament's reputation for rising to a critical occasion. But what parliament elsewhere has embarked on a debate in such circumstances, treating it as an interim and urgent measure and being prepared to go again into discussion at length? Despite some evasive action on the part of ministers and parliamentarians, we believe that at long last a spirit of candour has been awakened both in Government and Opposition.

A Rude Awakening

For the people of this country there have been some rude awakenings: the fact that guerrilla warfare and civil strife are horrible and can only be countered by the roughest justice and repugnant counter-measures; to the fact that much of this has been glossed over; to the fact that there is such a thing as institutional violence—as exercised by Stormont for fifty years—which has brought its own nemesis; to the fact that innocent men have shared maltreatment with the guilty; to the fact of abysmal human conditions on our doorstep which we never tire of denouncing in other countries. We seem to be awakening at long last to a human condition and predicament and showing signs of tackling it without party prejudice or partisan approaches. Here, in this paper, long before violence exploded, we have given chapter and verse of oppression of the Catholic minority in Ulster and warned of impending trouble. Just as loyalty to the Church must often involve a painful recording of the shortcomings of her members, so does patriotism involve denouncing injustice in our treatment of others. Both in fact should be seen as a mark of faith and confidence in our Church as in our country.

In this same confidence we should be prepared to see ourselves as others see us. In this issue we give considerable space to our Dublin Correspondent, letting him give what we believe to be an authentic account of reactions in Dublin to the British performance in these last few days and weeks and its effect on Irish politics. Likewise our Belfast Correspondent reports reactions which we find understandable, though they are not our own. We go along with him, however, when he ends with a plea for "radical and far-reaching approaches to the whole Irish question." We hope and indeed believe that both will take steps towards a realistic and representative form of government in Ulster with all the lessons learnt from a terrible past. If the Government enters into the forthcoming debate with no proposals or programme for a political rearrangement and dispersal of power at Stormont so that the Catholic minority has a voice in government, it will be fiddling whilst Belfast burns.