

Irish Freedom

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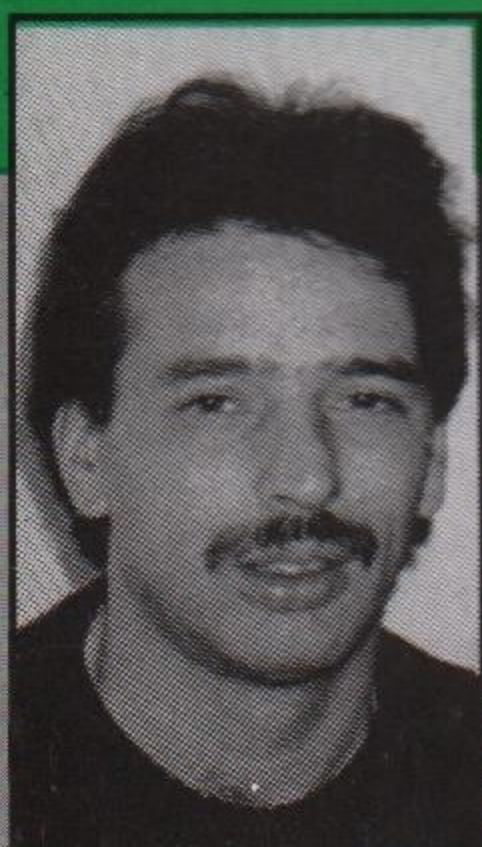
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EDITORIAL

APRIL/MAY 1991

From the hunger-strike to the release of the Birmingham Six

Time to learn some lessons

The announcement by Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Brooke, that he is to start a new round of political talks on the future of Northern Ireland involving all parties except Sinn Féin, came as no surprise to the Irish Freedom Movement. In numerous articles over the past months and years, *Irish Freedom* has revealed that all the 'peace initiatives' coming out from Westminster are nothing more than political hoaxes aimed at destroying the republican movement rather than solving the Irish question.

Since the mid to early eighties, the British state has attempted to isolate the republicans from their support in the community. The Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985 between London and Dublin aimed to boost the moderate constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party at the republican movement's expense. Government strategy has attempted to isolate and marginalise the republican movement by sowing confusion, disillusionment and division in its ranks to draw into discussion those sections who believe negotiations with Britain may bear fruit while isolating more militant republicans who refuse to compromise.

Brooke's latest announcement has no prospect of bringing about any change in Northern Ireland. But it does reinforce the strategy of isolating republicanism. More selective repression of known republicans and their friends and families has made an impact and reduced open support to a hard core. The Broadcasting Ban of 1989 reinforces the exclusion of Sinn Féin from normal political life in the Six Counties—an appearance which is further heightened by their exclusion from the Brooke 'talks'. The clampdown on Catholic businesses and the funding of vitally necessary community

groups with republican sympathies (see page 8 for a detailed study of this) is having a real material impact on an already beleaguered community.

So, does Brooke's latest initiative indicate that the balance of forces has swung decisively away from the republican movement in Britain's favour? What should the attitude of supporters of Irish freedom in Britain be to these developments?

By appealing more to
middle class sympathy
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opportunity to put the
case for Irish freedom at
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talking and thinking
about it

As far as negotiations are concerned, the IFM has consistently argued that there is no British solution to the Irish War. Britain can never provide the conditions for negotiations because the only thing it wants to negotiate is the terms of nationalist oppression. Brooke's way forward, no matter how it is packaged, is nothing more than good old British terror.

Where the balance of forces lies, however, is a different question. Although a shift in the balance of forces has undoubtedly taken place in favour of Britain, this does not mean that Britain is about to win the Irish War. However successfully British policy is packaged, sooner or later colonial rule in Ireland provokes resistance. The Irish War will continue, in whatever form, for as long as the British state denies the democratic right of self-determination and freedom.

When we talk of the balance of forces we must include the role and standing of the British solidarity movement itself. The solidarity movement after all, should count itself as part of the forces against the British state in Ireland.

These two issues—the balance of forces between republicanism and Britain, and the contribution to that balance of the solidarity movement in this country—make up the main content of this issue of *Irish Freedom*. It contains a special commemorative feature on the tenth anniversary of the hunger-strikes and an analysis of the release of the Birmingham Six. The lessons to be learnt from these events both help to explain the state of play between the British state and the republican movement on the one hand, and the importance of the contribution the solidarity movement in Britain can make.

It is 10 years since Bobby Sands became the first of 10 republican prisoners to die on hunger-strike in support of their demand for political status. The deaths of Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee and Mickey Devine in the course of this struggle shaped the last decade of the Irish War.

The hunger-strike ended in October 1981

having failed to secure its demands. Despite the heroism of the 10 hunger-strikers, the British government under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher refused to concede the demand for political status which had been withdrawn by the previous Labour government in 1976. Nevertheless, the determination of the republican prisoners cohered support outside the H-Blocks. The nationalist community rallied once more to the republican movement. When Bobby Sands died a Westminster MP, 100 000 nationalists came to bury a man who was in their eyes, an IRA volunteer, and not a British criminal.

The hunger-strikes and their aftermath struck a blow against Britain's attempts to portray the IRA as a criminal conspiracy without popular support or mandate. It is no exaggeration to state that it has taken the government the past 10 years to regain the ground it lost during this struggle. The crucial point for us to grasp and face up to is the fact that it was the failure of the British solidarity movement which made this task that much easier for the British government.

The buck stops here

For some the tactic of the hunger-strike was seen as just a desperate attempt to overcome the earlier successes of Britain's criminalisation strategy which had begun to isolate the IRA. But this misses the point altogether. The hunger-strike, despite being defeated, did galvanise nationalist support for the IRA and breathed new life into the liberation struggle. It proved yet again that colonial rule always breeds resistance. What it did not do was build support where it was most needed—in Britain.

The responsibility for the lack of support for Irish freedom in Britain lies not with the Irishmen and women fighting British imperialism in Ireland, but the British left itself. Their failure to campaign for political status during the hunger-strikes represented a betrayal of the Irish people (see page 17 for a more detailed examination). When Margaret Thatcher raised the stakes with her 'murder is murder....It cannot be a political crime', the left pretended the issue wasn't political status but prison reform. Their campaign was an attempt to mollify the conflict between the hunger-strikers and the government rather than bringing it to a head. More precisely, it became one of providing an alternative policy for British imperialism, fostering the illusion that Britain could play a progressive role in Ireland.

The problem was not simply one of cowardice—of not wanting to take on the difficult questions of IRA violence. By appealing more to middle class sympathy through moral humanitarian pleas, the left missed a real opportunity to put the case for Irish freedom at a time when the whole of British society was talking and thinking about it. In retrospect, it is clear now that the hunger-strikes precipitated the virtual collapse of the left's Irish solidarity work. In

the face of the polarisation of British society, an orientation that could not even get middle class and liberal support meant the left had no capacity to do anything. The result was a demoralised move towards the Labour Party; a party which was backing the Tory hardline without question.

The dissolution of the left's Irish solidarity work in this period had consequences few could see at the time. The British state had no fear of any domestic opposition to its rule in Ireland. It is this which has ensured that they have been able to develop their strategies in Ireland with little pause for thought or concern. The change in the balance of forces over the past 10 years has all too much to do with the evasions of the British left.

One only has to look at the release of the Birmingham Six to really see the consequences of avoiding the issue. When Paddy Hill, Gerry Hunter, Dick McKelvey, Hugh Callaghan, Billy Power and Johnny Walker walked as free men out of the Old Bailey at

The failure of
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the Guildford Four
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in the first place

4.05pm on Thursday 14 March after 5958 days in British jails, it was indeed an occasion to celebrate. However, the issue of the Birmingham Six, which exposes British justice and British rule in Ireland for what it is—a shoddy institution of liars and criminals—has become nothing more than a debate about a few bent coppers and the appeals procedure.

The ease with which the British establishment has contained the fall-out from the Birmingham Six case is breathtaking. Coming as it does so soon after the cases of the Guildford Four, the Winchester Three and the Maguires, the conspiracy against the Birmingham Six is probably the biggest political scandal this century. In days gone by, smaller scandals concerning call-girls have brought down governments. This time it

has strengthened government. Instead of the courts and the police force being in tatters, the opposite is the case—they are seen as having rid themselves of their rotten apples and come to terms with their failings.

The Birmingham Six rotted in prison because they were guilty of being Irish. Like the hunger-strikers, the case of the Birmingham Six was a direct result of Britain's criminalisation strategy. They were jailed as a deliberate message to Irish people living in Britain: bow your heads or this could happen to you. One only has to look at contemporary figures for arrests under the Prevention of Terrorism Act to see how this is still happening today. (See pages 19 and 20 for an interview with Tony Brennan recently excluded from Britain under the PTA.)

The failure of the left has meant that cases like the Birmingham Six or Guildford Four were able to happen in the first place. Ten hunger-strikers died in 1981 for this failure as well.

It was the experience of the hunger-strikes that led to the formation of the Irish Freedom Movement. Throughout the hunger-strikes we campaigned tirelessly (as the Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act Campaign) for unequivocal support for the liberation struggle. In contrast to the cautious approach of the rest of the left, we organised the biggest trade union conference on Ireland held anywhere in Britain at the time and a three-day march to the TUC conference in Blackpool from Manchester.

The founding of the IFM after the defeat of the hunger-strikes was not the result of sectarianism or infighting. It was an absolute necessity. The collapse of the left's Irish solidarity work in this period showed that a new organisation with a distinct analysis and strategy for building support for the Irish liberation struggle among working class people in Britain was desperately needed. The IFM has engaged in this project since it was founded in 1982.

Today the Irish Freedom Movement remembers the hunger-strikers not as victims of British imperialism. On the contrary, they should serve as an inspiration. Indeed, the spirit of resistance they displayed reveals why Britain cannot win the Irish War. By learning from the past, the IFM is committed to building the kind of solidarity movement which will alter the balance of forces where British imperialism will no longer have a free hand to do what it likes in Ireland and at home.

• If you are interested in learning more about the IFM's approach or want to get involved, then write to IFM, BM IFM, London WC1N 3XX or phone (071) 375 1702.

• *Irish Freedom* is edited by Charles Longford and Kevin Kelly. It is written by supporters of the IFM and is open to anyone genuinely interested in advancing solidarity work in Britain. If you would like to help, write to the above address.

The Birmingham Six are free

BUT THE BRITISH GET OFF THE HOOK



Alex Farrell looks at the case of
the Birmingham Six
and explains why this scandal
has strengthened
rather than weakened
the British establishment

At 4.05pm on Thursday 14 March 1991, the Birmingham Six walked out of the Old Bailey after 5958 days in British jails. Paddy Hill, Gerry Hunter, Dick McIlkenny, Hugh Callaghan, Billy Power and Johnny Walker stepped into the daylight, without handcuffs, without screws at their side, without blankets over their heads, to the ecstatic welcome of the waiting crowd. Hundreds broke through police and riot barriers to shake their hands and pat them on the back.

'Justice?', said Paddy Hill outside the court house, 'I don't think the people in there have

the intelligence or the honesty to spell the word, never mind dispense it. They're rotten'. Later that evening, he spoke of the frame-up that put the six men away and kept them inside for nearly 17 years. 'It could not have been done without connivance right up to the top level. It could not have been done without people in high places.'

Paddy Hill is right. The anger he displayed outside the Old Bailey is more than justified. Yet, despite a scandal of a scale that in the past has brought down governments, sharp on the heels of the Guildford Four and Winchester Three turnovers, those self-same conspirators in high places are sleeping easy in their beds. Instead, a few coppers may be sacrificed if that is what is needed to save the face of British justice. The pendulous neck of the lord chief justice, Lord Lane, has been dangled before us tantalisingly, but will shortly be withdrawn. A royal commission on criminal justice has been promised. And that is all.

How is it that the establishment has not only got itself off the hook, but now seems poised to turn the whole issue into a vindication of British justice?

Still lying after all these years

The extent of the cover-up and the scale of the conspiracy remains as shocking as ever. The full text of the appeal judgment was read out by Lords Lloyd, Mustill and Farquharson on 27 March. It was an epic whitewash.

On the forensic evidence, the judges argued that it has only been discredited since the 1987 appeal—which usefully excuses appeal judge Lord Lane from any blame. In the original trial the government's forensic witness Frank Skuse said that the Greiss test for nitroglycerine traces proved the men had handled the explosives. New forensic evidence since 1987 proves that the soap with which Frank Skuse—now retired because of 'limited competence'—cleaned the bowls used in the Greiss test, could itself give a positive result.

On the confessional evidence, Lloyd, Mustill and Farquharson accepted that it was now discredited, but only on the basis of recent electrostatic document analysis (ESDA), which proved that interview notes, claimed by the police to be contemporaneous, were in fact written up later. As for the 'alleged ill-treatment' of the Six in police custody, the court was 'unpersuaded'.

On the basis of the evidence presented since 1987, the court declared the convictions of the six men to be 'unsafe and unsatisfactory'. Nowhere an affirmation of their innocence. Nor, of course, any apology.

British justice and an economy of truth

Both the forensic and the confessional evidence were known to be false from the start. It has now been discovered that two salesmen on the Liverpool ferry, which five of

the Six were planning to take to Belfast, came up positive on the Greiss test. They had cast-iron alibis. The scientist involved concluded the positive result was due to their handling adhesive tape. This information was known to the Crown authorities at the highest level. It was deliberately withheld from the defence. In this conspiracy, Lords Lloyd, Mustill and Farquharson, etc, took no interest.

Of the Birmingham Six only Paddy Hill and Billy Power tested positive on the Greiss test. The Greiss test is no longer used by government forensic scientists. But even at the time it was not regarded as proof of contact with nitroglycerine. All six men were registered negative on the thin layer chromatography test (TLC), more sensitive than the Greiss test. Paddy Hill's left hand tested positive on the gas chromatography/mass spectrometry test (GCMS).

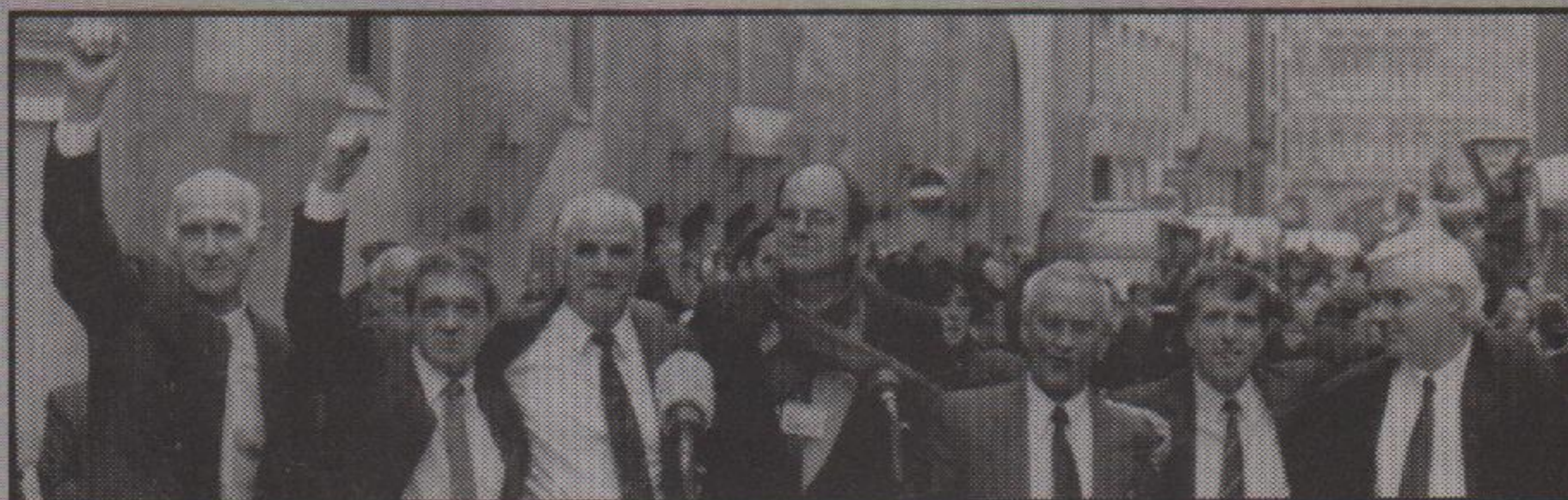
As early as 1976, at the first appeal, Lord Widgery admitted that the forensic tests offered no conclusive proof of the presence of explosives. He then went on to dismiss the matter as 'not a point of great importance in this case'.

Even on the Crown's own doctored evidence, only one of the men had any forensic evidence against them—one positive result on one hand. As the head of Strathclyde University's forensic department put it: 'The forensic evidence in 1974, even with the state of knowledge then, should

never have been regarded as conclusive.' This is what Lord Bridge, the trial judge in 1975, described as one of the two 'absolutely critical' elements in the prosecution case! This is what Lord Lane, at the 1988 appeal judgment, described as 'fatal' to all Six—inconclusive evidence against one.

The forensic evidence was discredited, and known to be so, from the very start. As for the confessional evidence, the noble lords preferred to concentrate on the inventive imaginations of the 'interviewing' officers. 'Verbals', forced confessions, are a common practice, but have the advantage of being deniable in any specific case by the higher echelons of the judicial machine. Now they have set about doing just that: shifting the blame away from the establishment, of which they are a part and which organised the frame-up of the Six, and on to a small group of policemen. There is however nothing about the forced nature of the confessions that the judges could have failed to understand. All the evidence points to the fact that the four men who signed confessions were tortured into doing so.

It is obvious even from the mugshots of the Six in police custody that they had been beaten. It was clear at their first court appearance. Had they been merchant bankers, medical examinations would immediately have been ordered. At their first appeal in 1976, Lord Widgery acknowledged



What they said about the Birmingham Six

Lord Justice Bridge, summing up the first trial, August 1975:

'If the six men are telling the truth...the police have been involved in a conspiracy unprecedented in the annals of British criminal history.'

Sentencing the Six:

'You stand convicted on each of 21 counts on the clearest and most overwhelming evidence I have ever heard.'

Lord Denning January 1980:

'Just consider the course of events if this action is allowed to proceed to trial. If the six men fail, it will mean that much time and money will have been expended by many people for no good purpose.'

'If the six men win, it will mean the police were guilty of perjury, that they were guilty of violence and threats, that the confessions were involuntary and were improperly admitted in evidence and that the confessions were erroneous.'

backhandedly that he knew of the torture, when he remarked that there was no evidence that they had sustained damage or 'knocking-about beyond the ordinary'.

That is not all. In the summer of 1976, 14 Winson Green screws, who had given the Six a further beating when they arrived on remand, were tried and inevitably acquitted. Since the authorities did not dispute the Six's injuries, this put the police right back into the frame. At that time, the home office admitted liability for the beatings.

The torture that led four men to sign confessions was known about and approved of from the very start. It was publicly admitted in 1976.

Red faces and pink protests

While the release of the Birmingham Six is certainly an embarrassment for the British establishment, the liberal critics who were quick to condemn the excesses of the case nevertheless were quick to leap to the defence of British justice. In pursuit of that project, both during and after the appeal, a whole string of diversions were thrown to the British public.

The liberal critics focused on the lord chief justice, Lord Lane, and called for his early retirement. Ignoring the fact that Lane is only one of a great many judges implicated in the case, the protests were easily fobbed off with

a discussion of possible changes in the criminal justice system. Home secretary Kenneth Baker killed off the controversy in its infancy by announcing the appointment of a royal commission to investigate the matter—reporting back within two years.

Both the liberal and the right-wing press began to explain away the conspiracy with talk of the 'understandable anger' which greeted the pub bombings, backed up with interviews with some of those wounded in November 1974 and relatives of the dead. Concern for the injustices suffered by the Birmingham Six was tempered by the campaign against the real bombers.

Following this handy but perverted logic, a new theme emerged in the debate—the idea that the Birmingham Six had only the IRA and Sinn Féin to blame for their misfortune, for was it not the nationalist resistance that created the horrors of the 'troubles'? With reality triumphantly stood on its head, it was only one more step to pinning the blame on—who else but—the Birmingham Six themselves!

'After more than 16 years in prison', declared the *Sun* conclusively on 15 March, 'the Birmingham Six are free.... Free to attend the funerals of IRA bombers. Which is where they were going when arrested. Free to go to republican rallies. As some did. Free to raise funds for the families of IRA prisoners. As some did. Free to take in IRA bombers as

lodgers. As at least one did.... We are more concerned about the hundreds of innocent men, women and children who have lost *all* of their lives because of IRA bombers'.

Many will dismiss the *Sun*'s view as typical of the crudity of the British gutter press. However, the liberal critique of the establishment shares many of these assumptions. It is the common denominator of supporting British rule in Ireland that underpins the establishment's ability to take on board such criticisms.

Getting away with murder

From the standpoint of the Six and their relatives, the overriding concern was of course simply to secure their freedom. The wider campaign for their release aimed not at eradicating British influence against the Irish, but at saving Britain's good name. Hence the *Times* could argue in its editorial: 'The quashing of the Birmingham Six convictions has partly vindicated British justice.' (15 March 1991)

Those who have argued that support for the Birmingham Six should be considered apart from the war in Ireland are making a distinction that does not exist. The Birmingham Six were jailed because they were Irish. They were jailed as part of Britain's efforts to criminalise Irish resistance to British rule. They were jailed as a deliberate message to Irishmen and women living in Britain: keep your heads down, or this could happen to you.

Since the Prevention of Terrorism Act was rushed through parliament in 18 hours on the back of the Birmingham bombs, over half a million people have suffered the unwanted attention of the Special Branch and anti-terrorist squad. Only a few days after the Six finally walked free, Kevin Barry O'Donnell was deported to the Six Counties on the diktat of the home secretary, after being acquitted on firearms charges.

Nothing has changed

The real lesson of the Birmingham Six is that if you allow the British state to get away with murder, and refuse to challenge its right to prosecute its war in Ireland, then cases like the Birmingham Six will continue. It also ensures that when British justice is exposed for what it is, instead of it becoming a moment of triumph in a process of defeating the British state, it merely becomes a rare hiccup, soon forgotten.

To prevent injustice, the climate it thrives in has to be challenged. That means winning support for the right of the Irish to fight for their freedom. The release of the Birmingham Six is an occasion for celebration. It should also be an occasion to reaffirm our commitment to building a solidarity movement which unequivocally defends the right of the Irish to fight for their freedom.

'That would mean the home secretary would either have to recommend that they be pardoned or he would have to resubmit the case to the court of appeal. That would be such an appalling vista that every sensible person in the land would say: it cannot be right these actions should go any further.'

Lord Lane, dismissing the appeal, January 1988:

'The longer this hearing has gone on, the more convinced this court has become that the verdict of the jury was correct.'

Lord Denning, interviewed by the *Spectator*, August 1990:

'We shouldn't have all these campaigns to get the Birmingham Six released if they'd been hanged. They'd have been forgotten, and the whole community would be satisfied.'

Lord Justice Lloyd at the preliminary hearing, December 1990, on hearing of the volume of material to be read:

'I don't think we are going to let this spoil our Christmas.'

His words, freeing the Six:

'In the light of fresh evidence which has become available since the last hearing in this court, your appeal will be allowed, and you will be free to go as soon as the usual formalities have been discharged.'

Lord Denning, again, March 1991:

'It is not the legal system that is at fault but individuals. If anything has gone wrong it's the police, the West Midlands police, who are said to have been guilty of perjury. That's what's gone, not our system of justice, it's the police. Let them put them before the criminal courts and see if an English jury would convict them of perjury.'



STORIES FROM THE WAR ZONE

Operation Whiplash

A war against the community

In the early hours of Friday 5 October 1990 over 800 security personnel smashed their way into business and community project premises in nationalist areas in the Six Counties. Employees unlucky enough to be there at the time were arrested while hundreds of files and documents were seized for scrutiny by officials from the Northern Ireland Office. This was no VAT inspection or a crackdown on tax evasion. It was Operation Whiplash—a new campaign by the British government to close down enterprises they consider to be connected with resistance to British rule in Ireland.

The information gathered on these raids was used to frame the new provisions of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Bill (reported on in the last issue of *Irish Freedom*). In particular, Operation Whiplash prepared the ground for legislation which will enable the state to confiscate the assets of any person or organisation who the government says is benefiting from 'terrorist'-related activities.

Operation Whiplash marked the start of a new phase of intimidation and harassment of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. Since 1985 a total of 26 community groups have been politically vetted. Women's groups, nurseries, tenants' associations, housing schemes and an Irish language newspaper were deemed to have close links with 'paramilitaries' and were, therefore, deemed to be 'against the public interest'. In August 1990, the West Belfast Committee of the Irish language group, Glór na nGael, had their £90 000 financial lifeline withdrawn for the same reason. But now the net has widened to include private businesses as well.

Operation Whiplash and the Emergency Provisions Bill are part of a carefully constructed counter-insurgency operation being conducted against the republican movement. The government needs no specific allegations against businesses or community groups. Nor are there any grounds for appeal against decisions. Businesses or community groups can be shut down or sponsored according to

the diktat of the Northern Ireland office (NIO). Its aim is simple: namely, to intensify more economic hardship on the nationalist community to break their support for the republican movement.

Attacking the nationalist community at an economic level represents a new stage in the Irish War. Local nationalist communities have survived the past 22 years of war by setting up their own services and businesses outside the control of the authorities that they have never recognised as legitimate. Private businesses, like the West Belfast and Derry taxi associations (both raided in Operation Whiplash), for example, evolved out of the chaos caused by British troops' activity in the seventies and eighties. The black taxis, local tenants' groups, housing co-ops and associations all attracted harassment and discrimination from the authorities as examples of popular defiance of the status quo. They gave jobs to ex-internees and Catholics who were unlikely to find work in other parts of the Six Counties due to sectarian discrimination. They provided popular services that the authorities were unwilling to provide for sectarian or security reasons.

While successive governments have recognised the implicit threat any developments outside their control pose for them they have done little apart from propagandise against 'IRA mafia godfathers'. Now, however, as a mark of their confidence that they can put the boot in more directly they are stepping up direct attacks. NIO economy minister Richard Needham (known for saying 'I wish the silly old cow would go' of Thatcher over his carphone during the leadership crisis) outlined this quite clearly in a Radio Ulster interview in as early as November 1989:

'It has to be in our interests to get more jobs in West Belfast...this is the way in which we will reduce the terrorist menace, by making people economically independent from terrorism. This is the prime strategic objective of the government.'

What Needham was saying was that the government had to coerce the nationalist community into becoming economically dependent on the British state. He spelt it out more starkly after an IRA firebomb attack on business premises: 'The people of these areas have to make up their minds when it comes to an election whether they wish to continue to live in a world without work or whether they reject the supporters of violence' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 31 January 1991).

Today all government, European Community and international aid that flows into Northern Ireland is vetted to prevent nationalist areas like West Belfast from receiving any of it. The example of the International Fund for Ireland, set up in 1989 after the Anglo-Irish deal ostensibly to 'encourage self-sustaining, long-term economic growth across borders and communities, so that it can help build a more harmonious society', reveals how this operates. Of the £12 million that was set aside for use in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland (most of which were nationalist areas), only £271 000 had been disbursed due to the veto that Britain put on developing projects. The discrimination was so blatant that even the USA—the main sponsors of the fund—pulled out of the scheme last June.

The government and its Labour Party apologists say their quarrel is with a few isolated 'godfathers' or criminals who, in the words of Labour's Northern Ireland spokesman Kevin McNamara, 'benefit financially from the proceeds of terrorist offences' (Commons debate, Emergency Provisions Bill). Operation Whiplash and the Emergency Provisions Bill reveals that the British state is at war with an entire community.

Nigel Lewis

'Have you heard
the one about...'

Belfast City Council and British democracy?

In January this year, a special meeting of the Unionist-controlled Belfast City Council was convened to discuss recent IRA firebombings of local businesses. The eminent Unionist council leader, Eric Smyth, exercising the rights granted to him by order of the British Crown, opened the meeting by urging motions to be adopted barring elected Sinn Féin councillors from speaking in the debate. He

also called for Alex Maskey to be ejected from the chamber. In true Northern Ireland tradition, this is exactly what happened.

Sinn Féin councillors, well versed in the fine old traditions of British democracy, Northern Ireland-style, refused to accept the motions and filed for a judicial review in the high court. Surprisingly enough, the court ruled in favour of Sinn Féin. The flimsy Unionist defence case, that the motions were passed in the heat of the moment in a highly charged atmosphere, was promptly destroyed when minutes of the meeting revealed that the town clerk had warned Smyth that his motions were unconstitutional. The high court had little choice but to uphold Sinn Féin's appeal.

All would be well if things ended here. One might even imagine that this was like any other British city council. But in Northern Ireland there are no fairy tales: after the hearing, Democratic Unionist Party councillor, Sammy Wilson, declared that the ruling would have no effect on Unionist members. Indeed, Wilson went further and stated that 'Unionists will continue to deny Sinn Féin any effective role in decisions made by the council'.

Or the one about...

The British general who's going to crush the IRA?

Lieutenant General Sir John Wilsey, General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland shocked nationalists throughout Ireland when he served notice that, after the defeat of Saddam Hussein, they were next on the target list for the 'Baghdad' treatment. 'We beat Saddam Hussein', he declared, 'now we'll beat you'. After a few more gins he proceeded: 'It is inconceivable to my mind that a nation and its army which has, with allies, faced down the fourth most powerful army in the world, is going to be defeated in its resolve to see the job through here.' Hear, hear! responded his audience.

'Where, where?' cried surprised nationalists. Was the general implying that there was a war going on in Ireland? Had he told the British squaddies in South Armagh, dug in their bunkers, where helicopters are used to remove garbage by air-lift for fear of being

attacked, that victory was around the corner?

At the end of February an IRA active service unit of 12 volunteers mounted an attack on Britain's latest observation tower in the Silverbridge area. The sustained attack consisted of mortar fire and high-calibre machine guns. The unit then made good its escape without casualties.

That none of this was reported in the British media at least proves that you can trust them to play their part in Britain's war effort. As for Wilsey? He is destined to join the ranks of that large club of ex-generals and politicians who promised the imminent destruction of the IRA. However, at least 'Stormin' Sir John will be able to tell his tale to the lads in the officers' mess in a bunker in a field in South Armagh.

Kieran O'Hanlon

Behind the Morrison trial

The informer's role in the Irish War

The British press is currently gloating over the trial presently taking place in Belfast, in which, among others, the director of publicity for Sinn Féin, Danny Morrison, is implicated in the alleged murder of Alexander Lynch, a former IRA volunteer turned informer. The trial has prompted a discussion about the role of informers in the Irish War.

The British press invariably portray informers as willing parties, sick of the terrorism surrounding them who feel the need to do something about it. On the other hand, former members of the IRA who for whatever reason they turn are seen as heroes. They are held up as brave and courageous, standing up to the wicked 'godfathers' of the IRA.

On closer examination though, the world of the informer is one based on fear, coercion, intimidation, corruption, blackmail and violence which is explicitly sealed with the approval of the British state.

Supergrasses

The nationalist community is still suffering from the 'heroism' of the most notorious episode in the history of the informer in the Six Counties; the supergrass trials between 1981-83. During this period, the British state offered substantial rewards, including large cash sums, new lives and identities, and immunity from prosecution, to former republican activists in return for information about alleged IRA members and operations. To

assist, a slush fund of £1.3m was made available by the British government.

On the word of a supergrass, hundreds of suspects were imprisoned without trial for a few months or in some instances for up to a year and more. Prisoners were subjected to terrible physical and psychological abuse. The focus of the supergrass tactic was the show-trial, where the judiciary went through the charade of being seen to have justice done. They were considerable spectacles with, at times, over a dozen 'terrorists' in the dock at any one time. The media was in its element, at last the terrorists were being brought in to face justice.

However, within a very short timespan, things started to go wrong. The hundreds of convictions and the accompanying sentences totalling thousands of years were challenged. Gradually it became the case that the vast majority of the convictions were 'unsafe', because the evidence given by the supergrasses was found to be inadequate, unreliable and in many instances downright fictitious. Indeed a number retracted their original statements. The fact that a considerable proportion of the hundreds of people detained on the basis of evidence given by the discredited supergrasses were exonerated has been largely forgotten.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the 'supergrass' tactic was a failure because the convictions failed. The main function of the tactic was to create a climate of fear and distrust within the nationalist community and the republican movement.

Trawling

While the supergrass may have gone as a particular phenomena in the Irish War, the role of the informer still plays a central part as indeed do the methods used by the security forces during that period. A recent insight into the world of the informer published in the *Weekend Guardian* made the following point:

'The RUC doesn't hesitate to use every means available—money, coercion and blackmail—to recruit informers from the republican ranks. But these agents soon become mere tools. Their lives are cheap.' (15-16 February 1991)

One only has to read any copy of *An Phoblacht/Republican News (AP/RN)* each week to find just how extensive this practice has become. The recruitment of informers by the RUC is termed 'trawling'. This usually takes the form of approaching nationalists at random, often on foot patrols, or known petty criminals, the vulnerable and the weak, and 'persuading' them to join the ranks of state-employed informers.

A few recent examples help illustrate the tactic of trawling for spies in nationalist areas:

- Steven O'Neill from Gallbally, County Tyrone, was stopped by the RUC while driving through Dungannon. He was told to

take his car to the local barracks in order that it be searched (under Section 21, Emergency Powers Act). They found nothing, but an alleged faulty exhaust. Steven was told they would not prosecute him for this if he agreed to watch the movements of his neighbours and inform the RUC (AP/RN, 21 February 1991).

- Michael Rafferty, a 16-year old youth, was stopped in the Falls Road area of Belfast by a group of RUC officers. He was offered between £100-£500 in exchange for information about three local people named by the RUC. When he refused, the officers suggested he might need the money, hinting that they knew of his gambling habits. He naturally became worried and agitated at their knowledge of his personal circumstances. He ran off to the refuge of a local shop as the RUC shouted after him the offer still stands (AP/RN, 24 January 1991).

- Debra Wilson from Derry found the sustained RUC campaign of attempts to recruit her as all too much, resulting in a suicide attempt. She was originally detained for questioning over a charge in an RUC barracks in October 1989, where she was invited to attend a meeting of RUC officers to discuss passing on information about local people. She was offered a £10 bribe and told that the minor charge would be dropped. She refused to go. Six months later her house was raided, she was told on this occasion that if she did not inform she would be taken to Castlereagh interrogation centre in January 1991 for questioning. The RUC threatened to charge her with keeping IRA weapons at her home. The pressures of this campaign of intimidation and of bringing up a five-month old child with an acute heart complaint caused Debra to attempt suicide (AP/RN, 10 January 1991).

- The ultimate threat to reluctant informers is the threat of ending up with a bullet in their head, as John McCabe of Belfast found out. He was stopped in the Falls Road by the RUC and asked whether he enjoyed his four-day ordeal of interrogation four weeks prior. They suggested he would end up dead (as a shoot-to-kill victim in Armagh had recently) if he did not inform. He refused. Later that evening John and his girlfriend were stopped by a group of soldiers and RUC personnel. While John was being questioned by the RUC he witnessed his girlfriend being assaulted by a soldier, he protested and was subsequently charged with disorderly conduct and assault (AP/RN, 18 October 1990).

The pages of this bulletin could literally be filled with such accounts of the RUC's recruitment attempts.

Nationalist response

The response of the overwhelming majority of the nationalist community is to stand firm against the intimidation, the blackmail, the violence, the threats of death and to follow

the call of the republican movement to make public their experiences. Indeed, this is their only way out of the informer trap.

In all of the cases described above, the victims contacted Sinn Fein, who arranged press conferences (where the victim agreed) to publicise the latest underhand tactics of the upholders of the 'rule of law' in the Six Counties. Of course this is rarely ever reported in the media. Instead the press will concentrate on the punishment that the republican movement administers to those found guilty of informing. What is never pointed out is that it is the nationalist community itself which insists on such harsh punishment as it is they who suffer the harassment, intimidation, assaults and indeed death which results from the information passed on by the touts. Information which is now known ends up in the hands of Loyalist death squads.

The security forces do not allow for informers opting out, unlike the republican movement which offers an amnesty to informers who agree to come clean. Once ensnared the informer has little choice, if they resist or cease informing more pressure is applied; usually in the form of threats to inform the republican movement of their treachery or ultimately by the threat of death itself by passing their name on to a Loyalist death squad.

In this sense the informer is very much a victim, selected and picked on because of a vulnerability or particular weakness they might have. The moving story of Patrick

Flood, former IRA volunteer recently told in the *Weekend Guardian* clearly demonstrates this (15-16 February 1991).

Flood was a committed IRA volunteer until the security forces found out his particular weakness, a man totally devoted to his wife. The RUC recruited him by threatening to prosecute and imprison his wife for the storing of IRA weapons. They told Flood if he cooperated they would not prosecute his wife, whom he was warned would end up dead at the prospect of spending anytime locked up in prison. She suffered particularly badly from nervous depression.

The deal was that the RUC would not arrest anybody, but just thwart operations. However they lied, numerous volunteers were arrested together with arms dumps being found. The IRA soon discovered Flood's treachery and had no choice but to execute him. He was too powerful an informer, knowing the composition of the IRA structure in Derry too well. The acceptance and recognition of the necessity of Flood's death by the nationalist community was borne out by the almost derisory attendance at his funeral.

The informer is thus just another part of the British war machine. Like any other aspect of the military conflict its effectiveness depends upon political will: to date the spirit of resistance and solidarity within the nationalist community has ensured that the damage inflicted on the republican movement through this tactic, has been minimal.

Dennis O'Dwyer



JOE WATSON

In February the IRA showed, yet again, just who is in control of the Border areas of the Six Counties. While the British Army is confined to its barracks, spy towers and helicopters, the IRA is able to move around freely on the ground and mount sustained attacks on Crown positions with impunity.

At the end of February the IRA carried out an attack on a spy post in South Armagh that carried all the hallmarks of an army engaged in a conventional war in friendly territory. The British propaganda machine would have us believe that this is not the case so let's look at the facts of this one particular IRA attack in 'bandit country'.

The IRA active service unit of 12 volunteers mounted the attack on Britain's latest obser-

vation tower in the Silverbridge area of South Armagh. The attack, which lasted 15 minutes, was opened with mortar fire and followed up by volunteers armed with high-calibre machine gun and assault rifles. The IRA unit made good its escape having sustained no casualties.

The fact that 12 heavily armed people could enter an area, which is under heavy surveillance, pour gunfire on an enemy position for 15 minutes and then withdraw unhindered from the area indicates both the professionalism of the IRA volunteers and the unwillingness of the Brits to leave the safe haven of their barracks, to engage the IRA on the ground.



Bobby Sands' funeral—nearly 100 000 came to bury a 'British criminal'

'We have asserted that we are political prisoners and everything about our country, our interrogation, trials and prison conditions show that we are politically motivated, and not motivated by selfish reasons for selfish ends. As further demonstration of our selflessness and the justice of our cause a number of our comrades, beginning today with Bobby Sands, will hunger-strike to the death unless the British government abandons its criminalisation policy and meets our demands.'

This was the statement read out to thousands of nationalist demonstrators in West Belfast on behalf of republicans in Long Kesh prison on Sunday 1 March 1981, the day Bobby Sands began his hunger-strike for political status. It marked the start of a bitter struggle which ended in personal tragedy but unleashed a new force in the nationalist community which shattered Britain's war strategy in Northern Ireland.

On 5 May this year many thousands of nationalists will once again march through West Belfast to pay tribute to Bobby Sands and his nine comrades who died so heroically on hunger-strike 10 years ago.

In this special feature to mark the anniversary of the 1981 hunger-strikes, *Irish Freedom* attempts to draw out some of the lessons and significance of these events. We feature:

- The hunger-strikes—their background and impact on British strategy
- The British solidarity movement
- Exclusive interview with blanket protester who was with the hunger-strikers throughout their protest

The hunger-strikes—10 years on

IRISH FREEDOM FIGHTERS ARE NOT BRITISH CRIMINALS



The hunger-strikers: (left to right)

BOBBY SANDS 5 MAY FRANCIS HUGHES 12 MAY RAY McCREESH 21 MAY
PATSY O'HARA 21 MAY JOE McDONNELL 8 JULY MARTIN HURSON 13 JULY
KEVIN LYNCH 1 AUGUST KIERAN DOHERTY 2 AUGUST
THOMAS McELWEE 8 AUGUST MICKEY DEVINE 20 AUGUST

The hunger-strikes of 1980-81 were a turning point in the course of the Irish War. To understand why the question of political status became such a crucial issue, we need to go back to the beginning.

In 1968-69 what began as marches and agitation for civil rights by Catholics, had by 1971 erupted into a full-scale war for liberation between the Irish people and the British state. The British government's response to the undeclared war with Irish republicanism was a massive deployment of military manpower and resources. By 1971 the British state revealed that it was fighting another colonial war, but this time within its own borders, when it introduced internment without trial. Thousands of Irish nationalists found themselves in Long Kesh internment camp, held in detention without trial. But while Long Kesh was used to intimidate and brutalise any nationalist, it was also used to jail prisoners convicted of what the British government termed 'terrorist'-related offences. The question of status began from this point.

Those nationalists interned had special category status. Initially the convicted prisoners were refused prisoner of war status but when 40 of them went on hunger-strike, the British government backed down. When internment was phased out in 1975 by the then Labour government special category status was withdrawn: anyone convicted of offences committed after 1 March 1976 was to be treated as an ordinary criminal.

After this date, Long Kesh effectively became two different prisons. The cages, as they were known, housed the now dwindling number of special category prisoners and the

new blocks, which became known as the H-Blocks, because of their shape, housed convicted republican soldiers—'criminals' as they were now to be called.

The ending of internment and of political status were not hasty or off-the-cuff decisions. Unlike the decision to introduce internment in 1971, which was taken more in panic than part of a considered plan, the changes in 1976 were part of a broader and more comprehensive shift. It was an integral part of a new security strategy devised by a high-powered government think-tank, which included representatives of the army, police and the counter-intelligence agency, MI5.

Containment

The British state recognised that it was engaged in a colonial war against a community fighting for democratic rights. But unlike previous colonial wars, the Irish War was taking place inside the borders of the British state. Their overriding concern was to ensure that the war never 'spilled over'; that is, that it was contained militarily and politically. The criminalisation of the republican movement became one of the central elements of this strategy.

Britain's plans were a well-thought through political and military programme. Criminali-

Criminalisation and political status

The spirit of freedom

sation meant presenting Irish republicans as common criminals rather than politically motivated freedom fighters. To lend credibility to this goal, the British state introduced two further reciprocal policies: 'Normalisation' and 'Ulsterisation'. Normalisation entailed portraying the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland as simply a question of law and order—no different from any other part of the United Kingdom. Ulsterisation, on the other hand, involved the gradual withdrawal of British Army personnel from the streets of Northern Ireland and their replacement by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. With the police force instead of the British Army in the frontline, the argument that the 'troubles' were a law and order problem became that much more convincing.

It was not simply a question of cosmetic changes which lent credibility to this new view of Northern Ireland. Every aspect of Britain's war machine underwent a change. Since 1973 trial by jury had been denied to republicans charged with terrorist offences on the recommendation of the inquiry led by Lord Diplock. Under criminalisation the juryless 'Diplock courts' seemed less like military tribunals and more like courts. Hundreds of republicans became British criminals as a result. A propaganda offensive designed to discredit and isolate the republican



JOE BOATMAN

movement was unleashed: stories of corruption and gangsterism in the republican movement began to appear in the British press. Words like godfathers, gangsters, thugs, racketeers and criminals became common place in the British newspapers and the Irish papers happily followed suit.

The policy of criminalisation was an attempt to isolate the republican movement from the nationalist community, but its real success was to secure domestic support for Britain's war effort. The aim of British strategy was to contain the war—to what Merlyn Rees, the Labour Northern Ireland secretary termed, 'an acceptable level of violence'. Criminalisation was part of a strategy aimed at containing the national liberation struggle. However, the attempt to criminalise the IRA not only provoked the prisoners to resist but galvanised the nationalist community whose own experience of British oppression meant they knew who the real criminals were in Ireland.

A community which refused to be criminalised

Gerry Adams, speaking on the significance of criminalisation, spelt out why it represented such a challenge to the republican movement: 'The policy of criminalisation struck at the heart of the republican struggle and it did so at a time when it was politically weak. The resilience of nationalist resistance and the central question of support for the IRA were to be tested over the next six years as never before.' This was no exaggeration.

By 1976 the number of republicans imprisoned in Long Kesh began to increase

dramatically, as a result of the conveyor-belt justice of the Diplock courts. Republicans were beaten and tortured into signing confessions which incriminated themselves and many others. The republican movement found itself with little option but to resist this attack: after 1 March 1976 the majority of republican prisoners refused to be treated as criminals by refusing to wear prison uniforms. They were placed in prison cells without any clothes and forced to cover themselves with blankets. It was after this date that the non-conforming republican prisoners became known as the 'blanketmen'.

By 1978 the vicious attacks by prison warders—usually during 'slopping out'—forced the prisoners to escalate the blanket protest to a no-wash protest. Prisoners remained locked in a cell wrapped only in a blanket surrounded by four walls covered in excreta and urine and rotten food. The prisoners and the British government were now firmly locked on to a collision course with the prisoners until a hunger-strike became the only option left. By October 1980 the prisoners decided to embark on a hunger-strike as the only way forward. Brendan Hughes along with six others began the hunger-strike for political status. Their five demands were:

- 1) The right to wear their own clothing at all times
- 2) Exemption from all forms of penal labour
- 3) Free association with each other at all hours
- 4) The right to organise their own recreational and educational programmes
- 5) Full restoration of remission

The hunger-strikers, with Sean McKenna, one of the seven, on his deathbed, agreed to end the protest after promises that a document was being presented to them by the government answering their five demands. In the meantime, the British government was presenting the world news with a story of the prisoners' surrender, without giving details of any compromise.

The prisoners tried hard to reach a compromise with the authorities but it became clear the British were not interested in anything but outright victory. The prisoners came to the conclusion that they had no choice but to embark upon another hunger-strike—which began on 1 March 1981, the fifth anniversary of the phasing out of political status. The media tried to ignore the hunger-strikes but it soon became impossible to ignore. Bobby Sands, hunger-striker, was elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Republican supporters young and old from every corner of Ireland poured into Fermanagh and South Tyrone to help campaign for Bobby Sands. The republican election campaign came under massive harassment and intimidation. Labour and Tory leaders in Britain appealed to people to vote for the Unionist candidate Harry West, on the grounds that a vote for Sands was 'a vote for the murderers of the IRA'. A total of 30 492 nationalists preferred to vote for 'the murderers of the IRA'.

The message was loud and clear: the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone had elected IRA volunteer Bobby Sands as their MP. They told the British government that Bobby Sands was not a criminal but a freedom

fighter engaged in a political struggle for Irish independence. The 100 000 people who marched behind his coffin were a community who refused to be criminalised, and who themselves gave the lie to the British image of republicans as isolated criminals.

Nine more hunger-strikers were to die before the protest of 1981 came to an end on 3 October, 217 days after it began. There were many more expressions of support for the H-Block prisoners after Bobby Sands' death. Two prisoners were elected TDs in the Irish parliament. One of them, Kieran Doherty, went on to die on hunger-strike. On the day when Mickey Devine died, the last of the hunger-strikers to do so, Owen Carron, Bobby Sands' election agent, won the Fermanagh and South Tyrone seat for the H-Block prisoners with an increased majority. Proof, if any further proof were needed, of the standing of republican prisoners among the nationalist community.

Despite the British government's insistence that it would not negotiate with 'terrorists', direct talks between government officials and the hunger-strikers had taken place throughout the protest. These direct talks and the fact that the five demands were more or less met within a short period after the hunger-strikes prove that the British government internally acknowledged that these men were political prisoners. To concede this publicly however would be to lend legitimacy to a struggle which it had insisted was a criminal conspiracy devoid of popular support.

The government's intransigence highlights what was at stake in the conflict. The irony was that despite defeating the hunger-strikers, the conflict saw the balance of forces shift decisively in the republican movement's favour. The desperate recourse to a hunger-strike was a response to the success the strategy of criminalisation had enjoyed in beginning to isolate the IRA from the nationalist community. The hunger-strikes reversed this, and galvanised nationalist community support of the republican movement. The containment strategy was in tatters. It has taken nearly a decade for the British state to redress the balance lost in 1981.

The hunger-strikes also revealed why Britain could not win the Irish War. Despite the partial success of the containment strategy in the seventies British rule and oppression ensure that there will always be resistance. The hunger-strikes serve as a warning and inspiration to those who think that British imperialism can win the Irish War. This spirit of resistance is best captured in the words of Bobby Sands displayed on a republican mural in Belfast below a painting of blanket men:

'I refuse to change to suit the people who oppress, torture and imprison me. I have the spirit of freedom which cannot be quenched by even the most horrendous treatment. Of course I can be murdered, but I remain what I am—a political prisoner of war.'

Kevin Kelly

Life on the blanket

Guest of the Queen

Kevin Ryan, a community activist in Belfast, was a former volunteer who was on the blanket protest in Long Kesh (the Maze Prison) in the late seventies and during the hunger-strikes of 1981. He spoke to Nat Evans about the brutality of prison life before during and after the hunger-strikes. For security reasons his name has been changed in this article

Kevin was arrested at the age of 17 for his part in the nationalist people's response to the Queen's visit in her jubilee year, 1977. The visit was the high-point of Britain's strategy of presenting the Six Counties as another normal province of the United Kingdom. The withdrawal of political status from republican prisoners of war by the Labour government in 1976 placed them at the sharp point of British strategy in this period. Just as the nationalist community's response to the Queen's visit gave the lie to normalisation, the response of the republican prisoners showed they were not common criminals, but prisoners of war who were prepared to suffer the most inhuman conditions to prove it. When the first republican prisoner to be denied special category status, Kieran Nugent, refused to wear a prison uniform the blanket protest was born.

Kevin Ryan: 'I was arrested in 1977, during the upsurge of trouble around the Queen's silver jubilee visit to the Six Counties. I refused to recognise the court. The blanket protest had been going for just about a year by the time I got up to it. I arrived on the blanket protest May 1978.

'There was about 300-400 republicans on the protest at this time. We decided to escalate the campaign through an open discussion in the wing. There were three blanket blocks: H3, H4 and H5. I was in H4 which was a relatively new blanket block.

'We decided to start a new phase which was basically to rub our own excrement on the walls and slop the piss out underneath the doors. The screws did not like this at all, and they would come round in rubber suits to feed us. They replied to the dirty protest with beatings and hosing sessions. They would come on to the wing in the middle of the night to hose us down. They would open our cell door and put a hose in and they would do the same from the windows, which we had smashed. All we had in the cell was a mattress and a couple of blankets each and that was it—nothing else, no writing material, no cigarettes, no books other than a bible, no toilet paper. We used to rip pieces off the mattress in order to spread the excrement.

We were literally lying in our own urine and excrement because the screws used to brush it back into the cells. We spent fucking god knows how long, the whole rest of the campaign, in that manner. We were soaked all the time, covered in shit all the time, and we were refusing to wash.

'We had a campaign of passive resistance where we didn't hit them or anything, we just stood and let them do everything. They trailed us up the wing, naked and put us over a mirror. They used the mirror to search extensively. The mirror search meant that about four screws would grab you and physically squat you over the mirror and they were able to see if you had anything in your anus. That was how we smuggled things in and out—there was no other way you could have done it anyway. Another time they would put these little steel probers up inside you.

'A lot of the screws on the wing I was in were really bad. There was one we called Gusto Spence after a prominent Loyalist, his name was Spence, another guy called Reggie Little, an English screw and another screw called Brian Armour, he's dead now, the Provos blew him up about two or three years ago. Those screws in particular would do most of the beatings.

'Despite the beatings and searches we still managed to smuggle stuff in and out of the blocks. When we went on a visit, we sat across a table from our relatives. Two or three screws stood looking at us and we were still able to smuggle under those circumstances. We got quite adept at it. Smuggling used to be in the form of tobacco and little letters written on little pieces of toilet roll or cigarette papers stuck together. We also had the components of little radios smuggled in, so perhaps we could pick up one channel, but generally we had no news of the outside world. News from the outside apart from visits was in the form of little 'comms'. These comms would come in from the brigade staff outside, letting us know how the struggle was going and that our protest was very crucial and to keep the chin up, and so on. Morale was very high among most of the lads.'



Inside the 'cages': the dirty protests began a life and death struggle over political status for Irish freedom fighters

The hunger-strikes

The conflict between the authorities and republican prisoners continued to intensify. A low level of republican activity outside the jails placed the struggle in the prisons against criminalisation in an increasingly central position. In 1980 seven prisoners began a hunger-strike for political status. The strike was called off after 53 days when concessions were made by the Tory government. When it became clear that they had no intention of keeping their promises a second hunger-strike was initiated in March 1981 under the leadership of Bobby Sands.

Kevin Ryan: 'At the height of the hunger-strike the actual figures for people on the blanket protest was around 800. We all knew the hunger-strike was one of the weapons at our disposal at some point, and names had been put forward for hunger-strike years before the hunger-strikes had even started. We knew once the protest escalated we couldn't go beyond a hunger-strike, it was the last resort. I don't think we wanted it to go that far. But we felt that the Brits had really left us no option but to escalate the protest.'

'When I went back up the second time during the hunger-strike I ended up in hospital. As it turned out I ended up in the same hospital as the hunger-strikers. I was put into a little room. The first night I heard heavy breathing. I knew the hunger-strikers were there. I came to the conclusion that it must've

been one of the hunger-strikers. It turned out to be Joe McDonnell. I lay up the whole night listening to this, it was quite frightening. He was breathing heavily and then intermittently. It was like listening to an asthmatic. I knew he was dying. I spent the night listening to that. It went silent and outside the window I saw a black van pulling up and then I heard a flurry of footsteps outside my door. I was standing at the door with my ear cocked, listening to what was going on. I heard a woman start crying, which turned out to be Joe McDonnell's wife. The next morning, when they brought my breakfast round the medical officer told me Joe McDonnell died in the early hours of the morning.

'I was there for about five days and the screws allowed me to mix with the hunger-strikers. I was sitting in the canteen with them, watching television, walking round the exercise yard with them, until I got brought back to the block again. But for the whole time I was there the hunger-strikers were more concerned about my welfare and the welfare of those in the blocks than they were about themselves. They were like walking zombies actually; their eyes were sunk back into their heads—there were guys there who had been on hunger-strike 30 or 40 days at this point. I was talking to Martin Hurson just before he died. He was one of the ones that lasted the least—he died after about 48 days or so. Apparently his system couldn't take to the water.

'After I was passed fit by the doctor, I took

back to the block with me loads of tobacco that the hunger-strikers had given me and loads of well-wishes from them to us. I was able to give a first-hand account of exactly what was happening. We had no news of when each hunger-striker died—but we knew pretty much immediately by the mood of the prison. It was as if a huge cloud descended on the prison. Every time a death occurred it was always followed by a debate.'

Release

'I was released from prison in 1983, having spent three periods on the blanket protest. I had gone in at 17 and was released at 23, and I thought that there was no way I wanted to go back there. I had spent my whole youth there. I still agreed with the struggle, but I felt that I had done my bit. It was probably a selfish attitude to take, but that's what prison does to you. So I came out resolved not to get involved in anything. I decided to go to England and stay with relatives in Birmingham for a while. I needed some peace and quiet to decide what to do with my life. That wasn't to be: I was arrested at Stranraer under the PTA and held for seven days without charge. I was then excluded from Britain and kicked back to the Six Counties. I stood in Larne harbour thinking, "If there's ever a time to take up arms against these fuckers, here it is". I had walked out of prison deciding to turn my back on the war, and here were these people booting me back into it.'

The hunger-strikes and the British left

Infamy or a bullet

Alex Farrell examines the British solidarity movement's response to the hunger-strikes of 1980 and 1981

The hallmark of the British left's response to the hunger-strikes was its underestimation of what was at stake in this struggle. For the British state, the question of political status was not an option: the denial of political status to Irish freedom fighters had little to do with Margaret Thatcher's personality or hatred of the Irish. The criminalisation of the Irish freedom struggle was (and remains) the cornerstone of British strategy in Ireland.

The left was unable to understand what was at stake and unwilling to take on the unpopular issue of criminalisation. The left's evasions stood in stark contrast to the unequivocal stance of the Tory government.

The consequences of failing to build a campaign against criminalisation were disastrous: the government won acceptance for its position while the best opportunity to argue the case for Irish freedom since the introduction of internment was squandered. The restriction of the struggle to the North of Ireland ensured that the government had a free hand to pursue its interests without fear of opposition or resistance at home. Ten Irish freedom fighters died as a consequence and the hunger-strikes were defeated.

Let's change the subject

Even before the first hunger-strike started in October 1980, British radicals had already decided that the prisoners' demands for political status were unfit for public consumption. In June 1980 the Troops Out Movement (TOM) conference in Edinburgh voted not to adopt the demand for political status for republican prisoners as their third demand, along with those for 'Troops out now' and self-determination. The reason given was that liberals, trade union and Labour Party leaders would be more inclined to take up the prisoners' campaign if it was divorced from the liberation struggle and presented as a matter of human rights.

The demand for political status had been rejected at the 1979 TOM conference and was to be turned down again in February 1981, after the end of the first hunger-strike. TOM did however decide to support a new campaign initiated in June 1980 by the Socialist Workers Party—Charter '80.

Don't mention the war

Charter '80 was designed by the Socialist Workers Party to TOM specifications. It publicised the five demands of the prisoners as though they were simply prison reforms. It

was directed at winning support for the prisoners from those hostile to their cause. It expressly shied away from convincing British people that they should support the goals of the hunger-strikers:

'[Charter 80] does not ask its supporters either to agree with the declared political objective of the prisoners or to approve of the actions they are supposed to have done in pursuit of this. It does not even ask its supporters to support the prisoners' right to political status.'

This was not quite what the IRA blanketmen were referring to when they announced their determination to begin the 1980 hunger-strike:

'We, the republican prisoners of war in H-Block, Long Kesh, demand as of right political recognition and that we be accorded the status of political prisoners. We claim this right as captured combatants in the continuing struggle for national liberation and self-determination.'

The enemy, in the shape of Margaret Thatcher, was no less clear than the hunger-strikers:

'There can be no give on political status.... Murder is murder is murder. It cannot be a political crime. There can be no question of political status.'

For the British government the prisoners' struggle had nothing to do with a polite humanitarian debate about prison conditions. It was a struggle against criminalisation. A successful campaign would have meant not simply that they were free, for instance, to abstain from prison work. It would have smashed the whole criminalisation strategy. This was what was at stake for the British government.

Turning fighters into victims

More than a month after the start of the second hunger-strike the left unveiled another initiative at a meeting in the house of commons—the Don't Let the Irish Prisoners Die Ad-Hoc Committee. Fronted by the odd Labour MP, the British Communist Party and the Young Liberals, with the SWP and TOM responsible for the legwork, its declared aim was again not to support the campaign for political status but to 'prevent the creation of any martyrs' (March 1981 statement). Why? Because 'the creation of more martyrs

will fuel the conflict for another generation'.

In other words what bothered these campaigners most was the prospect of Irishmen and women joining the liberation struggle in ever greater numbers. With this argument they hoped to convince their colleagues in government that negotiating an end to the hunger-strike would be a bitter blow to the republican movement.

The figurehead of the Don't Let the Irish Prisoners Die committee was Ernie Roberts, the left-wing Hackney MP. After Bobby Sands' election victory in Fermanagh and South Tyrone a frantic search in legal circles began for a formula that would prevent a republican prisoner being elected to the commons again. Roberts opposed plans to 'expel' the imprisoned MP from the house of commons—because to do such a thing 'would earn Britain international condemnation and undermine the authority of parliament'. Roberts' attempt to marry the interests of the British parliament with the revolutionary dedicated to overthrowing its writ in the Six Counties was doomed to failure.

A pamphlet on the H-Blocks, published in September 1981 and written by a leading TOM activist, Liz Curtis, summed up the depths to which the left had sunk as the hunger-strike neared its end. In an effort to take the sting out of the H-Block struggle, the pamphlet's aim was not to argue support for the hunger-strike but to convince the government that there was a better, more humane way of administering its prisons and ruling Ireland.

To show how respectable was her case, Curtis listed a 'host of prominent people' who had 'criticised the British government's intransigent policy towards the prisoners in the North of Ireland'. This list included such well known democrats and freedom fighters as Cardinal O'Fiaich, Bishop Daly, Garret FitzGerald and Charles Haughey, the Ulster Defence Association and former SS officer Kurt Waldheim.

Curtis argued that the British government should not worry about the hunger-strikers as 'these reforms [were] already in existence in liberal prisons'. 'Thus', she concluded 'as has been widely recognised in Ireland and elsewhere, there is room for the British government to meet the demands without having openly to concede that they are political prisoners'. While Curtis was prepared to ignore the substance of the prisoners' demands, the government, like the hunger-strikers, knew that what was at stake was the political status of prisoners of war.

Her Majesty's loyal opposition

The left's campaign eventually ended up with a search, on behalf of the government, for a way to avoid the defeat of the criminalisation strategy—the target of the hunger-strikers—while securing some prison reforms which could bring the strike to an end, and preserve Britain's 'reputation'. As a result its message was aimed at establishment circles and liberal opinion, never at working class people in Britain. In the process the left propagated the idea that Britain could play a progressive role in Ireland, ruling without repression.

The left avoided the fact that the protesting prisoners were in the H-Blocks as captured IRA and Irish National Liberation Army members, portraying them as victims, not as fighters. Yet every single person in Britain knew that they were volunteers and inevitably sided with or against the hunger-strikers on the basis of their attitude to the Irish War.

Humanitarian sentiments during wartime are reserved for 'our side' and are only extended to the 'enemy', if at all, after they have been defeated. But the left accepted from the start that it was impossible to convince working class people to take sides with the Irish against the British ruling class.

In so doing they turned their backs on the only social force in Britain which had an interest in backing the hunger-strikers and the social power to do something about it.

Irish freedom

It was the experience of the hunger-strikes that led to the formation of the Irish Freedom Movement, out of what had been the Smash the PTA Campaign. The campaign organised flat-out throughout the hunger-strikes, including the biggest trade union conference on Ireland held anywhere in Britain at the time, a three-day march to the TUC conference in Blackpool from Manchester, pickets, marches and street sales in every major city in England—all on the basis of open support for the liberation struggle in Ireland. The result that our capacity to mobilise and involve people grew while the traditional left-wing campaigns collapsed.

The tragedy of the hunger-strikes was not simply the death of 10 brave young Irish freedom fighters. The hunger-strikes demonstrated the failure of the left to campaign for political status and only ensured that there was no real support for the prisoners in Britain.

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Thursday 6 December: Liam O'Dhuibhir and Damien McComb are sentenced to 30 years each after being convicted of plotting to cause explosions in Britain—they had been arrested at an arms cache on the Welsh coast a year previously.

Friday 7 December: Donna Maguire wanted in connection with IRA activities is extradited from Belgium to the Netherlands.

Tuesday 18 December: Northern Ireland's director of public prosecutions announces that three undercover British soldiers who shot dead three men robbing a betting shop in West Belfast, with no warning or challenge, will not face charges.

The IRA accuses the RUC of deliberate and wilful endangering of civilians when they failed to act on warnings about the presence of bombs at the Castle Court complex in Belfast—one bomb exploded and another was defused.

Wednesday 19 December: Home secretary Kenneth Baker announces that the broadcasting ban will be extended to include cable and satellite TV.

Thursday 20 December: Neil Kinnock visits the Third Parachute Regiment, the OC of the British Army and the deputy chief constable of the RUC.

A fulltime RUC reservist is shot dead by the IRA near Lurgan, County Armagh.

Friday 21 December: Two British soldiers are injured in a bomb attack on their foot patrol in Stewartstown, County Fermanagh.

Sunday 23 December: The IRA announces a three-day ceasefire—six Border checkpoints closed at night since 3 December are reopened for the duration.

Thursday 27 December: Twenty minutes after the end of the ceasefire the IRA attacks the Border checkpoint at Roslea in County Fermanagh. Later, two RUC men are injured in a bomb attack on an RUC barracks in Belfast.

Sunday 30 December: A civilian, Fergal Caraher, is shot dead and his brother seriously wounded by British soldiers in Cullyhanna, South Armagh. Eye-witnesses state the men were shot in cold blood and allegations of a car crashing through a checkpoint are lies.

Tuesday 1 January: The IRA launches its first attack of 1991 when it opens fire on the Border vehicle checkpoint at Aughnacloy, County Tyrone.

Wednesday 2 January: An RUC man is shot and wounded outside his home in Lisburn, County Antrim.

Patrick Sheehy, on the top of Scotland Yard's most wanted list is found shot dead in Nenagh, County Tipperary.

Saturday 5 January: The IRA attacks commercial targets in Belfast, Lisburn, Glengormley, Dunmurray, Newtownabbey and Newtownards.

Twenty-six-year old Gervais Lynch is shot dead by a Loyalist death squad at his home in Lurgan, County Armagh.

Monday 7 January: The trial of five Irishmen facing alleged arms smuggling from Libya to Ireland begins in Paris.

Tuesday 8 January: Three members of the Royal Marines are injured by a landmine explosion near the village of Cullyhanna.

Saturday 12 January: Local people from the South Tyrone/North Monaghan Community Association reopen one of the 'illegal' Border crossings in the area.

Monday 21 January: An RUC reservist is shot dead by the IRA at Brookeborough, County Fermanagh.

Thursday 24 January: There is a small explosion in a Territorial Army shooting range in Staffordshire and a shooting incident nearby—police say the IRA may have been responsible.

Friday 25 January: The high court in Dublin quashes the extradition order on Belfast man Michael McKee, on the grounds that he was entitled to claim exemption from extradition because the offences he was convicted of in the North were political.

WAR DIARY

Saturday 26 January: The Belfast offices of AP/RN are raided by the RUC—they seize computers, computer discs and documents.

Sunday 27 January: A civilian, Sean Rafferty, is shot dead by the Loyalist Ulster Freedom Fighters at his North Belfast home.

Thursday 31 January: An Army helicopter is hit by heavy-calibre machine gun fire as it came in to land at Forkhill barracks, South Armagh.

An Anglo-Irish inter-governmental conference is held in Dublin. The main subject is Peter Brooke's attempts to start talks involving Unionist parties and the SDLP.

Friday 1 February: Sinn Fein's 86th Ard Fheis begins in Dublin.

Sunday 3 February: The UDR base at Magherafelt, County Derry is blasted by a 500lb van bomb—a known civilian collaborator is forced to drive and position the bomb.

Monday 4 February: Two incendiary bombs are found in a central Dublin store (four more are found the following day). The UFF claims responsibility.

Tuesday 5 February: Brooke announces that there has been 'no progress' in his talks about talks because of a 'degree of mistrust of respective parties'.

Wednesday 6 February: At a press conference in Belfast Sinn Fein exposes attempts by the security forces to entrap ex-prisoners into becoming informers.

Thursday 7 February: The IRA fires three mortars in Whitehall, London from a transit van. One lands in the garden of 10 Downing Street while the war cabinet is meeting inside.

In Belfast three military bases and one mobile patrol come under attack by the IRA with grenades, machine guns and nail bombs.

Wednesday 13 February: On the approach to Crossmaglen, South Armagh a British Army helicopter is shot down by heavy-calibre machine gun/anti-aircraft fire.

Thursday 14 February: A UDR soldier is injured by a letter bomb at his home in Castlederg, County Tyrone.

Thames magistrates reject the two charges on which Dessie Ellis was extradited from Ireland to Britain last November. These are changed for two new charges. The Dublin government says Britain is breaking the spirit of the Anglo-Irish agreement on extradition.

Saturday 16 February: Another British Army helicopter is shot down with heavy-calibre machine guns, this time at Augher, County Tyrone.

Monday 18 February: One man is killed and several people are injured by a bomb at Victoria station in London after police fail to evacuate the station. A small bomb is set off at Paddington station in the early hours.

Wednesday 20 February: The trial of Sinn Fein publicity director Danny Morrison and four other republicans begins in Belfast.

Thursday 21 February: The trial of four Irish people charged with killing two Australian tourists in Roermond, Netherlands last year begins in Roermond.

Friday 22 February: John Major pays his first visit to Northern Ireland and visits a spy post in South Armagh.

Saturday 23 February: The IRA attacks a new spy post being constructed on Fosters mountain—just a couple of miles from where John Major visited the day before.

Sunday 24 February: A 25 year-old man, Peter McTasney, is shot dead and his three-year old niece wounded when Loyalist gunmen burst into his home in Newtownabbey, North Belfast.

Monday 25 February: Three different Army barracks came under machine gun and rifle fire. It is believed that two British Army soldiers are injured in a bomb attack on their foot patrol in the Lower Falls area of Belfast.

Wednesday 27 February: An RUC man is injured by a bomb blast at the home of a retired judge in North Belfast.

Thursday 28 February: Carmen Proeta, a witness to the SAS shootings of three IRA volunteers in Gibraltar, accepts damages of £150 000 from the *Sunday Times*.

Friday 1 March: Two British soldiers die and another two are injured when their jeep is blasted by a 'newly improvised directional missile' on the outskirts of Armagh City, County Armagh.

Saturday 2 March: For the second Saturday running the IRA in South Armagh launches a major attack on a British Army installation—this time at the Army base in Crossmaglen.

Sunday 3 March: Four men are killed in the nationalist village of Cappagh, County Tyrone when gunmen opened fire first on a car arriving at a pub killing three, then firing through a window of the pub killing another man.

Monday 4 March: A nationalist Belfast taxi driver is shot dead after he drives two men to the Shankill Road. The RUC declares it is 'keeping an open mind' on this and the killings at Cappagh.

Wednesday 6 March: A French court recognises as mitigating circumstances the political nature of what three Irishmen were involved in when they were arrested aboard the *Eksund* ship carrying arms from Libya to Ireland for the IRA.

Thursday 7 March: Prince Charles makes a brief visit to Belfast. Later that night the IRA attacks an Army Sagar at the law courts where Charles had been earlier.

Saturday 9 March: Within a 15-minute period

from 10pm, three different attacks are made on Crown force patrols in Belfast.

Sunday 10 March: The RUC stops an International Women's Day march on the Falls Road from entering the city centre on the grounds that a banner in Irish with 'International Women's Day' written on it, would be offensive to people.

Thursday 14 March: The Birmingham Six are released. The IRA says a soldier was injured at a checkpoint at the Fermanagh/Leitrim Border at Derrylin.

Friday 15 March: Kevin Barry O'Donnell a 20 year-old agricultural student from Coalisland, County Tyrone is found not guilty of possessing firearms with intent to endanger life. He is rearrested under the PTA and faces an exclusion order from Britain back to Northern Ireland.

Nationalist areas across West and North Belfast come in for consistent and heavy raiding over a four-day period.

Monday 18 March: Up to 1000 people come to the Fermanagh/Monaghan Border near the town of Clones to demonstrate against the British Army's closure of roads along the Border.

Thursday 21 March: The IRA wounds an RUC employee as she drives out of the Strand Road headquarters in Derry.

Sunday 24 March: A UDR soldier is injured

when ambushed at the village of Trillick, County Tyrone. Soldiers come under sustained fire at a closed Border checkpoint in County Fermanagh while trying to dismantle the base which has become too dangerous to remain in.

Thursday 28 March: Two teenage girls and a 29-year old man are murdered by Loyalist gunmen at a mobile shop on a Catholic housing estate in Craiganon, County Armagh.

Tuesday 2 April: Gerard Harte, 27 from Lurgan, County Armagh, is sentenced to 18 years in prison in Roermond. He and three others who are acquitted were charged with the killing of two Australian tourists in the town last year. The other three, Donna Maguire 24, Paul Hughes 27, and Sean Hick 30, are then rearrested to face extradition to Germany where they will face more charges.

Wednesday 3 April: A Catholic taxi driver Sam Bell 54 is found shot dead beside his burnt-out taxi in North Belfast after he had picked up a fare from the city centre.

Thursday 4 April: A 1000lb van bomb explodes outside the courthouse in Banbridge, County Down injuring an RUC man, who despite a 15-minute warning still didn't get out of the way.

Frank Hughes

Prevention of Terrorism Act

Guilty of being an Irishman in Kilburn

In the last issue of *Irish Freedom* we reported on the series of arrests under the Prevention of Terrorism Act in Kilburn. Tommy Brennan was one of three people released after eight days only to be faced with an exclusion order forcing them out of the country. Fiona Foster and Kevin Kelly visited Tommy at his home in Strabane in the Six Counties

'It was 10 o'clock in the morning. I was just feeding the kids when I heard a lot of movement just outside the front door. As I moved towards it they kicked it in and came hurtling towards me. One grabbed me by the hair while the other dragged me into the kitchen where I was handcuffed to a chair.'

Tommy Brennan had made a life for himself in London. He had a job, a big circle of friends and had never been in any trouble. Then one Sunday morning the anti-terrorist squad arrived and turned his life upside down. His sister Siobhan and her husband were also arrested and while Siobhan was released without being charged in early April, her husband is still in Brixton prison awaiting trial on conspiracy charges. His brother and another friend have been excluded from England under the PTA.

Siobhan was on a two-week holiday visiting her husband and four brothers working in London. Tommy had offered to babysit for her two-year old son while she spent her last night out on the town. When on Sunday morning she had not returned home Tommy got worried and phoned the local police who knew nothing. Later he got a call from Paddington Green police station. He was told his sister and her husband had been arrested under the PTA:

'I couldn't believe it. She was only here on holiday. And Siobhan's never been in any trouble. Twenty years of living in Strabane with the troubles all around her and she's never been arrested once.'

Then came the police attack. While officers grabbed the children, Tommy was thrown in

the back of a police van: 'They called me an IRA murderer. One of them dared me to jump out of the van like the IRA do and said there were cops behind just waiting to shoot me.'

He arrived at Rochester Row police station and was taken to a custody room. 'Where I come from you know not to say anything to the police, so after telling them my name I kept quiet.'

Tommy believes his silence angered the police. 'I think they were trying to humiliate me. To get a sample of my hair two policemen held my arms while another wriggled my hair round his finger and yanked it out. Then they got a toothpick and stuck it deep in behind my nails and scraped out some dirt. They still hadn't told me why I'd been arrested.'

Tommy's cell was rotten; paint flaked off the walls and the stench of urine made him

retch. He stayed in that cell for eight days, occasionally being taken to an interview room. 'The questions reassured me. The police were young lads. They didn't ask me about bombs or killings—they just kept saying how do you know Siobhan Cane? How do you know Michael Brennan? By then they must have known they were my sister and brother. It was a farce.'

On the morning of his last day in detention a prison officer arrived at Tommy's cell telling him he was to be taken to court and charged. Breaking his silence to let the man know that he had nothing to fear Tommy laughed, 'Well that's fine, I can't wait to tell the judge about all this crack'.

Irritated by this, the prison officer told him his cell was rotten and needed cleaning and he'd have to move to another cell. As the door of his new cell was closed behind him Tommy immediately caught sight of an object sticking out from a small shelf on the far side of one cell. It looked like a wallet of some kind. Suspicious, he shouted to the prison officer to remove it: 'He acted all innocent saying what's wrong with you? It's only a wallet, there is nothing in it, have a look.' Tommy continued to refuse to touch it and the angry

prison officer shoved him back into his original cell—which had not been cleaned.

When Tommy got newspapers he noticed that bits had been cut out. His solicitor filled him in on the events that had led to his arrest—the apparent seizure of arms and explosives from two cars parked on a Kilburn estate. 'My solicitor told me that the headlines said "Anti-terrorist squad has seized London IRA bomb team".' His solicitor also told him how the keys to the cars containing explosives had apparently been found in his sister's bag. 'It upset me because I know they've been planted on Siobhan. I was more worried about her than me but I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing me upset. I stayed cocky.'

The exclusion order on Tommy came as a relief and a surprise. A relief because at least he knew he was getting out: a surprise because no one had really treated him like a terrorist suspect. He was presented with an 'exclusion order' explaining that, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, provision was made for the exclusion of 'suspects' for specified periods of time for unspecified reasons. 'The paper said they had reason to believe I was connected with the troubles in

FIONA FOSTER

Northern Ireland. I couldn't believe it. If they had reason to believe this, why weren't they charging me?'

Tommy's solicitor explained that to appeal he would have to stay a further two weeks in prison and answer many detailed questions about his life in England, who he worked with, lived with, drank with: 'Imagine telling the home office all that stuff—I could just imagine people I named getting the same treatment as me so I decided against.'

Tommy was released from Rochester Row only to be rearrested, handcuffed to two plain-clothes police officers and put on a flight bound for Belfast. 'Half the people on the plane looked terrified as if I was a dangerous terrorist. The rest looked sorry for me, the guy behind me asked me if I was alright. I said no, I just got married against my will.'

Tommy Brennan was being kicked out of the country he'd made his home for nearly 10 years. He was being branded a 'terrorist' and he was leaving his younger sister behind bars facing a possible life sentence. He was angry but he was damned if he was going to show it: 'I recognised one of the policemen as the guy who'd kicked in the door that morning, so I kept whistling the theme tune to *The Sweeney*—it drove him mad.' Eventually an air hostess objected to the whole spectacle. The handcuffs were removed and Tommy Brennan walked on to Irish soil a free man.

For Tommy the irony was that he had never felt a free man in the occupied Six Counties. Living in the heart of Strabane made Tommy and his family regular victims of harassment from the British security forces. In one week in 1979 the Brennan family home was raided over 50 times. 'It was the troubles that made me move to England. Even though none of us ever did anything we were Catholics in the wrong end of town. That never seemed to matter in England—well not until now.'

It is not easy to adjust to the lifestyle back in Strabane. A combination of massive unemployment and his new label as a 'terrorist suspect' means the prospects of work are negligible. Most of his old friends have had to leave to find work and he finds the social life in Strabane quiet after London's. The publicity around Tommy's exclusion also means that by now he is probably on the Loyalist hit-lists.

Siobhan's little boy who was asleep on the sofa cries out for Tommy's attention. As he cuddles him he begins for the first time to show some anger: 'It's not right that the wee one should be without his mother. It's not right that they kicked the door down like that. It's not right that I'm back here with no job or nothing.'

Two of Tommy's brothers are still living and working in London. 'This PTA works. My brothers are angry about me and Michael and what's happening to Siobhan. But I keep telling them to keep their heads down, to say nothing. That's not right either, that Irish people should be scared to be angry when things are not right.'



Tommy Brennan: Britain's latest 'terrorist suspect' views life from Strabane

75 YEARS SINCE THE EASTER RISING

James Connolly, Padraig Pearse, Joseph Plunkett. Once the government of the Twenty-six Counties in Ireland held up these men as heroes of Irish history and founding fathers of the Irish Republic. Now, at the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Easter Rising Connolly and the others led, Charles Haughey and other political leaders shuffle their feet in embarrassment and try to play down the significance of the armed rising of 1916.

It was only a month before Easter when grassroots pressure from Fianna Fail supporters forced the government to announce its plans for the seventy-fifth anniversary. After much debate Haughey revealed the official government policy stating that the anniversary of the Easter Rising would be 'commemorated' this year rather than 'celebrated'. A commemorative stamp was duly issued by An Post, and the taoiseach and president Robinson were briefly seen at the GPO on Easter Sunday where the Proclamation was read aloud and the tricolour hoisted. Sinn Fein has condemned the Dublin government's inactivity, particularly given the opportunity for creating international awareness of the anniversary during Dublin's year as European Capital of Culture.

The voluntary Seventy-fifth Anniversary Committee, set up by Sinn Fein and other individuals concerned about the lack of activity around the anniversary, was the only national (even international) group organising for the event. The committee urged local councils and corporations throughout Ireland to 'join in the national commemoration of Easter 1916 to pay due tribute and respect to the patriots of 1916' by promoting local celebrations and commemorative ceremonies. Haughey's belated call for local authorities to make their own arrangements to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary was a cynical move to cover the dearth of initiative from Dublin with the results of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary Committee's campaign.

There is no doubt that the Easter Rising of 1916 was the catalyst to events leading directly to the withdrawal of Britain from four-fifths of Ireland and the eventual establishment of the modern Irish government. But the Dublin government has just as obviously failed to live up to the ideals of those who were willing to die for the cause of Irish freedom 75 years ago.

The uncomfortable position Fianna Fail

finds itself in this year stems from the campaign of the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland. Fianna Fail expropriated the heroes of 1916 to give credence to its claim to be the modern-day republican party. Today another political party more rightfully claims the inheritance of Connolly and Pearse, making republican rhetoric from Fianna Fail less and less plausible.

At the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966 the Irish government was able to celebrate the memory of these revolutionaries secure in a 'peaceful and modern Irish nation'. Today in the Six Counties, Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA carry on the armed struggle to remove occupying British forces from Irish soil and to create the free and united Ireland the revolutionaries of 1916 laid down their lives for. Fianna Fail has little justification to celebrate an incomplete rebellion for national independence. Additionally the government is rightfully uneasy in the hypocrisy of glorifying the men and women who took up arms against the British state. They would find themselves in the awkward situation of lauding those who used violence in 1916 while reviling the 'men of violence' today.

In the early seventies, when the IRA campaign against the British presence had begun in earnest, the Irish government gave up its yearly celebrations of the Easter Rising. In more recent years, unable to ignore the issue of the Rising and equally unable to reconcile its lack of initiative in creating a united Ireland with the ideals of the independence struggle of 1916, the Irish establishment has chosen the relatively simple course of changing the history it inherited over changing its political attitudes to the Border imposed by Britain.

The modern-day 'revisionist' historians have undertaken the groundwork for this shift in Irish political consciousness. The revisionists are, in effect, anti-nationalist writers who have attempted to apologise for British imperialism in Ireland, supporting the notion that Irish people did not despise the British presence so much as object to its more brutal aspects. They have diminished the nationalist tradition of Ireland's people, elevating the 'home rule' movement to the fulfilment of most Irish nationalist aspirations. On the other front the revisionists have set about creating the concept of 'two Irelands'—

one Catholic and nationalist, the other Protestant and British—both traditions having equal historical claim to being 'Irish'.

The emergence of the revisionist historians coincides with a period of renewed struggle for political independence in the Six Counties of Northern Ireland. The school of thought is sympathetic to the Dublin government's present policy of stabilising the Northern counties through cooperation with Britain.

The revisionists claim, with historical justification, that the majority of Irish people supported John Redmond's constitutional home rule bill even up to 1916 in spite of the bill having been shelved by Westminster for the duration of the First World War. The events of the past three years had made it evident that a 32-county Ireland united under home rule within the British state was no longer on the cards, but had done little to erode mainstream support for home rule.

It was the Easter Rising of 1916 that marked the turning point. The men and women who fought an armed struggle against British forces found little support in the Dublin newspapers or among the civil servants and bourgeoisie following their surrender. The revisionists pay little heed to reports that working class neighbourhoods showed a great deal of sympathy with the volunteers as did the provincial press, preferring to assert that, historically, near-universal condemnation was the reality.

It was Britain's quick and heartless execution of the rebel leaders that turned popular political opinion away from a British home rule solution, revisionists claim. In fact, the history of Irish nationalism shows a people willing to support whatever political programme they believed to be the quickest means of achieving independence from the hated British domination. Far from 'British insensitivity and over-reaction', only the pragmatism of the Irish people can explain the massive shift in political allegiance allowing Sinn Fein to take 75 per cent of the vote in the general election of 1918.

More recently Austen Morgan, a member of the popular revisionist school claiming the nationalists of Northern Ireland are to blame for their oppressed state, has set his pen to rewriting the Easter Rising of 1916 in *James Connolly: A Political Biography*. Ignoring Connolly's uncompromised stance on socialism and working class unity in Ireland, Morgan is able to dismiss this leader of the Irish Citizen Army and leader of the Easter Rising as 'a Germanophile who collaborated with a wartime imperialist state'. Morgan's argument is that by launching the uprising in the middle of Britain's war with Germany they were taking sides with the kaiser. Connolly's stance was clear; 'Neither king nor kaiser' was his slogan, but he also understood the republican adage that England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity. In fact, so little credence does Morgan give to the nationalist sentiment of the men who fought 75 years ago that he is able to sum up the event as 'the pro-Germany rising in 1916'.

The revisionists' claim that there exists two

distinct but equally valid 'traditions' in Irish historical development has allowed the Dublin government to sidestep the issue of Irish unity and appear as modern thinkers at the same time. The British have long used this same idea when maintaining that their role in Northern Ireland is simply to see the democratic wishes of the Unionist majority upheld. Prior to Easter Brian Lenihan, still one of the most popular members of Fianna Fail despite his loss in the presidential elections, felt confident enough to suggest on television that a united Ireland in 'the traditional sense of territorial sovereignty' will no longer be relevant after 1992. Borders will be irrelevant after 1992 and the people of Ireland can get on with building friendly 'European' relationships like that of Belgium and France or Italy and Switzerland.

The issue that Lenihan and those members

of the Dail who wish to remove articles two and three from the Irish constitution (the sections claiming sovereignty over all 32 counties of Ireland) miss is that it is Britain's presence in Ireland that is the problem, not the symptoms of that presence: sectarianism, distorted judicial and local government systems, and the armed struggle against Britain.

The people of Ireland have no qualms with celebrating the armed struggle of 1916. Until the people of Britain and Ireland realise that the legacy of the Easter Rising, the armed struggle that endures in the Six Counties of Ireland 75 years on, is as legitimate a response to the British occupation of Ireland today as the 1916 Rising was in the past, little progress will be made to finally realising the ideals Connolly died for.

Anne London

Irish neutrality revisited

Will they beat the drum slowly?

The Western world's latest bloody adventure in the Middle East has reawakened a spectre that has haunted Irish politics for many years: the neutrality debate. There has been widespread anger in Ireland at the Southern government's aid to the West's Arab allies and the 'transport support' provided to the coalition war machine at Shannon airport.

In the mainstream of Irish politics Labour leader Dick Spring and Worker's Party leader Proinsias de Rossa spoke out against any Irish participation in EC aid for the war, claiming it made a 'nonsense of Irish neutrality'. Irish students and the left mounted demonstrations against military refuelling at Shannon airport and moderate groups such as the Campaign for Democracy condemned the Irish government's support for a 'non-genuine' United Nations task force. Across the board of radical Irish politics there is a feeling of betrayal of Irish neutrality, summed up in the annual review of the liberal magazine *Phoenix* 1990:

'It is also good to see that the Squire [Charles Haughey] has put behind him any grandiose notions he might once have harboured about an independent foreign policy, and has subordinated the interests of Irish trade, foreign policy and even hostages to the higher interests of those Nato countries that control the EC. There was a time when Hockey (sic) could not be relied on to do the decent thing—as exemplified by his treachery during the Falklands adventure.'

As in their struggle to defend independent Irish interests in the campaign against the ratification of the Single European Act in 1986, the Irish left has again held up Irish neutrality as a rallying standard, and its belief

that neutrality is a political choice for the South tells an awful lot about the state of the Irish left.

Neutrality has never been an option for Ireland. Its survival and its very borders are dependent wholly on Britain's continued occupation of the Six Counties. In all of Britain's imperialist adventures Ireland has played a supporting role. During the Second World War Ireland supplied shipping, trade and intelligence to Britain, as well as turning a blind eye to Allied operations in and around Ireland. Throughout the fifties and sixties British military planes were among the hundreds each year to make use of Irish facilities. More recently, during the Falklands War, Ireland supported the British-backed UN resolution 502 against Argentina and supported a similar embargo, EEC resolution 877/82, 'in the interests of EEC solidarity'. When Ireland, in order, according to Charles Haughey, to defend its 'traditional position of neutrality', refused to support a renewal of the EEC sanctions Britain responded with economic sanctions of its own, blocking EEC farm price rises in a direct attack on the Irish economy. In three months Ireland has dropped any further reference to neutrality. In Britain's longest imperialist war the non-existence of Irish neutrality has been most stark, and Ireland has been Britain's most uncritical ally in the struggle to crush the nationalist uprising in the Six Counties.

Ireland's ruling elite was installed and armed by and depends upon Britain. It has historically displayed the neutrality of a Rangers fan at an Old Firm match, and yet the historic tradition of Irish neutrality has again been invoked by radical critics of the Leinster House administration. This is a result of the myth of Irish independence.

Irish neutrality, along with Gaelic football, the Brehon Laws and Roisin Dubh, formed part of the mythical tradition of Twenty-six County independence that was established by the Free State in the 1930s. It was vital to the Southern ruling class that it establish a formal commitment to independence in order to consolidate and win support for its regime. The policy of Irish neutrality was set out by Eamon de Valera as a political declaration of independence, in reality the government's view of Irish foreign policy was quite different:

'The real defences of Ireland were not those which might be put up by her people—the defences, that is, on which the government declared itself to rely—but rather the British navy.' (Quoted in GA Hayes MacCoy, *Irish Foreign Policy 1938-1951*)

The formal independence of the Twenty-six Counties was crucial to containing any revolt against British domination that would undermine the Irish establishment, and neutrality played a vital part in its make-up. The true dependence of Ireland on Britain however prevented neutrality from having any concrete consequence. Thus it was possible for de Valera publicly to threaten to attack any belligerent incursion on to Irish soil during the Second World War, while privately inviting one belligerent, Britain, to set up intelligence bases in Ireland. This neutrality has been an essential feature of Irish politics right up to the Gulf War, and the approach of European 'unity' in 1992 promises that the neutrality debate will continue. In the words of one radical writer, Patrick Cromerford:

'There is no reason to presume that Ireland cannot continue to preserve its unique neutrality just as the other European neutrals have, providing the political will to do so is shown by Irish governments.'

The myth of Irish neutrality has been adopted by the radical left in Ireland because acceptance of Irish independence removes the difficult task of fighting for a truly independent Ireland through a defeat for British imperialism. If Irish independence can be maintained through urging the Dail to make the political choice to be independent, then the struggle for Irish freedom can be ignored. It is ironic that as the Dublin establishment feels it is no longer under popular pressure to make rhetorical nationalist gestures it is its opponents who cling to the traditions that for 70 years have maintained the Southern government as an obstacle to Irish freedom.

The lesson of Ireland's complicity in the Western butchery of the Gulf, and its continued conspiracy with Britain against the republican movement, must not be that the Southern government lacks political will, but that it is incapable of any independence from imperialism, and it must be exposed for what it is, the crony of the British warmongers. It will not be the independence of the Twenty-six County state but its destruction that will bring Irish freedom.

Nat Evans

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