Ulster



NO PEACE WITHOUT FREEDOM

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Cover photographs: Simon Norfolk (front), Michael Kramer(back)

BRITAIN IS TO BLAME

This issue of Irish Freedom is devoted mainly to the 'Peace process'. Everybody wants peace in Northern Ireland, most of all the nationalist people. But the 'peace' currently under discussion means the IRA laying down its arms while Britain continues its colonial occupation.

One of the most alarming aspects of the peace process is the way that 'IRA violence' is accepted as the cause of the conflict. If the IRA stopped the killing, the argument goes, everything would be alright and Ireland would be back to normal. But this account turns reality on its head. Before the British invasion in 1969 there was no IRA. It was created after the British Army arrived, to defend the nationalist community and fight for Irish freedom. The removal of the IRA would simply leave the nationalist people without their protective shield, allowing the British and their Loyalist allies to run riot in areas they once feared to enter.

IRA violence is not the cause of the problem. It is Britain's colonial occupation which causes the violence. There will be no peace in Ireland until the source of the divisions and conflict is removed through a complete British withdrawal. Any settlement which removes the IRA but leaves partition and British domination intact can only make matters worse for nationalists in Northern Ireland. And any settlement which leaves the fundamental conflict between the British state and the Irish people unresolved will be a recipe for future oppression, instability and strife, both in Britain and Ireland.

We welcome critical comments and would be especially interested to hear our readers' views on Britain's 'peace' initiative. Please send your comments to Irish Freedom, BM IFM, London WC1N 3XX.

Irish Freedom is edited by Fiona Foster and Mark Reilly. It is written by supporters of the Irish Freedom Movement and is open to anyone interested in advancing solidarity work in Britain.

Editorial

BRITAIN'S DIFFICULTY...



With each passing week it becomes more obvious that Britain is within reach of an historic victory in the Irish war. British politicians and commentators openly acknowledge that they now have the republican movement in a position they could only have dreamed of 10 years ago. Yet the establishment seems disturbed by its impending victory on the field of battle. There is little of the triumphalism you would expect from a defeat over Britain's most hated enemy. Instead, Major and his men seem uncertain, now inching forward, now stepping back. Why the trepidation?

For some time now, the British government has been luring the republican movement with talk of peace. In November 1992, Northern Ireland secretary Patrick Mayhew made a speech in Belfast telling republicans that they would get a place at the negotiating table in return for dumping arms. He even acknowledged the legitimacy of the Irish nationalist tradition. In November 1993, Gerry Adams revealed that Sinn Fein and the British government had been in contact since then. So how do these overtures square with the hard line being taken by the government?

There are two things going on that are pulling the British in opposite directions. One is the prospect of Major claiming victory in Britain's longest war. The other is the dimmer prospect of what happens next.

A victory in Ireland would be a great boost for the government. In the corridors of Whitehall, civil servants and ministers will be thinking of the glory days of 1982, when Thatcher defeated the Argentinians and secured her rule with the Falklands factor. With the credibility of the government at an all time low, a repeat (and better) in Ireland must seem too good a chance to pass over.

And yet at times that is what they seem to be doing. The problem for Britain is that the whole peace process keeps slipping out of their control. With all the talk of peace, everybody is expecting something to happen. The peace process has acquired a dynamic of its own which the British find difficult to control.

This is a profoundly disturbing experience for Britain. Making behind-the-scenes overtures to Sinn Fein is fine, just the sort of skullduggery for which the British are well equipped. But when people start expecting that great constitutional matters will soon be up for discussion, then something like panic sets in.

The question now facing Britain is, what will go on at those negotiations which they have done so much to bring about? Or even worse, what will the public think is going on there? Given the expectations that have been aroused, it will be difficult to scotch the idea that some kind of constitutional revision is taking place.

Even if Britain can set an agenda where the parties discuss little more than who will empty the bins, problems remain. If Major is to live up to the expectations being aroused by the talks, then he must pretend that great matters of state are being resolved. But if he does this, it will be difficult to avoid the charge that he is discussing the future and shape of Her Majesty's realm with a bunch of 'micks'.

When the negotiations do take place, it will be difficult for Major to make even the smallest, most superficial concessions. Any suggestion that the government of the day is compromising the integrity and unity of the state would cause chaos in the establishment. Even talking to 'terrorists' who have surrendered is problematic. While the weakness of the British establishment may prompt Major to go for a propaganda victory in accepting an IRA surrender, the same weakness will make the most meagre concession a cause of discord and instability.

The conflicting pressures on the British government explain the different signals. One day Major dismisses Hume/Adams out of hand. The next day he praises Hume for his courage and tells him to keep up the good work. One day he threatens to tighten the broadcasting restrictions on Sinn Fein still further, the next, he tells Sinn Fein that there will be a place at the negotiating table in return for an end to violence.

Ultimately Major will have to choose. The dynamic of the 'peace' process will probably take him to the conference table. Even if the British government manages to pull off a coup and emerges from the negotiations with its authority enhanced, what then? Nothing can ever be the same again in the relations between the two nations of these islands. The arrangements which have worked well and kept the Union stable for 70 years, even through the turmoil of the last 25 years of war, will be gone. The South is ditching its last attachments to the nationalist legacy with the proposed abandonment of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. Republicanism will appear very different to what it has been for the last quarter century. This means two things. First that there will no longer be any familiar channels through which the anger at Ireland's national oppression will flow. Second that new constitutional arrangements between Britain and Ireland will be necessary. The British establishment knows from experience that such changes bring nothing but trouble. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the stable institutions associated with the East/West divide, the West has seen its old political legitimacy ripped to shreds. Now a similar process threatens to take place within the United Kingdom itself, with the added danger that unlike in the Cold War, there is a real enemy in Ireland.

Whatever else it may bring, the peace process will not bring peace. There is no escaping the fact that we face a defeat for the liberation movement. But even in victory Britain will have little to rejoice about. The end of the poltical framework through which Britain has contained Ireland since partition means that any peace imposed by Britain will not last long. The future will not be peace, but a new and more dangerous round of conflict and turmoil.

'IRELAND UNFREE SHALL NEVER

The peace initiative launched by Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams and SDLP leader John Hume has fuelled speculation that an end may be in sight to Britain's longest war. But, Michael Fitzpatrick asks, can such a deal bring peace?

Details of the Hume/Adams initiative have yet to be made public. To discover exactly what is happening we need to look more closely at the statements made by Sinn Fein leaders in recent weeks. It is first important to note that all the movement is coming from the republican side: Sinn Fein leaders have made clear that they are now prepared to accept an arrangement that falls far short of an end to partition and an immediate British withdrawal.

The clearest indication of the new pragmatism of the republican leadership is its fudging of the issue of national self determination. 'We would like to see a 32 county republic in Ireland' says McGuinness, 'but what we're trying to bring about is a situation where all the people of Ireland get a right to national self-determination' (*Guardian,* 18/19 September). Adams has expanded on this cryptic formulation: 'Whatever agreement we come up with has to be an agreement that Unionists, like the rest of us, can give their allegiance to. They have to be part of it and have to feel that it accommodates them' (*Independent on Sunday,* 3 October). In a speech at Cookstown on the 25th anniversary of the launch of the civil rights movement, McGuinness returned to the theme of what he called 'national reconciliation' between the Unionists and the rest of the Irish people, in terms echoing the Hume/Adams statement: 'any new agreement must respect the diversity of our different traditions and must earn their allegiance and agreement' (*AP/RN,* 30 September).

The contrast between these statements on national rights and Adams' response to Hume in their last round of talks in 1988 is striking.

'When a people are divided in political allegiance, the democratic principle is that majority rights should prevail; the more so when such fundamentals as national rights are in question...

'The exercise of the right to national self-determination in practice involves, primarily, the acceptance of Irish national rights by the British government'(*Irish Times,* 13 September 1988)

It appears that over the past five years the confusions of the SDLP have been assimilated by Sinn Fein.

Adams' 1988 response states with exemplary clarity the basic issue of the Irish conflict: the denial of national rights of the majority of the Irish people by Britain. There can be no flexibility on such a fundamental issue: Ireland can either be independent or ruled by Britain. Concessions to Unionist 'difference' mean in practice abandoning the national rights of the majority. It is important to emphasise that the Loyalists neither have nor claim any 'national' rights. Their 'loyalty' is to Britain and to its suppression of the national rights of the majority of the Irish people. When republicans declare their respect for the political allegiances of the Unionists, they effectively give up their own struggle for national liberation.

Eire Nua

There is also a striking contrast between the conciliatory line towards Loyalism advocated by Adams and McGuinness today and that taken by them in their earlier factional struggle for power within the republican movement. *Eire Nua,* the programme adopted by the Provisional republican movement in 1972 shortly after the 1970 split from the Officials, proposed a federal structure for the 'new Ireland' which would emerge after British withdrawal. The key feature of this scheme, which the Provisionals had inherited from the Stalinist mentors of the Officials, was its attempt to appease the Loyalists by offering them a degree of autonomy within the ancient province of Ulster. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the federal policy of *Eire Nua* became a central bone of contention between the rising Northern-based faction including Adams, McGuinness, Danny Morrison and Joe Austin, and the old-guard Southern leadership of David O'Connell (Daithi O'Connaill) and Rory O'Brady (Ruari O'Bradaigh).

The Northern faction, with direct and bitter experience of the savagery of Loyalist sectarianism, argued that reconciliation could only be achieved within a united independent Ireland, but, given the British role in promoting Loyalism, not before a British withdrawal. This position prevailed by a simple majority in 1981 and by the requisite two thirds majority in 1982. Adams became Sinn Fein president in 1983. A decade later the Sinn Fein leadership has moved towards adopting a position close to that not only of its long-standing critics in the SDLP, but also to that of its former rivals in the republican movement.

'IRA violence'

The current republican initiative is the outcome of the strategy outlined in the document Towards a lasting peace endorsed by the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis (conference) in 1992. This document advanced a four point plan aiming to secure agreement between London and Dublin to end partition; to establish an 'inclusive dialogue' among all relevant forces to end the conflict; to win the assistance of the 'international community'; and to achieve the 'complete demilitarisation' of Northern Ireland. In current discussions this agenda seems to have been reduced to the mechanics of a trade-off between an IRA ceasefire and a place for Sinn Fein at some sort of conference table.

The very terms of the 'peace process' discussion reflect a significant propaganda victory for Britain. The whole debate implicitly accepts that 'IRA violence' is the central problem and the major obstacle to progress in Ireland. In reality, the armed struggle conducted by the republican movement over the past two decades only emerged in response to British military occupation. Military resistance has been the only means available of defending the nationalist population in Northern Ireland against the brutally coercive character of British rule. The continuing domination of Britain over Ireland, mediated through the partition of the country and the division of its people remains the barrier to peace and progress. For as long as this oppressive framework remains intact, no amount of

BE AT PEACE'

talking and diplomacy will move Ireland a step closer towards peace.

What would be the consequences of a cessation of the armed struggle while partition and the British military occupation continued? First, Catholics would remain second class citizens in a sectarian statelet. Even official quangos like the Fair Employment Commission confirm that job discrimination remains as pervasive as it was when the civil rights movement first took up the issue in the 1960s. Catholic men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestants; in some areas the ratio is 1:3 (*Guardian,* 26 June).

Second, in the absence of the IRA, sectarian terror is likely to intensify. The 12 month ceasefire in 1975 led to a major upsurge in random Loyalist assassinations of Catholics. In his own account of this period Gerry Adams noted how the British 'used bilateral truces with the IRA to gain the upper hand, to cause confusion in republican ranks and to introduce new strategies', though they never had any 'serious intention of considering or conceding the republican demands' (The politics of Irish freedom, p101). Noting the resulting demoralisation, Adams conceded that the British 'probably came nearer at that time to defeating the republican struggle than at any time during the last 14 years' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News,* 21 July 1983).

The trend towards more sectarian violence is already clear before any deal has emerged. In September the IRA observed a de-facto one week cessation of military activity in Belfast while an Irish-American delegation promoting the peace process was in town. In seven days four Catholics were murdered by Loyalist gangs. The immediate response of the Ulster Freedom Fighters to the Hume/Adams announcement was a declaration that violence against the nationalist community 'would intensify' (*Guardian* 8 October). It was no idle threat. Within three weeks 13 Catholics had been slaughtered by Loyalist gangs.

Before the 1975 ceasefire one republican expressed his scepticism about the proposed terms: 'Suppose we get the release of all detainees, an amnesty and the withdrawal of troops to barracks, we are still back where we started in 1969' (*Sunday Times,* 19 January 1975). The tragedy of the terms apparently on offer this time is that the republican movement is offering not merely a ceasfire but 'a cessation' of the armed struggle on terms which will leave the nationalist people in Northern Ireland back where they started in 1969, but without even securing the release of all the prisoners or the withdrawal of troops to barracks.

A recurrent theme in statements by republican leaders is that, as McGuinness puts it, the British government should 'learn from South Africa and Israel'. Major should 'be radical' and negotiate a historic settlement with Adams and Sinn Fein just as De Klerk has done with Mandela and the ANC and Rabin has with Arafat and the PLO. The republican movement's endorsement of these deals as an appropriate model for Ireland is both revealing and alarming.

There are obviously major differences among these three conflicts. Yet the key external influence on all three is the new international balance of forces resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the associated demise of socialist and national liberation movements around the world. In the new world order the Western powers have gained a new confidence about interfering in the affairs of other countries and liberation struggles are everywhere in retreat.

In this bleak climate the leaders of the ANC and the PLO have been forced to abandon military resistance, scale down their objectives and make humiliating compromises with their former enemies. In South Africa, the ANC has put off the goal of black majority rule towards the end of the century, at the earliest, while agreeing to participate in a new government framework that maintains white rule for the forseeable future. In Palestine, the PLO has been allowed to raise its flag over a large refugee camp (the Gaza strip) and one small town (Jericho). Meanwhile the degradation and the slaughter that are inseparable from imperialist domination continue, at present on a more gruesome scale in South Africa. The clear lesson for Ireland from South Africa and Palestine is that there can be no peace without freedom.

Some pundits have argued that the crucial distinction undermining the prospects of peace in Ireland is that Adams is no Mandela or Arafat. In fact, as their mutual rapport suggests, there is much common ground among these three nationalist leaders. The key distinction is better expressed by stating that Major is no De Klerk or Rabin. The most important difference between South Africa and Palestine on the one hand and Ireland on the other concerns the position of the dominant state power. Though both the ANC and the PLO had reached a military stalemate and had lost cohesion and direction, they faced governing powers which were also in a weak position.



PHOTOS SIMON NORFOLK

Above and previous page: The funeral of IRA volunteer Thomas Begley

Leaves on the line

The combination of the world slump and internal instability have devastated the South African economy, making some sort of deal imperative for the regime, despite the risks involved. The events following the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War confirmed Israel's declining importance as the West's major Middle Eastern proxy, exacerbating its already serious domestic economic and social problems. Rabin too was pushed into making concessions to the PLO.

The British government, by contrast, though it is in considerable difficulties, is unfortunately under less pressure in relation to Ireland than at any time in the past 25 years. Recent IRA bombings in Britain appear so far removed from any rationale in relation to events in Ireland and so apparently random and often purposeless in their selection of targets, that they now provoke little public interest or response. Even the two massive explosions in the City of London (Baltic Exchange, October 1992 and Bishopsgate, July 1993) though they caused major disruption and enormous insurance claims, made little political impact. The deaths of two boys as a result of an IRA bomb in Warrington in March 1993 provoked a much bigger response in Ireland than it did in Britain. For British public opinion the occasional bombing in Britain has become, like the year after year toll of death and destruction in Northern Ireland, 'an acceptable level of violence'.

Londoners have come to regard IRA bombs as just yet another nuisance of life in the capital, like leaves on the line or holes in the road.

The effective collapse of radical and labour movement opposition to the government gives it much greater room to manoeuvre in relation to Ireland as in relation to other issues. Thus events and exposures that might in the past have put the government on the defensive now cause little embarrassment. Last year's shocking revelations of close contacts between the British security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries raised scarcely a ripple. Last week's outrageous court decision to drop all charges against the police who framed the Guildford Four provoked only a universal shrugging of the shoulders.

Now that separatist conflicts are breaking out all over Europe, Britain is less embarrassed by its own squalid war, and its long record of sectarian strife, ethnic cleansing and terror. Indeed the British authorities have used the eruption of national and ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe and elsewhere to bolster their own spurious claim to be playing a civilising role among the 'warring tribes' of Northern Ireland.

It is thus not surprising that the British government is not rushing to respond to the Hume/Adams initiative. Major and his advisors have been quite happy over recent months to sit back and let the republicans make the running: as we have seen their intransigence has been rewarded by substantial shifts in the Sinn Fein approach. Major has also to consider his declining parliamentary majority and to remember his little deal with the Ulster Unionists to get his Maastricht Bill through the House of Commons in June in face of a substantial Tory back bench revolt. In his firm Tory party conference speech rejection of the Hume/Adams approach last week, Major repaid some of this debt.

No victory for Britain

While Major may elect to let the current process drag on, the possibility remains that he might be attracted by the prospect of posturing as the British prime minister who negotiated the end of Britain's longest war. While the spectre of Gerry Adams shaking hands with Ian Paisley across the Downing Street lawn while Major looks on seems unlikely, so, not so long ago, did the Rabin-Arafat and the De Klerk-Mandela assignations. Given the current unpopularity and lack of coherence of Major's government, some such stunt as part of a ceasefire and negotiations package might appeal to the Major team. Influential figures—former Tory prime minister Edward Heath, former Northern Ireland minister Michael Mates, Official Unionist MP and Orange Order chief Martin Smyth, Dublin leaders Albert Reynolds and Dick Spring, even the Loyalist paramilitary Ulster Defence Association—have already indicated their support for some such settlement. The fact that Democratic Unionist boss Ian Paisley continues to trumpet opposition could be considered to add legitimacy to the whole process.

However, though any British-imposed solution would amount to a defeat for the nationalist movement, it would not necessarily be a victory for Britain. Because, as we have argued, any such deal would not bring peace and stability to Ireland, the Six Counties would remain a source of conflict within the 'United Kingdom'. As a result of the unique constitutional arrangement through which the Six Counties are incorporated into the British state, the instability there directly affects Britain itself. While any cessation of the conflict within the existing framework could only be short-lived, even token concessions by the British government to Irish national aspirations could compound the crisis of legitimacy that already grips the British establishment.

Tactical retreat

It is understandable that, after more than 20 years of a bitter war that has scarcely left a single family untouched, the nationalist people should be weary and desparate for any sort of settlement. The republican leadership may consider that it has no alternative but to talk terms with Britain. The IRA has displayed a remarkable resourcefulness and resilience in carrying out military resistance against Britain on a number of fronts using a wide range of tactics and techniques. It has maintained a much more effective guerrilla organisation than either the ANC or the PLO, with less resources and international support. Yet, faced with the overwhelming strength of the British state the IRA has been forced to concede that it cannot, given the current wider balance of forces, expect to drive the British out of Ireland by military means alone.

There is nothing wrong with negotiating a compromise with superior forces—so long as this is presented as what it is, a compromise, which given the unresolved conflict at stake, can only be unsatisfactory, provisional and temporary. But when such a deal is presented as marking an advance towards justice and peace, the result can only be confusion and demoralisation. Nobody expects the IRA to fight to the last man; when confronted with overwhelming odds a tactical retreat is often expedient. But a tactical retreat should not be represented as a strategic breakthrough. After nearly a quarter of a century of suffering the Irish people have a right to hear the truth from those who claim to represent them.

As we approach what appears to be the end of the current phase of the long-running Anglo-Irish conflict it is worth recalling a famous statement made at the opening of the present cycle, after the onset of the First World War, but before the Easter Rising. Padraig Pearse, then a member of the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood and shortly to be executed for his leading role in the 1916 Rising, gave the panegyric at the funeral of the old Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. O'Donovan Rossa had played a prominent role in the national struggles of the nineteenth century, gaining an international reputation for his heroic resistance to the British authorities during prolonged spells of imprisonment. After his death in America his body was brought back to Ireland for burial in a ceremony that became a mass demonstration of the growing nationalist consciousness that was later manifested in the Rising and the subsequent War of Independence.

This is how Pearse concluded his oration:

'Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. The Defenders of the Realm think they have pacified Ireland...but the fools, the fools, the fools.

'They have left us our Fenian dead and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace.'

This passage well expresses Pearse's well-known conception of national redemption through blood sacrifice, a feature of the ambivalent legacy of Catholicism to Irish Republicanism. But it expresses too a sense of the suffering of the Irish people and a recognition that national freedom was the precondition for bringing this suffering to an end.

Remember the living

Some 80 years of struggle later Ireland holds a great many more graves. It is estimated that less than 500 people died in 1916, perhaps 1400 in the War of Independence and 600 more in the Civil War that followed partition in the Twenty Six counties; some 3000 more have died in the resurgence of the Troubles since 1969. What springs from all these graves? Evidently nothing but a 'peace process' that cannot bring either peace or the goal of national freedom for which so many gave their lives.

It is appropriate on occasion to remember those who have died, and, more importantly, what they died for. But in the end it is not the legacy of dead generations that drives the liberation struggle forward. Britain's folly is not that it has left Ireland its Fenian dead, but that it thinks it can pacify Ireland without offering any future to its younger generation. Whatever the outcome of the 'peace' talks, the liberation of Ireland's future must now start anew.

The British government is not about to pull out of Ireland. Nor will it ever do so voluntarily, argues Alex Farrell.

A MATTER

'The British government', said Gerry Adams in October, 'is part of the problem, and it has to be part of the solution.' Can any British solution deliver real peace and real freedom to the Irish people? And how solid is the British state's determination to hold onto Ireland?

When matters of life and death are at stake, the results of negotiations are not determined by the integrity or the intelligence of the negotiators. What is decisive is the real balance of forces between the two parties in the conflict. So, who is on top? The British establishment or the Northern nationalists? What pressure is there on Britain to make concessions, or even to get out completely?

The relationship between Britain and Ireland is unique. Ireland is far from being just another British colony. Unlike any other it has been incorporated directly into the British state itself. The British ruling class claims its home territory to be the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'. As a result, what is at stake in the Irish conflict is the very survival of the state—its credibility and authority, its capacity to rule. That is why the Irish question has been and still is so dangerous for the powers-that-be.

Then and now

This is not some fine abstract theory. The last time Ireland dominated British politics—in the 1910s and 1920s—the British state came closer to collapse than at any other time this century. There was an open split in the ruling class. An illegal armed militia—the Ulster Volunteer Force—was raised in public defiance of the British parliament to fight the Liberal government's plans to introduce limited Home Rule in Ireland. The UVF turned out to have majority support inside the British ruling elite. Tory Party leader Andrew Bonar Law threatened civil war, bluntly declaring that 'there are things stronger than parliamentary majorities'. No idle threat. He had the backing of Britain's military leaders. The British army stationed at the Curragh mutinied, refusing a command to disarm the UVF.

When the integrity of its own state is at issue, the British establishment drops the parliamentary facade and fights for keeps. Militant Unionism was not based on the rantings of rabble-rousing Orange clergymen. It was built into the modern British political system at its birth and into its twentieth-century standard bearer—the Conservative & Unionist Party. Fittingly, the first prime minister after the collapse of the Liberal Party was the Tory, Andrew Bonar Law.

Fair enough, it could be argued—but that was then and this is now. In fact the prospect of defeat on the Irish question would have an even more cataclysmic effect on the stability of the British state today. In Bonar Law's day, British imperialism had only just began its slow descent to the bottom of the Premier League of imperialist powers, and little did its leaders know it. Their Empire was at its largest extent and their military power awesome. Today Britain is in the relegation zone, in a profound economic slump, caught in mid-ocean between a German-dominated Europe and a disinterested USA, dependent on a world market dominated by stronger rivals, running a £50 billion a year deficit and struggling to maintain its undeserved status as a world power. The only thing the establishment has going for it is the absence of any serious domestic political opposition.

The emperor's clothes

Though Britain is in a strong position in relation to Ireland, it is nevertheless afflicted with a deep-seated malaise that arises out of its wider crisis of legitimacy. Far from making it more open to compromise, this weakness makes it more dangerous and more desperate to uphold its authority. The less certain its capacity to govern, the more crucial it is to maintain the appearance of absolute control. The Irish have had the temerity to point out by their actions that the writ of the British state does not even apply on its claimed home ground. This the British state can never publicly acknowledge.

To walk out of Ireland would be to announce its own impotence. The emperor would have confessed to being naked and defenceless. Britain's foreign rivals would take it as a green light to feast on rich British pickings abroad, confident that a nation state unable even to hold onto its own territory could hardly defend its pitches outside. Domestically the key myth of British invincibility would be smashed, and the consent of society to be ruled by a parasitic minority would disintegrate. Such a development would split the British establishment and lead to civil war.

This is the scale of the danger that Irish national self-determination poses for the British ruling class. Does this mean that Britain will never get out of Ireland? No. Have 25 years of hard struggle been a waste of time? No. They have proved what can be done by working class people who reject the right of the state to rule them. But northern nationalists cannot force Britain out of Ireland on their own. Without a mass working class anti-imperialist movement in the Twenty-Six Counties and in Britain itself, the British state—mindful of what is at stake—cannot be put in sufficient fear for its survival to cut and run.

Substantiating the hopes for peace riding on the Hume/Adams proposals, many people believe and argue that Britain is under tremendous pressure to get out of Ireland. In fact Britain is under less pressure than at any time since the mid to late 'seventies, the republican movement's lowest ebb after the disastrous 1975 IRA ceasefire and the introduction of the criminalisation strategy in 1976.

● The dominant trend internationally is not imperialist concessions to national liberation movements but the exact opposite. Since the end of the Cold War nationalist leaders have, one after the other been pressed into talks and made concession after concession. The South African and PLO/Israel peace deals are not victories but defeats-in-process. In South Africa, black majority rule has already been postponed with ANC agreement until after the millenium. In the Middle East the PLO has recognised the state of Israel in exchange for the right to raise their flag over the Gaza strip and Jericho—a mini-state which can only be entirely dependent on Israel.

In the West the anti-imperialist tradition has never been weaker. Liberals and left-wingers have queued up to lead demands for imperialist intervention overseas, in the Gulf, in Yugoslavia and in Somalia, lending Western efforts to impose their New World Order a spurious democratic and humanitarian justification. No pressure there on the British government.

● Don't most British people want Britain to get out of Ireland, as reflected in opinion poll results over many years? The dominant sentiment in Britain is apathy. When asked, people want out because they could not care less about what happens in the North, accept the propaganda presenting it as an irrational tribal conflict, and don't see why 'our boys' should get killed stopping 'mad Paddies' killing each other. The same sentiment supports the measures that the gov-

OF LIFE AND DEATH



SIMON NORFOLK

British power in Ireland comes out of the barrel of a gun

ernment takes, so long as they are justified as anti-terrorist. Hence there is no significant opposition to the criminalisation of the whole Irish community in Britain. Far from constituting pressure on the government, in concrete circumstances this sentiment adds up to support for it.

● What about Clinton? Isn't the American president bringing heavy pressure to bear on the British government? But Bill Clinton's pre-election pro-Irish remarks were simply aimed at getting the Irish-American vote on board his bandwagon. It worked. But we've been here before. In his election campaign, Jimmy Carter came out with even more radical positions than Clinton, openly advocating a united Ireland. Once inside the White House, Carter and later Clinton became the leader of the world's largest imperialist power. As such, the USA has every interest in backing Britain and ensuring that no third world nation gets the idea that you can take on imperialism and get away with it.

● But surely Britain is internationally embarrassed to be Europe's number one human rights abuser? Not embarrassed enough to change its repressive practices—except for the worse. The successive releases of the Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four, the Winchester Three and Judy Ward led to the setting up of the Royal Commission on Criminal Justice—which, far from inaugurating a new era of justice, proceeded to propose removing the right to silence, and questioned the right to jury trial, among other authoritarian suggestions. No sign of embarrassment there.

The trial of four of the policemen involved in the Guildford Four frame-up turned into a retrial of the Four and the exoneration of the police. More brazenly yet, the trial of three Birmingham Six police was called off by the judge before it even got started, on the contemptuous grounds that no fair trial was possible—not a courtesy commonly extended to Irish defendants.

None of this suggests that Britain finds itself under pressure—domestic or international—on the human rights front.

● What about the massive costs of its Irish War to the British Exchequer? Face it, a ruling class that is living with a deficit which grows by £1 billion a week is not going to threaten the integrity of its own state for a mere £6 billion a year.

The results of negotiations are determined by the real balance of forces between the two parties in the conflict. The balance today in the Irish War is firmly in favour of British imperialism. Under these circumstances, any deal which emerges would be determined by the British agenda.

Britain might change the form of its rule in Ireland. It might dress up a new arrangement in hyped-up democratic terms. It might invent a symbolic 32-County institution, with which nationalists could 'choose' to 'identify'. But this can only be speculation.

Worse, not better

What is not speculation is that no deal will emerge that will remove Britain's deadly presence in Ireland. The apartheid system in Northern Ireland and the reactionary British-dependent system in the South were both created by Britain through partition, and are maintained by it today. As far as the North is concerned, so long as Britain remains, so will apartheid and the second class status of the nationalist community—if anything, even worse in 1993 than in 1968.



NO BLUEPRINT FOR PEACE

Hopes that the deal between Israel and the PLO can be a model for peace in Ireland are both misguided and dangerous, argues John Conroy

The peace deal hatched between PLO leader Yasser Arafat and the Israeli government at the start of September is being treated as a model of how old enemies can forget their differences. In Britain and Ireland all shades of opinion see it as a sign of hope. The effect of the deal has been to speed up the momentum for a peaceful settlement of the Irish War. What sort of peace deal is this, and who benefits?

First of all, the deal is a defeat for the Palestinians without being a victory for Israel. Many people will recognise that the Palestinians have suffered a historic defeat in accepting such humiliating terms. Since

the deal was signed in Washington, the killing of Palestinians by Israeli forces has continued as before, with curfews imposed on the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank. Throughout the Palestinian world there is a growing unease with the scale of the surrender. Even figures from within the PLO leadership, such as Farouk al-Kaddoumi have attacked the deal as a sell-out.

While the scale of the Palestinian defeat is more obvious, the future for Israel after 'peace' is also bleak. One paltry concession to Palestinian statehood is enough to undermine the whole fabric of Israeli society.

It may seem paradoxical to suggest that an agreement reached by two opposing sides can be a defeat for one without being a victory for the other. Talks are never more than a ratification of the balance of forces between opponents. However the distinctive thing about the Middle East deal is that neither side was a free agent. Both were forced to make concessions detrimental to their long-term interests.

No private chat

When news of secret talks between Israeli and PLO officials broke at the end of August, the immediate impression was that this was a private chat between the two sides away from the glare of publicity. It was also seen as a snub to the United States and the UN sponsored peace talks in New York. As the months passed it became more obvious that the reality was rather different. That historic handshake on the White House lawn between Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin under the benevolent gaze of Bill Clinton revealed who was the key player. It is America's domination of the Middle East that forced the two sides into the fatal deal.

Since the end of the Cold War the USA has had a much freer hand in reorganising the Middle East. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that both the PLO and the Arab regimes could no longer escape Western power and influence. This shift in relations was consolidated in the Gulf War, when Bush mobilised the support of Arab states in his crusade against Saddam Hussein. The fact that the USA could now dictate directly to the Arab regimes also meant a downgrading for Israel. Throughout the Cold War, Israel was the only state in the region on which America could rely. Every year America spent billions of dollars keeping the Israeli state afloat. With the end of the Cold War and America's new freedom in the region, Israel became little more than another Middle Eastern regime. As a result, aid budgets have been slashed and Israel treated with a disdain once reserved for Arabs.

'A Palestinian Versailles'

In a scathing attack on the deal, Palestinian activist and writer Edward Said described it as '...an instrument of...surrender, a Palestinian Versailles'. There is a grim irony in Said's attack, since he himself has played a major intellectual role since the 1970s in guiding the PLO towards an accommodation with Israel. Yet there is no denying the scale of the Palestinian collapse.

In return for abandoning the armed struggle for national self-determination, the PLO has accepted a role as a municipal department of the Israeli state.

Even in terms of regional autonomy, the terms could hardly be more humiliating. The PLO is to run the Gaza Strip and the town of Jericho on the West Bank. The Gaza Strip is a rubbish dump, home to 800 000 Palestinians, most of whom are forced to work in conditions of near-slavery in pre-1967 Israel. The Israelis tried to give Gaza to Egypt in 1978 but were told to keep it. The Strip is a liability and a security nightmare for Israel. Now the PLO will police it and save them the trouble and expense in money and Israeli lives. As for Jericho, the idea of a separate authority for such a medium-sized town is a joke. Everything bar the directing of traffic will be controlled by Israel. When the first Palestinian police turned up for work in October, they were immediately arrested by Israeli soldiers. Such ignominy will become ritual in the months to come.

Artificial state

While the deal is a terrible defeat for the Palestinians, it is also bad news for Israel. The Zionist state has been forced to make a concession which strikes at the very heart of its existence. Since its foundation in 1948, the state of Israel has survived through the suppression of Palestinian national rights. Israel is an artificial state imposed on the people of the region by the Western powers. Its creation meant that two peoples were laying claim to the same piece of land. There can be no real compromise where such rivalry exists. Any recognition, however superficial, of the rival claims of another people throws the whole existence of the state into question.

No part of Israel is more legitimate than another. Every bit of it was robbed by violence. So conceding that the Palestinians may have a claim on Gaza and Jericho today raises the question, 'Where will it end?'. The recognition that there were rival claims on the land of Palestine explains why the Israelis took such a hard line in the past—and why the Zionist right has a point when it warns that the deal could have dangerous long-term consequences for Israel.

Whatever the consequences for Israel, the most important thing to recognise is that this deal is a defeat for the forces of liberation. To treat it as a blueprint for peace in Ireland or anywhere else is both inappropriate and dangerous. We should also recognise that while the PLO was forced into a surrender, it shares much of the responsibility for the demise of the Palestinian cause.

Equivocal PLO

Although the PLO has been the focus for Palestinian hatred of Israeli and Western domination, its own attitude has been far more equivocal. Since the mid-1970s the desire to come to some kind of accommodation with imperialism has been manifest within the leadership of the organisation. Arafat has increasingly pinned his hopes on Western diplomacy rather than on the struggle against the Israeli state.

The reliance on Western diplomacy has had a poisonous effect on the liberation struggle. Compare for example the two national liberation movements, Irish republicanism and the PLO. The fact that republicanism has always been spurned by Western diplomacy has made it a far more effective fighting organisation, relying only on the courage and resources of its own people. At a simple level of resistance, the IRA has always put the PLO to shame, despite the men and firepower at the disposal of the latter. Unlike the PLO, the IRA never had the problem of trying to reconcile armed struggle with respectability in Western capitals. Contrast, too, the lifestyles of republican and PLO leaders. The former live in conditions not much different from, and probably more insecure than their supporters. PLO leaders by all accounts live in a state verging on debauchery. It seems that no high-society scandal is complete these days without the presence of a senior PLO official. The Palestinian experience would indicate that Western diplomacy and active resistance soon become incompatible.

Unstable future

What is certain about the Middle Eastern deal is that it will bring neither peace nor stability. The end of hostilities between Israel and the PLO means that the old framework which held the region in an uneasy stalemate is gone. Just for a start, the Arab regimes can no longer claim a legitimacy in the eyes of their own peoples by identifying with the Palestinian struggle. Without the rhetoric of Arab nationalism, all those unpopular regimes could be exposed for the pro-Western tyrannies that they are.

Everything will have to be renegotiated in the Middle East—relations between governments and the governed, between states, and between the West and all the players of the region. That is sure to be a bloody affair. Soon enough the West may come to regret the loss of the old stand-off in the Middle East. Without the framework of the Arab/Israeli conflict, the future is uncertain and dangerous for all concerned.

DUBLIN'S

Fiona Foster assesses the dangers for Ireland's rulers contemplating constitutional change

When Irish Prime Minister Albert Reynolds was asked by BBC's On The Record if he wanted a united Ireland, he answered, 'I want peace in Ireland without a predetermined future'. Reynolds was being interviewed from his party's annual conference in Dublin last November. In the background a Fianna Fail banner declared the conference theme 'Transforming the Nation'.

The Irish government's open abandonment of the goal of Irish unity, inconceivable just five years ago, comes as no surprise in a nation where academics, politicians and journalists have banded together in recent years to transform the national identity of their state. According to former Prime Minister Garret Fitzgerald, speaking at a recent conference in Dublin, 'the transformation of Irish nationalism in this state is a revolution which in its extent and short timescale has few parallels' (*Irish Times,* 2 November 1993).

Where once Irish politicians of all shades were forced to play the green card (ie. to adopt anti-British rhetoric) to win votes, they now compete with each other to win the regard of British and Unionist politicians. To argue in favour of a united Ireland now is to stand accused of being a sectarian and a supporter of contiuing violence.

The Irish government's six-point peace plan, presented days after the joint British-Irish rejection of the Hume/Adams proposals was welcomed by British politicians and Unionists as further evidence of the Irish government's willingness to officially endorse Britain's right to rule Northern Ireland. An editorial in the *Independent* newspaper welcomed the 'significant shift in Irish thinking':

'Recognition that any new arrangments will require the consent of the Unionists is more explicit than ever before. Ten years ago it would have been impossible for an Irish government to grant the Unionists such an uncompromising right of veto.'

Five of the six principles put forward by Deputy Minister Dick Spring relate to the rights of Northern Ireland's Unionists to determine their own future and to withhold their consent from any proposed change to their constitutional position. The final principle commits the Irish government to abandoning Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution which lay claim to a united Ireland in the context of an agreed settlement on the future of Ireland.

Even the British government distanced



No more blessed virgins for Ireland

itself from Dick Spring's declaration that Unionists should never be forced into a united Ireland, even if the majority in the North opted for it. Blaming 'loose drafting' for Spring's statement, Patrick Mayhew chided Mr Spring, telling him that Britain stays in Ireland to abide by the wishes of the majority in the North.

So why do Ireland's leaders feel confident enough to ditch the nationalism on which the state always relied? While the Irish establishment has been toning down the nationalist rhetoric for some years, the major impetus for change in Ireland has come from external events. The breakdown of traditional political loyalties throughtout the world since 1989 was also evident in Ireland with the election of Mary Robinson as President in 1990, followed by the massive swing to Labour in the 1992 general

S DEATH WISH

election. From America to Japan the parties and institutions of the past suffered electoral defeat and humiliating scandals. In Ireland, the establishment took advantage of a popular disenchantment at a discredited past to dump the most important feature of traditional Irish politics—nationalism. A narrow opening appeared where the state was able to blame all the backwardness and reaction of Irish society on those who pursued national unity. By doing this, the establishment could pretend to be modern and forward-thinking, while washing its hands of the terrible failure of the Southern state.

Prior to these dramatic changes, Ireland was a country which appeared immune to external influence. Despite constant criticism from British commentators for its strict Catholic code and backward social laws, Irish people took pride in their strong identity as a Catholic and nationalist country. This strong sense of nationalism was the key to the survival of the South.

From the beginning, the 26-County state was presented to the Irish people as a temporary settlement. Former IRA leader Michael Collins, described the Treaty which he signed with Britain in 1921, as a 'stepping stone' to Irish unity. De Valera's constitution of 1937 which contains Articles 2 and 3 simply ratified this theory. In the past, any Irish politician who suggested abandoning the claim on the North was forced to make a swift exit from politics into academia.

Articles 2 and 3 are more than just a bit of grandiose rhetoric. They are the political foundation of the state. Like the six-county state, there is no national basis for the 26-Counties. It is just an arbitrary creation with no independent national identity. That's why Articles 2 and 3 are so important. They reconcile the national aspiration with the miserable reality. It wouldn't make any sense to be a 26-County nationalist, to accept the southern state as the realisation of some ideal. But it is possible to accept it as a stepping stone on the way to national unity. In that way the national aspiration can be attached to an arbitrary institution.

It is remarkable how stable the South has been throughout its history. Despite its backwardness and economic stagnation (unemployment now stands at a staggering 20%), it has always managed to just muck along without provoking too much popular discontent. That level of social harmony would have been impossible if the state was perceived as an entirely artificial creation without any particular goal or aspiration.

Articles 2 and 3 have only ever been a sop to the popular desire for Irish unity. Far from wanting an end to partition, Ireland's rulers actually depend on it for their survival. After all, if it wasn't for partition, they would lose their legitimacy as the leaders of an independent state.

This is evidenced by the vast array of repressive measures used by Irish governments against those who continue to fight for a united Ireland. No sooner had republican leader Eamonn De Valera taken power in the 1930s, than he began to imprison and execute his erstwhile republican allies. Right up to the present day the Irish state's fear of the conflict raging in the north of their country has been reflected in their draconian anti-republican laws. A recent United Nations Human Rights Committee condemned the Irish Republic for its special no-jury courts, its blanket censorship of republicans and the permanent State of Emergency which allows extensive powers of arrest and detention. Current estimates show that the Irish government spends around £200m a year on measures designed to ensure that the national struggle in the North does not destabilise the South.

In this sense, today's admission by Ireland's leaders that they are not pursuing the goal of a united Ireland is just a more honest declaration of the position of all Irish governments past and present. However, few Irish politicians seem to realise the implications of what they are doing. While in many ways Ireland's leaders were very uncomfortable with the nationalist identity of the past, at least it gave the state a sense of historical legitimacy and endowed the elite with a sense of purpose.

Many Irish politicians and commentators sense a danger in abandoning Articles 2 and 3. But even those who warn of the dangers, see only temporary obstacles. In his interview with On The Record, Albert Reynolds argued against the unilateral abandonment of Articles 2 and 3. When asked why, Reynolds replied, 'because this would not succeed in bringing peace. If we abandon Articles 2 and 3 without an overall settlement we will leave the IRA as the only people carrying the nationalist flag—we cannot let this happen.' Those campaigning to retain Articles 2 and 3, such as Robert Ballagh, Chairman of the Irish National Congress, express the same fears.

The fear of delivering the national flag into the hands of the IRA, while a legitimate concern for the establishment, seriously understates the scale of the problem. Ditching Articles 2 and 3 could well mean political suicide for the South. Perhaps Labour spokesman on Ireland Kevin McNamara sensed this when he warned Dublin against making such a hasty move. McNamara should know about these things. Since his party discarded its state socialist identity, it has lost all sense of purpose and respect among voters. McNamara knows from bitter experience that an institution cannot just discard the thing which defines it, and hope to pick up something else along the way to which people will then blindly offer their allegiance.

It is difficult to see what identity a separate 26-County state could have if not as a stepping stone to unity. Two tendencies will emerge once they dump Articles 2 and 3: the first, towards more direct British control over Southern affairs, something already well developed in the military sphere; the other, towards social collapse.

Irish Freedom does not want to alert Southern politicians to the madness of their actions (besides which, they are being driven by forces beyond their control). In the long term it can only benefit the cause of liberation if the South is exposed for what it is—Britain's obedient servant. So when they read this article, we hope the rulers of the South will throw it aside and carry on with their suicide plans.

WHO'S

The pressures of isolation are telling on the republican movement. Eve Anderson suggests that they are now making concessions unthinkable a few years ago

The talks between SDLP leader John Hume and Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams have been heralded as a major breakthrough in the log-jam of Irish politics. Sinn Fein in particular have presented the Hume/Adams initiative as a way of putting pressure on the British government to concede Irish national rights.

As we go to press the actual details of the talks remain a secret. However, it is clear enough from what has been said that Sinn Fein have made a fundamental shift towards a point of view traditionally articulated by John Hume and the SDLP. Before looking at the key shifts in republican thinking, we will look at what factors have forced the republican movement to make such concessions to their opponents.

Sinn Fein leaders have insisted that Hume/Adams is a bold new initiative and a mark of political sophistication. The grim reality is that it is a desperate act. Irish republicanism is more isolated now than at any stage in its history.

Strengths and weaknesses

The republican movement has long recognised that while it could continue to wage war against Britain on the basis of its existing support, it could not expect to win. Since the hunger-strikes of the early 1980s new tactics were developed in an attempt to overcome its isolation within the working class areas of West Belfast, Derry and along the Border. Following spectacular election victories such as hunger-striker Bobby Sands' election to the House of Commons in 1981, Sinn Fein stood candidates in local and general elections north and south of the Border.

The election strategy in particular exposed both the strengths and weaknesses of republicanism. In the North Sinn Fein has consistently received between 10 and 15 per cent of the vote. While it proved beyond doubt that the armed struggle had mass support among nationalists, it also proved just how isolated that support was from the rest of Irish society.

In the South, Sinn Fein has failed to connect with the problems created by British domination. At the last election the party received just over one per cent of the vote. This isolation is compounded by the fact that even the rhetorical republicanism which was a hallmark of Southern Irish politics since the creation of the state is now a thing of the past. While the rhetoric was only intended to give legitimacy to the state and accompanied the violent suppression of republicans, it did at least contribute to the idea of a common nationalist identity. Now the republicans are treated as total outcasts in Southern Ireland.

In addition, the political failure of the republican movement to break out of the ghettos has been reinforced by British policy. Broadcasting bans and an intensified propaganda war which portrays the conflict as a tribal one have reinforced the sense of isolation.

Finally, and perhaps the most decisive factor in fostering a mood of despair is the international shift in the balance of forces in favour of imperialism. This development is covered elsewhere in this issue of *Irish Freedom*. Suffice it to say that the collapse of liberation movements around the world strengthened the republican sense of isolation.

Hostile ideas

It is essential that supporters of Irish freedom recognise the desperate state of the liberation struggle. Pretending that all is well or that we are on the verge of a major breakthrough is self-delusion, which can only store up greater difficulties and confusion for the future. We must first acknowledge that the republican strategy aimed at breaking out of the ghettos has failed. The Hume/Adams initiative was an attempt to continue with this strategy and to influence broader opinion. Instead, what has happened is that public opinion is influencing republican thinking to an unprecedented extent.

There has always been a mismatch and conflict between the determined practical activity of the republican movement in leading the struggle against Britain, and its shapelessness at the level of politics and ideas. This conflict could exist without consequence for much of the time because the British rarely had the opportunity to exploit it. However the extent to which the Sinn Fein leadership has accepted ideas which fall far short of Irish liberation has now reached a qualitatively new level.

Historically there are two political forces which have had a major influence on republican thinking. One is the left, both in Britain and Ireland; the other is constitutional nationalism, north and south of the Border. Statements from Sinn Fein leaders since the start of the Hume/Adams talks indicate that their influence has reached new heights, which is ironic, since both forces are themselves in terminal decline.

The left has had greatest influence in promoting the idea that Britain is a neutral player in the conflict. Labour politicians such as Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone have consistently argued that Britain has no reason to stay in Ireland, that its presence there may be part of a conspiracy by the secret services, and that the state is only looking for an opportunity to withdraw.

It is odd to suggest that one of the antagonists in a conflict is in fact neutral. If a military historian suggested that the Allies in World War Two had no great preference as to the outcome of the war with Germany, he wouldn't get much of a hearing. The idea that Britain is neutral in Ireland is an even more absurd idea given that this war has lasted 25 years—rarely has a state in the modern world displayed such determination in carrying on a war so costly in terms of lives, money and international reputation.

Old prejudice

It is not too surprising that the British left would offer such explanations of the war, given its pro-state traditions. What is more extraordinary is the fact that the republican movement has adopted the same notion. Given the history of the last 25 years, nobody could accuse republicans of paranoia for thinking that Britain is out to destroy them. Yet every statement coming from Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness echoes the old prejudice that Britain has no vested interest in remaining, and that Major should be 'radical' and show 'imagination' in starting talks. Not only that, but the British government is seen as the facilitator of peace and progress. According to McGuinness, 'the British government is the key to this (the peace process). Ingenuity is needed on their part.' (*Guardian,* 18 September 1993).

At a practical level no republican militant could believe any of this. However it would be wrong to underestimate the effects of such a political concession. If even Britain's opponent in Ireland is saying that the British government is the key to peace, then it gives the government enor-

INFLUENCING WHOM?



IRA colour party: accommodating diversity?

mous authority in defining the shape of a new settlement.

The concessions which Sinn Fein has made to constitutional nationalism are even more far-reaching in their implications. While the republican movement has always been loose and amorphous politically, it has stood out on the importance it attached to the question of national self-determination. Now that question, the central issue of the Irish conflict, has become blurred.

Freedom or diversity?

In a joint statement issued at the end of April, Hume and Adams stated that: 'We both recognise that such a new agreement is only achievable and viable if it can earn and enjoy the allegiance of the different traditions on this island, by accommodating diversity and providing for national reconciliation.'

The accommodation of difference has always been the hallmark of the SDLP. In reality it is a polite way of accepting the status quo. There is no problem of diverse traditions in Ireland. Loyalists do not identify themselves as such because of some cultural heritage, but because the maintenance of their special position in Ireland requires Britain's occupation of the country. The accommodation of diversity and national reconciliation have in fact been British policy for the last 70 years. It's called partition.

The idea of diverse traditions is incompatible with national self-determination. There is no political solution which can enjoy the allegiance of the 'different traditions', because Loyalists and nationalists are opposed in their allegiance. Reconciliation in this context means acceptance of British oppression by the nationalists.

The fact that the republican movement has been forced to make such concessions to the thinking of its political opponents should be a cause of concern to all who support Irish freedom. It is vital that anti-imperialists look at reality, however dark, and explain what is happening. Believing that the liberation movement is taking a great step forward or setting an agenda for peace will only cause demoralisation in the future.

'TRICK OR TREAT'

Austen Cameron explains Loyalist bloodlust

The Loyalist response to talk of peace has followed a grimly familiar pattern. More Catholics have been murdered this year by Loyalists than in any year since the bloodbath of 1975. The unbridled savagery of these attacks contributes to the view that there is little rationality in the politics of Northern Ireland. By all accounts, Loyalist assassins get great pleasure from their work. The massacre at Greysteel, where one of the assassins walked up to a woman of 19, asked her 'Trick or treat?', then blasted her in the face, typifies the casual brutality of Loyalism.

The vicious response to the peace process is not the work of isolated extremists. There is a myth that the Loyalist paramilitaries hold their community to ransom and intimidate those who might want to escape their grip. Sometimes it is even argued that they intimidate their own community as much as they do the Catholic. It is true that groups such as the UDA and UVF are heavily involved in ordinary criminal activity and extortion rackets, but this has never stopped ordinary Protestants lending their support.

In the course of 25 years of war there has never once been any movement among Protestants against the UDA or UVF. This contrasts with the situation in nationalist areas where there are occasional backlashes against the IRA, usually prompted by war-weariness and British-sponsored peace-movements.



Local heroes: Loyalist people back the killer gangs

The UDA headquarters on the Shankill which the IRA destroyed at the end of October was a well-known landmark. Everybody who visited the chipper on the ground floor knew that overhead, UFF commanders like the infamous 'Mad Dog' might be planning the next massacre of Catholics. 'Mad Dog' himself lives quite openly in Protestant West Belfast. The four-foot bollards around his front door are to stop the IRA getting him, not to fend off locals, most of whom would think of him as a bit of a character.

The notion that an organisation can intimidate so many people for such a long time is absurd. The so-called siege mentality of Loyalism is shared by all the Protestants of the Six Counties, the paramilitaries are simply its police. So why have the Loyalists reacted with such brutality to talk of peace?

Fuelling paranoia

The Union which the Loyalists defend is inherently unstable and artificial. There is no national, democratic basis for the existence of the Six-County state of Northern Ireland. It was created to maintain British control over the whole of Ireland. To prevent it falling apart, Britain must maintain a massive armed garrison there, pour in hundreds of millions of pounds every year, and, most importantly, guarantee a privileged position to the Protestant population for which the state was supposedly created.

Any situation where minority rights (like those of the Loyalists) are asserted as a way of denying the rights of the majority will fuel the most intense paranoia within the minority. The millenarian sense of betrayal and the language of 'No surrender' reflects a justified sense of fear. Any change to the status quo, however superficial, will be seen as an attack on the special position of the Loyalists within the Union. The standard Loyalist response to any political initiative is to lash out and kill as many Catholics as possible in an attempt to derail the initiative through terror.

Taking the broader view

However the instability which causes the British government to grant such a privileged position to the Loyalists, also forces them to seek new ways of controlling Ireland. Unlike the Loyalists, Whitehall must take a broader view of the situation. So other political forces such as the Dublin government and the SDLP are important for Britain.

Any hint that Britain may make concessions to Dublin or the SDLP ignites Loyalist paranoia. This reaction is not the result of some genetic flaw as the media would have it, but arises from the contrived nature of the state. The paranoia and sense of doom are well-founded. Partition set the Unionists up as the privileged minority in Ireland, and the foe of every Irish nationalist. Until the Loyalists realise that peace under present conditions means strengthening the Union, they will continue to visit their brutality on the nationalist people.



Fiona Foster

Beyond the pale

Well, I gathered the game was up for John and Gerry when John Major announced his decision to order a review of the broadcasting restrictions on Sinn Fein with a view to tightening them further.

Far from imitating FW De Klerk and Yitzhak Rabin by acting to bring the 'terrorists' in from the cold, Major's rejection of the Hume/Adams peace proposals, coupled with his apparent desire to intensify the censorship of Sinn Fein, indicates the government's willingness to leave Irish republicans perishing for a while longer.

Major's announcement of a review of the broadcasting restrictions came just two weeks after the fifth anniversary of the ban introduced in October 1988. Speaking in the House of Commons, Major castigated broadcasters for 'stretching the guidelines to the limit and perhaps beyond' by running a series of interviews with Gerry Adams dubbed by an actor's voice (as my Dad says, deaf people who can lip-read are exempt from the ban!).

The BBC, outraged at the suggestion that it was somehow giving Irish republicans a bit too much of that oxygen stuff, defiantly exclaimed that they had always acted within the restrictions. The Beeb was really missing the point. You see, Mr Major doesn't really want to see or hear Sinn Fein at all. Well, at least not until they renounce violence and surrender to Britain.

Defending the broadcasting ban in a high court challenge from the NUJ, the government claims, 'interviews with Sinn Fein tended to increase their standing and create the false impression that support for terrorism is itself a legitimate political opinion'. Mr Major and his back benchers are concerned that the high-profile Hume/Adams talks may have conferred some legitimacy on 'terrorists'. He thinks the media have contributed to this and so he must tick them off.

I would say that by far the most important aim of British policy in Ireland is to marginalise Irish republicanism and so remove the only threat to Britain's ability to run Ireland. After all, though you'd never know it from the media, the only conflict in Ireland is between British imperialism and the national liberation struggle.

In this context the Hume/Adams proposals posed an awkward challenge to the British government. How could it pursue its dual strategy of marginalising republicans while promoting the constitutional nationalists when these forces were locked together in a high-profile bid to find a new peace process. They dealt with this by constantly praising John Hume's courage and commitment to peace, at the same time as continuing to present Sinn Fein and the IRA as the source of all violence and conflict in Ireland.

The Department of National Heritage, now responsible for implementing the ban(!) reflected this theme in their statement, 'the government believes that organisations and individuals who support the use of violence for political ends in Britain do not share the same rights of access to the airwaves as anyone else'. Now you and I might think that 'using violence for political ends' would be a perfect description for Britain's use of 32 000 armed men to impose British rule on Ireland. But, alas, I think we are unlikely to get a broadcasting ban on those who support the aims and activities of the British military in Ireland.

The national heritage crowd are rightly confident that everyone will know exactly whom they mean when they talk about those who use political violence. And I think it's worth pointing to the fact that the honourable men from the British media who now object to the broadcasting ban are themselves largely responsible for a climate in which for 'political violence' you can read 'IRA'.

The fifth anniversary of the ban brought the honourable men out to reiterate that opposition to this attack on their independence. Far from defending the rights of Irish republicans to have their voices heard, these commentators argued that the ban has prevented them from exposing these 'apologists for murder'. Tony Hall, head of BBC News and Current Affairs spoke out in a lengthy article in the *Observer.* He summed up the media's concern about the ban: 'We believe that Sinn Fein find it to their advantage to hide behind the ban to avoid being cross-questioned about the terrorist atrocities they condone.' That's fighting talk where I come from.

The fact is, the broadcasting ban has changed little. We didn't hear the case against Britain before the ban and we don't hear it now. While having little effect on the coverage of republicans, the ban has been a useful tool in Britain's war against the Irish. It has helped to stem the electoral growth of Sinn Fein within the Six Counties, where Sinn Fein councillors were often interviewed on local radio and TV. And in propaganda terms, it has reinforced the idea that Sinn Fein and its supporters are beyond the pale. It tells us that if certain people pervert democracy by casting their votes for extremists, they cannot expect to be rewarded with the normal rights associated with a democratic society. The liberal opponents of the broadcasting ban always accepted these points.

The liberals in the media suggest that without the ban they would be reporting on Northern Ireland in an impartial manner. As we have argued many times in *Irish Freedom,* the true nature of the Irish War is more distorted than ever. In today's uncritical climate not one single journalist in the national media has challenged Britain's claim to be a neutral arbiter caught in a tribal feud.

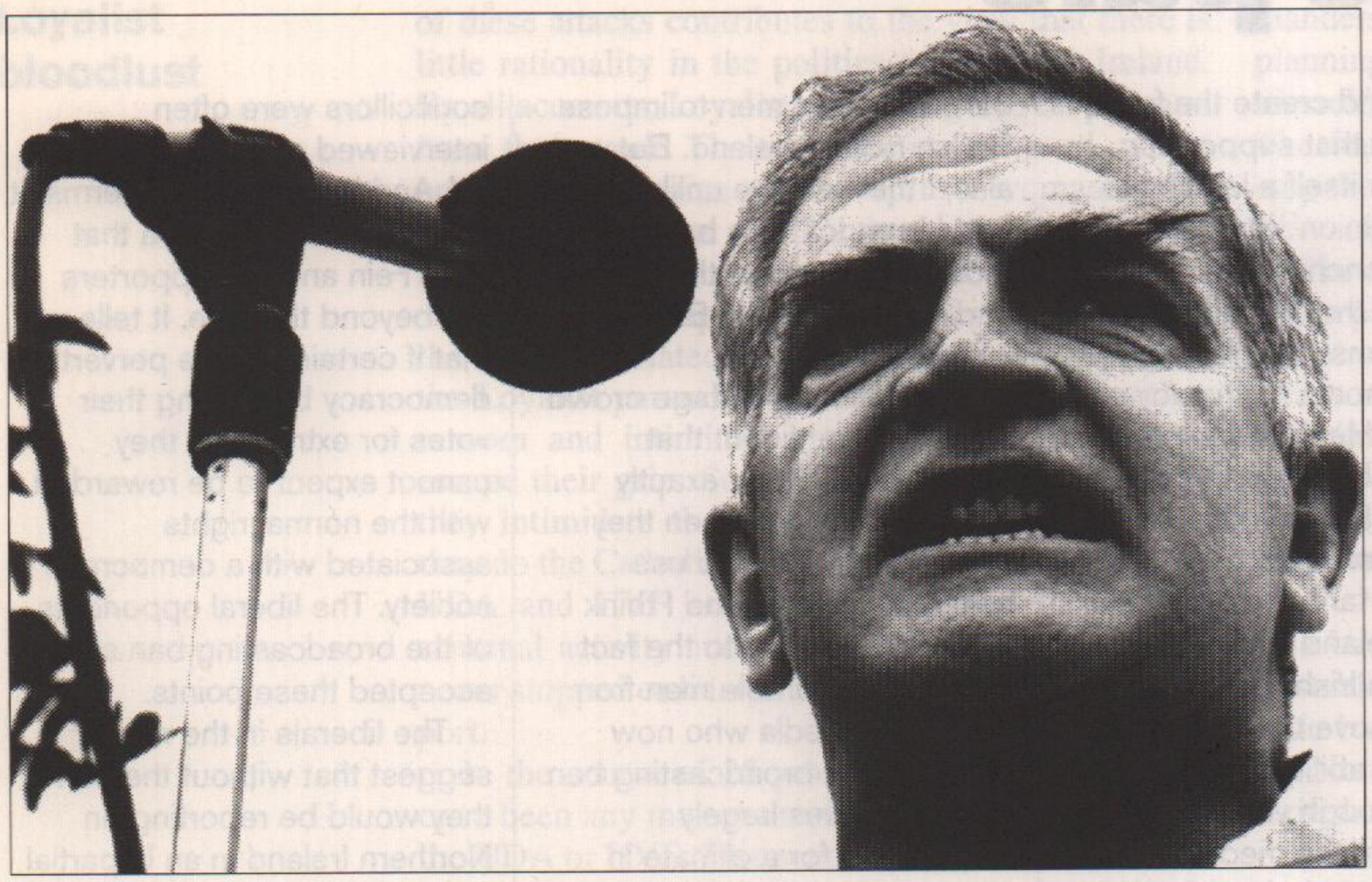
The Shankill bomb, followed by the Greysteel massacre, provided the perfect footage for the creative talents of journalists keen to portray the dark and terrifying world of ancient religious feuds.

In the last all-Ireland election in 1918 three quarters of Irish people voted for a united Ireland. How did Britain respond to this democratically expressed desire? By dividing Ireland.

In the 1987 general election, 40 per cent of Northern Ireland's Catholics voted for Sinn Fein. How did the British respond? By banning Sinn Fein from the airwaves. Five years later they now want to strengthen that ban.

For me, the fifth anniversary of the broadcasting ban is a timely reminder that Britain can never bring democracy to Ireland.

BRITAIN BACKS



Oliver Kearney has been at the forefront of the battle for civil rights in Northern Ireland since his involvement in the original civil rights movement in the late 60s. While in London to address an IFM rally commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the civil rights movement, he spoke to Fiona Foster about the battle for equality then and now.

Fiona Foster: Oliver, why do you think it's important to commemorate the anniversary of the birth of the civil rights movement?

Oliver Kearney: Well, the twenty-fifth anniversary of 5 October 1968 is of particular significance because that is the date on which the British state began using physical violence against a non-violent movement for civil rights and social justice.

How did you get to 5 October?

The civil rights campaign had been formed in 1967 arising out of the Campaign for Social Justice, which had begun looking at the statistics of inequality in employment and housing and the abuses of the Special Powers Act.

The issues of housing was of particular importance because housing was used as a political weapon for controlling the Catholic population. It wasn't possible to vote in a local government election unless you were a householder. So denying houses to Catholics was a way of denying them votes.

Then there was the issue of jobs. Despite the fact that more Catholics emigrated than Protestants, Catholics were still more than two and a half times more likely to be unemployed. And the other issue was the Special Powers Act—which was such an obnoxious piece of legislation that it was publicly admired by the then South African minister for justice who said he would give up his entire battery of repressive legislation for a single clause of the Special Powers Act.

What exactly happened on 5 October and why do you describe it as a turning point?

On that day about 600 people assembled in Duke Street in Derry to walk to the city centre. As they assembled a large force of police stood across the route of the march which had been banned by the Unionist minister of home affairs.

The police instructed women and children to leave the demonstration. Demonstrators then walked up to police lines and the police then broke ranks and began a systematic assault on the marchers and bystanders. As demonstrators attempted to run away, they encountered another police cordon behind them. So they were sandwiched between the two and the RUC used large-scale violence and water cannon and pursued the demonstrators right across the city and into the nationalist Bogside area, where there was fighting that night and the next day.

That pattern of state violence continued over the next 12 months until the Battle of the Bogside on 12-13 August 1969, where there was a large-scale invasion of the Bogside by the RUC which was, for the first time, resisted by the entire population.

In the period from 24 August 1968 to 15 August 1969, eight Catholic civilians were killed by RUC gunfire or baton charges, and those included the first child victim of the conflict—nine-year old Patrick Rooney. These people were killed when the RUC invaded Catholic areas of Belfast equipped

BIGOTRY

with armoured cars, mounted with Browning machine guns. So within a period of 12 months, the RUC response to a non-violent campaign for civil rights had escalated from indiscriminate use of batons and water cannon on the streets of Derry to the use of armoured cars and machine guns in the streets of Belfast.

Why do you think the British responded so brutally to your non-violent campaign for equality within the state?

Well, even though our demands did not in any way cover the removal of partition or the unification of Ireland, the state forces instinctively recognised that the demand for equality was in fact a demand for the dismantling of the artificial state. The Protestant people gave their conditional loyalty to Britain on the basis that their supremacy would be maintained. These were the grounds on which the state was established. The violent response from the state reflected its recognition that our demands would undermine the partition settlement.

Why couldn't the Unionist regime contain the civil rights movement?

The resistance of people in the Bogside was so fierce and so intense that the RUC were unable to cope. The British government placed its own troops on the streets and for a short time this had the effect of cooling things down. But with British solders in position in Ireland, the development of conflict was simply a matter of time.

Within months, Catholic areas were being systematically curfewed by the British Army. By 1971 there was large-scale internment of Catholic men and boys accompanied by the systematic torture of suspects in a form which had not been seen in Western Europe since the Second World War. And finally the British used the ultimate solution to street protest when, on Bloody Sunday, British paratroopers slaughtered 14 unarmed civilians.

It is my personal conviction that the state authorities consciously opted for violence as an alternative to conceding equal rights. But they could not defeat the demand for equality and now we have had 25 years of bloodshed with every conceivable abuse of human rights. Even today the British government still shows no inclination to promote equality as an alternative to engaging in violent conflict.

So, if the British aren't concerned about equal rights, why have there been a series of fair employment laws?

When the civil strife had erupted to such a degree that Britain's international reputation was in tatters, the Heath government set up an inquiry into job discrimination. Since then we have a record in Northern Ireland of repeated declarations and promises by British ministers of every political persuasion of their fixed determination to eliminate discrimination. We had the 1973 Act, which outlawed discrimination, followed by the 1976 Act, the 1989 Act and the 1991 Act—all of which outlawed discrimination.

Did the legislation have any impact on discrimination?

No. The Catholic male population today is still 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed than their Protestant counterparts. In other words, between 1968 and 1993—in 25 years of fair employment legislation, the differential between Catholic and Protestant males has shifted by just 0.1 per cent. By every social standard, the Catholic population is worse off than their Protestant counterparts. They are more likely to live in council homes, more likely to live in overcrowded conditions, have a higher incidence of illness and death in childbirth, a lower level of access to consumer goods, and so on.

I would ask any reasonable person to question why the British government is so inept at writing effective anti-discrimination laws when it is so adept at rushing anti-terrorist laws through the House of Commons, often with retrospective effect. I would argue that now, as in 1968, the government recognise that granting full equality within the Northern Irish state would sound the death knell of the state created by partition.

As speculation rises about the content of the Hume/Adams peace proposals, do you have any concerns about a political settlement which leaves Irish Catholics as second class citizens in Northern Ireland?

I think there is a very real danger that some form of settlement might be cobbled together at this point which would temporarily secure the continuation of the Northern Ireland state, which would not alleviate the level of inequality and disadvantage experienced particularly in nationalist ghettos. That settlement, like the partition settlement, could be made to work for a short period of time, but would simply be sowing the seeds of further and even more violent, bloody conflict within the space of another decade or another generation. And when you bear in mind that for 50 years the Catholic community tolerated this system of economic and housing apartheid, that was a reflection of the degree to which they had been militarily repressed after the partition of Ireland.

Unless a just settlement is achieved now which actually produces equality, the seeds will be sown for a new and more terrible conflict.

Finally, Oliver, why do you think British people should be involved in the campaign for equality in Ireland?

People in Britain are looking at conflicts all over the world and wondering why and how they developed. The Irish experience can be useful in understanding other world conflicts. I think British people have a huge stake in the solution of the Northern Irish conflict in the interests of safeguarding their own civil liberties and their own aspirations to democracy.

Siobhan O'Dwyer reports on the latest developments in the Kate Magee case and argues that the government is wasting no time in bringing in new draconian legislation.

Recent developments in the Kate Magee case and a series of proposed changes to the legal system provide disturbing new evidence of the erosion of civil liberties in this country.

As reported in previous issues of Irish Freedom, Kate Magee is a young Irish woman with no involvement in Irish politics. She was charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act with 'failure to disclose information' on the whereabouts of her brother—wanted by the British for 'terrorist' offences.

Having waited for over a year under threat of imprisonment on this trumped-up charge, Kate Magee's trial was recently cancelled at short notice. She was told that her case would now be heard alongside that of her brother, who is due to be extradited from the Irish Republic. Clearly the authorities are more hopeful of getting a conviction in the sensational atmosphere created around an IRA showtrial.



An off-duty member of the Royal Commission for Justice

In the meantime, leaflets produced by the Kate Magee Campaign have been seized by police from a bookshop in Sheffield and sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions who will decide whether they will prejudice Magee's case at the trial. This is particularly insolent given the media's banner headlines announcing the capture of IRA members whenever an Irish person is detained under the PTA.

No one-off

The charge of 'failure to disclose information', the seizure of the campaigning material and the decision to hear the Magee case as part of an IRA showtrial are disturbing, not just for Kate Magee but for all Irish people in this country. No sooner had Irish Freedom reported the Magee case as the first of its kind, than an entire family was arrested under the PTA in Newcastle. Four of the five were charged with failing to disclose information about the fifth family member who was charged with "terrorist" offences.

For those who thought that the release of the Guildford 4, Birmingham 6 and Judith Ward marked a new chapter in the relationship between Irish people and British justice, recent developments have come as a nasty shock. Most alarming are the conclusions of the Royal Commission for Justice, set up in the wake of the scandal around the Birmingham Six.

Instead of removing the basis for further injustice, the Royal Commission proposed new limitations on the right to trial by jury and endorsed government plans to abolish the right to silence.

At the same time as removing people's means of defending themselves, the authorities are thinking up new catch-all ways to prosecute them. At this year's Tory Party conference, Home Secretary Michael Howard proposed the introduction of two new charges under the PTA. These charges, 'possessing items that give reasonable suspicion that the person is involved in terrorism' and 'gathering information for terrorist purposes' are already in use in the six counties of Ireland.

Fast movers

Two years ago campaigners celebrated the release of the framed Irish prisoners and argued that the policy of criminalising Irish people in Britain had suffered a severe setback. Yet the re-trial and re-conviction of the Guildford 4 at the trial of the police officers charged with framing them and the court decision to drop all the charges against the police who framed the Birmingham 6 shows what sort of people we're up against. Not only has the state got over the embarrassment of all these incidents, but it is now moving quickly to get a new battery of repressive legislation in place.

Kate Magee and the Newcastle family awaiting trial for witholding information are now names on a long list set to replace the Birmingham 6 and Guildford 4 as the latest victims of British justice.

THEY REGRET NOTHING

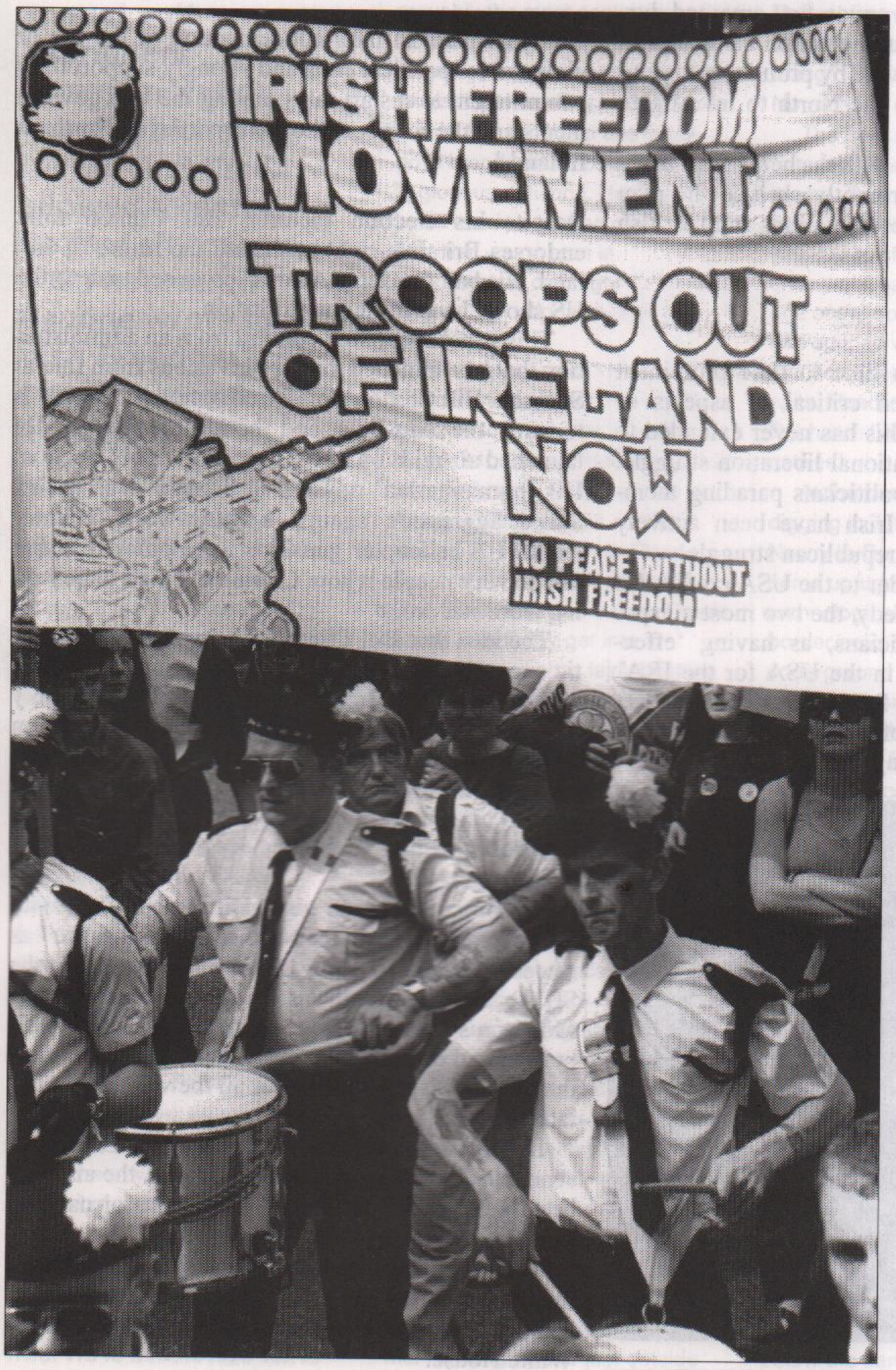
3000 SUPPORT ANTI-WAR MARCH

Stuart Sharpe reports on this year's August Troops Out march

The British establishment has always feared the prospect of people in Britain protesting at the occupation of Ireland. For the IFM, the authorities' fear of open displays of support for Irish freedom is one good reason to make our August Troops Out march such a big event.

This year's march was a militant and colourful display of opposition to Britain's right to intervene in Ireland or anywhere else in the world. Over 3000 people marched through central London led by a Republican flute band and banners declaring 'No peace without Irish freedom'.

The IFM's decision to join with the Campaign Against Militarism (CAM) in organising this year's march (and the basis for a march with a distinctly anti-imperialist flavour including contingents from the Somali, Iraqi, Kurdish and Turkish communities) also succeeded in attracting more people than ever to march alongside the Irish Freedom Movement.



The overwhelming support given to the Western powers for their bloody 'peace-keeping' interventions around the world has led the IFM to broaden its anti-imperialist message over the past few years.

We have pointed to the experience of Irish nationalists over the past 25 years to challenge the consensus that British troops can bring peace and harmony to other countries.

It is now more important than ever that the IFM play a central role in building an effective anti-war movement in Britain. Joining with CAM to build this year's march was the first step to achieving this.

As thousands of chanting demonstrators arrived in Kennington Park, CAM's Lynn Rawley welcomed the march from a massive stage set up for a post-march music festival.

To resounding applause, Rawley declared that the march had one simple message: 'We are against the militarism of the West in whatever form it takes...The UN calls this peace, I call it old-fashioned colonialism, the people of Somalia call it hell. We must learn one simple lesson from the Irish—if you want peace, you have to fight for it.'

The IFM's rally was addressed by several speakers including a leading member of the Somali community, Siobhan O'Dwyer from the Kate Magee Campaign and Jim Slavin from the Connolly Society in Edinburgh.

Slavin described how the Labour Council in Edinburgh had banned a demonstration in support of Irish freedom earlier this year. Organisers, however, had refused to accept the ban and Jim Slavin was charged with organising an illegal demonstration. To the delight of the audience, Slavin defiantly announced that next year's march would go ahead, 'legally or illegally'.

Also addressing the rally was Eilish McAnespie, a republican from a border town in the six counties, who described how her brother Aiden was shot dead by a British soldier as he strolled through an army border checkpoint. She angrily rejected the depiction of British soldiers as neutral peace-keepers:

'British peacekeeping is about total economic, political, social and cultural domination of one nation over another. Peacekeeping is imposed upon Irish people down the barrel of a gun.'

The IFM's Claire Foster concluded the rally by describing how the Irish War had been used as an excuse to introduce surveillance cameras all over the country and to bring armed roadblocks onto the streets of London. After a heavily policed march, during which police officers had openly videoed demonstrators, she was cheered by the crowd for saying:

'Now it's time for us to turn the cameras on them. I say to them, every move you make, every step you take—we'll be watching you.'

US envoy

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THIS...

Denis O'Dwyer argues that Irish republicans will find no allies among Irish American politicians

Some years back, Irish republicans used to delight delegations of republican sympathisers from the USA to an unscheduled meeting with armed, masked members of the IRA.

In stark contrast, a fact-finding visit of Irish-Americans led by former Democratic congressman Bruce Morrison in September was marked by a week-long unofficial IRA ceasefire.

Both gestures were a reflection of the belief in republican circles that American opinion can be harnessed to increase the pressure on Britain for a just solution to the Irish War.

Bruce Morrison, described in the *Irish Times* as the opposite of the 'stereotyped Irish American who blames Britain for Ireland's woes', is known to be the mover behind the idea of an American peace envoy. The idea of a peace envoy first emerged during Bill Clinton's presidential election campaign in which he courted the Irish vote by promising to send an influential American to the North to investigate the prospects for peace.

Having won the election with the help of the Irish-American vote, Clinton promptly shelved the plan for a peace envoy after representations from British ministers.

Critical of British policy

While it is true that from time to time prominent Irish-Americans have been critical of aspects of British policy in Ireland, this has never extended to outright support for the national liberation struggle. Indeed, many American politicians parading themselves as friends of the Irish have been actively working to undermine the republican struggle.

A recent Irish ambassador to the USA credits Tip O'Neill and Edward Kennedy, the two most outspoken Irish-American politicians, as having 'effectively cut off the support in the USA for the IRA'. Tip O'Neill joined Ronald Reagan in 1985 at a party to celebrate the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement aimed at marginalising Sinn Fein.



US peace envoy

O'Neill's group, Friends of Ireland in Congress, is the driving force behind the International Fund for Ireland which has channelled over £200,000 into a number of British-approved organisations in Northern Ireland, including the SDLP.

Special relationship

More recently, Bill Clinton has further dashed the hopes of Irish republicans by coming out in support of the peace process put forward by the British government in opposition to the Hume/Adams proposals. Endorsing the joint statement issued by John Major and Albert Reynolds in Brussels in November, Clinton rejected a role for Irish republicans in any peace process:

'I join them in their condemnation of the use of violence for political ends and strongly support their commitment to restart talks among the two governments and the four constitutional parties of Northern Ireland.'

Despite his election rhetoric, Bill Clinton fully endorses Britain's right to dictate the future of Ireland. His ban on Gerry Adams' proposed visit to the US shows he is in step with Britain.

This is not surprising coming from an administration that has launched military invasions from Iraq to Somalia. Bill Clinton's preferred option for Bosnia is to arm the Muslims and bomb the Serbs. He launched air-raids on Iraq within days of his election. His 'humanitarian' mission in Somalia was in fact naked aggression against a third world country where US helicopter gunships were ordered to fire on the very people whom Clinton claimed to be saving from starvation.

The idea that Bill Clinton or any of his Democratic supporters are going to exert pressure on Britain to withdraw from Ireland is pure fantasy. The only lecture the British government is likely to get from Bill Clinton is on how to pursue imperial interests more effectively.

Lay down arms

When Bruce Morrison visited Ireland he met with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as well as representatives from the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP, Sinn Fein and the Dublin government. Yet Morrison's request for a temporary ceasefire was only aimed at Sinn Fein. Morrison shares the view that the IRA is responsible for all the violence in Ireland.

If Morrison succeeds in persuading Clinton to send a peace envoy to Northern Ireland, the aim will be to get the IRA to give up their fight for national liberation.

The isolation of Irish republicans has forced them into a desperate search for allies around the world. They will not find them among the murderers in the White House.

LETTER FROM THE WAR ZONE

Pauline has recently become a supporter of the Irish Freedom Movement in Newcastle.

In August she and her sister-in-law visited the Six Counties of Ireland. Their trip was planned to coincide with the West Belfast Festival culminating in the annual anti-internment commemoration march which was, for the first time, allowed to enter Belfast city centre.

On her return Pauline wrote to Irish Freedom with some observations from her trip.

Dear *Irish Freedom*

I write to let you know my impressions following my trip to Belfast. I'll start at the end, Sunday's march to the City Hall. People marched from all over the city, where a massive tricolour was hung from the gates, obscuring the empress mother's view out on to the city. Cleaning work in progress had already obscured 'Belfast says no!' behind the plastic sheeting. People in the crowd spotted a few Unionist councillors skulking behind wire meshed windows. Small boys waved tricolours from the top of the ornamental lampposts at the gates. Across the way, a banner held aloft by a dozen or so men proclaimed, 'Ballymurphy ex-POWs: Ireland unfree shall never be at peace'. We sang the national anthem and a great cheer went up, drowning out the wail of the helicopter.

It was difficult to make out what the speakers were saying because of the whine of the helicopter, but the overall message was 'We're here. We've arrived. Now talk to us.' Twelve thousand people had come out of the nationalist ghettos and demonstrated their existence. After 25 years they were still there. It felt like a victory.

That night as we walked into the GAA club in Ardoyne everyone was buzzing with stories of the march. 'Did you see the faces of the RUC at the City Hall? Having to stand for the "Soldier's Song"'. Then we heard the news. Local councillor Bobby Lavery's son Sean had been murdered. Shot by a Loyalist death squad in the front room of his North Belfast home. And you see the faces of the RUC and they're betraying nothing.

So what is going on? The RUC, arguably the most sectarian and vicious police force in Europe showing such patience and tolerance at the City Hall, even as the march dispersed and small boys brandished tricolours at them in glorious defiance. Has the same force which extracted confessions from five young men in Beechmount, overnight learned to love young nationalist boys? I doubt it.

The festival week was a mass of contradictions. Janet and I took a trip over to Twinbrook to visit a friend. It took us an hour and a half from picking up the black cab in Ardoyne. First off was an RUC roadblock on the Antrim Road. Then an army roadblock by the Unity Flats. Change taxis at Castle Street. We finally get into Twinbrook, which is fairly bristling with soldiers and we're pulled up by six of them.

We finally get to see them operate at close quarters. They have a van stopped in front of us. (It's not white, so it can't be IRA.) Behind us a line of taxis and private cars builds up.

Our boys go about their business as lethargically as possible. They check the driver's licence, his photograph, his cab number, his registration number, they even open up the bonnet and pretend to check the chassis number. They pretend to write it down. Then one of them gets on his radio, just out of earshot. Another wanders round the back of the cab and examines the boot. There's yet another looking in the back window at us. Janet nudges me. A young soldier just outside the window of the cab is flicking his finger on the trigger of his automatic rifle. The soldier looks around 12-years old. Are the soldiers getting younger or are we just getting older? 'Don't say anything', hisses the old woman opposite, knowing we are 'strangers'. 'Don't look at them.' Finally, the driver gets out. He's had enough. The trigger-happy 12-year old backs off a bit and, if you close your eyes, you could almost be on Golders Green Road listening to a cabbie slagging off a traffic warden. 'What are you doing? You're just harassing people. I've got a job to do. I'm trying to earn a living....' No reply. The soldier nods towards the boot. The driver opens it. 'What're you doing? That's my private property.' No reply.

The boot slams shut. The driver gets back inside. The soldiers confer. They look us up and down again, like they're wondering whether to shoot us or wave us on. They wave us on. As we pull away, one of the soldiers approaches the half-opened window of the cab, reaches deep into his lungs and spits. Headline: 'Brit spits on Brits.' Subhead: 'Women mistaken for natives.'

At the border the Army are digging in. Literally. Crossing from Newry to Dundalk and back, you come up against the latest technological refinements in border policing. Watchtowers, underground bunkers and unmanned, automatic checkpoints. You approach the checkpoint. Slow down. Stop at the red light. An invisible camera takes your picture. Two soldiers hidden inside a reinforced windowless box check you out, scan the interior of your car and run your registration number through a computer. If you're lucky, the light turns green, you drive on, over the automatic bollards which could shoot out of the ground at the merest flick of a switch from inside the windowless box. There have been a dozen or so 'accidents' since the automatic bollards went on line.

Around Crossmaglen the Army is almost invisible on the ground. This is Europe 1993. No more borders. The border has gone...underground. Soldiers below the earth communicate with patrols in the sky. And if you look straight ahead and wish very, very hard, you'd almost believe they'd all gone away. Getting into Newry is just like queuing at the toll booth for the Tyne Tunnel. And they say the British want out of Northern Ireland?! Yet there are 19 000 troops on the ground, under the ground and hovering over the ground. Watchtowers straddling the border. British troops and RUC are as dangerous and belligerent as ever, whether they're giving you a hard time at a roadblock or colluding with the death squads to launch attacks on nationalist people. The prisons remain full. The Diplock courts are still the engine of the conveyor belt that delivers thousands of young nationalist people into maximum security. So what's new?

The strength, resilience and the spirit of freedom within people was evident right through our stay. Coming from the political wastelands of Britain, it hits you in the face. But after the music, the drinking, the debates, the march, the checkpoints and everything else that makes up Festival Week in North Belfast, we were going back to England. People there were left to carry on.

The people of the Six Counties are strong, politically intelligent and weary of war. They long for peace. I am convinced that the British state is not preparing to pull out of Northern Ireland. The evidence of my own eyes tells me that, but more importantly, I don't see a British state which takes for granted the right to intervene in Bosnia, Iraq or Somalia relinquishing its right to govern within its own borders.

My trip made me feel stronger than ever that the time has come for British people to analyse what our government is doing in Ireland and to challenge it at every move. In this way we're offering real support to people fighting for self-determination in Ireland and striking at the heart of their enemy.

So, there are my impressions. Hope they are of some use. By the way, I love the picture on the front of the latest IFM bulletin. Is that intentional? The advert behind the solder with the caption 'Some headaches just won't go away'.



JOIN THE IFM

Annual membership £10 including a free subscription to *Irish Freedom*. Cheques/POs payable to IFM Association. Send your details to IFM, BM IFM, London WC1N 3XX or phone them through to (071) 278 9908