

sectarian acts.

Much space in the Provisionals' paper *An Phoblacht* is given to denouncing 'sectarianism'. But does it ever denounce sectarianism on its own side? Why not? Does not sectarianism at all exist on the Catholic side? Denouncing the sectarianism of the others can also be a means of appealing for communal solidarity and of incitement against the other community.

Unlike most of his political tribe, Geoff Bell does know something about the real Ireland, as distinct from the fantasy Ireland in the collective mind of the 'anti-imperialist' British left. Is it unreasonable to conclude that his flaccid performance in this polemic says something about the nature of the position he wants to defend? Is it an accident that he ends his article with a piece of Gerry Healy level misrepresentation of what I advocate?

Geoff Bell says I advocate "Brits into the south of Ireland. Wave the union jack and pass the ammunition". Where did I advocate that? When? Confederal links between Ireland and Britain could not mean that. Nothing I say can be loyally read as advocating or implying it. Confederal links imply voluntary association of the sovereign Irish and British states.

Bell is indulging himself in ridiculous hyperbole. But there is more here than a confession that he can't handle the facts, the issues, or the arguments.

Some readers of *Socialist Outlook* are bound to think — on Geoff Bell's authority, and not having read my article — that I really do advocate something like 'British troops into the South'. I've grown used to boneheaded and malicious sniping and misrepresentation, but this, I repeat, is Gerry Healy stuff.

The chain of publications put out by Geoff's tendency over the years — *International*, *Red Mole*, *Red Weekly*, *Socialist Challenge*, *Socialist Action* — have not, in my view, contributed much to political enlightenment, least of all about Ireland, but they did not deal in shameless factual lying and outright

misrepresentation like this. You should not start now, Geoff Bell.

A few words, finally, about the broader issues involved in this discussion. It links, obviously, with similar debates like that on the rights of the Jewish nation in Palestine.

Our attitude to these questions is all of a piece, and so is that of *Socialist Outlook* and the 'kitsch-Trotskyist' political culture of which it is part. Geoff Bell and his friends are comprehensively wrong. The issue goes way beyond Protestant and Catholic Ireland and Arab and Jewish Palestine.

Vast areas of the world are now covered by multi-national states — many of them old colonial units of more or less arbitrarily grouped peoples which have remained units after colonialism and become bureaucratic states. Almost everywhere in these states there is the domination, sometimes genocidal, of people over people, nation over nation or fragment of nation.

The Marxist programme for this vast area of world politics has already been outlined — consistent democracy. Depending on circumstances that may mean the right of various peoples to full independence, to local autonomy, or to special cultural rights, etc.

The alternative to this Marxist approach is to decide that some peoples are bad and some good, to ascribe some universalist and transcendental 'world-revolutionary' significance to the nationalisms of chosen nations, and to deny any collective rights to other nations.

Of course, on some issues you have to take sides, sharply and clearly, as we side now with the Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza against the Israeli occupation, and as the tendency to which I belong has always supported the Northern Ireland Catholics in struggle against the British state and against the oppression to which Partition consigned them. But you must do that within the political framework of the Marxist and Leninist programme for resolving conflicts like those between Arabs and Jews and between Catholics and Protestants.

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Where the only proper Marxist approach in national conflicts is to argue for the equality of peoples — and in the first place for equal rights and unity within the working class — the kitsch-Trotskyists pick and choose, designating 'good' and 'bad' peoples, 'pro-imperialists' and 'anti-imperialists'. They do not know it, but they are in the tradition not of the mature Marx or Engels, or of Lenin and Trotsky, but at best of the young Frederick Engels, who in 1848 denounced "small, pig-headed nations" in Europe. (Engels argued that such nations would inevitably serve as the tools of reactionaries wanting to obstruct the then progressive unification of the big nations of the continent).

More: Geoff Bell and his friends hold to the view of a 'world revolution' marching inexorably ahead as if guided by some god of history. This teleological view lends itself especially to the approach that designates some nations 'good' and others 'bad'. The nationalism of the 'good' nations is in the camp of the 'world revolution'; the nationalism of the 'bad' nations is in the other camp, of 'imperialism'.

In Geoff Bell's case, this approach leads a member of the Protestant Irish minority not to rise above the tragic communalism dividing the people of our island to working-class internationalism — or even Wolfe Tone Republicanism — but simply to swap communities. Communalism is the problem. Consistent democracy, and the fight for working-class unity on that basis — that is, socialist Republicanism — is the answer.

How to argue for troops out

Geoff Bell wrote this polemic in response to a report in *Socialist Organiser* on a Labour Party conference debate on Troops Out. The report argued that the left had lost not only the debate but also the argument, because it failed to answer the objections of the right-wing or to explain how troops out could lead to a positive solution.

Socialist Organiser of 17 October 1985 gave over three pages to attacking myself and three other movers and seconders of the resolutions

on Ireland at the Labour Party conference.

In reply to this, the first admission I would make is that I am somewhat dubious about doing so. I find it rather difficult to take seriously John O'Mahony's 'review' of the Irish debate at conference. It is reminiscent of those old stories about theatre reviews written by someone who spent the entire performance of the play in the theatre bar. Like John O'Mahony, that reviewer may have read the script — and O'Mahony reproduced ours at great length — but there are more to plays

than the script. And there is more to debates at Labour Party conference than what is actually said in speeches.

However, let me begin by questioning O'Mahony's methodology. In asking why, or rather asserting that, "the Troops Out current still counts for little in our movement" he says that those who seek an explanation for this can begin by looking at the debate at conference and at the weak argument put over by those who made speeches there.

This is a very silly suggestion. The movers of the resolutions have five minutes each, the seconders and other

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speakers three minutes. To expect any individual to make a detailed, theoretically-sound, answering-all-possible-objections-that-might-be-raised type of speech in that time is absurd. This is especially the case when the issue concerned is Northern Ireland: an issue continually distorted or neglected by the ruling class press and the labour bureaucracy. No, all we can do when speaking to resolutions on Ireland at the party conference is hope to make a couple of polemical points, correct one or two misapprehensions and supply the odd bit of information which perhaps, just perhaps, may start the odd delegate thinking afresh about the Irish issue.

These may appear modest intentions, but I do suggest that John O'Mahony is rather naive if he believes that it is speeches at Labour Party conferences which win or lose debates there. As I am sure he knows, the vast majority of votes are decided beforehand at caucus meetings of the unions. What informs their discussion on Ireland I will discuss shortly, but to give over three pages of Socialist Organiser to discussing four or five speeches of a few minutes each is to elevate the importance of those, and the possible effect they could have, to a level they do not warrant.

But if John O'Mahony wishes to do that, at least let him get off his metaphorical theatre bar stool, buy a programme and see what the play was called. The basis of his attack on us was to insist "the single slogan 'Troops Out' needs to be replaced by a broader agitation which would make 'Troops Out' one element in a coherent programme." I agree, as I am sure do the other delegates O'Mahony attacked. And that is why, totally contrary to the impression given by Socialist Organiser, the resolutions we moved and seconded went way, way beyond 'Troops Out'.

O'Mahony wants "a coherent programme". So do we, which is why in the resolution I moved we called not just for withdrawal within the lifetime of the next Labour government, as Socialist Organiser reported, but also for the working out of "a detailed policy for British withdrawal". Call it a "coherent programme" or a "detailed policy", it matters little: what does matter is they amount to the same thing.

Certainly we did not detail this policy or programme, although the second resolution mentioned some possible components of it — the ending of the PTA, plastic bullets and strip searching — but what we did do, in the wording of our resolutions, was to suggest that the working out of this policy/programme

was of such importance that we needed a wide-ranging discussion within the labour movement to flesh it out. That is what the resolutions called for, and for John O'Mahony to try and parade us as Troops Out simpletons is a sectarian distortion.

And, if I may, I will add a personal note here. John's kind enough to say in his article that I have written some "useful works" on Ireland. For that, thank you, but if he had read one of those works a little more closely — "The British in Ireland" — he would know that in the conclusion I argue for and detail a coherent programme for British withdrawal.

The Labour Committee on Ireland also argue the importance of establishing a programme for withdrawal. All of which underlines the importance of not jumping to too many polemical conclusions on the basis of what is said in a couple of minutes of speechifying at Labour Party conferences. As to the quality of those speeches which O'Mahony seeks to denigrate, that is, of course, a matter of opinion. In the opinion of the *Irish Post*, for instance, "the Irish case was put most eloquently at Bournemouth — the best ever presentation and all who spoke in favour of those resolutions must be warmly congratulated."

Now the *Irish Post* may not possess the theoretical wisdom or Marxist analysis of Socialist Organiser, but there is one reason for taking its views a good deal more seriously than those of O'Mahony: its coverage of the Irish debate at conference concentrated on attacking the disgraceful, incoherent performance of Alex Kitson, the spokesperson for the NEC.

That, for me, was a much more important target — the target of the labour bureaucracy who historically and presently must share the responsibility for British misrule in Ireland — than that of their left critics such as myself and the others who spoke in the debate in favour of ending that British misrule. Mention of the labour bureaucracy raises a further point concerning the debate in the trade unions in Ireland and the relationship of this to discussions in the Labour Party. When O'Mahony asked: "Why is the Troops-out-of-Ireland current so feeble in the British labour movement?" he was not only mistaken in characterising us as simply 'Troops Out', he was also wrong in his assessment of our strength.

Within the last four or five years we have won the party to supporting, on paper, Irish unity; secured promises to repeal the PTA and stop the use of plastic bullets; and defeated the NEC on the ending of the jury-less courts and strip-searching. Support for our positions in the CLPs has also ensured that Ireland has been debated at conference for the last five years.

I would also argue that we now have the majority, if not overwhelming, support in the CLPs in support of British withdrawal. Where we lack support is in the trade unions, and it is their block vote which has consistently ensured our

withdrawal motions are lost.

Why have the unions adopted this attitude? Is it because, as John O'Mahony suggests, the trade union delegations at conference are worried about the prospect of a blood-bath if Britain leaves? They may be worried about this, and certainly the question of the blood-bath needs serious discussion, but to suggest this is what informs the unions' opposition — or that of the NEC — to British withdrawal is to ascribe to these union bureaucrats — as many of them are — a degree of concern and compassion for the poor Irish Catholics of which, quite frankly, there is as much evidence as there is of snow in hell.

No, as any half-decent materialist analysis would recognise, the reason the union leaderships are hostile to British withdrawal is because of their membership in Northern Ireland, the vast majority of whom are loyalists and who would quite likely leave their unions if they believed their leaderships were voting for pro-Republican resolutions at Labour Party conferences.

Add to that fact the unions' local leaderships in Northern Ireland have, in some instances, been themselves accused of operating discrimination against Catholics by the Fair Employment Agency, and you begin to get a materialist explanation for the unions' attitudes towards Northern Ireland, rather than some idealistic notion that it is all in people's heads and if we put the right argument over we will win the debate.

With that in mind, let me just conclude by making a couple of remarks as to how we can help to change this situation. The work of building up support for British withdrawal from Ireland within the rank and file of the unions is an obvious priority, and one way in which, in future, the material interests of the bureaucracy could be negated. And we are all agreed that to win that support means going beyond Troops Out Now.

Where the real dispute lies, I suspect, is just exactly where do we go? For myself, the guiding political principle is that socialists insist that British withdrawal from Ireland is unconditional. To spell this out, neither the British government, the Labour Party conference nor even Socialist Organiser can place conditions on British withdrawal. The principle of self-determination means that they have no right to insist that the Irish construct their state in this or that way before Britain leaves.

That is why I object to John O'Mahony's practice — both in this article and others — of coupling British withdrawal with the advocacy of a federal Ireland in which there would be considerable autonomy for the Protestant North. I have no intention of entering into this argument here because I do not accept the prime responsibility of British socialists at this stage in the Irish struggle is to sit around and commentate on debates at Labour Party conferences one day and construct con-

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strategic arrangements by which Ireland will be governed the next.

Our job is to work for British withdrawal from Ireland. In the course of that work we can suggest ways and means of lessening the threat of a blood-bath — for instance, the disbandment and disarming of the UDR — and we can include these measures in a wider and more detailed programme for British withdrawal.

That, however, is an entirely different process than the Irish priority Socialist Organiser has chosen to adopt in the last couple of years — arguing in Britain for a Federal Ireland.

It all conjures up an amusing vision: we win the debate in the Labour Party; a socialist government prepares to withdraw from Ireland; John O'Mahony parades up and down Whitehall with the banner 'Troops Must Stay Until Protestant Rights Are Secured'.

This, of course, is a caricature. The point I am making is that, for me, any theoretical discussion on the nature of loyalism which we in Britain have is best placed in the context of advocacy for unconditional British withdrawal. Once that context is agreed, then perhaps we can get away from both the type of 'reportage' Socialist Organiser used for the Irish debate at conference and the type of reply which was necessitated by that reportage.

The need to link the issues

John O'Mahony replied

Did I "attack" Geoff Bell and others whose speeches at Labour Party conference I summarised and commented upon in SO 248? Certainly I criticised them pretty severely, and I suppose I was a bit unkind to Sarah Roelofs, whose writings on Ireland in Labour Briefing sum up for me much of what's wrong with much of the left. But to disagree is not necessarily to "attack". I consider myself to be on the same side as those who spoke for Troops Out at Labour Party conference.

I presented full summaries of the speeches in order to avoid giving the impression of trigger-happy factional sniping and to give readers the chance to form an independent judgement: I solicited Geoff Bell's present reply because I believe a serious debate *within the left* on the question of Ireland is one of the most urgent tasks we have to tackle.

Unfortunately Geoff Bell declines to discuss most of what I wrote. Having summarised and critically analysed the

arguments used by advocates of Troops Out, I concluded that: "...The left lost the argument at this year's Labour Party conference. With the partial exception of Geoff Bell *the left did not even seriously attempt to answer the arguments*" (emphasis added). Was I right or wrong?

Geoff Bell is of course right that there is more to the Labour Party conference "play" than the mere script, the speeches, alone embodies or can convey. The pressures and vested interests of the outside world overshadow the debates, giving their precise meaning and weight to the sentiments and ideas expressed there and sometimes predetermining the vote and without regard to the speeches and arguments that emerge at conference.

Geoff is right that it is a weakness in my account of the debate that I didn't underline and bring out the significance of Kitson's reference (which I cited) to the TGWU's 200,000 Irish members. But my subject was *the script*, i.e. the arguments. The absence of comment on the trade union bureaucracy's vested interest not to upset the status quo is a weakness in my article, but not a decisive one *unless* you want to say that the arguments are irrelevant.

I itemised the three arguments on which the opponents of Troops Out base themselves: "(1): That British withdrawal would be followed immediately by sectarian civil war, and therefore, (2): Troops Out leads not to a united Ireland but to bloody repartition and two Irish states; and (3): That Northern Ireland is some sort of legitimate expression of the rights of the Protestant community, which can only be changed fundamentally with their consent."

My summary of all the points made by the speakers established the remarkable fact that only one left-winger even attempted to deal with any of these arguments — Geoff Bell took up the bloodbath argument. The rest of the arguments were not touched at all by any of the left speakers. That was the most striking feature of the debate — *they didn't try to argue*. In terms of the arguments it was almost a non-debate because the left simply defaulted on the arguments.

If I'd seized on this or that nasty speech and said the equivalent of: "It is no accident, comrades, that comrade X in his speech about rate rises in Tower Hamlets neglected to deal with the class character of the Communist Parties of Cuba and Outer Mongolia!" — then that would be very unreasonable. But what happened in the conference debates needs an explanation.

Because movers of the resolutions have only five minutes, says Geoff Bell, and seconders only three, "to expect any individual to make a detailed, theoretically sound, answering-all-possible-objections-that-might-be-raised type of speech in that time is absurd." Moreover, though "the question of the bloodbath needs serious discussion", "any half-decent materialist analysis would recognise (that) the reason the union leaderships are hostile to British

withdrawal is because of their membership in Northern Ireland, the vast majority of whom are Loyalists and who would quite likely leave their unions if they believed their leaderships were voting pro-Republican resolutions at Labour Party conference. (This suggests) a materialistic explanation for the unions' attitude towards Northern Ireland rather than some idealistic notion that it is all in people's heads and if we put the right argument over we will win the debate."

So the arguments don't matter? Or anyway not very much? But the arguments do matter — and if they don't, why write articles and books, why bother to make speeches at all? The arguments had an importance outside the 'theatre' of the conference — they went out live on two TV channels.

Was five minutes not enough? That wouldn't explain the virtual absence of even attempts — rushed and garbled as they might have to be in the circumstances — to take up the arguments. Nor does it explain the fact that in an article of about 1800 words — which can't be much less than the 'comment' part of my article — Geoff Bell still doesn't attempt to answer any of the points: what the arguments in the movement are? Well then, what are they?

In fact, Geoff Bell's position seems to be not that the arguments don't matter, nor that they are different from what I stated, but that we *don't have the right to discuss such issues*. Neither the British labour movement nor British Marxists (nor — in my own case — Irish Marxists who live in Britain) have any right to discuss the issues. Our political rights can go no further than the right to repeat, as often as we can muster the energy and conviction, the single relevant slogan, Troops Out Now, with no qualifications.

I must have expressed myself badly, because Geoff Bell has not taken on board the main point I made, about the need for seeing Troops Out as one element in a coherent programme. His response is "that the resolution we moved and seconded went way, way beyond Troops Out...the resolution I moved... called not just for withdrawal in the lifetime of the next Labour government...but also for the working out of a 'detailed policy' for British withdrawal." Further:

"Certainly, we did not detail this policy or proposal, although the second resolution mentioned some possible components of it — the ending of the PTA, plastic bullets and strip-searching

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— but what we did do... was to suggest... that we needed a wide-ranging discussion within the labour movement to flesh (this programme) out." By "detailed policy" he understood a detailed policy for how to withdraw the troops, not a proposal for what is to replace the present structure which depends for its survival on British troops.

My entire argument was — and I said it explicitly — that 'Troops Out' alone is counter-productive. It begs questions — like the bloodbath issue — which it does not answer and which can only be answered by a programme for how Ireland should be restructured. I said our programme should be "self-determination for Ireland as a whole and within that autonomy for the Protestant areas." Even allowing 50% of the responsibility to the opacity of my writing, it is still remarkable that Geoff Bell does not seem able to take in the point, let alone reply to it.

In fact he explicitly refuses to discuss issues like 'federalism' in a profane publication like SO in a foreign country. Ours is not to reason why...

"We are all agreed that to win that support means going beyond Troops Out Now. Where the real dispute lies, I suspect, is just where we do go. For myself, the guiding political principle is that socialists insist that British withdrawal from Ireland is unconditional. To spell this out, neither the British government, the Labour Party conference, or even SO can place conditions on British withdrawal. The principle of self-determination means that they have no right to insist that the Irish construct their state in this way or that way before Britain leaves..."

But this is metaphysical, not politics of any sort and certainly not working class politics. You elevate Irish self-determination into an absolute principle against which everything else is measured and to which everything else is, if necessary, sacrificed.

Now I'm for a united federal Ireland (any other form of united Ireland is simply inconceivable). But I don't start out from the idea that a united Ireland, or even an independent Ireland, is the goal itself, an unquestionable axiom. I arrive at support for a united Ireland as a result of asking other questions. How can the Irish working class be united? How can the paralysis of the Irish working class be lifted? What are the conditions in which the Irish working class is most likely to separate itself politically from the Green, Orange, and Green-White-and-Orange segments of the split and divided Irish bourgeoisie?

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I arrive at the belief that a united Ireland is necessary because I believe a federal united Ireland in which the democratic rights of both sections of the Irish people will be protected is the necessary way towards another goal, working class unity, which I consider a higher goal and, if there were a choice to be made, a far more important goal.

I reject the politics of ABC economic agitation combined with abstract socialist propaganda characteristic of Militant and other groups because it simply has no way of relating to the political questions which dominate the life of the Six County working class and sections of the 26 County working class, and therefore has no grip on reality.

But if I thought the working class could be united by ignoring the unresolved and festering national question, then I would consider it a socialist duty to ignore it. Neither Irish independence, nor Irish self-determination, nor Irish unity is an absolute principle if your standpoint is that of Marxist socialism. That is what distinguishes us from all nationalists, left and right: Irish independence and unity is not the end but a means to an end. We are for it or against it depending on other things.

You make of 'self-determination' a self-sufficient programme with Troops Out as its sole expression. It is not even something that can be discussed. Your position conflates the Marxist support for a democratic programme and for those fighting for it — a support that is always conditional in the sense of being a means to an end — with the nationalist view of slogans like Troops Out as an end in themselves.

You collapse the particular, and exceptionally complicated, Irish question into generalities about self-determination — the concrete into the abstract. For a certainty the 26 Counties have self-determination and full political independence from Britain — they took a different line in World War II and the recent Falklands war, they argue with Britain as an equal within the EEC.

Southern Ireland hasn't got economic independence? No, it hasn't. But that is an entirely different question. The socialist programme against colonialism and imperialism is not the reactionary utopia of economic independence and autarky, which the Irish bourgeoisie partly attempted between 1932 and 1958. Our solution to the economic questions is class struggle and socialism.

Self-determination is an organising principle for socialists, and an always binding and active principle. We are obliged to oppose its opposite, oppression and denial of national democracy. But how, if not by discussion, can we decide concretely whether we are for self-determination of particular groups, what self-determination means in particular circumstances, and what form of self-determination it is to be?

You cannot make 'self-determination', meaning concretely 'Troops Out' and no talk about what

comes after' an absolute principle, presented to British workers in a spirit of ultimatic sectarianism. Self-determination has to be assayed, concretely, discussed and weighed: you have to make your case for your interpretation.

How should British (or Irish) workers work these things out? After all there is good reason to be perplexed, and reason to fear that Troops Out is the road to a bloodbath and the repatriation of Ireland. How? I say, by reason and argument. You say, by accepting the issue as posed now by the militant nationalists and in the demand 'Troops Out Now' with no nonsense or procrastination and no talk of a programme other than for how to withdraw.

This is metaphysics for another reason. For how is 'self-determination' and Troops Out going to be realised? By a sudden British pull-out with no political settlement?

Any serious talk of British withdrawal is necessarily talk of Britain negotiating its way out, arranging for a replacement for the state power which Britain now sustains. It will be a negotiated pull-out.

This is the Sinn Fein version of 'Troops Out', and the only one that does not raise the spectacle of Troops Out meaning an inevitable bloody civil war, leading to repatriation. Why should the left and the labour movement confine itself to the phrase-mongering role of saying 'Troops Out and no discussion', thereby depriving itself of any possible role in shaping a political settlement? It makes no sense.

The 'Troops Out and no chatter' line amounts to a self-denying ordinance for the left in trying to explain and argue its case. This may not matter too much if you confine yourself to a 'constituency' predisposed towards you by attitudes on Nicaragua, Cuba, etc — people who might indeed well be lost by having the issues and arguments teased out in a way that would make the Third World parallels difficult to sustain.

I worded carefully what I wrote about the "feebleness" of the Troops Out current: "Even after a notable accession of strength in the last three or four years, the Troops Out current still counts for little in our movement." Geoff Bell replies by claiming victories on the juryless courts, strip-searching, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and Labour's commitment to a united Ireland.

Even if you accept the claim that the Troops Out current won all those victories, the fact remains that all those positions — and especially a united Ireland — are counterposed by the Labour Party leadership to Troops Out! It is true that there is a lot of support for Troops Out in the Constituency Labour Party left, and there is also a lot of passive support for Troops Out in the British population (over 50%). Yet the Troops Out current still has very little clout outside the comprehensively left-wing sections of the CLPs. You admit that it counts for little in the unions.

More is involved than numbers. The Troops Out current is politically feeble.

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It is a current that cannot answer its opponents politically and at the conference did not seriously try. I think that Geoff Bell is kidding himself if he thinks the solid Troops Out support can be identified with the number of votes that Troops Out can get at constituency GCs. Will those who cannot answer the arguments of our opponents on the bloodbath question and on Troops Out not leading to a united Ireland stand up under pressure of a serious civil war scare? Passing a resolution reflecting conventional left wisdom at the ward or GC is one thing — sticking to it in face of the harsh realities that may unfold in Northern Ireland is something else, and so is being able to go out and argue and campaign in the trade unions for it.

For example, given the wide passive support for Troops Out in the population, why are the Constituency Labour Party Troops Out forces unable to win the unions? The Troops Out current is a lot bigger than it was, but I didn't

neglect to record that. But it remains feeble.

The argument that we have no right but to support those in struggle in Ireland is not only widespread but also a very old argument. I have difficulty talking it seriously because I encountered and opposed it as far back as August 1969, when it was used as an argument against British socialists calling for Troops Out!

When the British troops were put on the streets in August 1969, Catholics in Belfast and Derry welcomed them. Socialists and Republicans in Northern Ireland did not call for their withdrawal and some explicitly welcomed them. The biggest revolutionary socialist group in Britain dropped its previously prominent call for British withdrawal and polemicalised in Socialist Worker and elsewhere against those of us who refused to give de facto support to the deployment of British troops. And as one of their most 'clinging' arguments they us-

ed the fact that neither our socialist co-thinkers in the Six Counties nor even the Republicans were calling for Troops Out.

You will say, of course, that they were wrong. But logically, Geoff, you shouldn't. For if it is a principle now for us that we have no option but to go along with the Northern Ireland left and Republicans then the same principle must have been in operation then, even though it led to diametrically opposite conclusions.

When the 26 Counties voted to ban divorce

The partition of Ireland and the repressive Six County state in the North were given a much-needed boost from the voters in the South in June 1986.

That was one of the tragic effects of the massive vote against legalised divorce in a referendum proposed by the then coalition government of Fine Gael and the Labour Party.

The referendum proposal was to allow divorce under fairly tight conditions when a married couple could show that their marriage had broken down for at least five years. All that is available now are church and civil annulments after which separated people have no right to re-marry.

The Church worked hard for a 'no' vote. Fianna Fail campaigned for 'no', though it claimed to be neutral. And by two to one the voters rejected the proposal to liberalise the law.

The first victims were the 70,000 Irish women thought to be affected by the ban on divorce. These women have no rights to maintenance or help, and yet no right to remarry.

The second victims were the Northern Catholics. Their basic civil and democratic rights cannot be won in the mainly Protestant and sectarian Northern Ireland state. They need to break down that state and create a united Ireland.

The harsh reality is that this united Ireland will not come about without big defeats for the two traditions of sectarianism. The referendum defeat showed the malignant vigour of Catholic sectarianism.

John Hume, leader of the main Northern Catholic party, the SDLP, realised this. For the sake of the Anglo-Irish Accord he made a final appeal to Southern voters to say 'yes' to divorce reform.

Sinn Féin, in a confusion which reflects the populist politics of the movement, came out for a 'yes' vote, but then went on to explain how they could understand many of their supporters not being able to vote 'yes'. They evaded the issue.

Many socialists who are sympathetic to Irish nationalism will point to the reactionary attitudes of most Loyalist leaders on issues like divorce, and say that it is all really irrelevant. They will be right about the Loyalists. They will be wrong about the relevance of the vote.

What the vote showed us is how the Irish Republic treats a minority — non-Catholics,

or separated women. Since the whole of the national question in Ireland today revolves around the question of a minority, the Northern Protestants, the point could hardly be more relevant.

One of the ironies of this is that many of the leading anti-divorce campaigners would see themselves as strong fighters for a united Ireland. For us, as socialists, that just underlines the vast gulf between secular republicanism, whose aim is to remove the divisions between the communities in Ireland, and chauvinist Catholic nationalism.

In its explicit attempt to create "a Catholic state for a Catholic people", that nationalism simply mirrors the Protestant-sectarian politics of the Unionists of Northern Ireland.

Uniting Ireland and uniting its working class are two things that have to go together. If you are not for both you are not for either.

Labour's 'unity by consent'

Jonathan Hammond and John O'Mahony interviewed Clive Seley for Socialist Organiser in February 1983
At the time, Clive Seley was deputy Labour Party spokesperson on Northern Ireland

Can you outline the Labour Party policy for us, as it stands now?

The first think Labour would do on gaining power would be to give a clear commitment to a united Ireland by consent.

Why consent? First of all, we prefer to govern by consent, obviously. But, secondly, and this is very important, the population of Ireland is five million. Of those five million, one and a half million live in Northern Ireland. Of that 1½ million, one million, to a greater or lesser extent, support the Unionist cause. And to try to force one million to join the other four million without their consent would be a recipe for disaster.

I don't think a united Irish government would be well equipped, particularly in the early days, to cope with the problems that would come from that. But what consent must not mean is a veto on political progress. We would legislate in a way that would lead people to the conclusion that a united Ireland was in their best interests.

The sort of things I would like to see us consider, and I think we would consider, would be measures like joint citizenship, joint voting rights, the ability to vote and stand in each other's elections, very close harmonisation, so that the Unionist won't feel trapped in a united Ireland — so that he knows that if he chooses to he can travel on a British passport or an Irish passport, he can vote in British elections, he can vote in Irish elections and, I would hope, could stand in elections on both sides too.

I think we would be looking very quickly for a major effort to harmonise various matters on the economy, social factors, and political institutions north

and south of the Border. I believe the Border has distorted the economies of both North and South alike. One of the things I would want to consider very urgently would be an all-Ireland Economic Development Council. I'd also like to look at some form of all-Ireland council, or a sort of British-Irish council — with elected representatives from the North and the South, and possibly from Britain.

We'd want to consider an all-Ireland police force, recruited — and I emphasise this — from both sides of the Border, trained in a common training school, with a common sense of identity.

I would say to people who are worried about an all-Ireland police force that unless you do consider things like that, then frankly you are not serious about a united Ireland. At the end of the day, there has to be a police force that can cross that border, and it's an important step forward.

There's a whole range of factors of that sort which we'd want to consider.

Do you see withdrawal of troops as an objective of Labour Party policy?

The aim should be troops back to barracks as soon as possible. That is actually happening, but slowly. We want to continue it as quickly as possible.

I'm not a Troops Out man, nor am I for setting dates for British withdrawal. I see a policy of British withdrawal from Ireland as opposed to a policy for a united Ireland. It does not follow that if we withdraw our troops then you will have a united Ireland.

We all know that some unionists are prepared to fight for an independent Northern Ireland. I don't think it would work, but I do know that plenty of them are prepared to fight for it.

Therefore my view is that policies that are designed simply to get Britain out don't provide a solution. They simply get Britain out, which might be nice for us but doesn't solve the problem.

Can I put to you a view of what the last Labour government did? You have a situation where the government balances between the Protestants and Catholics. The Labour government capitulated to the Orange general strike in May 1974. I think it simply let its strategy (power-sharing and a Council of Ireland) be wiped out. Then it swung in the opposite direction and, after he succeeded Marilyn Rees, Mason adopted a policy that was essentially one of bending down the Catholics. There is a lot of evidence of very widespread searches of thousands of Catholic homes. It amounted to terrorisation. It was basically a policy of holding the ring, doing nothing, sweating it out — immediately after buckling under the pressure of the Orange strike. That's what happened.

I understand that view. Can I say how I see it? I wasn't involved in the politics

of Ireland until I came into this House in 1979. I always felt there should be a united Ireland. Then when the civil rights movement came along in the late 1960s I got very excited. I thought there was a good chance of real political and economic progress by peaceful means.

I think the destruction of that civil rights movement was a crucial step. A lot of people have got a lot to answer for. The main people are the Stormont government, and then the paramilitaries on both sides of the divide over there.

Because, leaving aside the obvious things the Loyalists and the Stormont government did, the other thing that happened is that the IRA, as it then was, recognised that the initial popularity of the British troops could not be allowed to continue. So they started their policy of shooting at British forces.

But why do you think the civil rights movement of the late 1960s turned into the armed offensive led by the IRA?

I think the civil rights movement was thrust to the paramilitary groups on both sides. Certainly it was a massive threat to the Stormont government and the Loyalists generally. There is no doubt in my mind that a whole lot of people who had a very fixed view of how they saw things developing, thinking they represented their particular group set out to destroy the movement.

The IRA severely exalted in 1969.

Well, it existed all right, and it existed enough to do the damage by turning out the British troops.

The Provisionals emerged at the end of 1969 as part of a reaction against the fact that over the previous seven years there had been an evolution towards peaceful methods by the old IRA. They were involved in the civil rights agitation. They had no guns, or scarcely any, during the pogroms of 1969. The IRA didn't, in fact...

I'm quite prepared to accept that you know more about the IRA than I do. I wasn't deeply involved. But I put it to you that there was an effort to alienate the minority community from the British presence there when the troops were first brought in. Is that not correct?

I doubt it — not at first. I could, for example, tell you in detail about how the British army was allowed into Catholic Free Derry, and the protective barricades (erected in August 1969) voluntarily taken down, in October 1969. It was actually organised by the Republicans. Later the IRA split and things changed. But can I put the point in a different way? It seems to me that there was an absolutely necessary political logic in the development from civil rights to the IRA offensive, in that the basic civil right that the Catholics lacked was the right of self-determination.

Right.

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The whole logic of the struggle for limited objectives led to a Protestant backlash, which in turn pushed the Catholics, in fear and terror, towards self-defence, and then boosted those who wanted to go on an armed offensive, after the IRA split. That takes us back to what you said about waiting for a majority in the Northern state. The point is that it has been artificially carved out — very artificially. 35% of the population are opposed to the state's existence. Over the past 15 years, in fact from before the violent phase, when it was a question of Britain putting pressure to reform on the old Orange state, the central problem has been that the state was deliberately designed to give a permanent Protestant majority. It was not reformable. Yet you are committed to remaining within the narrow limitations of a state which has a built-in Protestant sectarian majority.

These are very important points, and I recognise the logic of what you have said. I'd go along with quite a bit of it. I'd have reservations about some of it. What I would stress to you is that the key to this is having the political skill and determination to go through with the political, social, economic and institutional changes regardless of opposition from the Unionist group.

I don't mean rough-riding over them. I am saying that we would not accept that they had a veto — for example, on setting up an all-Ireland Economic Development Council, or an all-Ireland police force, and a whole host of other things of that nature.

If you do that, you are saying something you've never said before to the unionists: it's not just that we want to get things better in Northern Ireland. We are saying to you that we don't want you in the UK any more, we want you in a united Ireland. That is a very different message going out to the Unionists than has gone out before.

I don't think you can assume that all Unionists are hard-liners who will fight in the last ditch. Obviously there are lots of those. They keep making their presence felt. But there are also a lot of them saying things that they would not have said even five years ago, let alone ten. 'Well, we can't go on as we are, can we?' for example. That's a very significant change.

I think you could not coerce the Unionists. Quite certainly you would have to have a federal Ireland and give them rights over their own affairs. The thing is that a British Labour government could create the political conditions for change by a declaration of intent to withdraw; by really energetic determination to change the whole structure and framework to make some form of a united Ireland realistic politics for the Protestants — give them options where they would have an incentive to accept change.

I haven't ruled out any of that.

But if you start by accepting the majority's rights within the artificial entity, then you are in fact saying to them: 'We'll always let you veto us'.

No, I'm not saying that at all. All I'm saying, very clearly, is that what we'll do first is have talks with the Dublin government — whatever government it happens to be — to set up new economic and social institutions, and we do not allow them to veto that.

I've already indicated that, obviously, governments can get pressurised and deflected if the pressure is strong enough. That's where the political skill comes in.

There would be a major effort not to allow any group or any individual to veto those things that were agreed by London and Dublin. In effect what I'm saying is: yes, we are giving a strong commitment to get out. We are not setting a date. I think, as I've said, a commitment to getting out is not a policy for a united Ireland — it might be that the real policy is to have a commitment to a united Ireland, and that's what I'm saying. You yourself say we can't do it by coercion. Therefore we have got to do it by consent. But you don't allow them to veto the political progress.

How would a new Labour government treat the Catholics?

Better.

For example, it was a Tory government which granted political status as part of an attempt to find a new solution after Bloody Sunday (when 13 unarmed men were shot dead in Derry, on 30 January 1972). A Labour government took it away. You still seem to be committed to a policy that would involve a continual harassment of a big section of the Catholic population.

I would hope things like the Prevention of Terrorism Act can go, and that we would have a major review of the Emergency Provisions Act. I would want to have a whole look at human rights issues there, like the delay in getting death certificates and coroners' reports on children killed by plastic bullets, and all sorts of other things like that.

That won't come about quickly. The Catholics, for very understandable reasons, don't trust the security forces, and it's very difficult to change that quickly. I mean, I'd like to change it tomorrow morning.

We'll make the forces be seen and felt to be totally impartial. I haven't got a magic wand that would do that. I have got a number of things in my mind, including an all-Ireland police force, that would help do that. But not overnight, I fear.

What do you feel about restoring political status to Republican prisoners?

I would not give political status. I've always been very opposed to political status, not least because as an probation officer I very strongly take the view that if you decide to lock people up for whatever reason then you should treat them equally, except on the grounds of security (ie. a burglar doesn't get the same sort of security as a mass murderer).

I think it is wrong in principle. The only justification for it would be under the Geneva Convention on prisoners of

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war, in which case you have got to have two states that have declared war on each other, both sides wearing recognisable uniforms.

One of the most dangerous things about political status for nationalists is that you also give it to Loyalists. If you do that, and you then have a united Ireland, you hand over a large number of Loyalist prisoners of war to the new state, which is the surest way I know of saying to the Loyalist people — you have a legitimate fight, you are entitled to prisoner of war status too, you have got it, and make sure you keep it.

I know that the Unionists will be prepared to fight and kill and die themselves for their cause, as are the Nationalists at present.

But you accept that the Catholics have been oppressed terribly for 60 years at least. On what definition are the IRA straightforward criminals?

They're not. Of course they're political, I'm not disputing that for a moment. But if we lock them up, that doesn't mean that they should be treated differently.

You are saying that an ordinary criminal should be treated worse. As a penal reformer I reject that strongly. There is no reason why a so-called common criminal — personally I find the phrase very offensive — should be treated worse than you who committed your act for political reasons.

Secondly, what's political? If you are a young black in this country, you feel the police don't defend you, and you take out a brick in your pocket to defend yourself — is that political or not? I would argue it is political.

So would I.

Someone who goes around shoplifting and says, 'I don't like the present structure of society in capitalism', is political.

You're mixing up two questions, though. I'd be in favour of penal reform, and of recognising the political dimension in the case of the young black or the unemployed person shoplifting. But there is a qualitative difference between the political element in these things and the political army of an admittedly oppressed community, with grievances which — you admit — pose a united Ireland as the only solution, even if you disagree with their methods.

That's not a reason for treating them differently. And certainly no reason for treating them better — which is the request.

They are soldiers.

If they are soldiers, then prisoner-of-war status comes from a very specific

The left

agreement. It is the Geneva agreement, which covers two states at war, and wearing a uniform when you are in combat. It's a dangerous policy because at the end of the day you'll wind up with a Loyalist prisoner-of-war camp in a united Ireland. If you want that, OK. But it's dangerous.

The Geneva Convention in its details is a product of established governments. We are talking about an oppressed people and their guerrilla army, which does not wear a uniform because it is outnumbered and so on. But they are soldiers.

By that definition, anyone who is fighting the British state as such, including the Tartan Army in Scotland and the Welsh arsonists and the Angry Brigade, are soldiers. We give them political status, do we? What sort of status would you give them and why treat them better?

I think you are using the whole business about penal reform to obscure the qualitative difference. For example, the Catholics in 1969 did not have guns. The IRA offensive grew out of the civil rights movement in reaction to the Protestant backlash and the pogroms. Your picture about how the armed conflict developed is somewhat askew, because one of the earliest events was the British curfew in the Falls just after the Heath government was elected, in July 1970 — before

the IRA offensive got under way. The whole chronology of how it developed shows that the IRA began as the defensive militia of the Catholic community.

I think that people who pursue this line are, not intentionally, betraying socialist values. There is no reason to argue that people who are less articulate — the vast majority in your prisons are working class people — don't in fact have political motives for what they do. Some of them act as organised groups like the Provisionals do. But that does not justify unequal treatment. If you want specific prisoner of war status, then two things follow: one, you must accept prisoner of war rules and regulations under the Geneva Convention; two, to my mind more importantly, you must give PoW status to Loyalists too. You must take on board that you will hand over to a united Ireland political prisoners of war and you are virtually saying to the rest of the Unionist population that this legitimises their fight against the new Irish state.

Isn't that the distant, or mid-distant future?

I don't think so. I'm working as fast as possible on this programme. Although I'm not setting dates, I'm not writing it off as some distant future aim. You are using the 'Unionist PoWs' argument and the political element in ordinary so-called criminal activity to

obscure the actual problem, that the Provisional IRA is an army of an oppressed people.

I've been working for good treatment in prisons for donkeys years — but I want it for everyone, not just one group. So you're in favour of a blanket reform in prisons?

Yes. One of my positions from early on in the hunger and dirty protests was that if we had made such reforms, we would have had no problem — the five demands would have been met.

So your policy in Northern Ireland will be to bring in a complete prison reform to include all sorts of rights for political and other prisoners?

In fact Northern Ireland prisons are better than the ones here, which are appalling. If we could do more to liberalise prisons, I'd be very happy.

You will in effect grant political status to all 'ordinary criminals' in Northern Ireland?

No. You are twisting my words. I'm saying I want good conditions for prisoners, and I'm not prepared to distinguish as to why a person committed an offence or not.

You are evading the actual point.

I don't think so, but we'll have to leave it there.

Thank you very much.

Tony Benn on Ireland

The time has come when British withdrawal from Northern Ireland must be moved to the centre of public debate. For too long those who have so courageously advocated it have been denounced as if they supported terrorism.

Yet it must be obvious to everybody that the present policy of military repression has failed, is failing, has no prospect of success and, in so far as it is intended to enforce partition, does not deserve to succeed.

Not only is the bitterness growing, along with the casualties, but the techniques for para-military policing and counter-insurgency are turning Northern Ireland into a police state, and those techniques are in danger of spreading to mainland Britain. Though there is massive media coverage of the violence, it is presented in such a way as to blank out any serious discussion of the alternatives.

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Parliament itself devotes a few hours every year to the procedures necessary to renew the emergency legislation, listens to ministerial statements that follow major incidents and debates, in a very low-key way, such administrative issues as fall to it to deal with under direct rule. My own experience of Cabinet is that the real choices do not even

get properly discussed there.

There was a debate in full Cabinet in 1969 when troops were sent in; again, after the Birmingham pub bombing when the anti-terrorist legislation was brought forward, and we had reports on the Ulster workers' strike. But at no time was the option of withdrawal ever seriously considered. Even discussions of successive Labour manifestos were always hedged about with warnings that any commitment to withdrawal might cost lives — as if they were not being lost all the time.

I believe that one reason why Britain retains control is based on an analysis by the chiefs of staff that an independent and unified Ireland might constitute a defence threat, though this is never made explicit and is not a valid reason for staying there. Some confirmation of this may be drawn from the papers that have come to light recently, suggesting that during the last World War Winston Churchill himself was quite prepared to ignore the Ulster veto if the Dublin government would assist Britain in its war effort.

What we should be discussing now is the way in which Britain could break the deadlock by a clear statement of intention to withdraw.

First, we should legislate "to terminate Her Majesty's jurisdiction in Northern Ireland", and set a date — not more than two or three years ahead — by which time Britain would withdraw, leaving open the possibility of an earlier withdrawal if suitable arrangements could be made meanwhile.

Second, we should invite the United Na-

tions to send a peace-keeping force into the province to replace our troops and to sustain law and order until such a time as the new government could assume that responsibility.

Third, we should negotiate a tripartite agreement setting out a basis for future relations between Britain, the Republic and a new Northern Ireland government, including safeguarding of human rights.

Fourth, we should declare an amnesty for prisoners held under the emergency.

Fifth, we should offer financial aid to the new government equal to the present contributions to Northern Ireland plus the costs of the emergency, for a five-year period, to be renegotiated thereafter on an annual basis for a further fixed period.

The very fact that such an alternative was being seriously considered by Britain would force both communities in Northern Ireland to discuss how they could best cooperate to

tackle the real problems of the province. These are mass unemployment, bad housing, poverty, inequality and social deprivation, the solution to which require reconciliation and political action, especially by the labour movement, that could override the sectarian hostilities that have been deliberately encouraged to divert people from the main tasks that need to be faced.

No-one can be sure that a policy along these lines would succeed, but there would certainly be massive support for it in Britain and the Republic. The people in the North, once they realised that we were in earnest, would then have a chance to build a future for themselves and their children, free from the unending prospect of further violence that now seems inevitable.

It sometimes appears as if Britain is an excuse that can be used to postpone consideration of what so many people in the province

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know must be done sooner or later. A clear statement of our intention would strip away that excuse, end an ancient injustice perpetrated by Britain on the Irish people over many centuries, and open up possibilities for cooperation that for the moment seems totally beyond our reach.

The Guardian, 18 July 1983

A reply to Tony Benn

Tony Benn has outlined a policy for ending the conflict in Northern Ireland in his *Guardian* column on 18 July 1983.

He wants to make the proposal for British withdrawal central to public debate in Britain. "For too long those who have so courageously advocated it have been denounced as if they supported terrorism," he says.

Benn's solution is this:

(1) Britain should set a date for withdrawal not more than two or three years ahead.

(2) The UN should be invited to send troops to replace those of Britain.

(3) A tripartite agreement should be negotiated — "including safeguarding of human rights" — between Britain, the Southern Irish state, and "a new Northern Ireland government".

(4) There should be an amnesty for prisoners "held under the emergency".

(5) Financial aid should be given to the new Northern Ireland government, equal to what is now spent on 'security' and the present British subsidies to Northern Ireland, for a five year period.

This is, essentially, the 'independent northern Ireland' policy long favoured by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and by one or two Catholic mavericks like former SDLP socialist Paddy Devlin. It begs questions that Benn does not even consider, let alone try to answer — and these are the decisive questions.

What would be the political system in an independent Northern Ireland? Majority rule? Rule by the Protestant majority artificially built into the state?

The references to 'guarantees' suggests that Benn's trend of thought would lead him to answer yes. The Catholics have no reason to believe such guarantees, and would fight on indefinitely rather than accept it.

They would be right to do so, for majority rule would be sectarian rule, whatever the guarantees. Though the British makes propaganda that the Six Counties are the democratic expression of the rights of the Protestant majority, in practice it refuses to let them exercise their majority. Why? Because there is no



way that 'majority rule' in Northern Ireland could avoid being, or quickly becoming, Protestant sectarian rule. The British government knows it — and so do the Northern Ireland Catholics.

The 'independent Northern Ireland' policy is unviable because the Six Counties is not a stable entity — it would quickly dissolve into communal civil war. If the South could be kept out of it all the UN could hope to do would be to freeze the conflict at a certain point, as in the Lebanon.

The explosive communal eruptions in Ceylon, with its mass movement of people to their own 'safe' areas, shows us what would inevitably happen in an 'independent Northern Ireland'.

Benn hopes that proposals such as these and a British declaration that it was going "would force both communities in Northern Ireland to discuss how they could best cooperate to tackle the real problems of the province. These are mass unemployment, bad housing, poverty, inequality and social deprivation, the solutions to which require conciliation and political action, especially by the labour movement, that could override the sectarian hostilities that have been deliberately encouraged to divert people from the main tasks that have to be faced."

Sure, the ruling class in both Britain and Ireland encouraged and took advantage of the communal division: it is much deeper-rooted than that, though.

The 'real problems' include the problem that — in social and political fact — shapes and conditions all others: the problem of the right to national self-determination of the majority of the Irish people, and how that Irish majority community will relate to the natural Irish minority, the Protestants of north-east Ulster.

To appeal to 'bread and butter questions' as the 'real issue' — though where possible working class unity should be built even on this minimal basis — is to repeat the error of the 'socialism-is-the-only-answer' activists who were outflanked in Northern Ireland by the rising IRA at the beginning of the '70s. Militant is the heir of such politics for Ireland.

Another argument thrown in by Benn is that Britain sees a united Ireland as possibly posing a military threat. This is out of date by three decades and an epochal revolution in military technology (from battleships and World War II aircraft to Cruise missiles).

In fact Benn's policy is an in-jellable mix of the UDA, Militant and the Communist Party (Bill of Rights/'guarantees'). The UN presence would not jell it. Nothing could.

The solution is a united Ireland with, within it, as much autonomy for Ireland's natural minority (the Protestants) as is compatible with the rights of the majority.

Who was James Connolly?

Any man who tells you that an act of armed resistance — even if offered by 10 men armed with stones — any man who tells you that such an act of resistance is premature, imprudent or dangerous — any and every such man should! at once be spurned, spat at. For remark you this and recollect it, that somewhere, and somehow, and by somebody a beginning must be made, and that the first act of resistance is always and must be ever premature, imprudent and dangerous."

James Fintan Lalor
Thus it was with the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. This was the spirit in which the successors of Lalor acted. And to act at all they needed such a spirit.

One thousand men, one quarter of them the trade union militants of the Citizen Army, badly armed and with little training, went out into the streets of Dublin to challenge and to fight the greatest empire the world had seen. Many of them knew — certainly the leaders knew — that, given the isolation of Dublin, they had little chance of success.

Yet: "We went out to break the connection between this country and the British Empire and to establish an Irish Republic...believing that the British government has no right in Ireland and never can have any right in Ireland," proudly explained Connolly to the military court that condemned him to death a week later.

Earlier Connolly had summed up the spirit of desperate determination which governed him between the outbreak of war in 1914 and his murder in 1916: "If you strike at, imprison or kill us, out of our prisons or graves we will still evoke a spirit that will thwart you, and maybe, raise a force that will destroy you. We defy you! Do your worst!" (Irish Worker, 1914)

With such conviction Connolly faced the British government and its firing squad. Awaiting his executors, he remained unrepentant. "Hasn't it been a good life — and isn't this a good end?" he said to his wife when she visited him for the last time. Yet, at his death, he believed that the socialists who knew him in Britain and America would never understand what he, a revolutionary socialist, was doing fighting for the mere

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national independence of Ireland. He knew that any of the socialists would regard it as an aberration for a Marxist to take Connolly's course. And of course many of them did.

How came Connolly to that end of his, which united the heroic act of traditional Irish Republicanism with the first decisive act of revolutionary labour?

Born of Irish parents in Edinburgh in 1868, Connolly started work in a print-shop at 10 or 11 and at 12 in a bakery. Like most emigre families, the Connollys remained very much attuned to Ireland. There at that time the crypto-socialist Fenian movement of the 1860s had given way to the fight of the Land League and Parnell's parliamentary party.

The League welded the tenants together to fight the landlords. Tenant solidarity and its warlike expression, the boycott, together with Parnell's obstruction in parliament, shook the English system. Callous men who had never bothered when the Irish people suffered in silence now became convinced of the need to solve 'the Irish problem' from above, before it solved itself from below.

The Connolly family atmosphere in Edinburgh, like that of most Irish families then, was saturated with a spirit of bitter rebellion against the 'English system': it was the air which the child James Connolly breathed, and it never left his system.

At 14 he joined the army, following many young workers forced in by economic pressure and following also a Fenian tradition: in the army they learned to use arms. Connolly was stationed in Ireland and it is probable that he deserted.

The Irish Socialist Republican Party

By 1889 he had become a socialist. The Jacobin ideas of the Irish Republicans transplanted to the conditions of the workers in Edinburgh blossomed easily and naturally into a socialist consciousness. From then to 1896 he developed his knowledge; winding up in the Marxist Social Democratic Federation. (Though his 'Marxism' remained one-sided: he seems never to have shed Catholicism.)

He married and 'inherited' a job as an Edinburgh dustman, but when he fought a local government election he was squeezed out and thereafter found it impossible to get a job.

Then came the turn which threw him for the first time completely into Irish politics. The Dublin Socialist Society invited him to become its paid organiser. He accepted.

By May 1896 he was ready to transform the group into the Irish Socialist Republican Party. From the start the ISRP distinguished itself by declaring for an independent Irish Republic. Even the SDF declared only for Home Rule for Ireland and many socialists considered it a betrayal of 'socialist internationalism' to bother at all with the question of oppressed nationalities.

Following Marx rather than the shallow 'Marxists' of his time, Connolly blended the plebian revolutionary tradition of the United Irishmen and the Fenians with revolutionary socialism. He declared: "Only the Irish working class remains as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland."

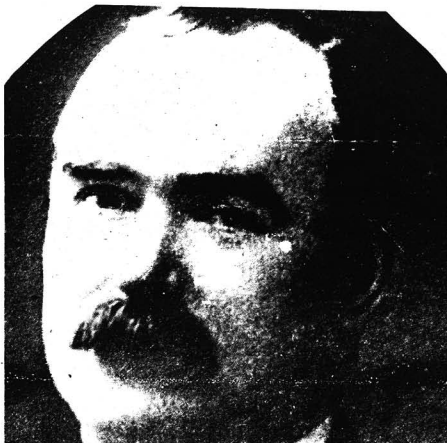
Often he expounded his ideas on this question:

"The development of democracy in Ireland has been smothered by the Union [ie, the Act of Union of 1801 of Britain and Ireland]. Remove that barrier, throw the Irish people back upon their own resources, make them realise that the causes of poverty, of lack of progress, of arrested civil and national development are then to be sought for within and not without, are in their power to remove or perpetuate, and ere long that spirit of democratic progress will invade and permeate all our social and civil institutions." (Workers Republic, 1897)

"The Socialist Party of Ireland [the ISRP's successor] recognises and most enthusiastically endorses the principles of internationalism, but it recognises that that principle must be sought through the medium of universal brotherhood rather than by self-extinction of distinct nations within the political maw of overgrown empires." (Forward, march 1911)

And: "We desire to preserve with the English people the same political relations as with the people of France, of Germany or of any other country. The greatest possible friendship, but also the strictest independence...Thus, inspired by another ideal, conducted by reason and not by tradition, the ISRP arrives at the same conclusion as the most irreconcilable nationalists." (1897)

But: "Having learned from history that all bourgeois movements end in compromise, that the bourgeois revolutionaries of today become the conservatives of tomorrow, the Irish socialists refuse to deny or to lose their identity with those who only half understand the problem of liberty. They seek only the alliance and friendship of those hearts who, loving liberty for its own sake, are



not afraid to follow its banner when it is uplifted by the hands of the working class, who have most need of it. Their friends are those who would not hesitate to follow that standard of liberty, to consecrate their lives in its service, even should it lead to the terrible arbitration of the sword."

These words were written 19 years before Easter 1916.

Connolly at the same time struggled against the middle class Home Rule party. He mocked at those who saw mere independence as a panacea.

"If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the Green Flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the socialist republic your efforts would be in vain. England would still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through the whole army of commercial-industrial institutions she has planted in the country and watered with the tears of our mothers and the blood of our martyrs. England would rule you to your ruin."

A social as well as a national revolution was necessary: "A system of society in which the workshops, factories, docks, railways, shipyards etc. shall be owned by the nation...seems best calculated to secure the highest form of industrial efficiency combined with the greatest amount of individual freedom from despotism..."

But he qualified this: "State ownership and control is not necessarily socialist — if it were, then the army and the navy, the police, the judges, the gaolers, the informers and the hangmen

would all be socialist functionaries as they are all state officials — but the ownership by the state of all the lands and material for labour, combined with the cooperative control by the workers of such land and materials, would be socialist...To the cry of the middle-class reformers, 'Make this or that the property of the government', we reply — 'yes, in proportion as the workers are ready to make the government their property'." (Workers Republic, 1899)

Arguing thus, fighting for working-class independence from Home Rulers and Nationalists alike, Connolly was by no means a 'millennial socialist'. He fought for limited gains and against sectarian socialists who refused to do so.

"Of course some of our socialist friends, especially those who have never got beyond the ABC of the question, will remind me that even in a republic in France and the United States. Therefore, they argue, we cannot be Republicans. To this I reply: The countries mentioned have only capitalism to deal with. We have capitalism and a monarchy..."

This, too, was his approach to the national question: we have capitalism and national oppression. Connolly would have had no time for the 'pure' nationalists today. Neither would he have time for those who, with the slogan 'For Connolly's Workers' Republic' on their lips, declare that the reunification of Ireland, even under capitalism, the removal of part of the double oppression of the workers of Ireland, is of no interest to socialists. Connolly was no

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'Connolly sectarian'.

Connolly's ISRP never had more than 100 members, though at certain times it was influential beyond its membership. During the Boer War its anti-government, pro-Boer press was smashed by the police.

Industrial unionism

In 1903 Connolly went to the United States on a lecture tour. Shortly afterwards he moved there with his family. He worked for the American Socialist Labour Party and the Industrial Workers of the World. He had been one of the guiding spirits of a group of SDF members who had split off the same year to found a British SLP on the model of the American party.

Though eventually it was to become rigidly sectarian, Daniel De Leon's SLP was at that time producing trenchant criticism of the existing trade union and socialist organisations. De Leon was among the first to castigate the increasingly conservative and cautious trade union bureaucrats as 'labour lieutenants of capitalism'. He also saw how feeble were the big socialist parties of Europe, with their dominant parliamentarianism. Both the one-sided trade unionists and the equally one-sided parliamentary socialist parties seemed to De Leon to rule out any chance of working class revolutionary action. Just how right he was was shown by the collapse of the labour movement in 1914, when the World War broke out and most socialists supported their own governments.

De Leon tried to answer the problem he himself posed by arguing that the working class needed to build up a real social strength inside the womb of capitalism just as the capitalist bourgeoisies had done in the womb of feudalism. He proposed the creation of an infrastructure composed of industry-wide unions, capable of both seizing and running industry. And he saw the need to build on both the political front and the economic front, towards a strategy of taking power. De Leon was groping theoretically for the specific working class organisational form of industrial and social self-rule. History was to provide her own answer: the workers' soviets thrown up in Russia in 1905 and in Europe after 1917.

Of De Leon, Lenin was later to say that, despite certain sectarianism, he was the only man since Marx to add anything to Marxism. But, as too often happens,

The Republicans

the De Leonites combined many correct ideas with a sectarian practice which rendered their ideas impotent.

Connolly remained with the De Leonites for some years, eventually breaking with them. But while shedding much of the political harshness and intolerance of the SLP he retained a belief in 'industrial unionism'. Until 1910 he was an organiser for the IWW — the great syndicalist trade union movement of mainly migrant workers in America.

In 1910 he returned to Ireland, armed with the ideas of industrial unionism, to begin a period of mass activity which saw the Irish working class rousing itself for the first time into militant action.

The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union

Connolly returned from the USA to a changing Ireland. Jim Larkin had been at work for three years organising the dockers, carters and other trades misnamed 'the unskilled'.

The 'new' general unions which grew in Britain after the matchgirls', gasworkers' and dockers' strikes of 1888 and 1889 had been feeble in Ireland. Now labour was stirring itself again in Britain and in Ireland as well.

In Britain, where the general unions were already in the grip of self-serving officials, the labour upsurge created a rank and file 'unofficial' movement. In Ireland a 'new model' union was being built: the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union.

Connolly became an organiser for the ITGWU. A chastened Connolly, reflecting perhaps his experience in the American SLP, he had written before leaving the USA:

"Perhaps some day there will arise a socialist writer who in his writings will live up to the spirit of the Communist Manifesto, that the socialists are not apart from the labour movement, are not a sect, but are simply that part of the working class which pushes on all others, which most clearly understands the line of march."

Yet he remained a 'De Leonite' in his basic conceptions: the workers must build industry-wide unions which would act together against the capitalist class. As the organisational strength and class consciousness of the workers grew, it would be reflected in the ballot box, un-

til finally a sort of dual power in society existed with the militant workers organising and mobilising, to confront and finally expropriate the capitalists. Should the capitalist state attempt to use repression its limbs would be paralysed by the industrial power of the workers — and bloodshed would be minimal.

Whether the workers, once a majority wanted socialism, were to be helpless before the bosses' state, or the bosses helpless before the workers, would be determined by the industrial strength and cohesiveness of labour.

Both Connolly and Larkin saw their trade union work — and the ITGWU itself — in this revolutionary syndicalist light. But Connolly was no narrow anti-political syndicalist. He became a member of the Socialist Party of Ireland, the successor of the ISRP, as the other plane of the labour army they were mobilising. He helped found the Irish Labour Party in 1912.

As ITGWU organiser in Belfast from 1911 Connolly came up against the division in the working class which is still rampant today. In 1907 Larkin had allied with Protestant radicals (who had split from the Orange Order to form the Independent Orange Institute) and had briefly succeeded in uniting Catholic and Protestant workers in Belfast. But the rising tide of anti-Home Rule agitation (during which the original Ulster Volunteers were organised) swamped what was a promising beginning of working-class unity. Connolly got to the heart of the problem when he wrote, in 1913:

"Let the truth be told, however ugly. Here the Orange working class are slaves in spirit because they have been reared up among a people whose conditions of servitude were more slavish than their own. In Catholic Ireland the working class are rebels in spirit and democratic in feeling because for hundreds of years they have found no class as lowly paid or badly treated as themselves. At one time in the industrial world of Great Britain and Ireland the skilled labourer looked down with contempt upon the unskilled and bitterly resented his attempt to get his children taught any of the skilled trades; the feeling of the Orangemen of Ireland towards the Catholics is but a glorified representation on a big stage of the same unworthy motives."

This is true. Yet it is only a part of the truth. It ignores the entwining of such attitudes with the distinct — British — national identity felt by the Protestant population.

Connolly, however, didn't just denounce and castigate the Orange Order. Some of his most bitter comments were directed at the Home Rule party.

"The English Socialists have failed utterly to fathom the character of the capitalist Home Rulers of Ireland. Their failure arises from their inability to understand the difference between 'rebelly' talk and serious revolutionary purpose, even in a Nationalist sense, they are absolutely lacking. They easily succeed in fooling the so-called 'hard-headed' English working man, but they

never succeed in fooling the Socialists of Ireland. The latter know their men too well; they know in what an inferno of reaction they have succeeded in keeping the domestic affairs of Ireland, such as education and municipal housing and sanitation, and they see them ever in league with the most merciless exploiters of labour on the island." (The Harp (USA), September 1909)

"I have always held, despite the fanatics on both sides, that the movements of Ireland for freedom could not and cannot be divorced from the world-wide upward movements of the world's democracy. The Irish question is part of the social question, the desire of the Irish people to control their own destinies is a part of the desire of the workers to forge political weapons for their own enfranchisement as a class."

"The Orange fanatic and the Capitalist-minded Home Ruler are alike in denying this truth; ere long, both of them will be but memories, while the army of those who believe in that truth will be marching and battling on its conquering way." (Forward, 12 July 1913)

Connolly looked to a future unity of all Irish workers in struggle against capitalism for the Workers' Republic. *"In their movement the North and South will again clasp hands, again it will be demonstrated as in '98 [1798] that the pressure of a common exploitation can make enthusiastic rebels out of a Protestant working class, earnest champions of civil and religious liberty out of Catholics, and out of both a united social democracy."*

The Dublin lock-out of 1913

In contrast with the North, the workers in the South, led by Larkin, were making big advances. The standard of living of the newly organised rose substantially. So did their confidence. They had found a new weapon — class solidarity. No trade, no workplace, was isolated in its struggle. The policy of sympathetic strike action was applied by the union with tremendous success.

And of course the employers hit back. Led by William Martin Murphy, 400 Dublin employers organised to break the union. The famous Dublin Labour War of 1913 followed. Those workers who refused to sign a document repudiating the union were locked out. But all the union's members stood firm.

For eight months the bitter war dragged on. Before it ended strikers had been batoned to death by police. Larkin and Connolly (recalled from Belfast to help) had been arrested, and the Citizen Army, the strikers' militia that grew to become the first Red Army in Europe, had been organised to fight back against the cops.

After eight months the labour war ended. The workers were not defeated — the union remained intact. But it was

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The Irish Citizen Army

not a victory either: after that the union was more cautious and less able to bring full pressure to bear on the bosses. Connolly blamed the semi-defeat on the isolation of Dublin — on the fact that the British trade unions had merely given financial help while withholding the decisive aid of direct industrial action which they had it in their power to give. This failure of solidarity was a big blow to Connolly.

However, as late as November 1913 he had written: "We are told that the English people contributed their help to our enslavement. It is true. It is also true that the Irish people contributed soldiers to crush every democratic movement of the English people...Slaves themselves, the English helped to enslave others; slaves themselves, the Irish helped to enslave others. There is no room for recrimination."

But after the strike Connolly had less confidence in the immediate revolutionary potential of the English workers, seeing them, correctly, as tied too tightly to their imperialist ruling class. The support of the British labour movement for the 1914 war reinforced him in this bitter conclusion.

With the end of the strike in 1914, Larkin went to the USA (where he remained until 1923) and Connolly took charge of the union and the task of rebuilding its strength and confidence. And the Citizen Army was maintained and strengthened as labour's independent armed force. This was made possible by the fact that northern Unionists and the Green Tories also had their 'private' militias: the Ulster Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers.

Partition

When the English Liberals and the Irish Home Rule Green Tories, in face of a virtual rebellion by the Unionists and their Ulster Volunteers, agreed to the partition of Ireland, Connolly wrote the most tragically prophetic words he ever penned.

"The proposal to leave a Home Rule minority at the mercy of an ignorant majority with the evil record of the Orange Party is a proposal that should never have been made, and...the establishment of such a scheme should be resisted with armed force if necessary...Filled with the

belief that they were after defeating the imperialist government and the Nationalists combined, the Orangemen would have scant regard for the rights of the minority left at its mercy.

"Such a scheme would destroy the labour movement by disrupting it. It would perpetuate in a form aggravated in evil the discords now prevalent and help the Home Rule and Orange capitalists and clerics to keep their rallying cries before the public as the political watchwords of the day. In short, it would make division more intense and confusion of ideas and parties more confounded..."

"The betrayal of the national democracy of industrial Ulster would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured...All hopes of uniting the workers, irrespective of religion or old political battle cries will be shattered, and through North and South the issue of Home Rule will be still used to cover the iniquities of the Capitalist and Landlord class. I am not speaking without due knowledge of the sentiments of the organised labour movement in Ireland when I say we would much rather see the Home Rule Bill defeated than see it carried with Ulster or any part of Ulster left out."

With the outbreak of war the issue was shelved 'for the duration' and the Home Rules became recruiting agents for Britain. Their Irish Volunteers split, with a minority adopting a revolutionary nationalist stand.

Connolly now recalled — publicly — the Irish truism that Ireland could only hope for a successful rebellion against Britain while Britain was at war. And he vowed not to miss the chance to strike at the Empire. In August 1914, to avert the expected threat of a wartime famine, of high prices in the towns, he advocated guerrilla resistance, strikes and sabotage to keep enough food in Ireland to feed the people.

The article ('Our Duty in this Crisis') ended on a note which showed that he did not see it as merely an Irish struggle: "Starting thus, Ireland may yet set the torch to a European conflagration that will not burn out until the last throne and the last capitalist bond and debenture will be shrivelled on the funeral pyre

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of the last war lord."

He began to plan an insurrection. After initial conflict, an alliance was entered into with the nationalist volunteers of Pdraig Pearse. The Communist International was later, in 1920, to encourage communists, where genuinely revolutionary nationalists existed, to join with them — 'to strike together, while marching separately'. Connolly's well-known remark to some Citizen Army men before the Rising: "The odds are a thousand to one against us, but in the event of victory hold onto your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached" shows he had a similar conception to the International.

The Easter Rising

As early as 1910 Connolly had come close to an understanding of the theory of permanent revolution, which then may have had some grip on Irish realities. (Today it's an empty catchphrase used by people who know nothing of what the theory of permanent revolution is). In the foreword to his book 'Labour in Irish History', he wrote:

"In the evolution of civilisation the progress of the fight for national liberty of any subject nation must perforce keep pace with the struggle for liberty of the most subject class in that nation and...the shifting of economic and political forces which accompanies the development of the system of capitalist society leads inevitably to the increasing conservatism of the non-working class elements and to the revolutionary vigour and power of the working class."

The Irish bourgeoisie "...have a thousand economic strings in the shape of investments binding them to English capitalism...Only the Irish working class remains as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland."

If Irish labour between 1916 and 1923 had adopted this perspective, maintained its political independence and assumed the leadership of the Irish national revolution, at the same time fighting for its own class goals, then history could have taken a very different turn. To examine why it didn't is to explore the great weakness of Connolly: the inadequacy of his understanding of the organisation needed to fight for socialism and to fight for socialist hegemony in

The Republicans

national revolutionary movements.

He had understood that labour's real strength is industrial. But he had lost sight of, or perhaps never fully grasped, the fact that the potential social strength of labour, however militant on economic issues, would only be real to the degree that it was ideologically prepared, educated and class-independent; and in turn that this must be expressed in a political organisation which knew its own mind and had the structure and sinews to act as a revolutionary force — a party like Lenin's party.

Connolly's SPI was (whose leaders were expelled when the party was reorganised as the Communist Party of Ireland in 1921) an old-fashioned and ramshackle affair, over-recoiling from De Leonite 'purism'. The compromisers, the Lib/Labs, the 'Men-sheviks', were not outside it, looking in — some of them were its leaders as they were also of the ITGWU.

After 1916 they set themselves up as a bureaucracy within the ITGWU and betrayed socialism by timidly trailing after the bourgeois leaders who had seized control of the national struggle.

This was the flaw in Connolly's design. Not seeing it, he felt no inhibitions. Relentlessly he pressed for an armed rising, outdaring even the nationalist idealists around Pearse. From his writings we can understand the attitude adopted then.

In 1910, in 'Labour in Irish History', Connolly had told the endless story of the lost chances and the botched risings that succeeded each other like monotonous days of mourning and depression in Irish history. Bitterly he wrote — and the bitterness attested to his determination to do better himself if the chance came. Nor did he believe that there was such a thing as a ripe revolutionary situation. Revolutionary action would make it ripe.

"An epoch to be truly revolutionary must have a dominating number of men with the revolutionary spirit — ready to dare all and take all risks for the sake of their ideas... Revolutionaries who shrink from giving blow for blow until the great day has arrived and they have every shoestring in its place and every man has got his gun and the enemy has kindly consented to postpone action in order not to needlessly hurry the revolutionaries nor disarray their plans — such revolutionaries only exist in two places: on the comic opera stage and on the stage of Irish national politics."
(November 1915)

The plan finally agreed on was for

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simultaneous risings in a number of areas. But at the eleventh hour the titular head of the Volunteers called off the Easter Sunday manoeuvres, which were planned as a cover for the rising. Faced with this catastrophe, expecting to be rounded up, believing that European peace was imminent and that, through their failure to act, Ireland would miss the chance of an independent voice at the coming peace conference, the leaders in Dublin had to make their choice.

Connolly had already indicated what his choice would be in such a situation in 1914. He had written: *"Even an unsuccessful attempt at socialist revolution by force of arms, following the paralysis of the economic life of militarism [by a general strike], would be less disastrous to the socialist cause than the act of socialists allowing themselves to be led in the slaughter of their brothers."*

After Easter 1916

On Easter Sunday 1916 their choice lay between one kind of defeat or another. Either a defeat in battle, that might help rouse the forces for a new struggle. Or defeat without a fight, which would bring discouragement and demoralisation in its wake as so often before in Irish history.

Connolly and Pearse decided to fight. They went out to try and start that fire

Connolly had written of at the outbreak of the war. For a week they defended in arms the 32 County Irish Republic, one and indivisible, which they had proclaimed on Easter Monday 1916. Before they surrendered, Dublin was in ruins.

They died before British Army firing squads, together with the other leaders of the Rising, after summary Court Martial. Connolly, grievously wounded, was court-martialled in bed and shot propped up in a chair.

They did indeed light the fire of revolt which Connolly had spoken of, but it was not to be controlled by men of their persuasion nor to lead to their goal. The middle-class leaders of the Irish national revolution first misled it and then betrayed it to British imperialism.

And today, the bonds and debentures, the capitalists and their warlords, still exist. In Ireland they rule — for themselves and also for international and British capitalism. The Southern Irish capitalists, wrapped in the Green trappings of 'traditional' Nationalism and perpetually 'honouring' — in hollow, gruesome mockery — the 'men of 1916', still oppress the workers of Ireland with exploitation, poverty, unemployment and forced emigration. They collude with Britain in the North.

Connolly's name is that of a national hero, while his ideas are either suppressed or heavily toned down. As if foreseeing it, he himself once said of the great Irish Jacobin Wolfe Tone: "Apostles of freedom are ever idolised when dead but crucified when living."

Is Sinn Fein socialist?

The Republican movement was crushed and pulverised in World War 2, subject to terrible repression North and South.

It was discredited by its active alliance with Germany, from which it hoped for aid and favour against Britain.

It began to revive in the '50s, but it had shrunk into a single-issue crusade for a united and independent Ireland — which it proposed to achieve by armed struggle only. The economic and social concerns of workers and farmers on both sides of the Border were held to be no business of pure Republicanism.

Not to go into the partitionist Parliaments was a matter of principle, and so was commitment to the idea that only physical force, not 'politics', would win the Republic.

In practice the movement's prejudices and assumptions reflected right-wing Catholic Ireland at the height of the cold war.

It launched a military campaign main-

ly against customs posts and RUC stations in the North. The activities were very small-scale by the standards of the '70s, but they mobilised a lot of support. Abstentionist deputies were elected in not only in the North, but also in the South — something Sinn Fein could not repeat in the '80s even during the hunger strike.

After the Border Campaign

The Fianna Fail government introduced internment in the South in 1957 to deal with the Republicans. By the end of the '50s the 'Border Campaign' had run out of steam. A formal ceasefire was declared in 1962.

Many activists dropped out. The remainder analysed their defeat, and reached conclusions rather like earlier Republicans of the '20s and '30s and like Gerry Adams and his colleagues today.

Concentration on the Border and on the pure military struggle alone would



Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams leading Republicans

never call forth and organise the forces to gain a united Ireland. They began to discuss social policies and socialism, and to move both to the left and away from narrow militarism. Timidly they edged towards a break with the principle of abstention.

The Republicans did this partly under the influence of former (or perhaps undercover) members of the British Communist Party and its Irish 'front', the Connolly Association — Roy Johnstone and Tony Coughlin. The strong Stalinist coloration in the Workers' Party today dates from this period.

The Republicans turned to housing action committees and agitation over Catholic civil rights in Protestant-ruled Northern Ireland.

They expelled and purged traditionalists throughout the country, evolving a Stalinist regime. Opposition to this turn often took the form of a reflex defence of militarism.

The birth of the Provos

In August 1969 anti-Catholic violence erupted in the Six Counties — partly triggered by the success of the Republicans' housing and civil rights agitation in mobilising the Catholics. The Republican movement was unprepared and almost totally disarmed, incapable of defending the Catholic ghettos. Impatient Republicans blamed this on the turn towards politics, and denounced the Stalinist influence. In December 1969 the Provisional IRA split off.

They denounced the Official Republicans as 'extreme socialists', seeking to establish a totalitarian dictator-

ship, and as Marxists.

It is pretty firmly established that the Provisionals, certainly those in the North, had encouragement, including money, from elements in the ruling Fianna Fail party in the South. Until it made a sharp change of policy in April 1970, the 26 Counties government channelled money and other support to the Northern Catholics, and Prime Minister Jack Lynch said that the 26 Counties army "would not stand idly by" and let the Catholics in the North be massacred.

But whatever about that, the Provisional movement soon took on a logic of its own.

It grew very quickly, essentially as a militia of the Catholic ghettos and initially with a purely defensive concept of its role. In Belfast the Provos numbered a few dozen at the beginning of 1970, and over a thousand by early 1971.

They recruited on a policy of simple opposition to British imperialism — and especially the British Army, present on the streets of Northern Ireland since August 1969.

The British Army's heavy-handed policing of Northern Ireland had brought it more and more into conflict with the Catholics who had initially welcomed it. The Army's role was essentially to keep the balance within the artificial Six Counties state, which had a built-in bias in favour of the Protestants. The Catholics were the trouble-makers. The Army responded with CS gas against rioting youths.

And so the Provos grew. Somewhere along the line a decision was taken to go on to the offensive. The first soldiers were killed early in 1971, and there was a spate of bombings.

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Then in August 1971, internment without charge or trial, and exclusively for Catholics, was introduced. It completed the alienation of the Catholic community.

The Provos grew greatly. Many of the young radicals of 1968-9 joined them. The social reality of the Six Counties, the logic and power of the socialist Republican ideas of James Connolly, and the example of revolutions like those of Cuba and Vietnam, radicalised the Provo rank and file in the North. Under the formally right-wing platform staked out by the Provisional leaders in 1969, militant left wing currents developed.

The split with the Official Republicans was not mended. After mid-1972 the majority of the Officials began to veer towards abandoning Republicanism. Today they are the Workers' Party, venomously anti-nationalist, denouncing the Provos as 'fascists'.

And the radicalisation within the Provisionals has remained confined to segments of a politically unclear movement, still essentially bound together by commitment to the military struggle against the British Army in the Six Counties.

The IRSP

Another Republican faction emerged from a split in the Officials. At the end of 1974 Seamus Costello led a split which became the Irish Republican Socialist Party. Though he had been one of the foremost advocates of a 'political turn', Costello opposed and fought the drift of the Officials to exclusive reliance on the ballot box and their abandonment of the goal of Irish national unification and independence.

The IRSP set out to create a revolutionary socialist Republican movement opposing both British imperialism and Irish capitalism on a day-to-day basis, both sides of the Border. It said it would concern itself with the workers' struggles in the South much more seriously than the Provisionals did.

But when Seamus Costello was killed by the Official IRA in 1977, it was a fatal blow to the IRSP. It has since declined and fragmented; its armed wing, the INLA, has become more notoriously reckless and anti-Protestant than the Provos.

The form of 'socialist Republicanism' which the IRSP tried to organise is still strong, however, influencing people on the fringes of the Provos and inside too.

The Provos in the '70s

The Provos fell into the doldrums in late 1973 and early 1974, when a power-sharing Executive was being set up and operated in Northern Ireland.

They were pushed very much to the sidelines during the decisive struggle between the Protestants and the British government in May 1974.

Then the IRA's first response to the wreck of Britain's strategy was a surge of energetic militarism, which included a stepped-up campaign in Britain. When things slowed down, it became clear that the Republican movement was seriously disoriented. It must have been pretty clear to many in the movement that they had been decisively checkmated by the Protestant General Strike. The days of 1972, when the Provos were able to get direct talks with the British government, were long past. Prospects for any immediate political change in Ireland were bleak.

For most of 1975 there was an IRA ceasefire in Northern Ireland. This was the year in which Britain's Labour government set up an elected assembly to try to work out an agreed constitution to replace the one that the Protestant workers wrecked in 1974.

Sinn Fein was allowed to set up 'incident centres', recognised by the British authorities, through which a considerable amount of contact and collaboration took place.

In early 1976, the constitutional assembly's Protestant majority reported its conclusions to the British government: that majority (that is, Protestant) rule be restored immediately. Britain rejected this. It decided to make an end to the search for political solutions, and to go all-out to stabilise the Six Counties.

This meant making military defeat of the IRA the central immediate goal. The IRA was both the direct source of the Catholic military offensive against the British Army, and the indirect cause of the Protestant unrest.

Towards the hunger strikes

Britain launched a new offensive against the IRA. As always, it translated itself into a savage assault on the Catholic community, a sizeable part of which gives active or passive support to the IRA. This assault massively alienated the Catholic population; the IRA recruited, reorganised itself on a tighter cell structure, and fought back.

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In 1976 the Labour government withdrew, for all paramilitaries convicted after April 1976, the 'special status' conceded by the Tories in 1972. Republican prisoners began the 'blanket protest'. They refused to wear prison clothes. When confined to their cells in blankets, they refused to 'slop out'.

Outside, Relatives Action Committees agitated and built up support. Over five years the Catholic mass movement renewed itself, focusing on the prisoners.

By the time Bobby Sands was elected MP, and died on hunger strike — the first of ten — in 1981, the Catholic mass movement was on a scale not seen since 1972. There were even stirrings in the South, for the first time since 1972.

When the hunger strike was over, the Republican leaders had to decide what to do about the fact that their main gains had been political gains. The feeble state of the SDLP made politics — the chance to become the electorally recognised representative of the Catholic community — irresistible to the Provo leadership.

After years of wasting and going to seed in the no-politics wilderness imposed in Northern Ireland by Britain after 1976, the SDLP had been forced by the feeling in the Catholic community into reluctant, tepid support for the hunger strike. It was pushed into the invidious position of indirectly supporting the Provisionals, thereby conceding a tremendous moral advantage to them.

A new approach rose out of the grave of Bobby Sands MP. 'An armalite in one hand, and a ballot paper in the other', became the self-definition of the radical wing of the Republicans, based in the North. This was the politics that took over the national organisation at the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis (conference) of November 1983.

The contradictions in the radicalisation of Sinn Fein

The radicalisation was accompanied by a turn away from any serious notion of conciliating the Protestant workers. In 1972 the Provisionals had adopted the policy of a federal united Ireland which, in however confused a way, did (as one Provo leader put it) "extend the hand of friendship" to the Protestant people of Northern Ireland.

Now federalism was rejected as a sop to 'pro-imperialists', and implicitly replaced by a perspective of forcing the British state to force the Protestants into a united Ireland. Provo leftists continued to talk about reaching out to the Protestant workers — but said it would be possible only after a united Ireland had been imposed.

There are other contradictions in the radicalisation of the Provos, contradictions rooted deep in the history of Irish Republicanism.

One reason why the Republicans in the '40s and '50s had been so unrelievedly right-wing — in contrast to the '20s and '30s, and earlier — was the thinness

of their ranks. Scattered over the surface of Irish society, they lacked organic contact, involvement, or concern, as a political movement, with the social problems of either workers or small farmers.

In the North in the '70s it was different. The Catholics of the cities and towns were the specially oppressed, in semi-permanent unemployment, sunk in poverty and often in hopelessness.

In addition, the leaders of the Republican movement and its activists saw their own reflection in movements of the oppressed throughout the world, just as the Catholics of Derry in the late '60s saw themselves as the counterparts of the Blacks in the USA.

Apart and aside from all questions of political conviction, a movement like the Provisionals in conditions like Northern Ireland's has an imperious reason to be radical — it needs to attach as many people as possible to its nationalist cause. Social agitation and becoming involved in community politics has the same recommendation to the Irish-separatist physical-force politician in Belfast as to the parliamentary Liberal politician in Liverpool — it builds support, it makes the politician the champion of the community.

The political faction of the Provisionals initially presented their ideas to the movement as an essential part of the social logistics of fighting a prolonged guerrilla war which, they said, might last for 20 years.

Turn to politics, to social issues, and to the left, thus is and was compromised by two fatal limitations. It remains subordinate and ancillary to the military campaign, which is still the central unifying principle of the Provos. And it is a turn confined to one community in Northern Ireland's divided working class.

Sinn Fein election candidates will campaign, for example, for better bus services — but for better bus services for Catholic areas.

The left Republican tradition

The other strand woven into the Provos' new approach is the powerful historical tradition of left-wing populist Republicanism.

We must turn to the men of no property, said Wolfe Tone in the 1790s, and his words were deliberately picked up and repeated by the socialist Republican Liam Mellows writing from Mountjoy jail in 1922 about the deal that the southern Irish bourgeoisie had made with the British Empire to subvert and overthrow the Irish Republic. Mellows was shot by the Free State government in December 1922.

In the aftermath of the defeat of the Republicans and the consolidation of the Free State government, this idea was taken up by George Gilmore and Paedra O'Donnell. Their politics was a genuine populism — radicalism basing itself on 'the people' in general rather than the

working class in particular.

This native strand of left Republicanism, moving confusedly towards working-class politics, met up with the Stalinists in the 1930s, and had all its nationalist limits reinforced and strengthened. The notion of the two-stage revolution — first complete the 'bourgeois revolution', and only then fight for socialism — was translated into 'Irish' as the idea that national independence had to be 'completed' as a first stage towards socialism.

'First win the broad common demand for the independent national Republic — and then go for the Workers' Republic' was the slogan of the majority of the left-wing Republican Congress, which included the Stalinists, in 1934.

These ideas gained influence in the 1970s because they seemed to offer a reconciliation of socialist and radical goals with an immediate focus on the nationalist war in the Six Counties — begun by the Provisionals in their right-wing phase.

Abandoning abstentionism

In November 1986 the men who founded the Provisionals in 1969-70, Rory O'Brady and David O'Connell, broke away to form a new organisation, Republican Sinn Fein.

They walked out when Sinn Fein voted by the necessary two-thirds majority to end its 64-year-old policy of refusing to take any seats in the Dublin parliament. Sinn Fein had decided three years earlier to take seats if elected to the EEC parliament, but continues to boycott Westminster and will boycott any further Belfast parliament.

O'Brady and O'Connell had also fought against the change of line on federalism. Only 30-odd of the 160 delegates who voted against the change of policy on taking seats in Dublin walked out with them, and Republican Sinn Fein remains a small group. Nevertheless the split was significant.

Republican history has a recurrent pattern of groupings which move away from commitment to physical force on principle towards politics — and become more or less radical bourgeois parliamentary parties.

Such was the origin of Fine Gael, which is the descendant of the party founded by the ex-Republicans who set up the Free State in the 1920s. Such was the origin of Fianna Fail, set up by Republicans who entered Dublin parliamentary politics in the 1930s; of Clann na Poblachta, a venture into parliamentary politics by left Republicans in the 1940s which quickly collapsed; and of the Workers' Party, which was the Official Republican movement.

Why has there been this pattern? Because the Republican movement is a single-issue movement. Onto the stem of that single issue, radical social politics have been grafted at different times over the decades; but the twin axioms of

physical force on principle and abstention from parliamentary politics have remained fundamental, as the guarantees against being distracted, the way to ensure that social questions cut channels to the national question and do not displace it.

Traditional Republicans are intransigent revolutionaries. Their revolutionism consists in a stark rejection of existing political and state structures, and the pursuit of other, ideal, alternative structures.

The goal is 'The Republic' — a slogan which represents a mystical future state of ideal freedom, harmony and prosperity entirely beyond the modest real prospects of a bourgeois-democratic united Ireland. The ideal future Republic represents the ideal will of the people; all existing institutions are the work of traitors and foreign influences. Physical force is the only practical action that is recognised as desirable for the work of substituting the desired ideal for what exists now.

Thus the fetishes of physical force on principle and abstentionism complement and reinforce each other to sustain a sort of revolutionary politics.

But it is not socially revolutionary. And that is why so many Republican groups which moved away from abstentionism have also moved away from any sort of revolutionary politics.

A Marxist working-class organisation can use tactics and techniques in a varied way, working in a bourgeois parliament and trade unions or through armed street-fighting, and remain all the while true to itself. But once the tactical fetishes that separated those ex-Republican groups from the existing bourgeois and petty-bourgeois order were cleared away, there was nothing solid to maintain their revolutionary stance.

Abstentionist and physical-force-on-principle Irish Republicanism has many things in common with Spanish anarchism. Its repeated fate in relation to government is similar to that of the anarchists who 'denied' politics and the state for decades, and then during the Spanish Civil War joined the Popular Front government of the Republic (which repressed rank and file anarchists).

The anarchists denied the state; but the state is necessary. It cannot be abolished at this stage of social development. It must be either the bourgeois state or the workers' state.

The Spanish Civil War convinced some of the anarchist leaders that the state was necessary. But then they could only relate to it by betraying themselves. Having no programme capable of dealing with reality, they accepted the existing state and became its prisoners.

That is why the Provos' shift towards participation in parliamentary politics has destabilised their movement and may destabilise it further. For the present their commitment to physical force on principle remains strong, and the traditionalist breakaway small.

IRELAND: The Socialist Answer

Are the Provos socialist?

It is indisputable that many, or even most, of the members of the Republican movement want it to be a left-wing and socialist movement, based upon and championing the working class and working farmers.

Sinn Fein defines itself as based on the 1916 declaration of the Irish Republic and on the 1919 'Democratic Programme' of the Irish parliament, Dail Eireann.

Both those documents had a certain radical edge to them in their own time. The 1919 document was drafted by the Irish labour leaders, and adopted by Dail Eireann in return for the labour movement subordinating itself to the nationalists during the struggle with Britain for independence.

But they are not documents of social radicalism today. They do no more than talk vaguely about the state having social responsibilities, treating 'the children of the nation' equally, and so on. Before the Welfare State that was radical, but today even many Tories would at least pay lip-service to such principles.

The Provos remain a loose populist party which cannot in its present form function as a serious force for socialism in Ireland. Indeed, because of its attitude to the Protestant workers in Northern Ireland, it is bound, despite good intentions, to work against working-class socialism.

It remains the military leadership and militia of the oppressed Catholics, and for that reason deserves the support of British socialists against the British state in Northern Ireland. But there should be no illusions about its socialist pretensions.

The Provos and the Protestants

The populism of the Provos is expressed in the vagueness of their ideas of socialism, but also, and crucially, in their attitude to the Protestant working class.

Since the Protestants include the big majority of the working class in Northern Ireland, an attitude to the Protestants also implies an attitude to the working class, and has decisive implications for the identification and definition of the force that will bring socialism. Whatever the Provos mean by