

The Republican Movement and Socialism, 1950-70

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Much mythology attends developments within the Irish Republican Movement in the 1960s and because it has been purveyed *ad nauseum* it has been accepted as fact by many, even by republicans. Basically, the mythology informs us that the Republican Movement moved significantly towards revolutionary Marxism after the failure of the Border Campaign. In a recent book by some latter-day Workers' Party intellectuals, we are told that a "radicalisation...followed the defeat of the IRA's previous military campaign, that of 1956–62", and that Cathal Goulding saw the engendering of "social revolution in the Republic" as his priority during the 1960s.¹ What follows is an attempt to set the record straight and demolish some of the well-cherished misconceptions about the 'left-wing drift' of that decade. Hopefully, it will help place those who later formed the leadership of the Workers' Party in an historical perspective.

Cold War

The late 1940s and the 1950s was a period of great hardship in the lives of the working class and small farmers of Ireland. Mass unemployment gave rise to poverty, hunger and emigration. It was also the era of the Cold War when pulpit and press gave forth on the 'evils' of communism. Nationalist parliamentary politicians studiously ignored the plight of the people. With all attempts to build an 'independent' Irish capitalism behind tariff barriers failing, they now concerned themselves with promoting an Anti-Partition campaign and with declaring the 26 Counties a republic. With the IRA declaring that "the aim of the army is simply to drive the invader from the soil of Ireland"² and Sinn Fein (recently reunited with the IRA) stating that it was not "and never was a political party",³ workers had no reason to expect help from that quarter.

Indeed, when McCarthyite witch-hunts were being conducted by the *Catholic Standard* newspaper, the IRA took care to distance itself from the communists who had earlier been interned with its volunteers in the Curragh. It charged, in fact, that the interning of communists with republicans was part of a Fianna Fail plot to influence the IRA with materialist ideas! An editorial in the *United Irishman* in 1949 stated:

The IRA have as constantly opposed communism as they have opposed British

¹ Paul Bew, Ellen Hazelkorn, and Henry Patterson, *The Dynamics of Irish Politics* (London, 1989) pp. 99–100.

² *United Irishman*, July/August 1949. Organ of the Irish Republican Movement.

³ *United Irishman*, October 1954.

domination and have ever denied to communists and imperialists alike a voice in their councils or a plank on their platforms...even if communists were sincere in their advocacy of Irish independence, we could never accept their Marxian creed. Communism is a foreign ideology just as unsuited to Irish character and temperament as British imperialism.⁴

Later in that year the same paper explained the tenacity of Irish republicans in quasi-religious terms. "Every Irish leader", it stated, "has asserted that in order to gain the Republic we must maintain our spirituality as it is the very quality that has kept our movement the shrine of our National heritage. Ireland's cause is essentially one which appeals to saints and martyrs."⁵ No room for materialistic communists here, even if they be advocates of Irish self-determination.

Unemployment

By 1957, unemployed workers under the banner 'Emigrate, Starve or Fight' had begun to make their presence felt, despite witch-hunts and lack of support from the unions. In Dublin, in an effort to bring their protest into the Dail chambers, they succeeded in getting one of their leaders, Jack Murphy, elected. In Cork, Sinn Fein reaction was to order any of its members who were involved in the Unemployed Protest Movement (UPM) to leave. It was contended that the UPM was a Free State political organisation, because it had a member in the Dail. The reaction of Sinn Feiners was generally to leave the Republican Movement rather than the unemployed movement. One man who defied the order was given a show-trial, as an example to others, and promptly dismissed.

Even before the UPM became 'contaminated' by using Leinster House as a platform to air its grievances, Sinn Fein had taken a hostile attitude to it in many areas. At one stage, a group of about 40 unemployed, locked out of Cork's Carpenter's Hall due to a mistake in booking arrangements, had proceeded down the street, expecting to be facilitated in the nearby Sinn Fein hall. They were refused, however, because local Sinn Fein leaders claimed that they were communist inspired.

When a member of Sinn Fein, Norman Letchford, wrote and published a pamphlet, *Lives, Loves and Liberties - The Heresies of a Protestant Republican*, he was dismissed ostensibly for not having sought permission to publish. In fact, he had submitted a manuscript to his local Comhairle Ceanntair. At his unsuccessful appeal hearing, he was condemned for criticising the role of the Catholic clergy during the Great Famine. To back up his dismissal, members were later informed that he was a communist infiltrator and a former member of the Connolly Association. The trials and tribulations of the Irish working class found little place in the considerations of most Irish republicans in the 1950s; they were too busy being 'saints and martyrs'.

This then is the Republican Movement in which the future 'left-wingers' cut their political teeth. This is the movement that they joined and the movement whose policies they never fundamentally disagreed with until the failure of the border campaign necessitated an internal rethink. Even while they were supposedly undergoing a process of radicalisation in the prisons, the bourgeois politics frequently shone through. Tomas MacGiolla, for example, while in prison in late 1950s, spent

⁴ *United Irishman*, July/August 1949.

⁵ *United Irishman*, October 1949.

some time defending Franco's Spain against the verbal attacks of his more enlightened comrades.

New Leadership

Following the failure of the 1956–62 armed campaign in the 6 Counties, the leadership of the Republican Movement was deposed and a new leadership installed. Cathal Goulding assumed the leadership of the IRA and Tomas MacGiolla took over as acting president of Sinn Fein. Goulding's involvement with the IRA reached back to the 1940s and he was held in high esteem by his peers. MacGiolla came to Sinn Fein in the early 1950s from the Anti-Partition League. From a Free State background, he was a nephew of T.P. Gill an Irish parliamentary member at Westminster. He had served on the Ard Comhairle (National Executive) previously in 1956. With the ending of the campaign, Goulding and MacGiolla were released from Mountjoy Jail on 20 April 1962. Sean Garland, also destined to play a major role in the coming years, was released from Belfast Jail in July.

These men, along with some others, have been credited with leading the Republican Movement to socialism. It is held that the failure of the armed struggle to win appreciable support brought about a realisation by republicans of the need to involve themselves in agitational activity associated with the struggle of the exploited. We are told, primarily by the Workers' Party, that this process, which began within the prisons, led to the adoption of revolutionary socialism by the Republican Movement in the early to mid 1960s.

What is never examined, however, is the reason why republicans decided to involve themselves in agitational activity. It had to do with amassing support that they hoped would rebuild the Republican Movement and hold solid when they again launched an armed campaign. It had nothing to do with an ideological change in their thinking with regard to the working class. It was simply a change in tactics. Offering little or no threat to the capitalist system, it found favour with most republicans.

This tactic of republican involvement in social protest in order to win support for their petit bourgeois anti-partition objectives needs to be understood by all those who strive for socialism and national liberation. The working class is not there to be used, and workers have shown on countless occasions that they resent being used and are pretty astute at identifying and rejecting users. That is precisely why Sinn Fein today has made little inroads in electoral terms in southern Ireland. Despite its recent interest in social issues, its priority, indeed only real objective, remains the ending of partition.

That there was no fundamental change in the Republican Movement's ideological stand was evidenced later in 1962 when MacGiolla gave his presidential address at the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis. He declared that:

In so far as the communist menace is a battle for men's minds, we should undoubtedly be playing a leading part in the fight against it, as we should be in the fight against materialism of every blend. Our greatest weapon in the fight against all material philosophies is our essential spiritual nature.

He then went on to outline a six point programme to "fight communism or any other social or political ill of our day."⁶ Sinn Fein presidential addresses represent the view

⁶ *United Irishman*, December 1962.

of the entire movement. Obviously, spiritual Ireland was alive and well and entrenched in the Republican Movement. The *United Irishman* commented:

The president of Sinn Fein has dealt with our place in the struggle against communism in his presidential address. It is the only honourable and reasonable contribution which we as a small Christian nation can make towards the progress of civilisation and the cause of peace.⁷

The movement's anti-communism was later given further expression in an article reviewing the position of communism in Europe: "Poland has recently thrown off Soviet domination, has drawn away from doctrinaire communism and has adopted a more conservative system...The Hungarian revolution has resulted in severe setback for communism in that country...With so much internal trouble and unrest, these countries in Eastern Europe are a danger to nobody except themselves."⁸ What should be noted here is that it was not the style of 'communism' that existed in these countries that was being attacked, it was communism itself. The Republican Movement clearly wished for the installation of bourgeois democracy in Eastern Europe rather than a real system of socialist democracy. Years later, when asked by a journalist if "the policy adopted in 1962/3 was explicitly a socialist revolutionary policy", Cathal Goulding replied that it was.⁹

Despite the movement's conservatism, a small group of people formerly associated with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), the Connolly Association and the Irish Workers' Party, found its way into the Republican Movement or into its front organisations. They were in time to exert a major influence on the thinking of some of the republican leadership. That they could survive in such an anti-communist movement only goes to show the extent of their reformism.¹⁰

In-Betweenism

In pursuance of their policy of agitation, republicans began to involve themselves in the everyday struggles of the workers and small farmers. IRA volunteers were instructed to join trade unions, but by 1965 it was admitted Sinn Fein itself had failed to develop an active organisational structure. There was much dissatisfaction with Sinn Fein and the IRA wished its role to be confined to publicity and election work.

Whatever about the IRA curbing Sinn Fein, its president, Tomas MacGiolla, was still given free rein to deliberate on communism: "Communism...as it has manifested itself in many countries...is not an ideology which would commend itself to the Irish people"¹¹ The ambiguity of this statement is apparent. Was he issuing a blanket condemnation of communism? Or was he merely condemning the distorted form of communism that manifest itself in the 'socialist' countries?

Coupled with the ritual condemnation of capitalism, the Republican Movement, in

⁷ *United Irishman*, December, 1962.

⁸ *United Irishman*, November 1962.

⁹ *This Week*, 31 July 1970.

¹⁰ Most of this group later on left and joined the Labour Party.

¹¹ *United Irishman*, November 1965.

attacking communism, seemed, like the Catholic Church, to want something suspended between both. In reality, again like the Church, they wanted capitalism with something of a social conscience. They sought economic in-betweenism and frequently used James Connolly as a basis for their utopian concept. The economic policy promoted by Sinn Fein was immeasurably removed from any stand James Connolly ever took. It was nothing more than a bizarre mixture of re-hashed Proudhonism and Social Credit theories.

In 1965, what MacGiolla described as the 'essential spiritual nature' of the Republican Movement was greatly in evidence. The movement spearheaded opposition to the use of English in the Roman Catholic Mass. In a front page leading article, entitled 'Demonstrations in Churches?' the *United Irishman* announced:

A chapter is likely to be added to the history of republicanism and Roman Catholic church relations when the change to the vernacular in the Mass comes into force...for the first time since the coming of St. Patrick to Ireland the English language is not only to be given a place an official status in the very heart of Church affairs, the Mass, but also, over most of our country, a position of complete dominance. This, in the eyes of many, is the consummation of the conquest and the end of hopes for spiritual and intellectual independence, the first facet of republicanism.¹²

In the event, good sense took over and except for some more articles in subsequent months, we were spared the demonstrations. Strange, however, to find such Catholic-nationalist sentiments in an allegedly socialist revolutionary organisation.

Going into 1966 with MacGiolla defending a free enterprise economy and suggesting the co-operative movement as an alternative "to either, capitalism or communism",¹³ it was understandable that Ruairi O'Bradaigh could state emphatically during the Westminster election campaign that the Republican Movement was not socialist.¹⁴ At the Easter Commemoration in Cork City that year, MacGiolla launched into an attack on communism emphasising that it was an 'alien ideology'. In May 1966, an editorial in the *United Irishman*, contemplating who republicans should support in the Free State presidential election, said of candidate T.F. O'Higgins, that he had "very little to condemn him personally." Supporting fascism as a member of the Blueshirts in the 1930s was not to be held against him. Such liberalism!

By 1967, as Goulding revealed in an interview in 1970, the Republican Movement was dormant:

It wasn't active in any political sense or even in a revolutionary sense. Membership was falling off. People had gone away. Units of the IRA and the cumainn of Sinn Fein had become almost non-existent. We felt that something dynamic was needed or the movement was going to break up and splinter into pieces. We called a meeting of the Republican Army's local leadership at the end of August 1967...at that conference of 1967 we started on a Friday night and finished on a Sunday evening...they suddenly realised that they had no movement at all. They only thought they had a movement. Out of this conference there came a number of

¹² *United Irishman*, March 1965.

¹³ *United Irishman*, January 1966.

¹⁴ *An Phoblacht*, May 1966. Organ of the Irish Revolutionary Forces - better known at the time, as the "An Phoblacht Group".

recommendations. The first was that we should openly declare for a Socialist Republic. That was now the objective of the Republican Movement: to establish a Socialist Republic as envisaged by Connolly and in keeping with the sentiments of the Proclamation of 1916.¹⁵

A Native Product

With a moribund movement, badly in need of a shot in the arm, the tattered remnants of the leadership had got together for one weekend and come up with the good old Socialist Republic. The Republican Movement clearly thought it worthwhile to cash in on socialism's new-found popularity in the late 1960s, so it jumped on the bandwagon. By November, Sinn Fein had tailed the IRA and amended the party constitution to read that its objective was a Socialist Republic. The army had decided the matter and the party had followed. Truly indicative of a socialist vanguard party! However, the Republican Movement now had that 'something dynamic'.

"Socialism has nothing to do with either atheism or totalitarianism, as is evident from a superficial reading of Connolly", MacGiolla told the faithful in January 1969. He continued:

Neither is it a philosophy which must be imported. It is part of the Republican tradition since the founding of the United Irishmen, was deeply rooted among the Fenians, and was the driving force behind the 1916 rebellion.¹⁶

A few months later, socialism became even more acceptable when he claimed that "the revolutionary movements of the past all... recognised that socialism was a native growth on Irish soil."¹⁷ This nonsense hardly deserves comment, but it helps to show the reader the level of mumbo-jumbo prevalent in the Republican Movement at the time mythology has us believe that it was guided by advanced Marxists. But when the heady days of armed conflict arrived, people like MacGiolla lost their heads altogether. The notorious anti-communist, MacGiolla, in an interview in July 1970, informed us that if things happened as he hoped, he would be the Fidel Castro of Ireland. "Yes!" he said, "we have the same revolutionary style and objective. Mind you, not that I have any personal ambitions to be an Irish Castro. As a man I regard him as overemotional."¹⁸ I wonder did Castro, like 'Ice Cool' MacGiolla, realise that socialism was a native growth of Irish soil?

Reformists

This then was the Republican Movement of the 1960s. It was a movement that never strayed from reformism. It indulged in revolutionary posturing and phrasemongery when such activities were popular, but it never genuinely attempted to forge a Leninist-type revolutionary Marxist party. This is not to say that there were not some

¹⁵ *This Week*, 31 July 1970.

¹⁶ *United Irishman*, January 1969.

¹⁷ *United Irishman*, July 1969.

¹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 11 July 1970.

genuine Marxists within the movement, struggling for a way forward.¹⁹ What it does mean is that the Workers' Party is nothing less than the natural, and expected, product of policies formulated by the so-called 'left-wingers' of the 1960s. They had always dismissed real revolutionary politics; it was only a matter of time before they openly rejected revolutionary methods

Today's Workers' Party, true to its creators design, does not seek the overthrow of capitalism and the building of a socialist society. Rather, it seeks simply to 'ameliorate' the lot of Irish workers by working within the system. It is nothing more than a second Labour Party in Ireland. What is truly needed is not another Labour Party, but a Marxist party that makes the achievement of social revolution its inviolable objective. Only with such a party will an Irish Workers' Republic be built.

Jim Lane,

Cork, 1989.

¹⁹ Indeed, a grouping of Cork republicans (of whom the present writer was one) found an appreciative audience within the Republican Movement in the mid to late 1960's for *An Phoblacht* – a paper that attacked the leadership from the Left.