# British Labour and Ireland: 1969~79

the cost of bipartisanship

the case for troops out now

by Geoff Bell

cartoons by Cormac

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# 1. An end and a beginning

ON 28 March 1979 the Labour Government fell by a single vote on a motion of no confidence. There were many reasons for Labour's defeat at the hands of the Tories but the final deciding factor was the government's Irish policy.

Two Irish MPs, Independent Republican Frank Maguire and Social and Democratic Labour Party member Gerry Fitt, who had always previously voted with the government on major issues abstained on that crucial vote. In his speech during the debate Gerry Fitt summed up the reason for his abstention:

*'I have a loyalty to this government, to my own working class and trade union background and to the whole working class movement in the United Kingdom and further afield.*

*'But I have greater loyalty to the people of Northern Ireland who have suffered so tragically over the past 10 years. I am speaking with their voice tonight. It is their voice saying that because of what the government has done in the past five years — disregarded the minority and appeased the blackmailers of the Northern Ireland Unionist majority — that I cannot go into the lobby with them tonight.'*

The precise events which led to Fitt and Maguire bringing down the government will be explained and detailed later in this pamphlet. But the outrage they expressed at the Labour government's Irish policy was shared by many Irish people both inside and outside Ireland and by many traditional supporters of the Labour Party in Britain.

However, the extent to which the Labour leaders were prepared to go in defending their record was made clear by the deposed Northern Ireland secretary, Roy Mason, in the early days of the Thatcher administration. In an interview with the *Belfast Newsletter* he said that his term of office in the North of Ireland had made him 'internationally respected and admired'.

Mason's rule had been internationally exposed by Amnesty. Opportunist American politicians had attacked it for its denial of

human rights. The current head of the Irish Roman Catholic Church, Cardinal Tomas O Fiach had described the H block policy as 'grave injustice'. Even the editorial columns of the *Irish Times* had portrayed Mason as someone who 'has written himself off as a serious, concerned, arbiter of Northern Ireland politics... when he finally departs he will leave behind the sorry record of a bankrupt approach to Irish politics'.

No-one can say that the Labour government was not warned. Yet despite Irish policy sealing the fate of the Callaghan government, in the election campaign which followed both the Labour and Tory parties did their best to ignore the issue. It was a difficult job.

There was the assassination of Airey Neave, the Tory spokesperson on Ireland, by the Irish National Liberation Army; there was an editorial in London's *Evening News* headed 'Ireland should be an issue' and a similar statement from Cardinal Hume. From the U.S.A. came the opinion of Tip O'Neil, Speaker of the House of Representatives, that Ireland had been used as a 'political football' by the main British political parties. A newspaper article by Governor Hugh Carey of New York declared 'We should urge the British government to develop and announce a strong plan for political and physical withdrawal from Northern Ireland'.

All this pressure was met with stubborn resistance. Liberal leader David Steel spoke for all the main party chiefs when he insisted that the North of Ireland was 'one of the few issues on which there was no basic difference between the parties'.

The absence of discussion did not reflect the feeling of the electorate. In a public opinion poll published in the *Financial*

*Times* a higher percentage said Ireland should be an issue than did those who favoured education, defence, devolution or immigration. But still there was silence.

Those who did seek to raise the issue of what Britain was doing in Ireland were vilified and harassed. People who heckled Callaghan during his election campaign were immediately thrown out of his meetings, some, including Labour Party members, were badly beaten up by stewards. The international pacifist Pat Arrowsmith, who contested the seat held by Callaghan as an Independent Socialist on a ticket emphasising 'troops out' was twice arrested in Cardiff as she attempted to hold public meetings on Ireland. Accompanying such behaviour came smears against those who did want to talk about Ireland. Callaghan said his hecklers were paid to travel round the country (an accusation disproved later in the *Guardian*) while Conor Cruise O'Brien, editor-in-chief of the *Observer*, claimed the hecklers were 'a prong' of the IRA.

'You should be ashamed of yourself' shouted Callaghan to one Irish heckler at a Birmingham election meeting. The rest of this pamphlet seeks to repudiate the charge.

# 2. The origins of bipartisanship

THE OUTRAGE voiced by Gerry Fitt had built up slowly since August 1969. Then a previous Labour government sent in British troops to directly intervene in the civil strife that had broken out a year before in the North of Ireland.

Many myths have since grown up about the sending in of the Army: that they were sent in to keep Catholics and Protestants apart; that they were sent in to defend the Catholic minority

from a bigotted Unionist government in the North of Ireland. Neither was the case. The statement issued at the time by the then Home Secretary James Callaghan explained the real reason:

*'The government of Northern Ireland informed the United Kingdom government that as a result of the severe and prolonged rioting in Londonderry it has no alternative but to ask for the assistance of the troops at present stationed in Northern Ireland to prevent a breakdown in law and order. After three days of continuous duty the Royal Ulster Constabulary find it necessary to fall back on their police stations, thus exposing the citizens of Londonderry to the prospect of looting and danger to life'.*

The rioting referred to by Callaghan was a straight conflict between the RUC and the working class Catholics of Derry. The Civil Rights movement had first burst onto the streets a year before. Supporters of that movement had been repeatedly attacked by the RUC. The event which brought the North of Ireland to the world's attention was a vicious police attack on a civil rights march in Derry on 5 October 1968. That was the background to the events of August 1969. The people in Derry had risen up, had fought back and had defeated the hated sectarian police force. That was when and why Callaghan sent in the troops.

Members of the Labour Government were under no illusion about the consequences of sending in the British Army to put down the Bogside rebellion. The diaries of cabinet member Richard Crossman recalled the crucial discussions among the government leaders:

*'Callaghan and Healey both reminded us that our whole interest was to work through the Protestant government. The Protestants are the majority and we can't afford to alienate them'*

Crossman also recalls a warning given by the chief whip of the government, Bob Mellish:

*'Won't we find ourselves with British troops fighting on the side of the reactionaries?'.*

The 'reactionaries' were elated. The *Sunday Times* Insight team reported that William Orr, after discussions with Labour

leaders reported back; 'We are getting the troops and we are getting them without strings'. Considering that at the time Orr was a Unionist MP and Grand Master of the Grand Orange Council of the World the 'we' in question needs no elaboration.

The measures taken by the Labour government received the warm endorsement of the Tory opposition. It was the birth of a formal and explicit pact. 'Bipartisanship', as the agreement came to be called, was defined thus by James Callaghan:

*'Thankfully since the crisis of 1969 broad support for both Labour and Conservative governments was forthcoming from the Opposition of the day and each government was very conscious of the need to carry the Opposition with it in broad principle'.*

'Broad support' might make life easier for the party whips at Westminster, the question is, 'broad support' for what?

Once again it was left to James Callaghan in August 1969 to sum up the basis of bipartisanship in a statement which, 'reaffirmed the pledges previously given that Northern Ireland will remain a part of the United Kingdom as long as its Parliament and people so wish'.

At first glance the policy that the North of Ireland should remain within the United Kingdom as long as its citizens so desire appears reasonable — an adherence to the principle of self-determination. But that is not how others have seen it. For instance:

*'The first question is: is Ulster to deny the rights of the rest of Ireland to self-government? We say, "No, emphatically not". Arising out of that, and a somewhat narrow question, is this: Is Ulster going to deny the right of Ireland ever to speak and act and govern itself as a united nationality? We say "No, emphatically not".'*

The speaker was Ramsey MacDonald, the first Labour Prime Minister. MacDonald was what the media of today would call 'a moderate', so it may seem strange that 60 years ago he was expressing the very same principles which the Provisional Republican movement expresses today. But it was not only

MacDonald. A 1920 Parliamentary Labour Party Commission of Inquiry into Ireland came to the following conclusion:

*'Ireland is suffering today from a malady which has many civil effects, but only one cause. The frustration of national aspirations in social as well as political affairs has produced a feeling of bitter resentment, transmitted from one generation to another, against British rule. Nothing that the British administration has done or can do in mitigating the conditions of life for the Irish population alters this feeling.'*

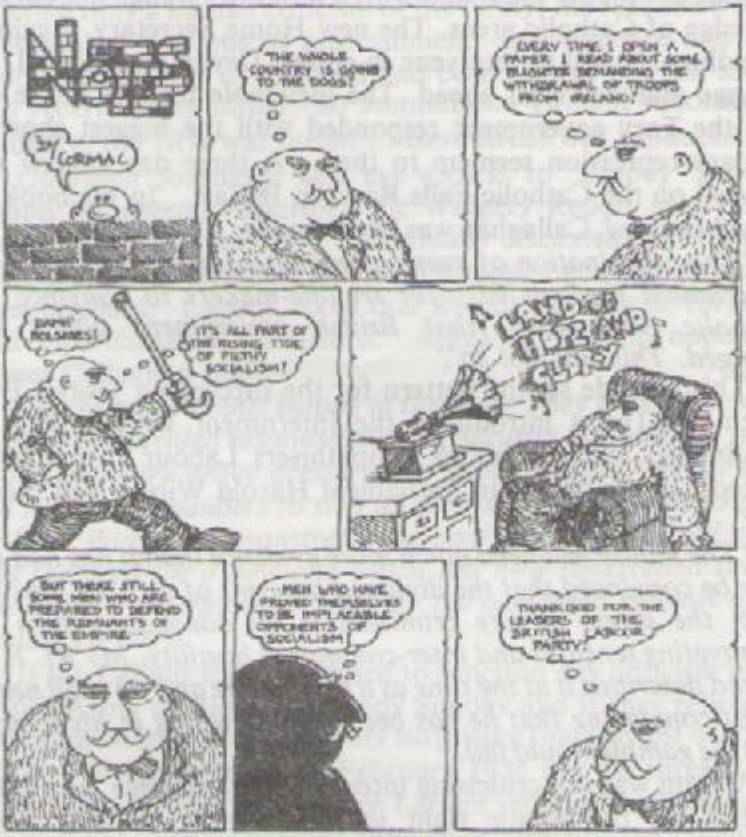
The reason the Labour Party and its leader could adopt such attitudes is explained by the context in which the above remarks were made. The British in Ireland were waging a bitter war in a bid to keep all of Ireland British. It was doing so in defiance of the 1918 general election which in Ireland produced an overwhelming majority for the independence party of Sinn Fein. The idea that part of Ireland could opt out of such a vote and declare its own state was such a blatant denial of the right of all of the Irish people to decide how all of Ireland should be governed that even 'moderates' such as MacDonald raised their voice in protest.

Ireland had never been divided before and the Irish people had never voted for such a division. If there was any argument for the seperate provinces of Ireland to have a measure of 'home rule' then it would only be logical if *all* the province of Ulster was given that right. But in 1920 'Ulster' was composed of nine counties, not the six of today. In the 1918 election a *majority* of nine county Ulster had voted for the break with Britain. The reason for this six county state was explained at the time by Lord Cushendon, one of the leaders of Ulster Unionism:

*'To separate ourselves from fellow loyalists in Monaghan, Cavan, and Donegal was hateful to every delegate from the other six counties...but the inextricable index of statistics demonstrated...that a separate parliament for the whole province would have a precarious existence'.*

In other words the boundaries of the Northern Ireland state established in 1921 were fixed to give permanent majority to a minority viewpoint, not just in Ireland, but also in Ulster. The defence of such an arrangement makes a mockery of self-

determination.




Whoever has been in power, whatever the tos and fros of policy, the guiding principle of bipartisanship has been the defence of the unnatural partition in Ireland. It has been indicated many times. When the Tory government introduced internment without trial in September 1971, Harold Wilson, then leader of the Labour Party, was on his feet insisting 'first, the border is not an issue'. But bipartisanship is not confined to guiding principles; it is also a policy of mutual support on given measures. This became clear with the election victory of the Tories in 1969. In the North of Ireland this coincided with the

jailing of Bernadette Devlin for her part in the Battle of the Bogside of August 1969, and with a series of Orange marches on the edge of Catholic areas. The new Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling refused to intervene in either; Devlin went to jail, the Orange marches went ahead. The inevitable trouble broke out and the Tory government responded with the biggest show of military repression seen up to then. A three day curfew was slapped on the Catholic Falls Road in Belfast. In his book, *A House Divided*, Callaghan was later to write:

*'The combination of events coming just after the change of government made it easy for trouble-makers to convince the Catholic community, that British government policy had changed. This was not so'.*

This attitude set the pattern for the succeeding years. Even when the Tories introduced the internment without trial of republicans and republican sympathisers Labour criticism was muted. In the debate in Parliament Harold Wilson had this to say:

*'The House will need much more evidence than it has had if it is to be convinced that the dividend in terms of security deriving from the arrest of key criminals is an adequate return for aggravating tensions and inter-communal hostility. My Rt. Hon. Friend described it at the time as a big gamble and we shall need a lot of convincing that he has been proved wrong in his forecast that the gamble would fail.'*

Wilson was not criticising internment in principle, nor did he defend the democratic right to a fair trial; he was merely wondering whether it was worth the effort. In this context it is hardly surprising that at the end of the debate the Labour Opposition abstained, although a considerable number of Labour MPs did vote against the government.

But safe in the knowledge that whatever they did, Labour would trail its coat behind, the Tory government proceeded full steam with its military solution. The nadir was reached on 30 January 1972 when the British Army shot dead 14 anti-internment demonstrators. Reacting quickly the government announced that public discussion on the events would not be

permitted as an enquiry would be held. The Labour opposition agreed. When the Widgery Tribunal announced its findings, offering only a limited criticism of the Army, the reaction outside Westminster was one of astonishment. No evidence had been produced that any of the dead had been armed, not one soldier had received any injury, no ammunition (which, according to Widgery, the IRA was meant to have fired) was produced.

*Guardian* journalist and eye-witness to 'Bloody Sunday', Simon Winchester, described the Widgery Report as a 'white-wash'. But when the Report was finally discussed in parliament the Stormont government had been scrapped and direct rule had been imposed. Labour asked that Bloody Sunday be forgotten and bipartisanship reaffirmed. Speaking for the opposition James Callaghan said:

*'These tragic events belong in the past. They took place when there was a divided responsibility for security and when it is fair to say that very heavy pressure was being brought to bear upon the Army commanders to step up their attitude...the description of Lord Widgery demonstrates the bankruptcy of the old policy and the need for a new one which has now superceded the old one. The Prime Minister asks for the combined support of the House. He has it.'*

If the Labour leaders refused to sanction any criticism of the British Army's actions on Bloody Sunday and if they refused to condemn internment, it is hardly surprising that the rest of the life of the Tory government to February 1974 saw no threat to the bipartisanship approach. When Labour returned to government the new right wing Thatcher opposition returned the favour.

The problem for the two parties was that their consensus view was not shared by the people of Ireland. The bipartisanship approach began to show signs of cracking as the Tory opposition started to question whether the new Northern Ireland Secretary, Merlyn Rees, was being tough enough. The Labour government quickly moved to restore two-party unity and in September 1976 a new North of Ireland supremo was appointed. A report in the *Irish Times* made clear the reason for the appointment:

*'Conservative Shadow Ministers privately lobbied in favour*

*of Roy Mason as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, before Friday's Cabinet reshuffle, it was learned yesterday. The former Defence Secretary is seen by opposition spokesmen on Northern Ireland as a politician prepared to adopt a tough security policy, and defer more to British Army thinking.'*

Not only was the Labour government at one with the Tories on Northern Irish policy, it was even letting the Tories participate in nominating who would carry out that policy! Roy Mason quickly lived up to their expectations. In December 1976 he assured parliament:

*'The security forces have an increasingly detailed inventory of who the significant terrorist figures are and of their activities and friends. The leaders face a chilly prospect. As our knowledge of them increases their room for manoeuvre decreases. They must be increasingly on their guard. There are less people they can trust and fewer places they can go. They cannot match the power brought against them and they will be tracked down, arrested and brought before the courts'.*

This sort of sabre-rattling bluster went down well with the Tories. First on his feet after that speech was the Opposition spokesperson on the North of Ireland, Airey Neave. He commented that Mason 'had shown a determined and robust attitude to the security problems of Northern Ireland which the Opposition welcomes'.

Conservative praise of Mason grew in volume as the months passed. In February 1977 when Mason announced 'a further increase in the strength and effectiveness of the Ulster security forces', Neave 'welcomed' the changes and assured any doubters that 'what the government needed and Mr Mason was working on was a strategic plan to bring organised terrorism under control during 1977 and destroy the hopes of success of the IRA'.

Although 'organised terrorism' was not brought 'under control' in 1977, this did not stop the Tories giving Mason ten out of ten for trying. In September 1977 Tory MP John Biggs Davison told a Conservative meeting in his Epping Forest constituency that Mason was 'a champion of law and order' and in May 1978 Airey Neave informed *Guardian* readers that

Mason, 'has always seemed anxious to adopt Conservative ideas on security and constitutional questions'.

The only jarring note in all this was that occasionally the Tories were somewhat annoyed that they weren't getting the credit they deserved for Mason's policies. Complained Neave in November 1977:

*'Mr Mason is not a man to give any credit to political opponents, though he expects bipartisanship to prevail. He is not solving the Ulster problem singlehanded. On the security front he is putting into effect policies long advocated by the Conservative Party, such as the increased use of the SAS. He may not wish these things to be remembered, but we are entitled to remind the people of Northern Ireland of what we believe to be a constructive and serious record in opposition'.*

But as Neave remarked, so long as Labour was carrying out Tory policies then the Tories had no reason to break with Labour. This feeling was not confined to the Tories.

'It's like this', an anonymous Unionist Party official who was quoted in the *Irish Times* declared; 'Roy Mason is giving us sheer bloody good government politically, economically and military'. Friendships are made of such like-mindedness and during the final years of the Labour government of 1974-79, the Labour leaders and Unionism not only shared a common approach, they became as thick as thieves.

# 3. Making friends with the loyalists

WITHIN A FEW MONTHS of the Labour government coming to power in February 1974 it was faced with a major crisis in its

Irish policy.

In opposition Labour had given full support to the Tory 'solution' for the North of Ireland. This solution took the form of the 'Sunningdale Agreement', by which the Northern Ireland parliament or Assembly would be run on a 'power-sharing' basis.

This meant representatives of the Catholic population would be allowed to sit in the ruling Northern Ireland executive. In addition an advisory Council of Ireland, including representatives from the South, was to be established.

Apart from the Provisional IRA the main opposition to Sunningdale came from the Loyalist population. In the February 1974 election all the Unionist MPs returned to Westminster had stood, in opposition to other Unionists, on a ticket of opposition to Sunningdale. When the newly elected Labour government persisted with the Sunningdale policy the Loyalists rebelled. In May of that year they launched what grew to become a general strike.

It remains arguable whether the Labour government could have defeated that strike if it had plucked up the nerve to take on the Loyalists. However what can be said is that it didn't have the political inclination to take such a course of action. Robert Fisk of *The Times* was subsequently to write a book (*The Point of No Return*), on the strike which catalogued the government's reluctance to either stand up to the strikers or to those in the British Army High Command who stated their unwillingness to take on the Loyalists. Fisk notes the government's 'many assurances of tough action which were not fulfilled'; he records how the minister responsible, Merlyn Rees, sent instructions to the security forces that as far as the Loyalists were concerned, 'confrontations were to be avoided'; he observes how, rather than use the Army to try and break the strike, the Labour government preferred 'to abandon the Protestant-Catholic Coalition to its fate'.

Fisk concludes that while harsh criticism of the strike was heard from government benches at Westminster, firm action to back up these words was never taken and that 'the only serious British government resistance to the strike was going on amid the genteel environment of the House of Commons in London'.

However weak the government was in handling the strike there is no doubt the overthrow of Sunningdale dented the pride of the Labour cabinet. Surprisingly, perhaps Prime Minister Harold Wilson was, at least emotionally, one of the stronger opponents to Loyalism in the government. He never really involved himself much in Irish affairs but during the May 1974 strike he appeared on television to denounce the Loyalist strikers as 'spongers'. Wilson was still smarting from his defeat at the hands of the Loyalists when he appeared on the 4 August edition of the television programme *Weekend World*.

There were rumours at the time that the Tories were negotiating with the Official Unionists. Specifically it was being suggested that in return for Unionists backing a future Tory government the Tories would increase the number of seats for the North of Ireland at Westminster. Any increase in seats would give the Unionists added representation in Westminster. On the television programme Wilson was asked to comment on these suggested dealings. He replied:

*'If they are dealing with extremists (the Unionist MPs) they would not have been seen dead with when Mr Whitelaw was there — and one of their ex-Ministers said this in the past 48 hours — it would be a grave dereliction of duty to the country, to Northern Ireland and to the people of Northern Ireland. It would be done to get a few doubtful votes for a future Conservative government'.*

How strangely principled Wilson's words seemed five years later! By early 1979 Roy Mason was describing the Official Unionists as 'moderates'. In an interview by Independent Radio News he commented on an opinion poll which suggested a growth in support for the Alliance Party and Powell's Official Unionists, and a decline in support for Gerry Fitt's SDLP and Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party. The poll itself was dismissed as unrepresentative by those taking it — an EEC institution — but this did not dissuade Mason from commenting that the poll:

*'Reveals a picture that the moderate Unionists and the Alliance Party, bridging the sectarian gulf, are growing and those*

*— like the SDLP, who have in recent times turned a little more greener, wanting Irish unity above all, and the DUP, the extreme Protestants — they're losing ground. So it looks as if there's a gradual undercurrent of feeling towards moderation and crossing the sectarian divide.'*

This characterisation of the Official Unionists confirmed to reality at only one level: they were and are 'moderates' only if they are contrasted with the most sectarian wing of Loyalism, notably Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party. But an evaluation based on comparison can be very dangerous. It could be argued that compared to Hitler, Mussolini was a moderate, that compared to the National Front's views on blacks, Enoch Powell is moderate. Accordingly it is more appropriate to look at what the Official Unionists represent in terms of their own policies, personalities and background, rather than in terms of comparisons with those to the right of them.

The chairperson of the new party in early 1979 was one Josias Cunningham, a nephew of both the party's president, Sir James Cunningham, and of one of the most reactionary Unionist MPs, the late Sir Knox Cunningham. Josias owns a large country estate in County Antrim. A similar property in County Armagh is the residence of Michael Armstrong, chairperson of the Official Unionists security committee. Armstrong is a barrister and former Army captain.

Martin Smyth, the party's vice president, has different qualifications, being a Presbyterian minister and Grand Master of the Orange Order.

The Orange Order is the largest of the exclusively Protestant secret societies in the North of Ireland, but the Royal Black Perceptory is the most exclusive and upper class. In early 1979 the head of that august body was James Molyneaux, leader of the Official Unionists at Westminster. The overall party leader, Harry West, owns a large farm in County Fermanagh and once described himself as 'a natural conservative'.

'Natural conservative' is appropriate, for one other observation can be made about the Official Unionists, that being that they are linked with the Tory Party, or to give that

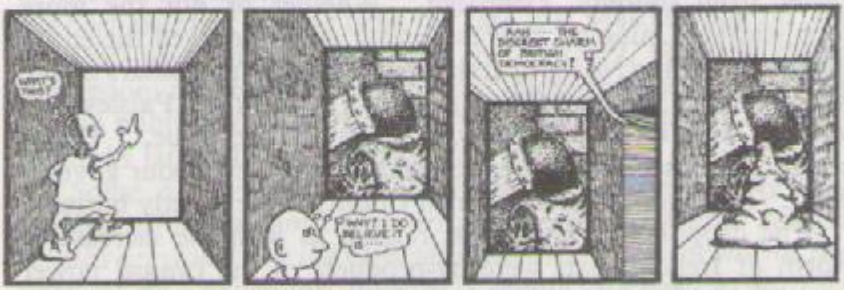
organisation its full title, the Conservative and Unionists Party. The Unionists are represented on the Tory's National Executive Committee, Margaret Thatcher attended the Unionists' party conference in 1978, Harry West spoke at Tory conference in the same year.

But it was not the Tories who delivered up the seats the Unionists demanded in August 1974. Rather it was Wilson's heirs who in their last parliamentary session rushed through a Bill giving Northern Ireland an extra six or seven seats. The predictions were that all but one would be won by Loyalists.

The argument against increasing North of Ireland representation had been stated on many occasions by Labour MPs. Merlyn Rees, 5 April 1974:

*'Many people in Northern Ireland, whatever we may think about it, look at the South and not this country. The problem that we all face is to bring these two communities together...*

*To talk of increased representation in this House in that context is not facing up to the facts of life...I do not see any circumstances in which extra representation of Northern Ireland, with its history, would be a means of bringing the peace that we all want'.*



But, to use Rees' phrase, the circumstances did arrive. These were the loss by Labour of a few by-elections and the ending of the Labour/Liberal parliamentary pact. Labour lost its overall majority in the House of Commons and needed new allies. So it was that Jim Molyneaux, leader of the Unionist MPs at Westminster held a press conference on 6 July 1977 at which he confirmed that the Unionists under his command had agreed to a

parliamentary pact with the Labour government. They would not vote to bring it down in return for an increase in the number of Northern Ireland seats at Westminster.

Once the Loyalists had seen the House of Commons Redistribution of Seats Bill — as the pay-off was called — pass through all the necessary parliamentary stages, they withdrew from the pact, but by then the damage had been done. It was that Bill which was one of the main reasons for Gerry Fitt's abstention on the Tory censure motion of 28 March 1979. It brought Ireland not one step nearer peace. The only beneficaries were Harold Wilson's 'spongers'.

Extra seats at Westminster was not all they gained from the Labour government. At times it seemed no price was too high for the Unionist votes at Westminster. One example concerned the question of gay rights. The 1967 Homosexual Law Reform Act decriminalised homosexual acts between men over the age of 21. But it did not apply to the North of Ireland. Finally in February 1979 Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Roy Mason pronounced an Order in Council to rectify this anomoly.

But the reform was hysterically opposed by the most backward Loyalists in the North of Ireland. Ian Paisley led a 'save Ulster from sodomy' campaign. Whether or not the more sophisticated Unionists at Westminster really believed the entire population of the North of Ireland would turn into pillars of salt if the reform was passed, they were aware that Paisley was making significant political capital from the issue. Under pressure themselves they applied pressure to the Labour government. The plans for an Order in Council were quietly buried.

The dropping of gay rights reform as with the increase in North of Ireland seats were by-products of the cynical power game played by the Labour government at Westminster.

The wheel had turned full circle. The very people Wilson had called 'extremists' in 1974 were now, by Mason's definition, 'moderates'. But it was not the official Unionists who changed spots; it was the Labour leadership.

The one claim that leadership makes to dealing toughly with the Loyalists is the second attempted Loyalist strike in May 1977.

The story goes that during that strike Mason sent in the Army and police to break the strike and by that action it was defeated.

But this is by no means the full story.

The strike — led by Paisley, but opposed on tactical grounds by the Official Unionists — had two aims: to bring back the old Stormont parliament and to win greater 'security' measures from the government. The crucial point in the dispute was a meeting Mason had with Loyalist workers at the Ballylumford power station. Out of this meeting and a further meeting Mason had with the Official Unionist leadership came a substantial offer by the government. As the *Irish Times* reported:

*'These included a build up of the RUC to a strength of 6,500 with more weapons, equipment and vehicles: an increase of the Ulster Defence Regiment's full-time strength to at least 1,800; a review of terrorist laws; increased emphasis of covert SAS-type activities and the formation of ten RUC divisional mobile support units'.*

These promises won over the power workers and within a few days the strike collapsed. Yet Paisley was later to say, 'The strike has been a partial success because Mr Mason has been forced into changing his security policy'.

Seen in this light the 1977 strike was by no means the failure it has been painted; it is far from the case that Mason 'took on' the Loyalists and defeated them. On the contrary, he made major concessions to the strikers and to the Unionists in general. When Mason publically announced the new security measures a couple of weeks later, the *Irish Times* reported:

*'Some of the security changes are based on a long and detailed memorandum on security presented to Mason several months previously by the Official Unionists. The document, the work of ex-Convention member Captain Michael Armstrong made a series of recommendations some of which Mr Mason has now taken up'.*

Whether it was more seats for Unionists at Westminster, gay rights or security measures, the pattern is clear: the Unionists wrote the policy and the Labour government carried it out.

So much so that at times it reached farcical proportions. Note

the following news item which appeared in the *Guardian* in March 1979:

*'A visiting radio journalist from America got in touch with the Northern Ireland Secretary to see if he could ask Mr Roy Mason about the controversy over conditions in H block.*

*'He was told quite reasonably that Mr Mason was too busy to see him. But instead of answering his questions, the Northern Ireland Office suggested that the journalist got in touch with Mr. Norman Hatton, the chief of the Official Unionists — who the official said, would be able to put the government view quite adequately'.*

# 4. Pursuit of the military solution

IN MARCH 1979 James Callaghan gave a long interview to the *Observer*. At one point Callaghan was asked to comment on his role as Home Secretary when he ordered the troops into Ireland in August 1969. He remarked: 'I think it is fair to say that I overestimated the Civil Rights aspect'.

Looking at the Labour government's subsequent policy in the North of Ireland it 'seems fair to say' that if Callaghan thought he leaned too far in favour of civil rights between 1968/9 then the obvious course to adopt was to redress the balance in the succeeding years. From 1974 onwards it emerged publicly what this evaluation meant in practice. The last days of the Labour government saw the evidence from two sources, one medical, one legal.

The medical evidence came from Dr Robert Owen who was employed by the Royal Ulster Constabulary as a police surgeon.

In the course of a television interview with *Weekend World* he revealed:

*'It's very difficult, but roughly 150-160 prisoners have shown themselves to me with injuries which I would not be satisfied were self-inflicted'.*

The substance of Owen's allegations were that 'terrorist' suspects were beaten up by the RUC on a regular basis; a revelation which was later confirmed by other doctors.

Within a couple of days of this exposure came a second, this time from a committee of inquiry set up by the government. The inquiry, headed by Judge H. G. Bennett, was into 'Police Interrogation Procedures in Northern Ireland', and centred on methods adopted by the police in their barracks at Castlereagh, Belfast and Gough, Armagh. Because of the restricted brief given to the inquiry by Roy Mason — it could not look at individual cases of ill-treatment so its findings were bound to be muted. Nevertheless, the Bennett report, at times explicity, at times implicitly, was a damning indictment of the RUC and its 'interrogators'. It's general conclusion was:

*'Injuries sustained during the period of detention in the police office were inflicted by someone other than the prisoner himself. This is indicated beyond all doubt by the nature, severity, sites and number of separate injuries in one person. An example would be haemorrhage into the eye, a swollen nose, a cut lip and multiple bruises on various parts of the body'.*

Bennett went into more detail on another section of the report when he listed a series of 'interrogating procedures' which should be banned. Clearly there would be little point in compiling such lists unless the report team was sure that what it was recommend-

ing to be banned was already taking place. Such practices as:
*requiring a prisoner to strip or expose himself or herself;*
*requiring a prisoner to adopt or maintain any unnatural or humiliating position;*
*requiring a prisoner to carry out exhausting or demanding action;*
*the use of obscenities, insults or insulting language about the prisoner, his family, friends or associates, his political beliefs, religion or race;*
*the use of threats of physical force or of such things as being abandoned in a hostile area;*
*the use of threats of sexual assault or misbehaviour.*

After the publication of the Bennett report the RUC chief constable, Sir Kenneth Newman, was asked whether he could ensure that the brutalities outlined in the report would not again be used. He replied: 'I find it impossible to give that guarantee'.

This was hardly surprising. The revelations in the report were nothing new. They had been spelt out in greater detail by an Amnesty International mission to Northern Ireland published in June 1978. Amnesty looked at 78 victims of police interrogation and in the vast majority of cases the mission confirmed that systematic 'ill-treatment' of prisoners under interrogation had taken place. Two examples will give a flavour of what such 'ill-treatment' consisted of:

Case No. 54

*'Maltreatment alleged (in Castlereagh): general beating, kicking, squeezing of testicles, hairpulling, direct trauma to the head, hand burnt against a hot radiator pipe, degrading treatment. His sweater was placed over his head and his trousers were pulled down, and the interrogators verbally humiliated him. While he was lying on the ground one of the interrogators stepped on his stomach, on his hands, his shoulders and his ankles. His wrists were both bent and stretched.*

*Conclusion: There is consistency between the alleged maltreatment and the (medical) signs'.*

*Case No. 12*

*'Female. Arrested during the latter half of 1977 and brought to*

*Castlereagh Holding Centre, where she was detained for 3 days. She was subsequently released without charge. She alleged to have been subjected to the following forms of maltreatment during detention:*

*— threats of rape — threats that her child would be taken away from her — threats that her husband would be told she was unfaithful to him — threats of electroshock — threats of injections and other medications — degrading treatment (her skirt was lifted) — intimidating procedure — her child was taken into Castlereagh with her — the light in the interrogation room was turned off and she was threatened with rape — one of the interrogators forced her to stand against the wall and then hit the wall next to her head with his fist. At the same time she could hear whimpering which she thought came from other prisoners.*

*...On the basis of their examination the medical delegates find consistency between the maltreatment alleged and her systems, and the residual signs. The medical delegates conclude that the detailed examination strongly corroborates the case that maltreatment took place'.*

The Amnesty Mission did not just report what was going on — in the name of the Labour government — in Castlereagh; the brutalities were put in a context of a systematic policy of repression. For instance:

*Powers of arrest and detention have been extended and are virtually unchallengeable. The investigation is conducted in an atmosphere of seclusion, aggravated by extended powers of police detention. Access to solicitors is denied as an apparent matter of policy, giving rise to an inference, whether or not justified, that not all statements are made voluntarily'.*

There was a reason, however malevolent, for all this. As Amnesty noted: between 70 per cent and 90 per cent of the convictions are based wholly or mainly on admissions of guilt (self-incriminating statements) made to the police during interrorgation. Accordingly if 'confessions' were the only way to gain conviction then anything was permissable in getting those confessions. The process was neatly rounded off by the type of trial the accused were subjected to. Under the Tory's Emergency

Provisions Act — supported by the Labour Party in parliament — those on 'terrorist' charges were denies the right of trial by jury, their guilt or innocence was up to one judge to decide. Not surprisingly a study undertaken by Queens University Law department in 1977 showed that 94 per cent of those brought before these courts were convicted.

Other aspects of the 'emergency' legislation can be briefly mentioned. Normal legal safeguards such as the inadmissibility of hearsay evidence and the right of silence did not apply. The Army was given unlimited powers to stop and search, and unlike Britain the police could order the taking of a suspect's fingerprints.

At the end of this conveyor-belt system of justice come the prisons themselves. During the lifetime of the Callaghan government the most notorious of these were the H block units at Long Kesh, just outside Belfast, where by the end of Callaghan's term over 350 republican prisoners were wearing nothing but blankets and were refused exercise and normal prison facilities.

The basic issue at stake concerning the government and the H-block prisoners was the latter's demand that they should be treated as political prisoners. The government's case was that this was not so, that those involved were normal criminals and should be treated as such. The fraudulence of this latter argument is apparent by looking at the way those housed in the H H-Blocks were arrested, interrogated and convicted. The process described above is not one which applies to ordinary criminals. Indeed the government admits as much as much in its own legislation.

The Emergency Provisions Act is specifically stated to deal with 'terrorist offences' and under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 'terrorism' is defined as 'violence for political ends'. Further evidence is provided by courts in France, the USA and the South of Ireland who regularly refuse extradition to Britain of republican suspects on the grounds that the crimes for which they were wanted for questioning were 'political'.

The existence of H Block was not just a consequence of British rule in Ireland, it was a consequence of Labour's application of

that rule. It was under a Labour government that the rules concerning 'terrorist' prisoners were altered so as to take away the right of 'political status' previously granted in 1972 by the Heath government. Nor is this the only case where Labour operated to the right of the Tories.

It was under Labour that the RUC was expanded, that the UDR was strengthened and that the Special Air Service was officially deployed in the North of Ireland. It was also under Labour that the Prevention of Terrorism Act was introduced.

In many ways the PTA sums the process up. One aspect illustrates its general nature. This is the provision under which a suspect can be deported to the North of Ireland or the South of Ireland. The victim has the right to appeal. But under the terms of the appeal the accused has no right to hear the evidence against him/her, neither has the accused's solicitor; even those hearing the appeal may not know the evidence under which the accused has been convicted.

Inevitably such 'draconian' measures — to use Roy Jenkins words when as a Home Secretary he introduced the PTA — picked up victims far and wide. They include pacifist Pat Arrowsmith, Irish trade union leader Phil Flynn, Barry Silverman, a prospective Labour candidate for Northwhich, Arthur Evans, a former Scotland Yard detective and journalist Ron McKay.

Taken as a whole the PTA, with its suspension of *habeas corpus*, its punishment without trial, its authority to refuse a 'British' citizen the right of entry to Britain, represents the gravest attack on individual liberty to have been passed in Britain since the war. Leaving wartime legislation aside it is the greatest legislative abuse of civil rights this century. And yet it was passed by a Labour government and passed without one single vote against from any Labour MP.

It seems strange to recall the nature of the promises that were made in 1969 when the Labour government sent in British troops to the streets of Derry. The most high-flown was that Labour was going to bring the standards of 'British democracy' to the North of Ireland. Ten years later the reverse

had taken place - *Britain's standards of 'democracy' in the North of Ireland had not just been hardened up, they had come back to the mainland.*

# 5. The civil rights aspect

IN THE *Observer* interview referred to earlier where James Callaghan said that he had 'over-estimated' the 'Civil Rights aspect', he also acknowledged that 'the Catholics at that time were in a position of very great inferiority in comparison with the Protestants.' But, Callaghan assured his interviewer, 'that's changed during the past decade'.

Other Labour leaders have made similar statements. In October 1977 Roy Mason declared that, 'Direct rule is positive, is compassionate and it cares'.

The rationale behind such arguments was fairly straightforward. If the injustice suffered by Catholics before 1968 were 'over-estimated', if what inferiority they did have 'changed a lot' and if direct British rule is 'compassionate', then this suggests that the source of violence in the North of Ireland is nothing to do with supposed Catholic grievances. This argument reinforces the view of the two main political parties in Britain that in no sense can the Provisional IRA be fighting for a just cause and that therefore they can be dismissed as 'men of violence', 'terrorists', or — as Mason often called them — 'criminals'.

The first problem with such resoning is that it is based on a false premise — the premise being the lack of genuine reasons for complaint by Catholics in the North of Ireland.

The grievances which led to the birth and growth of the North of Ireland civil rights movement in the late 1960s are well known, generally accepted as justified. To summarise they consisted of the one basic accusation — that Catholics were discriminated

against. They were discriminated against in the voting system for local government, in the allocation of housing, in the standard of housing and in jobs. In addition the Catholic population as a whole was subject to a rule of law which denied many of the basic human rights which are supposedly a feature of western democracy.

Changes were made. The voting system for local government was altered so that rate payers did not have an extra vote; the allocation of council housing was taken out of the hands of local councils in an attempt to prevent discrimination; and various laws were passed outlawing discrimination. But what in real terms did this amount to? Did the Catholics designated position as second class citizens really wither away during these years?

By 1971 there was little evidence of a real national improvement in the living standards and conditions of Catholics. The census figures for that year showed that in the predominantly Catholic working class Falls district had 19.64 per cent unemployed, while in the predominantly Protestant working class Shankill district unemployment was 9.43 per cent. At the other end of the scale in the two most prosperous Belfast wards, Victoria and Windsor taken together, the percentage of Catholics living in these areas averaged just over 8 per cent, compared to the Catholic population of Belfast as a whole of 34 per cent.

These figures were collated two years after the 'reforming' process in the North of Ireland had started and they bore out the general accusations of discrimination which Catholics suffered; in the working class Catholics were at the lowest end of the scale and in the middle and upper class Protestants were strikingly over represented.

Among the institutions established by the various reforms was the Fair Employment Agency. In January 1978 it published a report entitled 'An Industrial and Occupational Profile of the Two Sections of the Population'. The report confirmed that there still existed what it defined as 'major areas of Roman Catholic under-representation.'

One observation was again based on the 1971 census from which it was established, 'there was a tendency for those

industries which had the highest manual wage in 1971 to be predominantly Protestant'. But using later research the Fair Employment Agency's chairperson told the press when its report was published, 'there has been no real change since 1971'. As far as the working class went the conclusion was that: 'The model Protestant male is a skilled manual worker, whereas the model Roman Catholic male is unskilled'. The report also claimed that there were two and a half times as many Catholics who were unemployed as Protestants and that Catholics were 'under-represented' in middle class occupations.

There is other evidence which points to the same conclusion. Another survey published by the Fair Employment Agency in May 1978 showed that 40 per cent of the unemployed would normally work in industries in which over 50 per cent of Catholics looked for work, while a survey of local unemployment rates published around the same time showed that the predominantly Catholic Belfast districts of Ballymurphy, Whiterock, Lower Falls and Andersonstown suffered respective unemployment percentage rates of 49.3, 30.2, 27.9 and 18.1.

What all these figures emphasise is that, contrary to the assertions of Callaghan and Mason, as far as the quality and quantity of unemployment went things changed very little for Catholics during the years of supposed 'reform'. Indeed there are statistics which suggest that the nature of government intervention re-inforced the discriminatory systems. A well-researched estimate published by the Workers Research Unit in Belfast in mid-1978 showed that in a limited survey of factories and companies which had received state assistance as part of job creation less than 28 per cent of the factories concerned employed a largely Catholic workforce while nearly 56 per cent mainly employed Protestants.

Other observations can be made showing just how 'compassionate' direct rule was for the population of the North of Ireland during these years. The second anniversary of Roy Mason coming to power was celebrated by the publication of unemployment figures for the Six Counties which at 13.4 per cent were the highest since 1938. A few months later a report from

the Child Poverty Action Group said that there were nearly 75 per cent more socially deprived children in the North of Ireland than in Britain.

If all this economic deprivation greatly troubled the Tory and Labour governments from 1968 onwards they hid their concern well. Measures were attempted to revive the North of Ireland economy. Whether under Labour or Tory rule such efforts largely took the form of state assistance to private industry and as the companies involved were often capital intensive the gains in terms of employment were not great.

Such a strategy extended Tory/Labour bipartisanship to the economic field, no great socialist endeavours were attempted by the Labour governments. Quite the reverse. In 1978 when the Labour Party in Britain was howling with indignation at Tory plans to sell off council houses the Mason administration in the North of Ireland announced that one third of all publicly owned accomodation in the Six Counties would be sold off. In the same year when Labour was warning of Tory plans to disrupt the comprehensive education system, plans for a significant growth of comprehensive schools in the North of Ireland were quietly dropped.

A commitment to comprehensive education was one of the demands which were popular during the early days of the civil rights movement. What of the other demands?

One major concern was the disarming of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. They were disarmed for a few months, but then they re-armed with better weapons. The RUC also retained its overwhelmingly Protestant make-up and thus its reputation for partiality. So much so that in the early days of the Thatcher administration the House of Representatives Speaker, Tip O'Neill, called for an American arms sanction against the RUC.

A further demand of the civil rights movement was the disbandment of the exclusively Protestant para-military security unit the B Specials. They were disbanded at the end of 1969. They were replaced by the Ulster Defence Regiment who took over where the B Specials left off. Literally hundreds of members or ex-members of the UDR were convicted of arms and

'terrorist' offences; one was jailed in 1979 for his part in the assassination campaign of the 'Shankill Butchers' which resulted in the death of 14 Catholics; others were jailed for stopping the all Catholic Miami showband at a road block and killing three of them for being Catholics.

But perhaps the most famous of all the demands of the civil rights movement was the scrapping of the Special Powers Act which provided for, amongst other things, internment without trial. That too was scrapped. It was replaced by the Emergency Provisions Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act which collectively provided for internment without trial and many other things besides.

An indication of just how much really did change in the decade 1969-79 is given by the following two quotations:

*'Our investigations have led us to the unhesitating conclusion that on the night of 4-5 January a number of policemen were guilty of misconduct which involved assault and battery, malicious damage to property...in the predominantly Catholic Bogside area giving reasonable cause for apprehension of personal injury among other innocent inhabitants, and the use of provocative sectarian and political slogans';*

*'Maltreatment of suspected terrorists by the RUC has taken place with sufficient frequency to warrant the establishment of a public inquiry'.*

The two quotations almost run together. In fact one is from the Cameron Commission investigating the North of Ireland of 1968, the other is from the Amnesty Report investigating the North of Ireland of 1977.

This does not mean to say that no attempts were made to reform the North of Ireland in these years. But rather that the North of Ireland state was irreformable. Some Labour politicians had at least recognised this in theory. Richard Crossman had this to say of the North of Ireland in September 1971:

*'This is not a natural state of any kind at all. It is an artificial political product created to destroy political rights and to maintain one group of people in permanent power. By its very essence it denies every principle of democracy and always has from the time this House of Commons created it'.*

# 6. The left

THE ANALYSIS of Richard Crossman can be contrasted with the following, which featured on the front page of the Labour left's *Tribune* on 12 August, 1977:

*'The people of Northern Ireland are the greatest fools in Europe — and they haven't the sense to see it. Rather than face the realities of life as they have to live it, they dress themselves up in coloured regalia and parade to the music of their tribal musicians.'*

The author, Andrew Boyd, went on to cite these 'realities of life', noting: 'Ulster's unemployment problem is now as bad as it was in the hungry thirties... for many thousands of Ulster people, the houses in which they live couldn't be worse or more miserable... Ulster's public transport has been described as the most expensive and inefficient in Europe...the people of Northern Ireland get lower wages than anybody else in the United Kingdom' The tale of woe ended:

*'How long will this go on. Presumably just so long as the people of Northern Ireland will put up with it — and that could be a very long time indeed.'*

This sort of outlook illustrates that at least on an ideological level the bipartisanship was not confined to the leaders of the two main parties. Underlying these views from the pages of *Tribune*

was the same assumption made by Roy Mason when he wrote in October 1977, 'the Irish temperament would not give much chance for peace if British soldiers were pulled out'.

Such self-justification has invariably been used by colonialists and imperialists for their occuation of other peoples' countries. Holding their hands on their hearts they explain that the natives are just not capable of ruling themselves; that they are 'fools' or that they have the wrong 'temperament'. A complementary argument says that if the colonialists or imperialists were to withdraw, holocausts and chaos would follow. Roy Mason in September 1978 said that British withdrawal from the North of Ireland would be a 'dishonourable abdication of responsibility' and he went on: 'We should be fooling ourselves if we thought that the blood-letting that would flow from the precipitate withdrawal of troops would be confined to Northern Ireland. The undoubted violence could easily spread to the mainland with their large Irish populations.'

And not just Mason. Irene Brennan of the executive committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain in March 1977 reported, 'the simple demand that the troops should go ignores the plainful complexities of the situation'.

This multi-sided opposition to British withdrawal was at times an open, at times a hidden polemic against the majority of the people of Great Britain who in opinion poll after opinion poll voted for troops out. This majority was attacked in a similar vein as the Irish people themselves were attacked; essentially that they weren't intelligent enough or they didn't understand what Brennan described as the 'complexities' of the Irish situation.

This attitude was most notable when in late 1978 the *Daily Mirror* issued its call for withdrawal, qualified though it was by a time limit. Learned Professor Richard Rose countered the *Mirror's* claim that six out of seven of all the letters it had received supported its call by saying that the *Mirror* readership was 'the least educated'.

Such intellectual snobbery ignored a number of the more 'educated' proponents of immediate withdrawal — such as the leading bourgeois historian A.J.P. Taylor. But by now the logic of

the argument is familiar: the Irish people are not capable of running their own affairs in a sane fashion; that there is a very complex situation in Ireland; that those who didn't recognise this, whether in Ireland or in Britain, had neither the information nor the detatchment necessary to draw sensible conclusions.

Those on the left in Britain who shared this view responded in a number of ways. The type of despair quoted in the *Tribune* article was also detectable in a *Morning Star* editorial of 24 August 1978. This article was the first editorial comment the *Morning Star* had made on Ireland since the *Daily Mirror* had called for withdrawal. No opinion was stated on this call and although the editorial dutifully listed the abuses of British rule in Ireland it did not say that British rule had to end. Instead there was an exercise in pious hand-wringing: 'When will the British Labour movement help the people of Northern Ireland shorten the road they have to travel to democracy, peace and progress?'

Rhetorical questions are often used as a means of avoiding answers and although this *Morning Star* editorial did not offer one concrete suggestion of what the British labour movement *should* be doing, it did so on other occasions. The official position as stated in the 1978 final edition of the Communist Party's programme *The British Road to Socialism* ran as follows:

*'...a democratic solution in Northern Ireland, based on the implementation of a Bill of Rights, the end of all repressive measures, the withdrawal of British troops to barracks, and financial and other measures to tackle the appalling problems of poverty and unemployment. These steps would create conditions in which sectarian strife could be ended and British troops withdrawn completely. The British Government should recognise the right of a majority of the people of Ireland to rule the whole of their country and should co-operate with their representatives in bringing this about by consent.'*

So *if* there was a Bill of Rights, *if* all repressive policies were ended, *if* the troops were withdrawn to barracks — from which of course they could emerge at a moment's notice — *if* poverty and unemployment were ended and *if* all this resulted in the ending of 'sectarian strife', then British troops could be withdrawn complete

and the negotiations could start for the reunification of Ireland.

Presumably such an intricate process is to deal with Irene Brennan's 'painful complexities'. Yet if indeed the solution seems complex it can also, at times, appear remarkably simple. The *Morning Star* of November 1977:

*'Northern Ireland, where officially one in every third person is below the poverty line, where state torturers go unpunished, urgently needs a Bill of Rights and a local democratic assembly with full powers to tackle the crisis facing its people.'*

These arguments can be countered quite easily. The belief in a Bill of Rights — a position also advocated by among others, the Ulster Defence Association, Enoch Powell, Lord Hailsham and Ian Paisley — is extraordinarily naive. There are already laws in the North of Ireland against discrimination, but discrimination remains. There are even laws against the sort of 'interrogation' techniques exposed by the Bennett Report into Castlereagh police station, but as Bennett also remarked no member of the RUC was ever brought before a court for what happened in Castlereagh.

Similarly utopian is the plea for massive financial assistance for the North of Ireland. Capitalist Britain would have to mortgage all of its North Sea oil, and then some, if it was to raise the type of money necessary to restructure the North of Ireland economy along capitalist lines. As for the solution of 'local 'local democratic assembly' for the North of Ireland, a demand shared by the Official Unionists and the Paisleyite Democratic Unionist Party, the Northern Ireland parliament of 1921-72 was such an assembly. It was fully 'democratic' in the sense that it was one person one vote. There were elected governments and oppositions. There were parliamentary votes. Unfortunately, Stormont, as the parliament was called, was part of the problem. It was not so much *how* it was run that was undemocratic. Any six Counties-based parliament would invariably be a reproduction of Stormont.

Taken together, these solutions are utopian. But they are more than that, because what informs them is the same ideology which informed the *Tribune* article quoted above. It is best illustrated when the *British Road to Socialism* insists that the overall aim of

all its measures is to 'create conditions in which sectarian strife could be ended'. In other words it is 'sectarian strife' which is the problem.

This opinion, which is the main argument used by all quarters against the 'troops out now' position, was evident in the Communist Party's attitude to the now-forgotten Peace People who, for a few short months in 1976, managed to mobilise thousands onto the streets of Ireland and Britain. The *Morning Star* gave unequivocal support to the Peace People, on one occasion approvingly quoting the Irish Communist Party judgement that the Peace People were 'an effective way to defeat the bombers and assassins'.

Once again, the problem is 'bombers and assassins', the problem is 'sectarian strife'.

But wait a minute! There were no bombers or assassins when British troops hit the streets in August 1969. The Provisional IRA did not exist. The Ulster Defence Association did not exist. In the preceding years less than ten people had actually died from 'sectarian strife'. But the longer the troops stayed, the higher the death toll mounted, the greater was the repressive legislation passed and the greater the bitterness created. It almost became a self-fulfilling prophesy: the longer the troops stayed the more certain it seemed there would be a 'bloodbath' if they left. Yet if that is true then it is also true that rather than 'sectarian strife' being a precondition for British withdrawal, it is that withdrawal which is a precondition for the ending of 'sectarian strife'.

Certainly this was the conclusion which many working class North of Ireland Catholics drew as the years progressed. The once mass-supported Civil Rights Association disappeared into oblivion. The Communist Party sponsored 'Better Life for All Campaign', despite having the official approval of the trade union bureaucracies in Ireland and Britain, constantly failed to mobilise more than a few hundred. This was not because the type of reforms included in a Bill of Rights, in the Civil Rights Demands, or in a Better Life For All might not have been welcomed by the Northern Irish minority, it was rather that they became irrelevant to the main issue of British presence and the unresolved national

question.

As the enthusiasm in Ireland for the type of reforming solutions the British Communist Party and others were putting forward subsided, the Communist Party pleas for the British labour movement to intervene grew, if not in regularity then at least in passion. 'It is a terrible indictment of the British labour movement' editorialised the *Morning Star* in November 1977 'that on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the start of the civil rights movement it is necessary to call for the building of a campaign (in Britain) to force a Labour government to implement these simple demands'.

The difference with the bipartisan ideology is only one of degree. Only this time instead of advising how Britain should rule Ireland, there is the call on the British labour movement to fight for a 'civil rights' campaign, regardless of whether this is what the Irish people want. It was hardly surprising that when the British government lifted the ban on Trafalgar Square for Irish demonstrations in February 1978, to allow 200 supporters of the Better Life For All Campaign to parade there, they did so on the grounds that the demonstrators were 'non-controversial, non-partisan'. Or to put it another way, irrelevant.

So all-embracing was the desire for 'progressive' British intervention in Ireland that the Labour Party left took it one step further. On 7 November 1975, Tribunite and Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office, Stan Orme, wrote in *Tribune* on the subject of 'What we are doing in Ulster'. He welcomed 'the opportunity to spell out the socialist policies which the Labour government has been pursuing in Northern Ireland since March

1974'.

One or two Labour MPs — Joan Maynard, Tom Litterick — did speak out in favour of British withdrawal in a real sense. But by the end of the decade under review the Communist Party and Labour left had, by and large, by maintaining the right of Britain to rule Ireland, themselves become part of Ireland's British problem. And whether like Orme they were directly involved in the British administration, or like the Communist Party they were calling on that administration to be more benevolent, the one thing none of them could bring themselves to say was that the Irish people had the immediate right to determine their own future.

# 7. The other left

THERE IS ONE FINAL damning indictment of the analysis of the left Labourites and the Communist Party. This is the continuing resilience of the sworn enemies of the bipartisan policy — the Provisional IRA. What explains it?

A top-secret British Army assessment of the Provisionals, leaked just after the Conservative election victory, had this to say:

*'The Provisional IRA (PIRA) has the dedication and the sinews of war to raise violence intermittently to at least the level of early 1978, certainly for the forseeable future. Even if "peace" is restored, the motivation for politically inspired violence will remain.*

*'The PIRA is essentially a working class organisation based in the ghetto areas of the cities and the poorer rural areas... Nevertheless there is a strata of intelligent, astute and experienced terrorists who provide the backbone of the organisation.*

*'Our evidence of the calibre of the rank and file terrorists does not support the view that they are mindless hooligans drawn from the unemployed and unemployable.*

*'PIRA will probably continue to recruit the men it needs. They will be able to attract enough people with leadership, talent, good education and manual skills to continue to enhance their all round professionalism. The movement will retain popular support sufficient to maintain secure bases in the traditional Republican areas'.*

Such an analysis presents a number of riddles for those with minds saturated by the British ruling class's view of Ireland. How was it that what Mason described in December 1977 as 'the gangster and gunman...clearly and decisively rejected by the vast majority of the community of Northern Ireland' were able to prevent the 15,000 members of the British Army stationed in the North of Ireland, and the thousands of members of the RUC and UDR, from smashing them into oblivion?

Part of the answer lies in the question. The repression directed against the Provisionals, their supporters, and sympathisers and the Catholic community in general, illustrated to that community the justification of Provisionals' cause.

But that is not the crux of the matter. What distinguishes the Provisionals from the Labour and Tory administrations and from the British Labour left and the British Communist Party was that they openly acknowledged the realities of the Irish situation. In particular they recognised the paramount factor was partition — the national question.

That became obvious on Bloody Sunday. After four years of pleas from the Catholic community for fair play and reform, the ultimate response was given on the streets of Derry with the death of 14 unarmed demonstrators.

Such punitive exercises against Irish Catholics had been perpetrated many times by the British in Ireland. Bloody Sunday displayed that the story was the same as it had always been; that the time to rely on the good intentions of the British in Ireland had not only long gone, it was never there in the first place.

Much that followed Bloody Sunday confirmed this view — the special courts, coercive legislation, the H Block; the murder, harrassment and rapes committed by British soldiers. The source was the British presence and its violence; the Provisionals'

campaign was a defensive reaction. That was why they continued to receive the sometimes active, sometimes passive support of their community.

That community knew the Provisionals were not gangsters because the Provisionals were part of that community.

As these realities in the North of Ireland were camouflaged, distorted or censored the sickest joke of all for many in Ireland became the inability of the British people to ascertain what was the truth. That, as the historian A.J.P.Taylor pointed out in the *New Statesman* of 20 August 1976:

*'...the basic cause of the Irish problem is the presence of the British in Ireland and always has been. As long as British forces remain in Northern Ireland, the situation is frozen. Nothing decisive can happen until they go. The outcome may be unpleasant as it often is when men* (sic) *refuse to face a problem. Maybe our apprehensions are exaggerated. Responsibility is often a school for wisdom, and we have denied responsibility to the Irish for many generations. At any rate there is only one course for the British to follow for the sake of the Irish as well as their own. It is: Troops Out Now.'*

Why then did the British labour movement, from the most right wing social democrats to the Communist Party, refuse to rally to the 'troops out now' demand? Why did they actively oppose it?

The reason most commonly given, whether from Neave, Callaghan or those to the left of them was suitably wrapped in progressive ideological gloss — that there would be a blood bath if Britain left and that as there were more Protestants in the North than Catholics it would be the Catholics who would come out losers.

The first thing to note about this argument is its partitionist assumption. Because over 50 years ago the British government drew a boundary in Ireland and said the Northern Ireland state was now separate from the rest of the country, then in any contemporary conflict the very existence of that border would ensure those in the South of Ireland would not become involved; that the Catholic minority would remain a minority. Such a scenario is, to say the least, highly unlikely.

The opportunities for 'reforms' in the North of Ireland came many times from 1969 onwards. Anti-discrimination laws, power-sharing executives, proportional representation, industrial grants, a restructuring of the police force and so on. They came, went and left little of value behind. The reason lies in the words of Richard Crossman quoted earlier, that the state of Northern Ireland 'denies every principle of democracy'. In other words it is impossible to reform what is, by its very nature, irreformable. In the final years the Labour government itself realised this and they opted simply for the military solution. If nothing else it was an aknowledgement of the choices in Ireland. You are either for or against the survival of the irreformable Northern Irish statelet; there is no middle way.

In this way the blood bath argument carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. But what underlies all such logic is a much more coherent and worked out political philosophy. This philosophy is something which the Labour leaders, the Labour left and British Communist Party share — it is belief in the prescriptive capacity of reform to cure all ills.

But at the root of the blood bath argument was a more dangerous assumption: that British troops are 'keeping the two sides apart' and that the historical sins of British imperialism in Ireland were a thing of the past.

There is little doubt that on specific occasions in specific areas the British Army *did* reduce physical conflict between Loyalists and Republicans. But the essential political reason for that conflict in the first place is whether Britain has a right to be in the North of Ireland, and whether the Irish Loyalist minority have a right to, for their own benefit, declare the wishes of the Irish majority null and void.

What divides the people of Ireland, and what divides especially the Irish working class is Britain's presence in the North of Ireland. To then turn round and say that the British presence *prevents* them fighting over it is like saying that at least apartheid in South Africa keeps the blacks and whites apart.

Nevertheless others maintained the fruitless search for that middle way. High-sounding phrases were used to explain them.

'Workers unity' was the call from sections of the left and far left. Their formula was that the way to resolve the disunity of the Irish working class was through uniting around bread and butter issues — wages, unemployment, housing conditions. But that too included the suggestion that the national question did not dominate, or that at least the way to solve it was for Protestant and Catholic workers to unite on other things and then they would, with red flags waving, agree to unite on the 'constitutional' question.

But as far as Protestant and Catholic workers went the constitutional question *was* about houses, jobs and wages. For the Catholics the existence of the border ensured continuing discrimination, for the Protestant workers it was an assurance that they would suffer just that little bit less.

The statistics on jobs and wages quoted earlier illustrate the correctness of these assurances. At the 1979 general election when unemployment in the North of Ireland was higher than it had been for 40 years the Loyalists returned to Westminster three members of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party and two other fellow travellers.

With half the Loyalist seats captured the most extreme variety of Protestant sectarianism was more popular than ever before. It was a pattern confirmed in the European elections when Paisley received approximately 60 per cent of the Protestant vote. The worse the economic crisis became the more the Protestant working class insisted that what they had, they would hold. There is another tradition to that which says Britain should meet its responsibilities to the Irish people by passing more beneficial laws, or that which instructs the Irish working class to forget old-fashioned things like the disunity of their country and concentrate instead on loving one another. It was a tradition that belonged to the pre-Stalinised British Communist Party. In a pamphlet published in 1921 they explained it this way:

*'The Communist Party in assisting Ireland does so as part of its international policy. We believe in a Republic for Ireland because that is precisely what the majority of the Irish workers want. We*

*believe in helping Ireland because she is the victim of capitalist imperialism, and we are against imperialism all the time. It is nothing to us that our fight for Ireland brings us into opposition with the imperialism of Britain...*

*'The same principle that makes us lend a helping hand to Ireland in its fight against British domination impels us to assist the so-called backward nations, like India, Persia and Egypt in their onslaught upon the imperial power of Britain. As workers we Communists know that the same troops, tanks, machine guns that are sent to Ireland and elsewhere, are also hurled against us during a big strike... And just as the Communists are the first, are the most active in helping strikers to defeat the ruling class, so we place our assistance at the disposal of those nations subjected by the same ruling class.*

*'The Communist Party of Great Britain hails the dauntless fight of the Irish Republicans in their successful struggle against the British government. Unlike the Labour Party, which does not desire to harass the government during the present negotiations we defiantly declare that it is our intention to so challenge the government, that it will gladly yield all the demands made by the Irish Republicans. In lending every assistance to Ireland, it is not only necessary for us to attack the government, but also to warn our friends that the political and trade union leaders of the British labour movement are as dangerous to them as even a Lloyd George or a Hamar Greenwood. The cowardly ineptitude of the Labour Party in the House of Commons, so far as Ireland is concerned, is at once humiliating and treacherous. The bare-faced betrayals of Ireland and her workers by the British trade union leaders is on a level par with that of the Labour Party. We assure our Irish friends that these elements are being exposed by the Communists.*

*But above all, when the Irish proletariat decide to take power in their own hands, we shall be prepared to render them all the assistance that is humanly possible. And we promise them, here and now, that whatever cost we may have to pay, our life's blood will be the test of our comradeship and the price of our solidarity'.*

To which it is only necessary to add: Troops Out Now.

This pamphlet is produced by the International Marxist Group (British Section of the Fourth International). The IMG was in the forefront of the opposition to the despatch of British troops to Ireland in 1969. It has been in favour of their immediate and unconditional withdrawal ever since that time.

The IMG has over the last decade organised numerous meetings and other activities in solidarity with all those trying to rid Ireland of the British once and for all.

If you are interested in knowing more about the IMG tear off the form below and post it to IMG, PO Box 50, London N.1

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# About this pamphlet

**This pamphlet is the first detailed examination of the Labour Party's Irish policy from 1969 onwards.**

**Included is a fierce critique of that policy, of the 'bipartisanship approach' adopted by Labour in collaboration with the Tories and of the failure of the Labour left and Communist Party to make Ireland an issue.**

**The pamphlet argues the socialist case on Ireland, the case for the immediate British withdrawal and for the right of the Irish people to rule themselves. It is essential reading for all those in the working class movement involved in the current debate on what went wrong with the last Labour Government. The author argues that the issue of Ireland should be part of that debate.**

**The author, Geoffrey Bell is a Belfast-born journalist who is currently a member of the editorial board of** Socialist Challenge.

**Bell is the author of** The Protestants of Ulster **(Pluto 1976) reviewed at the time as, 'well researched, throroughly documented, packed with fact, a compact history, a sharp and cool analysis' (Irish Press) and 'refreshing...we have waited too long for such an honest appraisal' (Irish News).**

**Troops Out Now**

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