

IRISH BOOKS

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WHY BRITAIN SHOULD LEAVE IRELAND



**MICHAEL MULLEN
ANTHONY COUGHLAN
TERENCE McCAUGHEY
DALTON O CEALLAIGH**

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At the end of November, 1979, the Connolly Association was informed that the Irish Sovereignty Movement in Dublin was anxious to organise a delegation of representative Irish opinion which would visit London, and make suggestions regarding the solving of the Northern Ireland problem, to members of the British Labour and democratic movements.

The Connolly Association therefore arranged a Press conference in the Ivanhoe Hotel in Bloomsbury which took place on December 12th.

Mr Desmond Greaves, Editor of the Irish Democrat, took the chair.

As frequently happens when the Irish question is to be discussed, only two journalists turned up. But the meeting was notable for the number of trade union officials and others who attended, and the room was full.

The delegation consisted of Mr Michael Mullen, General Secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union; the Reverend Terence McCaughey (Presbyterian and native of Belfast); Mr Daltun O Ceallaigh, Secretary of I.S.M. and Information Officer of the I.T.G.W.U., and Mr Anthony Coughlan, lecturer in social sciences at Trinity College, Dublin, President of the I.S.M.

MR MULLEN read a statement which set out the policy of his union, and the other delegates amplified it from their own points of view.

While the ladies and gentlemen who attended the conference represented many hundreds of thousands of organised workers and others, it was appreciated that most of them had attended in their personal capacities and might not have as full an opportunity to report back as they would have done from a more formal conference.

It was therefore decided to publish the statements in pamphlet form, so that the British Labour Movement may be aware of the thinking of progressively-minded people in Ireland.

Address by Mr Michael Mullen, General Secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union.

MR CHAIRMAN, I want to thank you for inviting me here this evening to present certain views on the North of Ireland from the standpoint of an Irish trade unionist. In so doing, I shall be referring to or summing up my union's official policy as reflected in resolutions, speeches and annual conference proceedings.

First of all, I think I should explain the context from which these references are drawn, because I know that you may not be familiar with some of the details of the Irish trade union setting.

My union, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, was founded over 70 years ago at the beginning of 1909. It was launched by James Larkin. And the famous socialist writer and activist James Connolly also played a crucial role in building the Union up in its early years, eventually becoming Acting General Secretary.

THE ITGWU is today the largest trade union in Ireland with over 170,000 members in its ranks out of a total trade union membership in the whole of Ireland of about 600,000. Therefore, proportionately, it is larger than any single union in Britain. The ITGWU has nearly 200 Branches throughout the 32 Counties, including ones in Belfast, Derry, Antrim, Tyrone and Down. Altogether, we have approximately 6,000 members in the North and a representative on the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. In fact, the General President of the ITGWU, Senator Fintan Kennedy, is Treasurer of the Irish Congress.

Therefore, I think you can see that the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union speaks for a substantial section of the Irish working class, North and South.

We are anxious that the rift in the Irish nation and the Irish working class should be healed, so that bloodshed may be ended and the prospect of peaceful progress for all opened up. We believe that an encouraging sign in this direction is the growing and widespread recognition in both our countries that the British Government must cease to support, either actively or passively, the politics of reactionary unionism and should eventually leave Ireland altogether, after which these two islands can live together in harmony and mutual respect in the international community.

THE Irish Government accepts that this is the correct policy.

The new Prime Minister and his recent rival for that office hold to the position that the path to peace lies through British disengagement. The Social Democratic and Labour Party has also declared that this is the way forward, for at its Annual Conference in November, 1978, the Party resolved that British disengagement was inevitable and desirable. The main opposition party in the Irish Parliament, Fine Gael, under the leadership of Dr. Garret Fitzgerald, has announced that its objective is an all-Ireland Confederation, although it remains for it to clarify the steps in that direction.

The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union maintains that the Irish labour movement should be to the forefront in advocating the reunification of Ireland, because that movement should be the most prominent in upholding national democracy, opposing the ascendancy rule of unionism and seeking the unity of the Irish working class. We can appeal to the rank and file worker in the North to join us in the search for liberty and justice, while at the same time opposing the bigotry and sectarian politics of unionism—and the guarantee of survival which these effectively receive from the British Government through the maintenance of partition.

There is no contradiction in pursuing these two ends, and those in Ireland who say there is have abandoned the struggle to win our Protestant brothers and sisters away from reaction and in favour of the workers' republic of which Connolly dreamed. The trouble is that so long as Britain awards to the likes of West, Craig and Paisley—landlord, industrialist and demagogue—a veto on Irish unity; so long will they remain intransigent, foster fear and delusion among the Protestant working class and oppress Catholics within their partitionist enclave.

The key to change in the North is for Britain to say to the unionist: "You must end your system of discrimination against Catholics and sit down with your fellow Irishmen and women in order to work out the arrangements for the reunification of Ireland, because we in Britain do not want to maintain the union with the North and believe that your future, in terms of a democratic and just settlement, lies in an all-Ireland context."

MANY Britons have said that they have gone as far as they can go by indicating that they will not stand in the way of Irish unity. But they can and should go further by saying on behalf of the 50 million odd inhabitants of England, Scotland and Wales that they positively want to end the union and to see the reunification of Ireland, because that is the will of the overwhelming majority of the Irish people and the alternative is division, discrimination and violence.

Once Britain declares in favour, **not of instant withdrawal**, but gradual disengagement, a tremendous impulse will be given to negotiation and reconciliation. An opportunity will be provided for a breakthrough of moderate Protestant opinion which will say: "Britain has said that she wants to go and see a united Ireland and the majority of Irish people want that as well, so we'd better start talking about what we're going to get out of it." Of course, it's a form of pressure—legitimate and morally justified pressure, which is so designed as to encourage movement in the right direction, but not panic.

IT is the one course which has not been tried and the only one left. If it is not adopted, the misery will go on, the slaughter of civilians and soldiers alike will endure, year after painful year, and Britain will gain little credit in the world at large.

On behalf of the largest trade union in Ireland and I know many, many thousands more of Irish workers North and South, I would ask you to consider the course towards peace and friendship which your Government might adopt, through identifying with the principles of Irish national democracy and unity, which are the principles of your labour brothers and sisters in Ireland.

Let me conclude by quoting a few brief paragraphs from the report submitted to my union's annual conference in June this year:

"In looking for a democratic solution to the Northern crisis that will be in the Irish interest, the first principle that needs to be borne in mind is the fundamental responsibility of Britain, the British Parliament and the British Government for the present situation. So much attention has been inevitably paid to the 'negative veto' of the Unionists and to the half-century-long Unionist ascendancy in the North, that this essential truth about Britain's responsibility is forgotten.

"The North of Ireland, British politicians keep saying, is an integral part of the United Kingdom, but the past decade has seen unparalleled violence there; it has led to the presence of 20,000 British troops, to the deaths of nearly 2,000 people, thousands more maimed and injured, and millions of pounds of damage to property. It has seen the suspension of elementary civil rights. It has seen the British Government indicted and found guilty before the European Court of Human Rights. It has led to the suspension of civil liberties in Britain itself with the strange anomaly of citizens being 'deported' from Britain to the North of Ireland, i.e., from one part of the United Kingdom to another.

"The British people or the Westminster Parliament are never invited to examine the basis of British policy itself or to question whether that policy may be a major contributory factor to the political deadlock. After all, the British Government is the Government of the North. No Northern Irish politician or party has any power at all. Were any other part of the United Kingdom governed with the same singular lack of success, would there or would there not be a fundamental re-appraisal of the basis of policy?"

"Reconciliation and an end to division between people in Ireland is clearly an objective that would command the respect and support of all right-thinking people everywhere. Should that not be the stated policy of the British Government? Britain should declare that her policy objective in Ireland is to promote the coming together of both parts of Ireland in agreement before withdrawing. Britain's role ought to be to use all the considerable resources at her command, consistently and continually to promote such a policy, leading to agreement among Irish people themselves. That would appear self-evident, yet as long as Britain continues her present policy there is absolutely no incentive for the Unionists' political leadership to talk to anyone."

Statement by Mr Anthony Coughlan on behalf of the Irish Sovereignty Movement.

THE Irish Sovereignty Movement is a non-party organisation which includes members of all the political parties in the Republic within its ranks. It is concerned with upholding basic democratic principles, in particular the principle that every nation, including Ireland, should govern itself and make its own laws. For this reason it believes that the British Government should abandon its claim to sovereignty in Ireland, which it has asserted since 1172, and should work towards the reunification of Ireland and the ultimate transfer of its present sovereignty over Northern Ireland to a government representing the majority of the people of Ireland. For the same reason the ISM is opposed to the loss of sovereignty and national law-making powers entailed by full membership of the EEC.

We believe that the British people and the British Labour Movement have no objective interest in denying independence and sovereignty to other peoples. They do have an interest in fostering maximum goodwill and friendly relations with others, including the Irish, on the basis of respect for mutual independence and sovereignty.

BECAUSE of this we believe that in deciding its policy towards Ireland, the British Labour and Trade Union Movement should be guided above all else by the principle of showing friendship and solidarity with the majority of the Irish people as a whole and not with a minority. Specifically, this means attending to the views of the Irish Government, which is elected by the Irish majority, and to the views of the Labour and Trade Union Movement in the Republic of Ireland, on how the Irish national question should be solved. While Labour in Britain should properly be concerned with the rights and interests of the Northern Ireland unionists, this should not be allowed to override recognition of the principle that the Northern unionists are a minority within Ireland, entitled to minority rights but not entitled to overrule the wishes and interests of the majority.

Northern Ireland is inherently unstable and unhealthy because its boundaries are so drawn as to turn a national minority—the Ulster unionists, mainly Protestants—into an artificial local majority, while denying to the Northern nationalists,—mainly Catholic—their democratic rights as part of the political majority of the whole people of Ireland. Normal political life is impossible in such a situation, which gives rise to periodic violence.

Section C, Par. 30, of the recent Government White Paper, contains a damning admission of these facts. It states, apropos of the position of the artificially-created minority, that "the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland require special arrangements to protect the position of the minority community." The reason given is that "the representatives of the minority community cannot so broaden their appeal as to expect to win office by way of any future election." This is an admission of the fact, repeatedly asserted by Irish nationalists, that the boundaries of Northern Ireland were fixed in such a way that under a majority of unionists a minority of nationalists was included, the numbers being so chosen that they could never form a majority in Parliament. If the nine counties of Ulster had been partitioned the unionist majority would have been too slender to be safe. The amount partitioned was as much as could be held safely.

THE traditional policy of the British Labour Party and the trade union movement from the 1920s to the 1940s was to favour the reunification of Ireland. We suggest that such a policy accords with the best interests of the British and Irish peoples and that Labour in opposition should revert to it. Its good sense and desirability is being increasingly recognised—most recently by the former British Ambassador in Washington, Mr Jay. Adopting a policy of working towards the reunification of Ireland would have the following advantages for British Labour:

(a) It would make for permanent friendship between the peoples of the two islands and would lessen the burdens on the British economy while strengthening that of Ireland, thus increasing mutual prosperity and trade over time.

(b) It would end permanently the cycle of violence in Northern Ireland, which has caused so much death and destruction to British and Irish people and whose side effects have led to the reduction of civil liberties in Britain as well as huge costs to British taxpayers.

(c) It would help to make the one million or so first-generation Irish people in Britain into strong supporters of Labour at elections instead of the apathetic abstainers which so many are at present.

(d) It would reduce the electoral strength of the Tory Party at Westminster, which has so often been added to by the Ulster Unionists, who are shortly to be given more House of Commons seats than ever before.

MR Atkins's White Paper is based on excluding the so-called "Irish dimension" in any meaningful sense. Par. 4 of the White Paper states that "the conference will not be asked to discuss issues such as Irish unity or confederation or independence." While many of the White Paper's suggestions on devolution are of value, they are all based on the premise that the Northern nationalist minority must accept permanently the denial of their rights as part of the greater Irish majority. The White paper is also based on the premise that the Northern Ireland unionists will be indefinitely sustained by the British Government in the veto they have been given on the establishment of permanent friendship between 60 million people in these islands.

As long as the one million or so Northern Unionists are given an absolute veto on constitutional change by Britain they have no incentive to budge from their intransigence and seek political accommodation with their fellow-Irishmen within Ireland. Moreover, those within the Northern Protestant community who would welcome moves towards Irish unity are given no incentive to say so because of fear of the Paisleyite and Orange element, who are strong in the knowledge of having effective British support for their position. These premises make a stable solution based on the White Paper impossible.

We urge that British Labour should base its policy on what has been proposed by the Irish Government and by the principal representatives of the Northern minority, the SDLP, namely, that Britain should declare its interest in bringing about the unity of Ireland in agreement and its commitment to ultimate

disengagement and transfer of sovereignty, thus opening the way to discussions between the interests concerned—the two sovereign governments and the representatives of Northern majority and minority—on how best this agreement can be brought about.

In other words, Britain should withdraw from the Northern unionists their absolute veto on constitutional change. The British Government, and the British people, have a perfect right to end the union with Northern Ireland if they so wish for there can be no such thing as a unilateral right to union, and in deciding to whom British sovereignty should be transferred. Britain should give prime consideration to the views of the representatives of the Irish majority.

IT is not suggested that Ireland can be reunited and the Northern Ireland problem be solved overnight. What is needed is that British policy should be oriented towards a democratic solution—one of finally undoing the union so far as Ireland is concerned—and that a process leading to that end be instituted. Quite possibly there would have to be several steps along the way—including the establishment of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland perhaps, as long as this was seen as part of the process of British disengagement referred to.

The Government of the Republic has always made clear that it would consider any constitutional and legal arrangements which would meet legitimate unionist interests and susceptibilities, as long as they were compatible with Irish sovereignty, and southern public opinion would support that view. The adoption by Britain of a policy of working towards a united Ireland would cut the ground from under unionist extremism, would divide the present unionist camp into those willing to look for the best accommodation with their fellow Irishmen in Ireland and those rejecting such a perspective.

It could confidently be expected that over a period of time the pressures of political interest, supported by the financial and political suasion of the two sovereign governments, would ensure that the latter would be few in number. The present republican violence could be expected to cease with such a change in British policy. It is very likely also that political and public opinion in both America and Europe would support a solution to the Northern problem along these lines, which would thereby contribute to raising Britain's political standing in the world. By advocating such a course and by thereby showing a constructive path towards solving the Irish problem, the standing of Labour with British public opinion could not but be greatly enhanced in the period ahead.

Statement made by the Rev. Terence McCaughey.

SPEAKING as a Protestant Irishman, born in Belfast and educated in the North of Ireland, of Unionist parents, but who early in life changed his views on Irish unity and the need for a transfer of sovereignty over Northern Ireland from the British Government to an Irish Government representative of the whole people of Ireland, I would like to give my support to the points made in the appeal of the Irish Sovereignty Movement.

As one who is in constant touch with the people North of the Irish Border, I would like to make the following additional points:—

THE division of Ireland has had the effect of inhibiting the development of concepts of civil liberty and human rights on both sides of the Border, just as was foreseen by Connolly and others when Partition was first mooted.

A civil war in the South, together with the maintenance of one-party government North of the Border, and the continuing dissatisfaction of the majority of the Irish people with the "settlement" of 1920, has ensured that a security problem has persisted for the past sixty years since 1920. This has in turn given an excuse or pretext for the introduction of emergency legislation in both parts of Ireland. It has also jeopardised civil liberties in Britain itself, as what is called the "Irish Problem" spills over into Britain as well.

The maintenance—even, on occasion, the establishment—of such elementary liberties as citizens expect to enjoy in a democracy is going to remain very difficult in Northern Ireland as long as the question of Irish reunification remains unresolved.

NOT unconnected with this is the development of the Labour Movement in Ireland. The Irish Labour Movement has again and again been enfeebled and even stultified and side-tracked, as a result of Partition. The Irish Trades Union Movement has been tragically split and the development of a unified and articulate Labour Party has been effectively prevented by the forces of what was often a carefully nurtured sectarianism. It is altogether in the interests of British workers and of the Labour Movement in Britain to encourage the strengthening of the Labour Movement in other countries—and this must surely include Ireland.

It is often assumed, understandably enough, that sectarianism is a national disease of the Irish and, in particular, of the people of "Ulster". This is not the case. What is, however, true is that sectarianism was carefully fostered as an instrument of Imperial policy, and is maintained as a vital component

of the political status quo in Northern Ireland. Sectarianism often continues to exist after religious conviction itself has died—and it loses none of its virulence. It has both nourished and been nourished by the setting up and maintenance of the Northern Ireland statelet 60 years ago. It would be tragic if now when many Protestant workers have for the first time begun to realise the gulf that divides them from the Protestant employers and others, we were to fail to give them a vision of the future more progressive than that offered by Paisley or the U.D.A.

The continuing guarantee to the Unionists that the Union is indissoluble so long as they want it serves no-one but those who most wish to maintain the position of protestant domination to sustain which Northern Ireland was set up in the first place. Paisley and others are in fact tantalising Loyalists with a return to the type of dominance they enjoyed before 1969.

Constructive Protestants—and I prefer the word "constructive" to "moderate"—would be free to engage in real dialogue concerning their political future, if only a British Government could bring itself to withdraw their unconditional guarantee to the Unionists. Constructive and democratic Protestants—most of them of Unionist stock—require such a withdrawal to overcome the inhibitions they feel at present in face of intransigent Loyalism. They very understandably fear the populism and quasi-fascism of Paisley.

WHATEVER Mr Atkins may have said—and there is now some evidence that he regrets it—about ruling out of order any talk of an "Irish dimension", it is quite clear that when he and Mrs Thatcher speak about security they are almost hysterically aware of such an "Irish dimension". There is, of course, also a **political** Irish dimension, as is persuasively argued in the I.S.M. appeal.

But if there is an Irish dimension, there is also a British dimension. The Northern Ireland problem, the Irish question, co-operation between and eventually reunification of the two parts of Ireland, cannot be effected without a prior move on the part of the British Government. It is Britain which claims sovereignty over the six counties of Northern Ireland, is involved in considerable annual expenditure there and maintains a large military presence there.

There can be no question of Irishmen "working out their own future" unless two other things happen:—

- (1) The withdrawal of the guarantee to the Unionists, and
- (2) an undertaking, on the part of the British Government to commit itself to disengagement of an orderly kind from Irish affairs.

Mr Daltun O Ceallaigh explained the purposes of the Irish Sovereignty Movement as follows:—

THE Irish Sovereignty Movement is an organisation of concerned citizens, which was formed in 1972, in order to help defend Irish democracy and independence. It arose out of the anti-EEC campaign of 1969-71, and continues that tradition through its criticism of and opposition to the policies of Brussels, which diminish democracy in Ireland and threaten the welfare of the Irish people.

The other major concern of the I.S.M. is to secure the unity and independence of Ireland, as we believe that this is the surest path to justice and peace in Ireland and harmony between Britain and Ireland.

The I.S.M. has in its ranks persons of all political parties and of none, as in the case of the Chairman Anthony Coughlan and Secretary Daltun O Ceallaigh. Its role is not to compete with other political groups for electoral support, but to urge on the Irish Government and other responsible bodies the policies which will realise the aims of democracy and independence in Ireland.

MR PETER KAVANAGH stated that up to now his organisation had been primarily concerned with the liberalisation of the regime in Northern Ireland and the restoration of normal democratic rights. He understood that the delegation was anxious to stress the issue of the ultimate unity of Ireland. Members of the delegation explained that they did not in any way disparage the importance of the campaign for civil rights. They wished however to see joined to it the further perspective of a united Ireland. The two agitations should proceed side by side.

In answer to a query from a member of the Troops Out Movement the delegates explained that they did not want a precipitate withdrawal, and were completely opposed to the fixing of any arbitrary date. They were anxious that the British Government should set itself the aim of the reunification of Ireland and state that aim publicly. The pursuit of that aim would result in an orderly phased withdrawal.