



Freedom struggle in Ireland

THE present situation in the North of Ireland (the occupied six counties) of British colonial rule, counter-insurgency war against the nationalist people, and British support for the loyalist section of the population can be traced back to the political institutions imposed upon Ireland by Britain in the 1920 – 1921 period.

BACKGROUND

Ireland was Britain's first colony and for centuries the native Irish people have resisted the foreign rule accompanied by its alien culture, customs and language. Britain occupied Ireland as

part of its imperial expansion and later, in order to consolidate that rule, Britain opted for a policy of Plantation – dispossessing the native Irish and giving or selling off their lands to either soldiers, who had fought for Britain, or English and Scottish settlers.

In the early seventeenth century the most rebellious of Ireland's four provinces – Ulster – was finally quelled and the largest Plantation took place here. Most of those settlers were Presbyterians and Protestants since at the time of the Reformation the English king, Henry VIII, had broken with Rome in 1533, made himself head of the Church of England, and enforced Protestantism on his subjects.

This religious division introduced to Ireland, was a major dimension upon which Britain based its rule of divide and conquer. The bitter divisions were ones which could have been healed and reconciled if sectarianism had not been politically exploited by Britain and its allies in Ireland.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the Catholicism of the native Irish was suppressed and that the minority Protestant section of the population became the governing class, a movement inspired firstly by the American War of Independence (1776) and then by the French Revolution (1789), and embodying the ideas of economic emancipation and religious freedom, was begun by liberal Protestants which found its most radical expression in the United Irishmen, an organisation committed to republican principles and separatism.

In 1798 these republicans (from which Sinn Fein derives its republican tradition) rebelled against British rule. The battle was particularly fierce in the counties of Antrim and Down. Frightened by this unity of 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter' the British dissolved the Irish (Protestant) parliament in Dublin, bringing Ireland under direct colonial rule once again.

The sectarian Orange Order (1795) was used as a counter-balance against the United Irishmen and was encouraged to flourish. It was successful in deterring the majority of the Protestant population from mixing or sympathising with their Catholic neighbours.

There were several other unsuccessful rebellions against British rule, parallel with constitutional movements which achieved limited reforms. But demands for Home Rule (that is, an Irish legislature **still within** the British Empire) were sabotaged in the late nineteenth century by right-wing British politicians and the forces of the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, jealous to safeguard their economic privileges and perpetuate their power. They also resisted every and any extension of the franchise to their fellow Irishmen and women. They were totally opposed to Irish democracy.

In 1912 those who supported the union with Britain and who were opposed to Home Rule – the Protestant unionists – set up an illegal paramilitary army, the Ulster Volunteer Force, where they were strongest. They said that Ulster (which consists of nine counties) would resist Home Rule. Again they received encouragement from Britain and from the British army which said that even if ordered it would not move against the UVF.

Home Rule was postponed due to the outbreak of the First

World War (1914-18) but it is doubtful if Britain would have had the will or the inclination to move against the unionists, its traditional allies.

1916 RISING



At Easter 1916 those of the nationalist separatist tradition, the Irish Volunteers, and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, joined forces with the Irish Citizen Army (an organisation set up by James Connolly to defend Irish workers) to seek total national and economic independence from Britain. An Irish republic was proclaimed from the steps of the GPO in Dublin and the Irish Republican Army (the IRA) was born.

There was bloody fighting for a week and the Rising was suppressed, followed by the executions of the IRA leaders.

The Rising and the executions affected the nationalist people of Ireland who turned to Sinn Fein — the political movement which supported the IRA. In elections to the London parliament at Westminster in December 1918 Sinn Fein won seventy-three seats, the unionists twenty-six and the Irish Parliamentary Party (which Sinn Fein had displaced) won only six.

Sinn Fein set up an Irish parliament (Dail Eireann) and boycotted the British parliament at Westminster. Britain suppressed this democratic institution and a guerilla war raged throughout Ireland. As the IRA fought the Royal Irish Constabulary, the British army and other British paramilitary forces, Britain in 1920 passed the Government of Ireland Act and the following year imposed partition on Ireland, a supposedly temporary measure to overcome unionist objections.

The Ulster Unionist Party had dropped three of the counties — Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan — its leaders had pledged to defend with their "very blood", in order to consolidate its sectarian rule over the nationalists in the six counties. The unionists were given their own parliament in Belfast which was virtually autonomous and their own paramilitary forces — the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the infamous 'B' Specials.

The state of 'Northern Ireland' was not decided by natural boundaries, culture or language, but was the largest area (one million unionists and half a million nationalists in six counties) which the unionists could hold and possibly stabilise and they set up, in the words of one unionist prime minister, "a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people".

The nationalist — mainly Catholic — community became second-class citizens, were discriminated against in housing, employment and local government and although the IRA organised and occasionally struck against the state, extremely repressive laws were used to suppress nationalists striving for their rights constitutionally, peacefully or in armed struggle.

THE FREE STATE

Despite the imposition of partition in 1921 the IRA fought on against British forces in the twenty-six counties. A truce and treaty of 1921, the effect of which was to set up a 'Free State' parliament inside the British Empire in line with the British government's legislation of 1920, resulted in a split in the IRA and a civil war. The IRA, opposed by the Irish middle class and the nationalist forces of reaction, was defeated and the Free Staters, aided, abetted and armed by Britain, were successful.

In 1926 a former IRA leader, Eamonn de Valera, split from the IRA and set up a political party called Fianna Fail which abandoned the radical dimension of republicanism and eventually came to power in the South. It perpetuated Free State rule and although a republic was declared claiming the territory of the North, no real attempt to end partition was made. Both the main parties in the twenty-six counties (Fianna Fail and Fine Gael) have their roots in Civil War politics but differ little in their conservative economic policies.



THE NORTH

Since 1921 the unionists (or loyalists, as the most bigoted refer to themselves) monopolised the government of the six counties on an unashamedly sectarian basis.

The IRA made a number of attempts to destabilise the six counties but it was not until the peaceful civil rights campaign of 1968 and 1969 that the six-county state exposed itself before the world as a sectarian police state. Peaceful demonstrations, **for reform not revolution**, were beaten and hosed off the streets but the nationalist people continued pressing for their legitimate, democratic demands. ◦

In August 1969 the sectarian state reacted and after the nationalist people of the Bogside in Derry repulsed an attack by the RUC, the British army was brought in, not to 'keep apart two warring religious communities' or to 'save the Catholics', but to replace the exhausted and demoralised RUC!

Meanwhile, loyalists in Belfast in unison with the RUC and 'B' Specials invaded nationalist areas, shot and killed several people, including a nine-year-old boy as he lay asleep in his bed in Divis Flats, burned down hundreds of houses and left thousands homeless.

The British army was sent in to prevent the six counties from collapsing internally. There had been an empty threat from the Fianna Fail government in Dublin that it would not "stand idly by", but it did nothing, and over the following years it increased

cross-border military and political collaboration with British forces in the North.

The British army soon took up the role of the RUC and 'B' Specials (the 'B' Specials had been replaced with, modernised, and most of its members absorbed into, the Ulster Defence Regiment, the UDR) in suppressing the nationalist people. Loyalist parades were allowed to take place provocatively close to nationalist areas and British army raids for IRA arms, which were badly needed for defence, were stepped up. Areas were placed under curfew and searched, and in one notorious incident in July 1970 in the lower Falls district of west Belfast several people were murdered by British soldiers. (In contrast the British did not suffer their first casualty at the hands of the IRA until February 1971.)

The IRA, now with a widespread base of popular support, then moved from a position of defensive to offensive action and the armed struggle against British state forces began. A commercial bombing campaign in the towns and cities helped destabilise British rule by striking at the economic foundations of the six-county state and forced the British to stretch their forces.

In 1971 the British introduced internment without charge or trial, aimed almost exclusively at the nationalist population and a number of those arrested were tortured. Demonstrators against internment were intimidated, attacked or shot off the streets and in one such protest in Derry, in January 1972, fourteen peaceful civil rights demonstrators were murdered by British paratroopers in what became known as 'Bloody Sunday'.

Loyalist assassins of the UDA and UVF also attempted, and continue to attempt, to erode nationalist resistance by carrying out a campaign of sectarian bombings and shootings.

DIRECT RULE

In 1972 the British government, embarrassed by the open sectarianism of the unionists and under pressure from the IRA, suspended the unionist parliament at Stormont (which nationalist politicians had been boycotting for several months previously) and London took full control of the reins of government — direct rule. Political status was granted to prisoners after a republican hunger-strike and the British government met IRA leaders in a truce which collapsed when British deceit was exposed.

Over the next decade the British attempted to cobble together a number of internal governments with collaborationist nationalist forces — mainly the social democratic SDLP — and with unionists. Although the SDLP were selling out the nationalist aspiration for a united Ireland and were prepared to condemn the freedom struggle, the loyalists were not prepared to share power or enter into coalition and in one such attempt, in 1974, those unionists who did take part in a power-sharing executive soon found themselves isolated after a loyalist strike brought life to a standstill.

SINN FEIN

Since the early 1970s the IRA has waged an armed struggle against British rule and has carried out operations in Britain and

Europe.

Sinn Fein, which supports the struggle for self-determination, has articulated the demands for Irish independence, is working towards the establishment of a democratic socialist republic based on the 1916 Proclamation and sees partition and British rule in the occupied six counties as the major obstacle in the way of that goal.

Sinn Fein has, on occasions, been proscribed and its members are constantly harassed, arrested and jailed for resisting British and Free State rule, for organising protests and demonstrations and for selling '*An Phoblacht/Republican News*', the official organ of the Republican Movement.

In the twenty-six counties despite having elected representatives, successive Dublin governments have banned Sinn Fein spokespersons from state radio and television, thus censoring the authentic voice of Irish republicanism.

THE HUNGER-STRIKES



In 1976, shortly after ending internment, the British government set out to criminalise the Irish freedom struggle by attempting to portray as criminals those arrested and jailed for their political activities and who would have been granted political status prior to 1976.

In the H-Blocks of Long Kesh prisoners were beaten and punished for refusing to wear the British criminal uniform or for refusing to do prison work. A heroic prison protest ensued. Men wearing only blankets for cover were kept in solitary confinement and when denied adequate washing and toilet facilities were forced on a 'no wash/no slop out' protest which lasted for three years until March 1981.

Finally, the men and women (who were held in Armagh prison) undertook a hunger-strike and before anyone died the British government declared that it would implement a liberal and enlightened prison regime. But they reneged on the promised prison reforms and a second hunger-strike, led by the officer commanding the republican prisoners-of-war, Bobby Sands, commenced on March 1st 1981.

That hunger-strike lasted for seven months and nine other men fasted to death in testimony to their republican principles

and in repudiation of British government propaganda.

They were Francis Hughes (IRA), Raymond McCreesh (IRA), Patsy O'Hara (INLA), Joe McDonnell (IRA), Martin Hurson (IRA), Kevin Lynch (INLA), Kieran Doherty (IRA), Thomas McEiwee (IRA) and Micky Devine (INLA).

During the hunger-strike Bobby Sands was elected to the British parliament and in response to this the British, after his death on May 5th, rushed through legislation changing the electoral law to prevent any other republican prisoner contesting elections — so much for British democracy! Kieran Doherty was also elected to parliament in a general election in the Free State in June 1981, as was another IRA blanket man, Paddy Agnew.

That hunger-strike, in support of which Sinn Fein played a major part, brought tens of thousands of people onto the streets of Ireland, protests around the world, and was one of the major international events of 1981. British propaganda on Ireland was overturned, British rule and influence North and South was destabilised and support for the republican cause received a major boost.

An estimated 100,000 people attended the funeral of the first H-Block martyr, Bobby Sands, IRA Volunteer and Westminster MP.

The prisoners called off their hunger-strike in October 1981 after a campaign by the Catholic church, encouraging demoralisation and defeatism and urging families to sanction medical intervention against the wishes of fasting prisoners, rendered impotent the hunger-strike as a weapon. Nevertheless, the prisoners won significant reforms — the symbol of criminalisation, the criminal uniform, was abolished and although the interpretation of prison work was expanded to include a wide variety of activities the prisoners continued a no work protest.

LONDON/DUBLIN PACT

The British and Free State governments, beginning in December 1980, entered into inter-governmental talks on a wide range of subjects including cross-border issues, NATO membership and Free State neutrality. Support for this development has come from the US and various governments within the EEC and it is obviously aimed at stabilising Ireland along lines acceptable to Britain and the Western alliance.

Britain's presence in the North is one of **political imperialism** and has been costing it dearly over the last twelve years (over £1,000 million in 1981 alone).

These London/Dublin talks are also aimed at eliminating the Republican Movement and Sinn Fein, both through increased repression and by a propaganda offensive depicting these talks as 'progress' towards an Irish settlement.

However, the loyalist reaction to any cross-border talks (except, of course, on collaboration which the Free State spends £200 million on annually) has been one of anger and of protests led mainly by Ian Paisley. As the most outspoken loyalist politician he has support and sympathy from the RUC and UDR (20,000 strong) and his denunciations of Britain for 'selling out' would logically lead to him aiming for an independent or

repartitioned North. He has already flirted with the idea of loyalist independence which is also shared by the loyalist paramilitary group, the UDA.

By January 1982 the loyalists were demanding of the British government an end to these talks and for an increase in repression. Besides the RUC and UDR there are 12,000 British soldiers deployed against the IRA. Should the British government fail to satisfy their demands then the loyalists will grow increasingly restless and Paisley has already set up a 'Third Force' which has support from sections of the RUC and UDR.

The British government appears set to increase repression and it will have support from the Dublin government (which in December 1981, on the evidence of RUC men, sentenced two republicans for escaping from a Belfast jail, and which has been examining ways to change the laws on a person's 'right to remain silent' when arrested).

Like the British the Free State has already abolished jury trials in its special courts.

Despite this repression Sinn Fein will continue to oppose foreign rule in Ireland, and will support and defend the struggles of the oppressed sections of the population — the political prisoners (of which there are over one thousand), the unemployed (280,000), those economically and socially deprived, the underprivileged, etc.

It will also oppose censorship and agitate against the suppression of free speech and rally the nationalist people of Ireland behind the republican banner for a democratic, socialist republic, developing radical alternative policies to replace British colonial rule in the six counties and neo-colonial rule in the twenty-six counties.

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