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The power of the few

By Paddy MacDonagh

Who actually holds the power in this country? How much is forced on us by people with their own agenda and particular set of interests? In a recent Sunday Business Post article, journalist David McWilliams suggested that '11 per cent of the Irish population hold the majority of its power and wealth'.

The issue of power in Ireland and who actually exercises it is clear: power is wielded by a small number of fat cats in their mid-fifties who dominate all the important sections of Irish society such as industry, the media, the law, and government. There are no grey areas, no half measures; power in this country is simply a hierarchical bureaucratic top-down affair. As David McWilliams argues: the dividing ground in Ireland

on who holds the balance of power are the post-war babies. He suggests that it is those born between 1945 and 1959 who hold 90% of the power in Ireland. This tiny section of the Irish population hold so much power over the rest of us that their persuasive perception of how the country should be run becomes the democratic will.

The Jagger generation, as they are referred to, influence and dominate all sections of Irish society. The significance of this 11% of the population is seen in their rule bound manner of dominating how Irish society is structured. The power held by these fifty-somethings is enormous and they use it very cunningly. They have the power to tax, and to redistribute the wealth as they see fit. They quickly and firmly repress and dispel any opposition to the status quo, thus maintaining their status as the dominant class and always acting in their own class interests. The kind of rationality and expertise on which these elite few draw is neither scientific nor is it objective. It is in fact constructed and shaped to suit its own needs, social values and political aims.

History shows us that a wealthy controlling elite section of society has always exerted its power to exploit the mass of the population, sometimes using brute force. In contemporary Irish society the controlling elite disproves claims that social class at birth determines future life chances. By offering free medical cards for the less well off and free education for their offspring they create an illusion of softening the edges in an unequal democracy. This is little consolation when you consider the

recently published report suggesting that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. A very small price indeed is being paid by these fifty-somethings to continue accumulating profits without fear of unrest from the majority of the population. God forbid any of us would do anything to break a tradition and upset the old apple cart. The passing of recent laws such as telling nightclubs to stop people dancing at a certain hour, closing bars early, and telling us where we can and cannot smoke can be traced to this elite group deciding what is and what is not best for us.

A key aspect to consider and one worth reflecting upon in the context of this elite

'11 per cent of the Irish population hold the majority of its power and wealth'

group and the rule bound nature of our lives: Is it perhaps the case that they want an educated, healthy workforce who are ready to generate more profits and reproduce the next generation of workers ready for exploitation by their offspring? David McWilliams points out that all these laws are made by the Jagger generation to appeal to the Jagger generation when it goes to the polls. The victims of this powerful minority are the young and the old who have been harnessed by this organised powerful machine. The young 'are generally in lower wage jobs and renting accommodation in an expensive country, while constantly being told that their drinking and dancing habits are both anti-social and degenerate. They are the future, yet they are treated like a threat'.

Over the past ten years the elite few of fifty-somethings have seen their wealth dramatically increase due to the rise in property prices, while the rest of us who can't afford to buy houses are lumbered with an exorbitant hike in rent prices. Yet according to government officials, the ordering of our lives is done in a fair and impartial fashion and in the interest of society as a whole. The key social values of democracy in Irish society or any democracy, for that matter, have to be those of equality of opportunity, social justice and social citizenship that creates a level playing field for all. Until we arrive at that threshold, which is very unlikely in the foreseeable future, the reins of power will remain tightly gripped in a limited number of hands.

Paddy MacDonagh is a republican prisoner in Portlaoise Gaol

Small earthquake in Ulster...

By Brian Moore

Many years ago, a group of English journalists held a competition to see who could come up with the most boring newspaper headline. The winning entry, famously, was 'Small earthquake in Chile - no one hurt'. Things have moved on since then. If the same competition were repeated today, the smart money would undoubtedly be on 'Peace process in crisis - but Trimble survives'.

Less than five years on from the much-lauded Belfast Agreement, the North has become a political wasteland. The change is shocking. For thirty years, revolutionaries, reactionaries and imperialists battled each other across an ideologically divided landscape. The conflict was often brutal, and for its victims devastating, but the political atmosphere it generated was alive with the possibility of a better future. Under siege by the British Army, the nationalist community in the North flourished as never before. The IRA had demonstrated that nationalists could and would fight back; that they would never again be second-class citizens in their own land. The nationalist people responded by taking control of their own communities, creating local political structures which, for the first time, allowed working class people to participate in shaping their own destiny. All that changed in 1998. Despite the politicians' fanfare and the people's optimism, the Belfast Agreement marked the beginning of the end for grassroots democracy in Ireland. Looking back, we can now see what the return of Stormont really meant. Power was being taken away from the people and given back to the politicians.

Much damage has already been done. The local networks which sustained community life throughout the years of struggle have been absorbed into the apparatus of the British state. Newly officialized and staffed by Sinn Féin party men, they control the purse strings of the handouts which keep those communities alive now that the spirit of resistance is gone. Indeed, the corrosive disillusionment resulting from the IRA's capitulation is only now becoming apparent. Gone are the days of political awareness and popular debate, when ordinary people made it their business to inquire into the affairs of governments. Today, even the most committed republicans find it difficult to take an interest in the

latest twists and turns of the 'peace process'.

This lack of interest is understandable. The peace process, after all, has plumbed the depths of mind-numbing tediousness with extraordinary regularity and enthusiasm. Let's take just one example - the current 'crisis' over the long-delayed elections for the Stormont assembly. As we know, democracy - or what passes for it in Ireland - has been put on hold in the North until such time as Tony Blair can confidently engineer a victory for David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party. His plans, however,



David Trimble - the Houdini of Irish politics lives to fight another day

have been repeatedly upset by interminable infighting within the UUP itself. Elections, Blair has made clear, will not be permitted until this internal power struggle has been resolved. So the most important political issue for the North's nationalist population - the issue on which their political future rests; the issue which decides whether or not they will be allowed to exercise their democratic rights - is one over which they have absolutely no influence or control.

Most republicans will have paid little attention to the latest round of this ongoing civil war. For the record, at a meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council on September 6th, Trimble defeated a leadership challenge from rebel MP Jeffery Donaldson with a majority of 55% of the votes to Donaldson's 45%. The result means little. Donaldson's defeat marks his thirteenth leadership challenge since the signing of the Belfast Agreement. The party remains hopelessly divided, and few expect Donaldson to abandon his leadership ambitions any time soon.

So what are the UUP actually fighting over? Very little, as it turns out. The domestic spat at the heart of Big House unionism is essentially a dispute over which brand of virulent intolerance works best. Trimble's supporters believe that a place can be found in the unionist mansion for at least the more compliant of the North's Catholics. After all, floors need to be mopped and toilets scrubbed. Donaldson's followers take the more traditional unionist view - Catholic vermin aren't welcome about the place at all.

There is little here to inspire the interest of nationalists. Either way, religious bigotry will remain at the heart of unionist philosophy. The situation is only worsened by the sheer dreariness of the UUP itself. The UUP, it should be remembered, achieved international prominence long ago as the bland face of oppression. The Nazis, to give them their dues, wore stylish black uniforms and entertained the world with their open-air aerobics sessions. Others have followed their imaginative lead. Fellow Ulster-Scots, the Klu Klux Klan, at least

make an effort to look the part, even if they only end up looking foolish. And even the DUP, with their wacky religious fundamentalism, bring a little colour to any lynch mob. The UUP, in disappointing contrast, rely on bowler hats and shrill middle-aged women to intimidate their opponents.

Republicans, it must be admitted, are in no position to be throwing stones. After thirty years of war, we have achieved essentially nothing. British rule in the North has been stabilised, and the Republican Movement effectively disarmed. And despite Sinn Féin's empty rhetoric, we are not - as far as the casual observer can tell - on the road to becoming a socialist paradise any time soon. The Republican Movement, meanwhile, has imploded in far more dramatic and interesting a manner than the UUP could ever hope to imitate. The Provisional IRA is a shell of its former self - a Praetorian Guard for the Sinn Féin leadership, mired in increasing criminality. Its 'dissident' counterparts are in even worse shape, lacking both credibility and support.

But perhaps there is something in all this to inspire nationalists. Embarrassment may not be the most noble of motivations, but it's better than despair. Being oppressed by the Ulster Unionist Party, after all, is the political equivalent of being beaten to death with a wet lettuce. In both cases, the tragedy of the situation is overwhelmed by the sheer ignominy of one's demise. It's time republicans recovered their pride and began to fight back. We've shaken Ulster to its foundations before - a republican earthquake can put life into the headlines again.

Preserving the evidence

In the last number of years, calls have been steadily growing for the establishment of a National Trust, charged with the task of the upkeep and the safeguarding of all structures built from the Norman Conquest to the Georgian era. A formidable task, when you consider that every county in Ireland has numerous examples of these structures. It is believed that unless immediate action is taken, Ireland will be in danger of losing one of the major components of her cultural and historical heritage: the surviving great houses and castles, built by her former ruling class.

More alarmingly, if the current state of affairs at the Hill of Tara in County Meath is any indication, sites of greater cultural and historical importance are in an even graver state of jeopardy. Recently, An Bord Pleanála granted permission for the construction of a motorway in close proximity to this ancient site. Experts agree that if construction goes ahead it will destroy over 100 archaeologically important sites, and have equated it to 'building a motorway through the Pyramids'.

This seems incredible, when you consider that the Hill of Tara is, in the context of ancient history and archaeological significance, probably the country's most important site. Once the ancient seat of power in Ireland, in mythological terms Tara was the sacred dwelling place of the gods and the entrance to the afterworld. It is also the place where Saint Patrick is reputed to have confronted the religion of the pagans. Dating back to the Stone Age, the site contains a large number of monuments, the oldest of which, the Mound of the Hostages, was constructed about 2,500 B.C.

In a recently commissioned government report into the future of Irish historical structures of the Norman to Georgian era, its authors state that 'these structures shouldn't be seen as a celebration of the landlord system, but rather as the great artistic achievements of the architects who designed them'.

Sites such as the Hill of Tara serve to demonstrate that Ireland had a unique, vibrant and successful culture that was in a healthy and progressive state. Structures built by later foreign invaders serve to remind us that there was a callous and concerted effort to eradicate this earlier culture from the face of the earth. It is one of the first instances of ethnic cleansing on record, and as such, all physical evidence relating to it should never be erased nor forgotten.

A smoker's view

By Alan Patterson

Despite growing opposition it seems likely that the decision by the Minister for Health, Michael Martin, to ban smoking in the workplace will go ahead from next January. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern has given his full support to the ban and has said the move is not open to negotiation. The ban will affect a wide variety of places including pubs, hotels and restaurants.

This legislation marks yet another step in the government's ceaseless campaign of punishing smokers. Smokers are already heavily penalized in the amount they have to pay for cigarettes.

The official version goes something like this: tobacco is bad for our health and we need to be protected from its ill effects. Those of us who resist the instructions of the nanny-state to desist from smoking must be punished for our disobedience.

The main justification by the government for the current high rates of taxation on tobacco is that smokers suffer worse health and therefore cost the health system more than non-smokers. This economic argument does not stand up to scrutiny. Smokers do die earlier and, while alive, probably do run up more health costs than non-smokers but, according to the government's own stated views ('Smokers die young' et cetera), a large number of smokers will not live long enough to draw pensions and other old age benefits. Bluntly put, these pension savings almost certainly outweigh the extra health costs incurred by smokers.

In his determination to implement the smoking ban, Michael Martin is refusing to recognize the negative consequences the ban will have on Irish society. There are real fears the smoking ban will spell the disappearance of the 'traditional Irish pub'. More seriously, it will affect and damage business in pubs and restaurants. It has been claimed that the ban could cost up to 65,000 jobs in the hospitality sector. Given the precarious situation of the economy, these potential job losses are clearly something the country cannot afford at the moment.

Hoteliers and guesthouse owners will have a legal liability to prevent smoking in their premises. This means they are facing a large bill to install smoke detectors and other equipment. Those who do not comply with the ban in their establishments will face a large fine and/or three months in prison.

Courtesy of the taxpayer, Michael Martin recently embarked on a week-long trip to New York, where he visited a number of pubs and hotels to see how the ban is

being implemented there. Not surprisingly, he was unwilling to meet and talk to New York traders, many of whom claim that a citywide smoking ban has ruined their businesses.

So who is going to enforce this ban? Justice Minister Michael McDowell has ruled out any involvement by the Gardaí in policing its implementation. This effectively makes the ban unworkable. It is going to be an almost impossible task for already overworked and underpaid bar staff to stop customers from smoking in pubs. Bar staff already have to deal with drunk and rowdy customers, now they will have this extra burden added to their duties. In New York, it was reported that a customer stabbed to death a doorman working in a pub because he was asked to distinguish his cigarette. This was not the only violent incident. This ban will place Irish bar staff in a dangerous working environment, which is ultimately what the ban is supposed to prevent in the first place.

There is no doubt that the government does have a valid argument in saying that workers and non-smokers should not be subjected to other people's smoke. However, a compromise situation could create the right balance for smokers and non-smokers' rights. One possible solution involves designated smoking areas. Improved ventilation systems in all areas could also be an option. A study by the Oak Ridge Laboratory found that it was possible, through proper ventilation, to cut smoke levels to the same as those in premises where smoking was banned. But this government will not listen to reason and is so desperate not to be seen to back-down on this issue that they are not interested in any kind of compromise.

We are supposed to live in a democracy but this government is not respecting the rights of consenting adults to make their own choices. There is a fundamental legal principle that laws should be proportionate. The smoking ban fails this test. And even though public support for the ban has fallen, the government arrogantly refuses to listen to the wishes of the people. Ever since coming to power, this government has been consistently eroding our basic civil liberties. The smoking ban is just the latest in a long line of cheap stunts perpetrated in order to distract people from the government's utter failure to do what it was elected to do: serve the people.

Alan Patterson is a republican prisoner in Portlaoise Gaol

Segregation in Maghaberry

The recent decision by the authorities in the North to grant segregation to republican POWs in Maghaberry Prison marks a significant victory in the struggle to regain political status. Although British double-dealing can never be ruled out, especially in relation to prison protests, it does appear that republican prisoners will no longer be forced to integrate with loyalist and criminal elements. This move was only conceded in the wake of a nine-week long dirty protest and it proves that a small number of republicans acting in a disciplined manner can still inflict a defeat on the British government.

The policy of forced integration had led to a number of serious assaults being perpetrated by loyalists against heavily outnumbered republican prisoners. Fermanagh republican, John Connolly suffered a severe scalding when boiling water was thrown in his face. His comrade, John Swift also suffered a vicious beating from a number of loyalist thugs and had to be hospitalized. Many other less publicized attacks also took place.

The introduction of segregation followed the publication of a report compiled by a committee which had been appointed by the Secretary of State and which was headed by the former head of the Prison Service, John Steele. In August, Mr. Steele, together with other members of his committee, visited Portlaoise Prison and met with a delegation of republican prisoners from E2 and E3 landings, led by the prisoners' OC. In a frank and open discussion, the prisoners emphasized to the Steele Committee the importance of segregation and the inevitable tragedy that would occur without the separation of republican and loyalist prisoners. The Steele Committee also met with various other interested parties, north and south, the vast majority of whom supported the republican prisoners' demands. It was no surprise therefore when, in its written report to the Secretary of State, the Steele Committee concluded that the separation of republican and loyalist prisoners was necessary in the interests of safety for both prisoners and staff.

Predictably, the Northern Ireland Office denied that segregation would see a return to the prison regimes of the past, with security minister Jane Kennedy insisting that staff in Maghaberry would remain in control of the jail. In reality, the British government has once again failed miserably in its attempts at criminalizing republican prisoners. Let's hope this time they've finally learned the lesson.

Unchristian haste over abuse

By James Burke

The recent resignation of Ms Justice Mary Laffoy has not alone disappointed the numerous victims of child abuse but has also highlighted the cynical attitude of the present government to the matter. There is a mountain of evidence that allegations of sexual and physical abuse in religious-run state institutions were known about for years and yet nothing was done.

Out of the many thousands of victims, a total of 1,700 people from up to 110 institutions originally applied for a hearing before a commission of inquiry. They had hoped to confront those who had abused them while under their care. They had hoped to get some form of explanation as to why they had been left at the mercy of these criminals and why nothing had been done to stop the abuse when it was originally highlighted. In one case, Dr. Patrick Hillary, while serving as Education Minister in 1960, ordered the release of a Dublin boy, Peter Wall, from a Cork industrial school. The boy had complained that he had been systematically raped and beaten by a Rosminian brother. No further action was taken against the abuser who was allowed to continue his reign of terror until the school closed in 1966. The Laffoy Commission had promised victims like Peter Wall that their cases would be investigated. However, we now know that there were those in both the Church and government who were determined to preventing this from happening.

The religious orders in Ireland decided to take a stand against the victims and employed legal counsel in an attempt to safeguard their financial assets from possible claims. At the same time, they cut a deal with the government to limit any payouts from claims to €128 million, with the understanding that anything above that figure would be met by the taxpayers (estimated at a cost of €500 million). On the government side, the Department of Education refused to co-operate fully with the Commission. Documents were withheld for almost a year, yet the Education Minister, Noel Dempsey, complained that it was taking the commission too long to do its work. Ms Justice Laffoy had asked the government for extra resources but never got them. At three confidential meetings attended by the Minister, a radical review of the Commission's terms of reference was outlined. It was to be proposed that, for reasons of cost and time, only a sample of 100 cases should be looked at. This proposal, both from Ms Justice Laffoy and the victims' point of view, was totally unaccept-

able. Ms Justice Laffoy, knowing that she was wasting her time continuing under these conditions, resigned. Christine Buckley of the Aislinn survivors group said, 'The government has always regarded us as dimwits. I now feel that they never wanted this to work. I want him (Dempsey) to resign. He has done untold damage.'

The proposal that only a few sample cases be examined inevitably means that many institutions facing abuse allegations will not be investigated. Many of those who had spent years sexually and physically abusing children in their care will never have to face justice for their crimes. Many of the thousands of victims will never get the chance to face their tormentors. The cover-up will be continue and the full truth will never emerge. Given the extent of the crimes, it is little wonder the Church should want to sweep it under the carpet. The complicity of the government in aiding this cover-up is unforgivable. Instead of righting the wrongs done to young children, the government is now standing with the abusers. Last March, Ms Justice Laffoy declared, "I am utterly flabbergasted that the Department is not in a position to deal with the investigation which it is sponsoring. It is absolutely farcical".

The attitude of the Education Minister and the government with regards to the Laffoy Commission contrasts greatly with the other tribunals. When it came to the Flood Tribunal, for example, money was no obstacle. Millions of euros were paid to lawyers who were looking after the affairs of people like Liam Lawlor. How strange then that when it comes to the ill treatment of children under state care and the exposure of a vast network of paedophiles in the Church, money and time become an issue? This abuse went on for decades and no one could have reasonably expected that it would be dealt with in a short space of time. But given the extent of the abuse, the perpetrators should be pursued regardless of the cost. It is the very least the victims deserve. For too long both the Catholic Church and the state were allowed to adopt the see no evil, hear no evil and certainly speak no evil approach, lecturing the nation on morality while they facilitated a reign of terror and depravity on innocent children. Those involved should be jailed for their actions and the victims paid the compensation due to them, even if it bankrupts the Church. Any minister who is unable or unwilling to pursue this matter to a satisfactory conclusion should resign at once. This scandal has gone on long enough. Nothing short of a full public inquiry into the whole affair will do.

Interview with republican prisoners

One year on from their momentous statement calling on the RIRA leadership to 'stand down with ignominy', a spokesperson for the republican POWs in Portlaoise Prison speaks to Forum Magazine about the prisoners' stand against criminality and their hopes for the future of republicanism

Q1. One year ago Irish republican prisoners in Portlaoise prison - with the support of most republican prisoners in English prisons - called upon the RIRA leadership to stand down. The RIRA leadership refused to accede to this demand; the prisoners withdrew their allegiance and are no longer affiliated to the RIRA. Subsequently some republican prisoners in Maghaberry prison supported this position. Upon reflection how do the republican prisoners feel about the stand they took?

At that time we felt we could not remain silent and watch the organisation fall into the hands of a junta whose financial motivations far outweighed their political commitment to our struggle. As republican prisoners we found this both morally and politically unacceptable. Other major areas of concern which we identified included that leadership's inability to develop or articulate a medium-to-long-term politico-military strategy; their neglect of, and failure to maintain contact with, IRA prisoners in English and Irish prisons; and their negligent approach to recruitment. Several events over the past twelve months have vindicated our analysis and our description of that particular leadership. However, republican protocol prohibits us from elaborating upon these points. Upon reflection the prisoners remain totally convinced of the correctness of our actions in formally splitting from the RIRA. Our statement was open and honest and it was motivated by our republican principles.

Q2. It has been suggested by some of your opponents that the prisoners split from the RIRA in order to secure early release?

Those from whom we split were responsible for spreading these false and mischievous allegations. Nobody else. But this was entirely predictable. By September 2002 we had concluded a prolonged period of internal debate. However it should be remembered we did not reach our conclusions in isolation. We remained in constant contact with many areas throughout the country and had secured the support of the vast majority republican prisoners in English jails. We also attained the subsequent support of some republican prisoners in Maghaberry prison. So we knew that our position and analysis had generated significant support. However, when we decided to issue our public statement we were fully aware that our opponents would attempt to portray our stand as some sort of desperate attempt to secure early release. Indeed prior to the release of our statement we witnessed several leaks to newspapers suggesting as much. We attempted to pre-empt these type of slanderous allegations in the final paragraph of our statement when we stated that 'in order to dispel recent mischievous leaks to the media, we would like to state that no IRA prisoners' representative has entered into negotiations with any government regarding the early

release of political prisoners'. I can state with absolute certainty that, one year on, this remains the case. Our decision to split from the RIRA was, and remains, a principled stand.

Q3. Some political commentators have stated that there are now two 'Real IRAs' in existence. Do you have any comment to make in relation to these suggestions?

Obviously we have paid close attention to what various political commentators have said in relation to the split. During the course of a recent *Prime Time* debate RTE's Brendan O'Brien made a reference to the alleged existence of 'two Real IRAs'. However in an interview with *Forum Magazine* in February 2003 we declared that the split is irreversible and that there is no possibility of a reproachment with the Real IRA or its leadership. That remains the case. However, this does not mean that we now represent a 'second Real IRA'. That suggestion is ludicrous. We wish to be clear upon this point. The status of all the republican prisoners who split from the RIRA in September 2002 is that of an independent and autonomous group of Irish republican prisoners. Some prisoners are affiliated to the New Republican Forum, while other prisoners have contributed a number of articles to *Forum Magazine* over the past twelve months. That is their prerogative. However, we do not represent a second Real IRA. Nor are we organically attached to any other armed organisation.

Q4. In an interview in the February 2003 issue of this magazine, a prisoners' spokesperson stated that armed struggle is not a viable option for republicans opposed to the Belfast Agreement. Could you elaborate upon this point a little further?

The question you have raised is a difficult and a very emotive one for Irish republicans. But while it is a very easy to shy away from disturbing and uncomfortable facts, such behaviour can lead to political inertia. Clearly the answer to this question cannot be divorced from our recent history. The Provisional leadership's counter-revolutionary betrayal, which culminated in their acceptance of the Belfast Agreement and their administration of British rule in Ireland, devastated what was a strong, coherent and vibrant revolutionary movement. So the ultimate responsibility for the disastrous state within which republicanism currently finds itself, and the fact that the British occupation is becoming more normalised with each passing day, clearly rests with the Provisional IRA leadership. In November 1997 a section of the Provisional leadership, who refused to support the Adams/McGuinness led political capitulation, resigned in protest and reconstituted the IRA. The leadership

'A decision to 'dump arms' should not be equated with an acceptance of the Belfast Agreement. Nor should it be regarded as political capitulation'

who reconstituted the IRA remained opposed to British rule in Ireland, rejected the Belfast Agreement and attempted to rebuild the revolutionary movement. However, nobody was under any illusions. This project was always going to be an uphill task. At the outset they were joined by a significant number of experienced activists and young militants. However five years on, we must acknowledge the fact that republicans opposed to the Belfast Agreement have failed to confront the British state with a credible military threat. The reasons for this are manifold. Furthermore, over recent years, a section of the leadership who reconstituted the IRA, along with some of the more experienced activists and younger volunteers have been imprisoned. This situation undoubtedly created a vacuum whereby the organisation fell into the wrong hands, as is evident by our unprecedented statement of October 2002. So our analysis regarding the viability of armed struggle must be viewed within this wider political and organisational context.

For some time now we have argued that republicans opposed to the Belfast Agreement must accept political reality irrespective of how unpalatable it may be. One does not need to be a political genius to realise that there is no popular support for armed struggle in Ireland at this time. Indeed there is no tangible support for an armed campaign within the broad republican or nationalist community. If republicans continue to ignore these political facts, it will prove politically fatal.

Republicans cannot claim on the one hand to be fighting on behalf of people while on the other hand dismissing their expressed wishes. It is high time that militant republicans accept this political reality. In the previous interview we referred to the 1962 decision of the then IRA Army Council who in ordering its units to dump arms stated that: *'Foremost among the factors motivating this course of action has been the attitude of the general public'*. That IRA leadership analysed the objective conditions which prevailed at that time, did not evade their responsibilities and made what was undoubtedly a difficult but correct political decision. It was a decision which did not entail any ideological concessions. A decision to 'dump arms' should not be equated with an acceptance of the Belfast Agreement. Nor should it be regarded as political capitulation.

Genuine republicans must recognise that the continuation of what is currently being held up as an "armed campaign" represents the major stumbling block to the development of an effective political opposition to British rule in Ireland at the present time. Reality dictates that the present derisory level of military activity cannot achieve a British withdrawal. Therefore, the continuation of this futile and totally ineffective campaign in the current hostile political climate not only exposes the current military inadequacies of anti-Agreement republicanism and its complete lack of support; it also stifles the political development of a genuine republican alternative and allows our enemies to depict our revolutionary struggle as the major impediment to political progress on the island.

This is undoubtedly the current public perception. In the absence

of any popular support for armed struggle, Irish Republicanism as presently constituted is viewed as militarily ineffective, internally compromised, politically impotent and irrelevant. And if given a choice between the Belfast Agreement with all of its inadequacies and a low intensity, armed campaign that is synonymous with Omagh, the Irish people will endorse the Belfast Agreement, time and time again. This situation cannot be allowed to persist.

While nobody can predict the course of action which future generations may take, we must assume responsibility for our own actions and the inadequacies of our own political strategy. In an environment where armed struggle is not an option it is our duty to forward our political struggle by any other means. For example, it is nothing short of scandalous that the Provisional movement's interpretation of the Agreement is not subject to a

sustained and rigorous analysis by a genuine republican organisation. Why has this not transpired? It is not as if there is not a credible counter-analysis of the Agreement. If this political situation is allowed to continue without redress, the Irish republican project may become politically unsalvageable. However, if rational analysis prevails, Irish republicanism can once again become a relevant political philosophy with broad political appeal.

Q5. What is your position regarding the prison protest in Maghaberry Prison?

The situation in Maghaberry was very disturbing and totally unacceptable. Let me begin by stating that the Irish republican prisoners in Maghaberry prison must, as of right, have full political status restored forthwith. Arising from this, a policy of segregation must also be implemented. There can be no equivocation upon this point. Last August the Steele Prison Review Group, which was established to inquire into the current situation in Maghaberry, visited Portlaoise Prison in order to ascertain first hand how various political organisations are detained within the prison. A delegation of Irish republican prisoners from E2 and E3 met with the

Prison Review Group and impressed upon them the seriousness of the situation in Maghaberry and the necessity of restoring political status in tandem with a policy of segregation. Republicans will scrutinise the Prison Review Group's recommendations very carefully. We welcome the fact that the recommendations are to be implemented in full. However, it will become apparent over the coming weeks whether this issue has been resolved to the satisfaction of the republican prisoners in Maghaberry. At this time we would urge caution. It is imperative that republicans monitor the implementation of the Review Group's recommendations and remain alert in relation to this issue.

Q6. What is your assessment of the current state of Belfast Agreement?

From a republican perspective we are currently witnessing the

'For our part, our analysis of the Agreement remains unchanged. We reject the Agreement and consider it to be nothing other than Britain's latest attempt to stabilise its rule in Ireland'

'Irish republican prisoners in Maghaberry Prison must, as of right, have full political status restored forthwith'

unedifying spectacle that is the Sinn Fein leadership's ongoing attempts to persuade the Dublin and London governments to convene elections that will eventually enable them to resume their British ministerial portfolios in a Stormont executive. Who could have predicted this ten or fifteen years ago?

Clearly both governments obviously feel that an opportunity exists following Trimble's recent victory before the Ulster Unionist Council whereby - with the assistance of the Provisional leadership - they can convene autumn elections and re-establish the Stormont executive thereafter. Trimble has recently suggested that he will be flexible in the event of the Provisionals undertaking a further significant act of decommissioning. It is highly likely that this will transpire. The recent creation of the International Monitoring Commission is instructive in that it illustrates just how far the British government can unilaterally amend the Agreement.

Although the Provisionals are currently adopting a hard-line stance regarding new policing structures, it is inevitable that they will accept the reformed PSNI/RUC and ultimately take their seats on policing boards. It is interesting to note that some newspapers in West Belfast are actually publishing recruitment advertisements on behalf of the PSNI without any political outcry by Sinn Fein. This is not without significance. It may take time but it is inevitable that Sinn Fein will accommodate itself to the new policing arrangements in the six counties.

For our part, our analysis of the Agreement remains unchanged. We reject the Agreement and consider it to be nothing other than Britain's latest attempt to stabilise its rule in Ireland. If one is honest one must admit that in this regard the British government has achieved some success. The deletion of Articles 2&3 has clearly left Britain's claim of sovereignty over the north uncontested. Who can seriously argue the Agreement has not actually strengthened Britain's constitutional hold over the six-counties? This is an objective political truth. The Provisionals may attempt to portray the Agreement as a stepping stone to a united Ireland. But this is nothing other than intellectual and political dishonesty. If anything the Agreement represents a millstone around the neck of Irish unity. We have already referred to the fact that the Agreement has consolidated Britain's constitutional stranglehold over the north. However it should not be forgotten that the unionist veto also permeates the Agreement and it is this political mechanism which sustains and perpetuates British interference in Ireland. The unionist veto remains an anti-democratic impediment to the exercise of Irish national self-determination. In short the Agreement represents a massive strategic and political setback for the Irish republican political project.

Q7. Anti-imperialist political activists were encouraged by the public's response to the Irish Anti-War Movement's campaign against the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Do you have any comments to make in relation to these matters?

First of all it is important to pay tribute to all those who directed, organised and mobilised the Irish public in their opposition to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Indeed I would like to take this opportunity to compliment *Forum Magazine* for its progressive and articulate opposition to the invasion. Unquestionably the wide-

spread public opposition to the war surprised and shocked many within the Irish political establishment. I think most Irish people recognised that there were no justifiable grounds for an invasion; that it was fundamentally unjust, in breach of international law and that its primary motivation was oil, regional control and not any so-called WMD programme as was alleged by the imperialist warmongers in London and Washington.

Bush and Blair attempted to justify the invasion on the grounds that they were 'liberating' the people of Iraq from the Ba'ath party. Over recent weeks we have witnessed the Iraqi peoples' response to their so-called 'liberators'. Robespierre once stated that every nation possesses an innate disdain for 'armed missionaries' who occupy their land. Bush and Blair would do well to heed that warning from history. Colin Powell's plea for further international military assistance, during his recent visit to Iraq, represents the first

chink in the armour of the Anglo-American political and military command. Clearly London and Washington underestimated the political opposition they would face post invasion.

Bush and Blair have made it clear that Iraq is 'the battlefield upon which the war against terror will be fought'. If America and Britain are ultimately successful in Iraq it will undoubtedly pave the

way for further intervention in the Middle East and further afield. However if they fail, the 'project for the new American century' will lie shattered and decimated across the deserts and cities of Iraq. It is imperative that all anti-imperialists support the Iraqi peoples' heroic struggle against the occupation. A defeat for Anglo-American imperialism in Iraq will weaken its stranglehold over Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. It would also imbue the Arab world with renewed political confidence. This would undoubtedly have positive political repercussions for the Palestinian people whose repression has clearly increased under the by now farcical 'road map for peace'. An anti-imperialist victory in Iraq is of fundamental political importance at this time.

We could talk further but unfortunately time and space prohibits this. Thank you for your time.

A copy of the prisoners' original statement calling on the RIRA leadership to stand down, along with a copy of their first interview with the New Republican Forum (*Forum Magazine*, Issue 1), can be found on the New Republican Forum website: www.iri.net

Disagree with something you've read?

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Write to Forum Magazine or e-mail the New Republican Forum at:

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FORUM MAGAZINE

The arrogance of empire

September, 2003: Shots ring out across the West Bank city of Nablus as an Israeli armoured column punches through the Palestinian defenders' meagre perimeter. Bottles and stones bounce harmlessly off the low-slung Merkava tanks as children with slingshots emerge from shattered streets to greet the enemy. A symbolic gesture, they know, but a necessary ritual of defiance. Already, hundreds have died in such incidents, shot down by snipers and machine gunners, but still they come. Today, the Israelis ignore them and press on. Their target has already been selected - Mohammed Hanbali, the twenty-six-year-old leader of the city's Hamas fighters. Hanbali is soon tracked down - with satellites and helicopters and informers, there are few places left to hide - and the unequal battle begins. Shots are exchanged, another ritual observed, and another Palestinian leader lies dead.

Their mission accomplished, the tanks begin to withdraw. But one task remains - a minor skirmish to resolve. A handful of Palestinian defenders are holed up in an apartment block, dug in and prepared to fight. The problem is quickly solved. Loudhailers are brought forward and the residents evacuated. Then the tanks open up, pumping round after round into the building until, finally, the seven-storey apartment block comes crashing down in an explosion of dust and smoke. The battle is over; the Israelis go home. And one hundred Palestinian families are left destitute by the roadside, collateral damage from another precision strike in the War on Terror.

April, 2003: The victorious American army liberates the town of Fallujah in central Iraq. Ungrateful citizens stage a protest march in defence of Iraqi sovereignty. America objects, and sixteen civilians are shot dead. Across Iraq, criminal subversives are launching a campaign of unprovoked attacks against the forces of liberation. Their despicable motive is clear, the US President informs us: 'They hate our freedoms.' Thankfully, a solution is at hand. Saddam's torture centres are soon up and running again in defence of liberal democracy. It's all very different, of course, from the dark old days of Saddam's regime. This time round, they're staffed by Americans.

Welcome to the twenty-first century. It's not turning out like we expected - all flying cars and silver body suits. Holidays on the moon. In fact, it looks a lot like the twentieth century. Or is it the nineteenth? We seem to have returned to the age of gunboat diplomacy - of Great Powers and punitive expeditions. The age of armed missionaries, and nations 'held in trust' by more enlightened peoples until such time as they have earned their freedom. It's still far too early to tell how things will develop, of course, but one thing at

least is clear - the arrogance of empire has returned.

Of course, it never really went away. The twentieth century was just as much an age of empires as the nineteenth, or indeed any earlier century. But, for a short while at least, things did seem to change. Empires were rolled back, and notions of freedom, sovereignty and self-determination seemed to be in the ascendant. Now all that has changed. The American seizure of a recalcitrant Iraq's oil wealth is as blatant a case of imperial plundering as anything from the nineteenth century 'Race for Africa', while Israel's drive for '*lebensraum* in the east' is reminiscent of even darker days here in Europe.

So, where do we go from here? The US, it is clear, is set to get



a bloody nose in Iraq. But it is unlikely that Iraq will turn out to be another Vietnam, as some have predicted. Vietnam's victory over the US invaders - although primarily the result of first-class Vietnamese generalship, and dearly paid for in Vietnamese blood - was only made possible by the support of two major foreign powers, China and the Soviet Union. Without their massive shipments of military aid, and - even more importantly - the constraints on American strategy imposed by their nuclear deterrent, the North Vietnamese state would rapidly have been wiped from the map.

The Iraqi Resistance can count on no such support; nor are they likely to acquire it. No nation today can afford to take such an open stand against American power. But the Palestinian Resistance have shown that occupiers, even if they cannot be defeated, can be made to pay a terrible price for their arrogance. The humiliation inflicted daily on the Palestinian people, combined with their military impotence in the face of the US-backed Israeli army, has led them to strike out in desperation at the soft underbelly of Israeli society. Suicide bombers have exacted a heavy toll on Israel's civilian population. Such tactics cannot be defended, but they can at least be understood. And America, it seems clear, can expect no less from its imperial subjects. Once again, innocent civilians will pay with their blood for the crimes of their political leaders.

But perhaps something positive will also emerge from the current situation. The growth of a worldwide anti-war movement with significant support even in 'aggressor' countries such as Britain, the US and Israel reminds us that the real aggressors are in fact a tiny minority of even their own populations. 270 million Americans are not, and cannot be held, responsible for the crimes of the American government. For too long these crimes were hidden behind the smokescreen of anti-communist propaganda. Today, the sheer blattancy of the new imperialism provides us with an unparalleled opportunity to build a new international anti-imperialist movement. By their arrogance, the imperialists may be sowing the seeds of their own downfall.

Letters and articles can be sent to Forum Magazine at:

The New Republican Forum, PO Box 10, Dundalk Sorting Office, Dundalk, Co. Louth, Ireland.

America's War on Civil Liberties

Republican POW Liam Grogan details how the American government's biggest war may not be against the resistance in Iraq but against civil liberties at home

Someone once wrote that fascism would come to the United States with a friendly face. There would be no Nuremberg rallies. No doctrines of racial superiority. Political parties would not be formally banned. The Constitution would not be abrogated. The three branches of government - the legislature, the executive and the judiciary - would remain in place. There would, however, be the same nationalist fervour, the same dictatorial laws and the same violent military conquests. America since 9/11 is beginning to fulfil this prophesy.

One of the most chilling hallmarks of any totalitarian regime is the anonymous denunciation followed by the knock on the door in the middle of the night. This event, more commonly associated with the USSR and Germany in the 1930s, has become a regular occurrence in America today. After September 11th, the FBI exhorted every US citizen to report any suspicious behaviour by neighbours, friends, relatives, work colleagues and strangers. Within two months, 700,000 denunciations were registered. None of these led to arrests or information in connection with the attacks in New York and Washington DC. Even so, more than one thousand people, mainly Muslims, were taken into custody. They were detained without charge. Refused access to lawyers and to family members. In many cases, the authorities would not even confirm who or how many people they were holding. In effect, these people disappeared. Secret tribunals were set up. Secret deportations followed.

As awful and despicable as the attacks of September 11th 2001 were, they were not the first awful and despicable attacks perpetrated against innocent people. But such is the hysteria within American officialdom that to even point out this obvious truth, as writers such as Robert Fisk, Noam Chomsky and Edward Said do, is to be condemned and labelled as an apologist for terrorism. Or in the words of one recent Murdoch-paid journalist: 'terrorism's useful idiots'. To suggest that the deaths of civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq, and countless other places are as equally wrong as the 9/11 deaths is to invite further opprobrium and vilification. Three thousand people died on September 11th. Five thousand Iraqi children under the age of 5 died every month during much of the 1990s because of UN sanctions. Surely these deaths were just as wrong as the 9/11 deaths?

Patriot Act

Within forty-five days of the September 11th attacks, the US had drafted, debated and passed a long and hugely complicated piece of legislation whose full title is: Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001. It is better known by the acronym USA PATRIOT Act. The Senate voted for the Act 98 to 1 and the House of Representatives 356 to 66. It has been described as one of the most sweeping Acts in modern American history because of its impact on the civil liberties of US citizens and non-US citizens living in the United States. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said that the Act was constitutionally defective. And yet as Jim Cornehls, a professor of law at the University of Texas, point-

ed out, 'The vast majority of Americans never even heard of it at the time.' In fact, most of the members of Congress who voted for the Act later admitted to not having read it.

One of the most significant features of the Patriot Act is a new definition of terrorism broad enough to encompass the activities of organisations such as Greenpeace and the anti-globalisation movement. Disrupting a meeting as a means of drawing attention to an unwanted government policy can now be considered an act of domestic terrorism. The Act grants new powers to law enforcement and permits officials to side-step or avoid entirely many traditional controls on the surveillance, investigation, arrest and prosecution of civilians residing in the United States. According to Jim Cornehls, the Act violates at least six of the original ten constitutional amendments contained in the Bill of Rights.

**'After September 11th,
700,000 Americans
denounced their
fellow citizens to
the FBI'**

The Observer recently highlighted the sort of people being affected. A 74-year old Milwaukee nun, Virgine Lawinger, who was travelling on her way to an anti-war rally was stopped from boarding her plane because she was on a list of people considered too dangerous to fly. A New York lawyer, Barbara Olshanksy, who is involved in several anti-Patriot Act suits is regularly stopped and strip-searched when she attempts to fly. At times the level of ignorance shown by the authorities is breathtaking. Akil

Sachveda, who owned a petrol station and pool hall in New Jersey, was arrested on suspicion of Islamic terrorism. Mr. Sachveda is a Hindu. He was detained for several months, without access to a lawyer, before being deported to Canada. He lost his business. In San Francisco, a 60-year old man remarked at his local gym that he thought the war with Iraq was not just about fighting terrorism but about corporate profits and oil. He promptly received a visit from the FBI questioning him about his political beliefs. As did a North Carolina student who had displayed, in her own home, a poster critical of President Bush's stand on capital punishment.

Irish people have been affected too. Several have been picked up on minor visa violations or driving infringements, placed in jail and then deported. Some of these people have spent most of their adult lives in America, some have American spouses and children. Yet that does not prevent them from being summarily arrested and deported. Republicans have also been targeted. Belfast man Ciaran Ferry's case is one example. Ferry is a former republican prisoner who was released under the Good Friday Agreement. He went to live in America, married an American citizen and together they had a baby daughter. Early this year he was picked up by the authorities in Denver, Colorado. He has been in custody ever since. During several court appearances, the authorities produced no evidence or even reasons for his continuing detention, other than to say that they wish to deport him. A judge is expected to rule on Ferry's case in the next few weeks.

Given the fact that the Patriot Act represented virtually a complete law enforcement wish-list of investigative and detention powers and given its complexity and rapid enactment, there is a strong suspicion that much of it was prepared pre-September 11th and that the US government used the emotive mood following the attacks to introduce legislation that otherwise would have met stiff public

resistance. That the US government would so cynically use such a tragedy is not surprising. The same happened in Ireland after the Omagh bombing. Legislation that could not have been passed before the bombing, and probably could not be passed now, was passed in the immediate aftermath when public disgust was at its height.

Conspiracy theories

Some commentators have voiced even stronger suspicions. An opinion piece recently appeared in The Guardian newspaper which suggested that the US government had advance warning of 9/11 but had allowed it to go ahead in order to use the ensuing 'war on terrorism' as a means of consolidating its global power. The author cited as a precedent the often-repeated allegations that the US ignored warnings prior to the attack in December 1941 of Pearl Harbour, in order to facilitate America's entry into the Second World War. If this sounds like the fantastic musings of a conspiracy theorist gone mad then perhaps one is forced to sit up and pay attention when one learns that the author of the article, Michael Meacher, was for over six years (until June of this year) the Environment Minister in Tony Blair's Labour government.

While the evidence Meacher provides to support his main contention - that the US allowed 9/11 to occur - is circumstantial and consequently less than conclusive, he does argue convincingly that the 'war on terror' is being used by the US as a pretext to advance its imperialist interests. Meacher refers to the powerful conservative think-tank, the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) which strongly backed George W. Bush in his Presidential campaign in 2000. Some of PNAC's most prominent members include vice-President Dick Cheney, deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Florida governor Jeb Bush. A PNAC-attributed document, which Meacher quotes from, states that the US must 'discourage advanced industrial nations from challenging our leadership or even aspiring to a larger regional or global role'. It pinpoints Iran, North Korea and Syria as dangerous regimes and says their existence justifies the creation of a 'world-wide command and control system'.

These policies are not new. In 1948, George Keenan, a senior official at the State Department, stated in an official planning document that, 'We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population...Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships, which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security...We should cease to talk about vague and unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards and democratisation...'

Such selfish motivations give lie to the propaganda that American foreign policy's primary objectives are the promotion of democracy and freedom. The Patriot Act is not about defeating terrorism. The vast majority of those affected by its provisions have not the remotest connection to terrorism. The Patriot Act is about crushing political dissent and ensuring that opponents of US imperialism within America are prevented from asserting their opposition.

Stopping the Right-wing ideologues

The question is: Can the Right-wing ideologues - in the PNAC and elsewhere - be stopped? Certainly, they are not having it all their own way. In Iraq, they are in danger of allowing America to become bogged down in an unwinnable war. As well as losing an increasing number of soldiers, the cost of the operation is enormous. Before the war, Paul Wolfowitz predicted that oil revenues would quickly pay for the 're-construction' (i.e. occupation) costs. Now it is predicted that Iraqi oil revenues next year will be \$10 billion (at most) whereas the estimated cost of keeping US soldiers in Iraq during the same period will be around \$90 billion. A former US commander in the Middle East, Anthony Zinni, recently condemned the Pentagon, saying, '[In Vietnam] we heard the garbage and the lies, and we saw the sacrifice. Is it happening again?'

Previously, Zinni was a firm supporter of President Bush.

Public opinion within America is increasingly turning against the Patriot Act. So far, 150 cities have passed resolutions opposed to the Act's provisions. The anti-war movement is again gaining momentum. Its pre-Iraq war demonstrations were the biggest in America since Vietnam. On October 25th, they are holding another big march in Washington DC to oppose the occupation of Iraq. Tens of thousands are expected to attend.

And then there is next year's Presidential election. Bush will probably win. The combination of big business and an increasingly jingoistic media will ensure that he will be able to spend far more money than any other candidate in history and coverage of the election will be heavily biased in his

favour. It is worth recalling though that Bush senior was in a similar position twelve years ago and managed to lose.

Clearly, the only realistic challenge to Bush will come from the Democratic Party. This raises a familiar conundrum for the Left. Voting for the Democrats - the lesser of two evils - and not for a more radical candidate frustrates hopes of creating a progressive alternative in American politics. (Had a fraction of those who voted for Ralph Nader in Florida in 2000 actually voted for Al Gore then Al Gore would be President and not George W Bush).

Interestingly, and against the odds, the leading contender (so far) for the Democratic Party is former Vermont governor, Howard Dean. Dean was one of the very few senior Democrats to oppose the war in Iraq from the beginning and is now reaping the rewards for his stance as increasing numbers of Democrats become disillusioned with their party's slavish following of Bush's foreign policies. But Dean is no radical. Whilst being liberal on some issues, he supports gun rights and the death penalty and his economic policies are hardly socialist. A Dean presidency would only mean that the most extreme neo-conservative policies would end. As minimal as this objective might appear to be, the truth is that this is about as much as people, both inside and outside America, can hope for in the short term.

If the alternative is four more years of Bush, with the accompanying international conflagrations and domestic repression, then the American Left may well just have to hold their noses and vote Democrat next year. Otherwise those knocks on the door in the middle of the night may get even louder.



The New Republican Forum

The New Republican Forum is a coalition of political and community activists, founded to challenge the political status quo in Ireland by providing a radical Republican alternative to the mainstream political establishment.

The New Republican Forum:

- Stands for the reunification of Ireland and opposes all aspects of British interference in Irish affairs.
- Opposes the Belfast Agreement, which subverts the Irish people's inalienable right to self-determination.
- Stands for the creation of a just society in Ireland, based on principles of equality, social justice and genuine democracy, underpinned by a comprehensive charter of inalienable human rights.
- Supports the promotion and development of Irish culture.
- Opposes the resurgence of imperialism as a political ideology, led by the United States, its allies and client regimes.
- Supports all oppressed peoples struggling for national liberation.
- Opposes any attempt by the Dublin government to aid or assist any Western military alliance.

Our aims are:

- To establish a credible Republican opposition to British rule in Ireland.
- To critically reassess and analyse the history of the Republican struggle in Ireland, and by so doing, chart a course for the future of the Republican movement.
- To establish, support and coordinate the activities of Republican, community-based and other progressive organisations, forging a basis for a new national movement.
- To liase with other progressive forces, nationally and internationally, including anti-capitalist groups, trade unionists and environmental movements, along with national liberation movements worldwide, to further the cause of anti-imperialism.
- To establish a range of independent media outlets providing Irish people with alternative sources of information on political and social issues.

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