Fourthwrite

For a democratic socialist Irish republic

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Assessment

Listening to Bertie?

The impact of the Tohill affair will be greater than event itself

The details of the assault on Bobby Tohill in a Belfast pub have now been clouded to such an extent that the Sinn Fein party can, with a straight face, describe as a bar-room brawl what others are adamant was an attempted abduction with a view to murder. It requires a very broad and liberal view of affairs before one would be entirely convinced of Sinn Fein's interpretation of an attack by men wearing boiler suits and surgical gloves while wielding telescopic metal batons and having ready access to a suitable vehicle. Nevertheless, if Mr Tohill insists that he was only involved in a common street fracas, then it is wrong to level accusations against either individuals or organisations.

To those involved on both sides of the dispute, the dénouement of this case will have great significance. In a broader political sense though, details of the incident are now unimportant. Hugh Orde, PSNI chief constable, has given his opinion that the Provisional IRA orchestrated the episode and the media locally and nationally ran with his interpretation of events. No amount of 'clarification' will now convince Unionists that there is any other version of the story and in every likelihood, they probably do not want to know of an alternative explanation… if one is possible that is. The result of course will be additional and ultimately irresistible pressure on the leadership of Sinn Fein to do something about the Provos.

If proof was needed we have only to look to the very significant change of attitude among the southern establishment towards Gerry Adams and his party. Bertie Ahern has made it quite clear that now is the time for movement on 'dry-docking the Boys'. He later added to the Sinn Fein president's discomfort by stating frankly that he believed Adams to have been a leading member of the IRA for many years.

As is often the case, Senator Martin Mansergh of Fianna Fail was given the task of explaining to the world at large what all of this meant. On a RTE radio interview he spelled out that ten years after the first ceasefire and with Sinn Fein in such a strong political and electoral position north and south that the Dublin government believes that there is now no excuse for paramilitary activity. He added that it is disappointing that whenever progress in the North appears possible that Republicans do something silly and spoil the opportunity. In a further comment, he agreed with Ahern that Gerry Adams had most likely been an IRA member and that his ongoing denials only tend to undermine his credibility at large. Strong stuff indeed from the usually reserved Doctor.

Sinn Fein will effect to rubbish the impact of this 'roasting' and try to offset the damage by claiming that the only reason for the deluge of bad publicity and criticism is concern by the Southern political establishment at the rise and

progress of their party. There may well be an element of truth in this assessment but in reality Sinn Fein is now being forced to fulfil its commitments to become a conventional parliamentary party in return for the benefits of being accepted into the establishment. Adams and McGuiness have been given a ten-year transition period to ready their supporters for full membership and now the period of grace is coming to an end. They will have to normalise the party or pay a price.

It is unlikely after this period of time in VIP suite,that the Ard Chomhairle will vote for the wilderness. Their task will be to change the relationship with the IRA. Time to call in the experts and they are closer to hand than one might expect – there are surely still a few ex-Workers Party folk left in the vicinity of Leinster House.

Keep your queen off our lawn

by Mags Glennon

The Right Divine of Labour to be the first of earthly things;
that the Thinker and the Worker are Manhood's only Kings
Joseph Brennan, rebel of 1848

While surfing through the trashy satellite channels recently your columnist stumbled across a series called "Wife for William?", a show speculating on future marriage partners for the British Queen's grandson. Expecting a deferential royalist paean to the Windsor family the reality was a show inflicting very pointed satire on the "royals". Two stereotypical Hooray Henrys ponder on potential future brides with an irreverence surprising from a British establishment viewpoint. They identify possible spouses solely on the basis of being young, female and loaded. The public is then asked to vote for increasingly unlikely celebrities as possible future Queens.

The political tone of the programme provided a stark contrast to the crawling response afforded by the Irish media to the recent visit of a British "Royal" to our shores. A middle aged woman paid a flying visit, dropped into a Dublin tourist attraction, looked at a few horses and had dinner with friends. These mundane activities provoked an orgy of grovelling in the print media. The Irish Times going so far as to publish a photo of a line-up of Brigadier and Major Generals in the Free State army, in full dress uniform, all politely greeting "Princess" Anne. Considerable tabloid fuss was made about a supposed "suspect device" in Smithfield. A purely media inspired wave of speculation was unleashed about a possible future visit by an elderly English woman.

Such yap about a "Royal" visit has been going on since at least 1995. Supposedly the circus will indicate the normalisation of relations between Ireland and Britain, indicating that the Irish people are now welcoming the British Queen to our shores in a spirit of remorse for some wrong we have done in preventing her dropping in for tea in the past. If the visit of her son in 1995 is anything to go by a few little old ladies will be dragged out to be patronised and the Southern neo-Unionists will get a chance to (literally) drape themselves in the Butchers Apron, while simultaneously screaming like overly hormonal teenagers at a boy band concert. The media will witter on about "symbolism" and "healing", while assuring us that the "Royals" have no real power and the event will be good for tourism. However Ireland is already visited by large numbers of tourists from England, Scotland and Wales and the Prime Minister of that jurisdiction attends governmental meetings here. The contradiction of the establishment figures of a supposed "Republic" bowing the knee to "Royalty" will not be commented on.

The reality is that the feelings of the general public towards a British "Royal" visit are either apathetic or hostile. In the wake of the latest spate of monarchist babble TV3 News ran a poll asking if the English Queen should visit Ireland. Though not perhaps the most scientific of polls, it was interesting to see that 73% voted No and just 27% Yes. Another recent survey, this time

commissioned by the British Council of Ireland and the British Embassy in Dublin, revealed that 68% of Irish people favour the establishment of a united Ireland. Such snapshots of the public mind, while positive for Republicans, are unlikely to influence the opinion formers or the political interests who view the ignorant hoi polloi with contempt. So within the next few years large orders of smoked salmon will be heading towards Dublin Castle and our “betters” will be grooming their forelocks preparatory to greeting Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (alias Windsor).

It seems things were not all that different in 1897, when James Connolly analysed the forces gearing up to celebrate the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria: "Home Rule orators and Nationalist Lord Mayors, Whig politicians and Parnellite pressmen, have here now lent their prestige and influence to the attempt to arouse public interest in the sickening details of this Feast of Flunkeyism." Connolly’s appeal to the working class to reject and oppose royalist triumphalism was centred on the exposure of the political and economic interests of the classes which promoted pro-British jingoism in Ireland, the same forces which had a vested interest in subjugating Republicanism and maintaining working people in poverty and political impotence. Of the state visit to Ireland of George V in 1911 he wrote: "Let the capitalist and landlord class flock to exalt him; he is theirs; in him they see embodied the ideas of caste and class; they glorify him and exalt his importance that they might familiarise the public mind with the conception of political inequality, knowing well that a people mentally poisoned by the adulation of royalty can never attain to that spirit of self-reliant democracy necessary for the attainment of social freedom."

The 1900 visit to Dublin by an aged Queen Vic was marked by large scale protests and police baton charges over a month long period, many organised by Connolly and Maud Gonne. The visit was seen as politically necessary to boost Irish recruitment to the British army during the Boer War. A few years earlier a visit by the Duke of York had ended in some unpleasantness when a hostile mob wrecked the Lord Mayor’s Coach. To ensure an enthusiastic crowd to welcome the Famine Queen 15,000 employees from Harland and Wolfe were shipped from Belfast to Dublin and Guinness workers were given a paid holiday. School children got a day off to line the streets. A century later such monetary bribes would appear unlikely and will be substituted by the dubious cult of TV celebrity to lure the masses.

The Irish media were still at it eight years later when a sculpture of supreme ugliness, representing Queen Victoria, was unveiled at Leinster House. The Irish Times editorialised that "the general opinion entertained by the spectators was that the statue was one of the very finest erected in the United Kingdom to the memory of the gracious lady who ruled so wisely and well over these realms". Maybe we would be better to dispense with gnashing our teeth at such unrepresentative grovellers and ponder again on the words of Connolly "We, at least, are not loyal men; we confess to having more respect and honour for the raggediest child of the poorest labourer in Ireland today than for any, even the most virtuous, descendant of the long array of murderers, adulterers and madmen who have sat on the throne of England.

The Awkward Squad

By Joe Moore, Cork trade unionist

Does the Irish Trade Union Movement have a cadre of non-conforming activists similar to what is known in Britain as the awkward squad

May 1997 saw the return of a Labour Government in Britain after 18 years of Tory rule. During that 18 years, a most sustained onslaught was waged against the Trade Union Movement. Parallel to this all the State owned utility and transport companies were privatised. These privatisations resulted in huge job losses, a worsening of pay and conditions for those workers lucky enough to hold onto their jobs, and a deterioration of services for the public. Services that had been put in place with taxpayers money were now in the hands of multi-national companies whose only motive was profit.

The attack on the Unions was equally as devastating. Firstly the National Union of Mineworkers was defeated. The Tories had a personal vendetta against the NUM because of the role it played in bringing down Ted Heath's Government in 1974. Thatchers attack on the NUM was going to be a fight to the finish. She was supported however in this endeavour by the role played by both TUC General Secretary, Norman Willis, and Labour Party leader, Neil Kinnock. Their betrayal resulted in the miners having to fight the resources of the State, without the full support of the working class political and Trade Union establishments. After a year long heroic struggle, the miners were defeated.

After the miners, the next group of workers to be attacked were the printers. The catalyst for this fight was the move to Wapping of Murdocks printing works and the establishment of a non-union shop there. Again as with the miners, the workers struggled bravely. They were again supported by their rank and file colleagues but betrayed by Willis and Kinnock. With the defeat of the printers, the Tories goals became easier to achieve. Despite determined isolated struggles, the Trade Union Movement as a whole had been beaten by our class enemies using the law, the police the judiciary, the media and unfortunately class traitors within the trade union and labour movement.

The election of the Blair Government was seen as the end of a long winter and the beginning of a new dawn for the Trade Union Movement. Blair and company had different ideas however. Not alone were privatised utilities not nationalised but privatisation was taken further into areas not even attempted by the Tories, with the use of Private Finance Initiatives and Public Private Partnerships. Thus health care, education and local services are being handed over to the financial backers of New Labour.

Neither was anti-Trade Union legislation repealed. It was however used against any group of workers who dared to challenge the concept that the "market" determined everything. This caused a serious dilemma for the Unions. A Labour government was preferable to a Tory one, the Labour Party was the

political voice of the Unions, Unions supported the Labour Party financially, yet Labour in Government was no different than the Tories. This led to increased tensions between both wings of the labour movement.

Opponents of the government began to win elections for senior Union posts. Firstly a relatively unknown train driver from Leeds, Mick Rix, won the General Secretary election in ASLEF. This was followed by Bob Crow in RMT, Mark Serwotka in PCS, Billy Hayes in the CWU, Andy Gilchrist in the FBU and Tony Woodley in the T&G. All stood on a platform totally opposed to New Labour policy. The biggest upset for Tony Blair was the defeat of his "favourite" union leader, "Sir" Ken Jackson as general secretary of new union AMICUS by Derek Simpson. While all of the above are totally opposed to current Government policy, they differ on what tactics to use. Those on the left, like Serwotka, want to build a political force to the left of New Labour. Others for example Woodley want to "reclaim" Labour from Blair and Co.

The election of these left wing leaders, called the "awkward squad", has been accompanied by a growth in rank and file activity. Rank and file newspapers have been established by activists in the Communications Workers Union, Fire Brigades Union and the PSC public service union. The election of left wing activists into leadership positions alone is not enough to take on employers and challenge government policy. It needs to be accompanied by a growth in rank and file activity.

While the above gives a brief overview of the situation in Britain, what is the shape of the Irish Trade Union Movement? Do we have an awkward squad? Let us look at those who would claim to be on the left and are opposed to the Governments policies on privatisation and Public Private Partnerships. The most prominent of these, given his position as President of SIPTU the biggest union in the country, is Jack O'Connor. O'Connor has made numerous statements against Ireland's involvement in the US led war against Iraq, the proposed privatisation of both Aer Rianta and CIE, and the Bin tax.

Let us examine O'Connor's report card for 2003. During the year he faced three tests. We will look at each in turn and see how he did.

Test No. 1...Shannon Airport This civilian airport has been used by foreign military powers since at least the 1960's. This is totally contrary to 26-county neutrality. The main user of this facility is the US government. Military traffic through Shannon has increased dramatically in the build up to both the war against Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2003 alone an average of 14,000 US troops passed through Shannon each month. This does not include flights that carried military equipment, including weapons of mass destruction. This total disregard for our neutrality has resulted in Shannon Airport becoming a focal point for anti-war protests. These actions include demonstrations and blockades, as well as incidents of non-violent direct action by Mary Kelly and the Catholic Workers. The Government's response has been to supply Garda and army protection for the US war machine, and to use the repressive might of the State against those who oppose the militarisation of the airport.

Where does Jack O'Connor fit into all this. He is on record as being opposed to the US led war carried out since 9/11. He has spoken out on the issue on numerous occasions. Could he have done more? The majority of staff in Shannon Airport are SIPTU members. Without the Co.-operation of these workers, the US military could not use Shannon. Has O'Connor called on his members to black the US war machine? No. Has he assured them that SIPTU would fully support any worker who took unilateral action on the issue? No. If that type of support and leadership was given then Fintan Lane, Mary Kelly and the Catholic Workers would not have had to spend time in prison. O'Connor failed test number 1.

Test No.2 July 2003

The ICTU Biennial Conference was held in Tralee, Co.. Kerry. As is usual at these conferences, a number of fraternal speakers address the delegates. These are usually officials from other European countries. They normally speak for about 15 minutes and receive a polite round of applause. One of last year's speakers was in a different league entirely. His name was Luis Eduardo Garcia, from the Colombian Trade Union Sinaltrainal. Luis was in Ireland as part of a wider tour to promote a boycott of Coca-Cola because of it's role in the murder of Colombian Trade Unionists. Luis got a standing ovation in Tralee. The Conference decided to unanimously support the boycott. Luis subsequently addressed a fringe meeting in Tralee which was attended by over 50% of the delegates. Again he received unanimous support.

However once delegates returned home things changed. Support for the Coke boycott began to fade. In fact a trade union campaign against the boycott was launched. This campaign was led by SIPTU. What was Jack O'Connor's reply? Silence. He failed his second test.

Test No 3. Bin-tax

The arguments against all local authority service charges on the basis that they are a double form of taxation are well known. SIPTU are totally opposed to these charges. Jack O'Connor has been to the fore in this opposition. Last September, Fingal County Council began a policy of refusing to collect the bins of those householders who would not pay the bin-tax. The residents responded by blockading the refuse trucks. The local authority replied by using the Gardai and the courts against the campaign. This resulted in over 20 people being imprisoned, including Joe Higgins T.D.

The workers employed by the local authorities to collect the bins are SIPTU members. If they were given support by their Union to refuse to implement the Council's policy, then the bin-tax could be defeated. Jack O'Connor refused to give leadership on the issue. Local residents let their feelings be known on the (Cont. fromPage 8) matter when they booed O'Connor at a public rally outside Mountjoy Jail. Again O'Connor had failed his final test.

If Jack O'Connor is not a candidate for the awkward squad, then who is? The other prominent opponent of neo-liberalism is Mick O'Reilly of the ATGWU. Mick is not only opposed to privatisation but was also prominent in the campaign

against the Nice referendum and has continually opposed social partnership. Because he is a genuine member of the awkward squad, Mick was suspended from his position on false charges. This suspension lasted over two years. Some people are of the view that the political establishment had a role in this suspension. If this was the case it is proof that Mick is a real threat to the status quo.

Another Trade Unionist who bucked the system is Brendan Ogle. (All Fourthwrite readers should read his book "Off the Rails") He clearly explains what those who challenge the Trade Union establishment can expect. ILDA was on its own an awkward squad. Despite all the pressure applied the train drivers remained united and still remain to this day as part of the ATGWU.Other prominent opponents of class collaboration include Dick Roche of the Waterford Trades Council, Clare Daly in Dublin Airport, Des Derwin currently challenging the establishment in the SIPTU Vice-Presidential election and Owen McCormack of Dublin Bus.

The establishment of the Independent Workers Union marked a milestone in militant trade unionism. This union is not affiliated to Congress and is totally opposed to partnership with the bosses. Its General Secretary , Noel Murphy is indeed a fully paid up member of the awkward squad.

While the Irish Trade Union movement does not yet have the equivalent of Britain’s Awkward Squad, there are hopeful signs out there of the beginning of a fight back against over 16 years of social partnership and collaboration with a right wing neo-liberal agenda.

The DUP unchanged and unchanging

By Laura Duffy

Forty years ago, the then young Ian Kyle Paisley, was engaged in a noisy joust with the mainstream Unionist Party and its aristocratic, blimpish leadership. Many Nationalists believed at the time that if the bigoted and frighteningly sectarian leader of the Free Presbyterian Church was to get elected to Westminster, that his outrageous and egregious behaviour would so offend the urbane membership of the House of Commons that terminal damage would be done to the Unionist cause. Almost half a century has passed since Ian Paisley won a seat in the Commons and the Union is still secure and moreover, the 'Great Moderator' has not cost his constituency any noticeable ground as a result of his attendance in parliament.

The fact is that Paisley and his supporters have always been and still are adept at adapting their tactics and strategy to the place and to the occasion. They, better than any other group in Northern Ireland, recognise the difference between playing to the gallery and performing in the corridors of power. By this very token, therefore, it is a mistake of considerable proportion to believe that an alteration in style between the party at work (or at prayer) in rural Ballymena or impoverished urban East Belfast and its slicker presentations before the 10 Downing Street press corps represents a fundamental change in DUP policy.

The party of Paisley remains essentially what it always had been and that is the unreconstructed and unbending wing of the Unionist family. As political fundamentalists (many influenced by a very stern Presbyterian faith) they often see little merit in compromise with anything or anybody. Nor do they see any reason why the Unionist majority in the six northern counties should share power or influence with a Nationalist minority.

Of course the mood music has changed somewhat since the DUP achieved its very significant victory in the recent Assembly election. Having taken the larger slice of the Unionist electorate and thus become the biggest single party in Northern Ireland the DUP is brimming over with confidence and is now beginning to act like champions rather than contenders. They have also started to behave in a manner suited to leadership rather than opposition. With a very real pool of talented people in their organisation – many of them barristers – the DUP has begun to set out policy positions that on the surface appear to give the semblance of flexibility.

The Dublin media and others read into this a Pauline type conversion within Paisleyism and mooted the idea of a quick return of the Executive. The superficial reasoning within southern circles was that people such as Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds were so enamoured with their administrative positions in the Assembly that they would find the prospect impossible to resist even if it meant sitting down with the representatives of Sinn Fein. Such facile, not to mention wishful thinking, overlooked several very germane factors.

The first is that the DUP is the Unionist grass-roots party per excellence. With its organic connection to the world of Protestant religious worship through

the Free Presbyterian Church and its well-established base in poorer urban and rural areas they understand the popular feeling in working class community better than any other political party. At the same time, with significant support among the protestant middle class, the DUP is not unaware of concerns in suburban quarters either. They recognised before others that there is still deep resistance within the Unionist community to any deal with an unapologetic, unrepentant Sinn Fein. For them to now abandon the hard-line position that secured them pole position after 40 years in the wilderness would be an act of folly totally out of character for the supremely attuned Ian Paisley and his able lieutenants. They will not wander easily into the Trimble cul-de-sac.

Secondly, the DUP is now in position to replace the Ulster Unionist Party once and for all as the primary party of Unionism. In a strategic sense therefore, they have a very real interest in first getting rid of Cunningham House unionism before doing anything else. The shrewd tacticians that planned the rise of this party will not readily place themselves in a position that gives any comfort to Cunningham house Street or enter a parliamentary chamber that would force them to depend on the co-operation of the wider unionist family and leading an Executive under current regulations would effectively force them into that position.

Finally, the DUP is also a creature of its history and environment. For over a century, Unionists in Ireland have known that when the crunch comes, no British government has ever takes a firm stand against their intransigence. They have no cause to believe that things will be any different now. Furthermore, the reality is that they are probably correct in their assessment.

In light of this it is difficult to see the DUP doing anything other than making the correct sounds and creating the air of reasonableness while still retaining their basic position. Ian Paisley has waited all his life to bring his flock and its party to the Promised Land. He, of all people, will not miss the significance of having to hand over leadership responsibility to others before he actually gets an opportunity to ‘dwell’ there. The real difficulty is that the DUP’s Promised Land might look a lot like Hell to the rest of us. The generations long quest for a Republic still seems to be our best bet.

Difficult decisions for Sinn Fein

by Tommy McKearney

As Sinn Fein gathers for its annual ardfheis there will undoubtedly be a large measure of satisfaction among the party faithful albeit measured with a degree of trepidation in some quarters. The long cherished aim of overtaking the SDLP as the largest Nationalist party in Northern Ireland is achieved and few now doubt that Republicans have taken a decisive lead over their Nationalist rivals. Still greater success may be gained in the upcoming European elections and not only in the north but south of the border as well. Republican diehards who once scorned Gerry Adam's predictions that the Sinn Fein party could make significant electoral gains have been comfortably rebutted. There is a vibrancy about the party that borders on the arrogant.

Yet in spite of its obvious advances, doubts still linger about where the movement is going and where its journey might end. There is clear evidence that an influential element still exists within the wider organisation that has not entirely reconciled itself to a purely parliamentary strategy. Recent events in Belfast are sub judice and are best left that way but the mere fact that P. O'Neill has been unable to issue a statement that his members have decided to disband proves the point that not everybody in the family subscribes to constitutionalism.

This divergence of opinion is unlikely to lead to a public split but its impact will continue to cause difficulties for Sinn Fein. For so long as the military wing continues to exist it will cause problems for the parliamentary party. An outlawed, underground organisation cannot be hidden from view nor can it guarantee that it will not get itself occasionally caught in flagrante delicto.

As a result, there is now no likelihood of Unionist participation in a power-sharing executive. This problem may be side-stepped in the short term but eventually a situation that is in itself bordering on the abstentionist will challenge the party's ability to retain the support of its new voters in the North. Sooner or later that will also translate into a vote loser in the South as the more middle-class section of the electorate refuse to endorse a party with an ambivalent attitude to its partners.

The dilemma for the Sinn Fein leadership and its supporters is that there will come a time when this conflict of interest will have to be faced up to and in a fashion that will allow for no prevarication. Faced with an ongoing stalemate in the North and effective exclusion from influence in the South, the Sinn Fein bubble must eventually burst. There is a clear political imperative on the leadership to either prevail upon the IRA to disband or to at least put credible daylight between themselves and the party. It needs little imagination to guess the stark and stern message delivered by Blair and Ahern to Martin McGuinness and his colleagues over the past few days and the consequences for Republicans if things do not change.

Over the past decade the Sinn Fein party has demonstrated a remarkable ability to contort itself ideologically. Abstentionism is gone, participation in Stormont is

now eagerly sought and the blind promotion of militarism is no longer evident. There is no reason to believe therefore, that the organisation and its leaders will not be able to make the final move and disentangle themselves convincingly from the armed wing.

Dealing with this requirement will undoubtedly take time and effort on the part of the Sinn Fein leadership but doing so (and don't doubt that it will be done) will also have another impact. Freed from the 'shackles' imposed by its connection with the military, Sinn Fein will find itself having new opportunities. They will be able to resume their position in the Northern Executive and there will be a real chance of securing a significant number of seats in the Dail with the subsequent possibility of a coalition deal in the Republic. Nor is there any reason to believe that Sinn Fein will reject this option since to do so would severely diminish the thrust of their efforts over the past ten or fifteen years.

The exigencies of parliamentary life will then take over. Already we have seen Sinn Fein ministers in the North preside over the administration of PFI (Private Finance Iniative) – something that is clearly at odds with the parties claims to be socialist. Before long the 'needs of the day' will also require a softer line on other issues and before long the current flexibility will simply become at best what Michael D Higgins describes as 'managerialism' or opportunism at worst. The party that is rapidly acquiring all the appearances of a fairly mellow social democratic grouping will become indistinguishable from a host of other 'somewhere in the centre' parties.

Sinn Fein is succeeding at the expense of its radical republicanism and those holding feelings of trepidation are justified.

New Sinn Fein

By Margaret McKearney

As the political parties gear up for the forthcoming European and Local Government elections Sinn Féin will invest vast energy and resources to maximise their vote and resultant seats. With a party machine which is the envy of all other political opponents there is no doubt that they will return an impressive showing, especially at local level in the mainly urban areas which they have targeted as winnable seats. Equally no doubt, some will see electoral gains as further proof of the merit in the continuation of the existing party strategy North and South, and predict a continuous rise in the future. However this strategy may yet prove untenable, particularly in the South where they have yet to adopt a distinctive political agenda or offer anything new to the Southern voter.

Unless the party undergoes a radical rethink there is no distinctive or obvious role for them in Southern politics. Do they seriously feel that the country needs more corrupt "cute hoors", have we not enough in Fianna Fail? Nor do we need any more advocates of fiscal rectitude, Mary Harney and MacDowell are more that any country can endure, and really the idea of Sinn Féin representing or appealing to the conservative land owners and industry moguls borders on the ridiculous. That then leaves the time honoured alternative of the left, surely history and indeed the recent administration in the north can show what a non-starter that idea is.

Tómas MacGoilla and the Workers Party had a similar idea in the seventies. Later on Proinsias de Rossa in the Democratic Left thought that they could do better and they even reached the dizzy heights of partnership in a conservative led coalition before being devoured by a much older claimant to wear the red robes of the left. Today there is no trace of their once militant republican roots; even Eamon Dumphy couldn't prove it in the High Court.

Another scenario could be akin to the position in which Labour found themselves in the nineteen seventies. Labour at that time had widened its appeal and recruited prominent liberals and young professionals to the party banner and with a vibrant party and increased representation found itself in government with Fine Gael. Together these strange bedfellows oversaw the most punitive oppressive regime ever witnessed since the foundation of the state. If history offers very little in the way of solace to the aspirations of a potential Sinn Féin voter what does their track record in the North demonstrate?

The left is probably the most obvious and indeed fertile ground for new comers in the political field, and indeed the party flourishes in marginalised areas and centres of disadvantage where the well sanitised whiff of cordite assists in the electorate's perception of Sinn Fein as persons well able to fight for them. So far this has not been put to the test in the South and as the party moves further away from its militant roots and seeks and succeeds in attracting the young professional, so will their previous persona fade leaving them just another party of "suits" in the areas that they now cultivate.

Such a sell out of a large part of their base has happened in the North. De Bruin is not afraid of hospital closures and councillors sit on committees that willingly introduce more examples of double taxation. In addition this week has seen highlighted an epidemic of tragic deaths amongst young men in a small area of North Belfast. Those left behind to explain cited many causes including unemployment and no social amenities and a general feeling of disadvantage and of despair. If the alleviation of such problems were of major importance to Sinn Féin surely in its time in government some measures could have been taken to begin to redress the alienation and despair so obvious in that community.

That is why Sinn Fein will never make great gains amongst the Southern electorate. They are surplus to our need, we already have enough conmen and chancers, nor do we need any more of the hang ‘em high or flog ‘em brigade. What we do need is a decent and credible left, we need a party to campaign for the homeless, the weak, the underpaid, and all other marginalised people and communities. We need a voice to stand up to and not with American war and economic world dominance and unfortunately Sinn Féin have proved themselves too spineless for the role of a credible champion for the women and men of no property.

Tabloid threat a dismal departure

by Cathal Mac Samhain

The tabloid Daily Star recently featured an article purporting to convey a threat from the Continuity IRA to two named individuals for their part in attempting to extort monies from the owner of a Dublin-based lap-dancing club. The individuals concerned were gaoled by the Special Criminal Court for their part in the alleged offence. Both were denied status as republican prisoners and are currently housed in Wheatfield Prison in Dublin.

The article in question carried a report that the CIRA had denied that either man was ever a member of the organisation and maintained that they would deal with both at the 'earliest opportunity'. The article in the Star was followed by a similar renunciation in the Republican Sinn Fein newspaper Saoirse. Seemingly, republicans were accepting convictions secured in the Special Criminal Court.

Sources have, however, indicated to this writer that at least one of the named individuals has had associations with a number of republican groupings in the past. The other individual apparently had no such association. Whatever, the merits of the state's case against the two men, the issue which remains of concern relates to the fact that threats were issued against named individuals in a tabloid newspaper and frankly, that represents nothing short of "felon-setting".

Every republican organisation is entitled to demand standards of conduct from their members and state party policy where elements abuse the cause of republicanism for their own (often criminal) ends. In contrast to the statement of broad policy, the naming and threatening of individuals in a tabloid newspaper such as The Star represents a dismal departure from proper republican standards.

The Star is a newspaper which regularly tries to link republicans with criminal behaviour and has railed with a monotonous frequency against organisations such as Republican Sinn Fein claiming among other things that their associates have supplied weapons to feuding families in Limerick, smuggled contraband across the border and been involved in drug-dealing.

One must ask what type of investigation occurred in the absence of the individuals. Whatever the merits of the verdicts secured against them, surely both are entitled to a fair and impartial investigation and do not deserve to have the outcome of an enquiry prejudiced by sensationalism in a Sunday edition of a British tabloid.

Everybody is entitled to a fair hearing whether they are members of an organisation or not. It is simply not acceptable republican practice to engage in "felon-setting". Such practices undermine basic and long-standing republican principles to the detriment of all.

* *Felon-setting. A term introduced to Irish republican discourse by James Stephens in his denunciation of newspaper editor Alexander O'Sullivan's part in having activists gaoled by the RIC in the 1850's.*

Finlay keeps the kettle boiling

by John Nixon

POA chairman Mr Finlay Spratt is and undoubtedly will always be, an outspoken and verbose man. He has been a very busy man too, given his high profile in the media these days. It seems no matter what political decisions (or otherwise) the NIO makes in regards to prison policy Mr Spratt is keen to criticise and oppose it and does so in his usual outspoken if somewhat careless and overtly political manner. Why is it that the POA are always sought by the media for comment? He doesn't observe any protocols which is most embarrassing for Prisons Director Peter Russell and S.O.S. Paul Murphy and the other 'folks on the hill'.

Finlay Spratt has been busy rallying his forces and bullying the British government, pressurising them with all-out strikes by the Prisoner Officers Association, and advocating extreme action in the prisons here and in Britain. He opposes segregation, he opposes change, he opposes any political interference in Northern Irish prison affairs. He is quite eager and determined to extend his campaign to Britain's gaols and cause total disruption throughout the whole penal system. It matters little to him what the cost or outcome of his actions may be either to the government (his employer), or to thousands of inmates and their families and the wider society.

Once again the issue appears to be about money. It seems everything is about money where the POA is concerned. Their members are and always have been paid attractive wages. Despite the vast decrease in the gaol population in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement the prisons budget still runs into millions and it's the taxpayer who foot the bills. For Finlay Spratt and the POA it's about money; it's about danger money, it's about overtime money and it's about more money for security. They may have got what they wanted from the government this time not because of their threats but because the NIO must also consider the wider political implications for the peace process and into this equation comes conditions in the prisons and the role of the POA in implementing and determining the outcome of future prison
policy.

The POA contrived to ensure that the recommendations of the Steele Report would not be implemented. They knew that this would increase tension and tempers amongst prisoners. They are always too ready to exploit any volatile situation. They did the same in the wake of the first hunger strike in 1980 because they wanted to rule and govern the prisons their way. Yet they know segregation of bitter enemies makes sense. They must know that forced integration would lead inevitably to more deaths and casualties within the prisons. But they don't seem to give a damn! So what is different this time? It is the loyalist extremists who have taken on the POA and it is clear they are accountable to nobody. That is what is dangerous. They want to make the gaol

another theatre of sectarian/racist warfare. This time republicans have stepped out of the breach and have wisely kept their own counsel. UPRG/UDA reps Jackie McDonald et al will be more remembered for their lovely tans on TV than the laughable attempt to put the blame for the wreckage on republicans.

Peter Russell is more aware now of just how politically explosive the gaol environment can be. The NIO must get to grips with how the prisons are run and make explicit exactly who is in charge; either the government or Finlay Spratt. Within the public sector which accounts for almost 60% of employment here, prison officers are amongst the highest paid and heaviest subsidised. A lot of money goes into their wage packets and in turn goes into the economy, most of it into the 'unionist economy'. The NIO must now begin a process that will bring about the transformation of the prison service here in much the same way as Patten/PSNI.

For most nationalists/republicans it is seen as one of the last bastions of Unionism. The NIO must now review recruitment and employment practices in the prison service, it must address issues such as pro unionist symbols and icons that are a bulwark against Catholics entering the service. It must begin a process of wide consultation as to how best this institution can be made more conducive to all sections of society. It is necessary for real future peace and stability that changes are made sooner rather than later or Mr Finlay Spratt will continue to be the contentious focus of future media attention.

Neutral policing...can it exist?

by Siobhan O'Dwyer

There is a great deal of discussion and debate these days about the role and nature of policing in Northern Ireland and the Patten reforms which are being implemented. One of the only bargaining tools Sinn Fein have left within the political process is their view that the police reforms haven't moved on far enough and that they therefore as yet, cannot give their allegiance to the new PSNI. This is one of the last Holy Cow's of Republicanism and like all the others, Sinn Fein will abandon it too when it suits them. Indeed, given recent events and the pressure on Sinn Fein to ensure the complete disbandment of the Provisional IRA it will not be long before the Republican Movement decides that the PSNI are now reformed enough for them to sit on the Policing Boards and turn a blind eye to Catholics who decide to join. After all as they are now involved in running the state bureaucracy of Northern Ireland, they will need the police to be on their side too.

Indeed the numbers of Catholics who are queuing up to join the PSNI would seem to indicate that now that the war is over, many Nationalists are not waiting for Sinn Fein to give the go ahead but are getting on with it. So, is the Police Service of Northern Ireland now on the road at last to being a neutral, non sectarian, community police force free from political interference?

It is true that the PSNI have made a number of very radical changes in the four years since the Patten report. They have changed their uniform, badge and name; the Police Ombudsman is in place as are the Policing Board and most District Policing Partnerships; the 50:50 recruitment is going well with more applicants from both sides of the community than ever before; a new police college is on the way based in Cookstown; domestic violence, child protection and community safety police teams have been established. All in all it is true to say that the normalisation process that is taking place in Northern Ireland following the end of the war has indeed had a major impact on policing here.

The fact that a large section of the Northern Irish population from the foundation of the state did not accept the legitimacy of that state, obviously meant that the police would be involved in maintaining the security of the state as a primary role. The RIC became the RUC and the Irish Free State set up the Garda Siochana in a time of instability and war. Indeed, it has taken 75 years for any real questions to be asked about the methods and legitimacy of the Gardai in the Republic as the majority accepted that the status of the Gardai was beyond question and that their role was to protect the state and it's citizens.

The RUC in the North from it's inception was destined to be a partial, sectarian force and in that it reflected the society from which it was formed. The Northern Ireland statelet was seen as illegitimate by a large minority of the people who lived there and the state itself was set up to ensure that the majority Unionist/ Loyalist population were protected economically, socially and militarily. The RUC were an armed military style police force who had a major role in protecting the new state from enemies within and without but in that, they again

reflected the siege mentality of their politicians and a large section of the population.

However is it ever possible to have a police force that is free from political interference and why would any state want to have such a police force anyway? The issue of policing in a state that is contested brings to the fore the dilemma inherent in policing and criminal justice systems that always exist in a capitalist state. The state will always need to ensure that the police force is on their side and will implement the legislation and policies that it believes are necessary.

The police in the UK use emergency legislation like the Terrorism Act to harass, imprison and terrorise large sections of the population at the behest of the politicians and the state. The checks and balances that are supposed to exist to ensure a democratic state has a fair, balanced police force and criminal justice system are undermined again and again by political expediency. Indeed, in recent years under Jack Straw and David Blunkett the criminal justice system has become ever more draconian and anti – democratic with record numbers of people in prison and the detention without charge or trial of alleged terrorist suspects.

The PSNI is policing in a very different state and time. They will continue to ensure that they protect the Northern Ireland state from those who are seen as subversive and now they will do so with the consent of the majority of the population. They also reflect the changes in policing that have taken place in the UK generally, involving themselves more and more in policing people's private lives through child protection, domestic violence and anti social behaviour initiatives. The role they have to play in these spheres is welcomed and indeed, demanded by large sections of the community as a proper arena for the police to expend their energy. The fact that the PSNI remains the long arm of the state will not change however and they will continue to have difficulties with legitimacy because the Northern Ireland state will continue to be an unstable, backward and politically divided society for a long time to come. The PSNI will reflect the continued sectarianism, violence and inequality of the state but what is different is that there is no organised or united opposition to the role that the police play in maintaining an unjust and unequal society. That is the challenge in confronting the PSNI and the Northern Ireland state in whatever new guise they take on – building a united opposition to the continued existence of an abusive and undemocratic state.

The Four Year Farce

Me thinks the Democrat doth protest too much

by Matt Siegfried

Every four years we suffer through a farce of a national election. The current caucuses and primaries to determine the candidates of the two (though Bush is unopposed) perennial parties in the United States have long ceased to be fora of democratic selection. These primaries have become institutionalised venues to discard candidates of an independent base (like Dean) or ideas contrary to the party leaderships (like Kucinich and Sharpton) and the business interests that back them. This is done through a partnership with the media where candidates are divided at every opportunity, between "serious" candidates and "issue" candidates. By this they mean that candidates with issues do not seek to win themselves but that they wish the serious candidates to take on their issues. By serious candidates they mean those that have proven their allegiance to the policies of the ruling elite of their respective party. It is not the candidate that is serious but the party bureaucracy that is serious about the candidate.

Ideas are secondary to who the party leadership thinks can win. Those who the party thinks can win are determined not by their ability to mobilise and expand their constituency, but by abandoning their constituency in an appeal to "middle America" and the "centrist majority" (read white, well paid workers and the white middle class). It is testimony to the remarkable lack of difference between the two parties that the folks in the so-called middle are so readily appealed to by either party.

The leading candidates are enthusiastic supporters of the unending "War on Terrorism". They supported the invasion and continued occupation of Afghanistan and support the "right" to use force of prevention (semantically different from per-emption) against future "terrorist attacks". The leading Democratic candidates voted for the Patriot Act and its equally draconian successors, though some have expressed concerns after the fact, they are directly complicit in the erosion of civil rights. The leading Democrats saw intelligence from Bush on Iraq and voted for the war. They are complicit in the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis, Americans and others and all based on the lie of WMD.

All candidates would like the United Nations to give cover to America by shifting the responsibility from the US. The political reconstruction of Iraq would fall to the UN while keeping, indeed expanding, the illegal occupation forces and economic penetration of Iraq by the US. No genuinely anti-occupation nominee is possible from the two parties. The biggest complaint is not the war itself, but that the Bush administration was so inept in diplomacy that they couldn't convince other countries to join and give cover to the criminal American assault on Iraq thereby making the US look bad and further adventures more difficult.

The Democrats have been more stable supporters of Israel than the Republicans. Kerry has waxed lyrical over Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East where “the interests of Israel are the interests of the United States”. He means they are both interested in crushing Palestinian resistance and thwarting Arab self-determination. On this, though for different reasons, the two parties are in absolute accord. Whoever is elected billions will continue to flow to Israel while they engage in a protracted genocide. Humanity, collectively wringing its hands, wishes for “peace”.

There is no difference between the two parties in their majorities. The right of the republicans, representing certain agricultural sectors favours nationalist protectionism and the left of the Democratic Party, representing the labor bureaucracy and certain small businesses favour nationalist protectionism. Both parties in their majority support NAFTA, the FTAA, GATT and neo-liberalism in its myriad of forms and institutions and both parties have refused to repeal the reactionary anti-union Taft-Hartley Act. In the name of “Anybody But Bush” the AFL-CIO has endorsed John Kerry: vociferous champion of NAFTA, the FTAA and neo-liberal “free trade” that have decimated the very unions supporting him.

Both parties oppose gay marriage, a fundamental right of equality. Bush will use the issue to gay bash energising his evangelical base. The Democrats will not support full rights or marriage but find meaningless phrases of tolerance to deflect criticisms of their own gay bashing. Black people in their majority have historically voted for the Democrats. The deserved reputation of the Republicans for open racism and the lack of a viable working class or community based alternative has allowed the Democrats to do absolutely nothing for black folks, taking their support entirely for granted. The profound respect they show the African American community can be summed up as: “Hey, it could be worse!”

There is a clear difference between the two parties over the right to an abortion which must weigh heavily on us all. The Democrats, through devolving the issue to states, attacking welfare and medical coverage have done enormous damage to the ability of women to control their own bodies. Any return to the days before legality would be an enormous retreat for women in this country as for all those opposed to the moralism of priests combined with the fist of the law. But right without access is meaningless and for this universal, socialised health care is necessary to ensure all women have access. No candidate, of course, proposes that.

The differences on the environment are not fundamental. A dramatic change in the way we produce, distribute and consume goods is required to come to grips with the scale of the environmental crisis. The “solutions” offered by both parties ensure further environmental degradation and at their best seek to rely on “market forces” to protect the environment. A real ecological plan is utterly at odds with the “free market”. Environmental sustainability, necessarily planned, cooperative and long term is incompatible with capitalism’s extremely shortsighted anarchic drive for profit.

Never was a genuine alternative to the politics of the status quo so needed. Lay-offs, war, healthcare for profit, racial injustice, anti-women, anti-gay assaults are not the property of a single party. The mad dash to the bottom of the social ladder in the name of “free trade” is systematically destroying the living standards of a whole layer of American workers. America is now a country where 98% of all incumbent politicians are reelected, most unopposed. Our election turnout and rates of return would make most despots blush. The history of struggles around these and other issues of importance to workers, women, gays, African Americans, Latinos and other minorities proves that rights were never won or secured through elections alone. By ceding the struggle to those who do not share our commitments we settle for their commitments. Is it really better to vote for what you do not want and to get it?

Those of us in the United States who are serious about beating the Bush agenda should recognise that the surest, not the quickest, not the easiest, but the surest way is to build an independent political movement. One that comprises the emerging and growing social movements with a deep and lasting social and political force; the American working class in all its diversity, potential militancy and democratic traditions. A political party that identifies with and has as its base the working class majority of this country is not just a desire of many leftists, but an essential tool in the organisation of the working class in it’s own interests. How this will come about is for the future to decide but it is for us to decide now to continue that process.

Whoever seeks to administer a system of exploitation and war does not seek to fundamentally alter that system. The real question is; can we build an alternative to that system? Can we put aside secondary differences and unite around the urgent needs of our time: against war, support of workers organisations, for social health care, against racism, for women and gays and opposition to an economic system whose logic is profit, not human need.

We are in real need of a genuine democracy, one practiced from the ground up with economic democracy at its core. Socialism is routinely dismissed in the most ardent terms by the hacks of both parties and beyond. Socialism; the democratic, planned and free association of those who produce the wealth the capitalists horde and the politicians throw away on illegal wars, has for 150 years and more, continued to be a solution that has and can capture the imagination of our and successive generations.

The Public Inquiry business

by Pauline Hadaway

Speaking in the wake of last month's tragic spate of suicides in North Belfast, Irish President Mary McAleese blamed the peace process for failing young people in Northern Ireland, parts of which, she said, remained 'stuck in a time warp' of sectarianism and paramilitarism, and where, in the context of rising prosperity across Ireland, levels of poverty were often 'worse than during the Troubles'.

Working class areas like Ardoyne and Tigers Bay may bear the brunt of sectarianism, paramilitary punishment squads and economic failure, but are they uniquely 'stuck in a time warp'? Just hours before the funeral of 18 year old Bernard Cairns, North Belfast's 13th suicide victim of 2004, nominees and representatives of Northern Ireland's main political parties sat down together at a public consultation in Belfast's King's Hall, to consider the future of HMP Maze. As the NI Prison Service prepares to hand over land and buildings to the office of the first and deputy first minister, Sinn Fein put its case for the old H-blocks to be preserved as a museum, while the DUP's representative on the Maze consultation panel, suggested a museum should not be the over-riding consideration, observing that the site provided an opportunity 'to build for the future'. PUP representative David Ervine, sympathetic to local unionist concerns that the site may become a 'shrine' to republican hunger strikers, suggested the old prison simply be levelled to the ground. The British government meanwhile is conducting a feasibility study into the viability of a national sports stadium.

While politicians clearly have an important role to play in planning what is best for the region's future, discussions around the future of the Maze, affected by conflicting interpretations of the site's historical meaning, inevitably founder amidst diametrically opposed and seemingly irreconcilable views of its place in history. In other words, development plans for the 360 acre site are not only subject to normal economic and planning constraints, but even at the level of imagining future potential, the significance of the past will always be a determining factor.

Of course, the residue of the North's troubled past is visible everywhere, not least in the proliferation of walls, compounds and military installations, which disfigure the landscape, denoting Northern Ireland's historic failure to function as a modern democratic state. In this sense the dialogue between past and present is not only inescapable, but meaningful and relevant, as ideas for building a better future may be continually informed and measured against what is known and to a large extent still experienced of the past. In the forward tide of lived experience, where solutions flow from interpretation, so the past must always remain open to interrogation and revision. Nevertheless questions remain as to why, in a chronically underdeveloped region, crying out for more jobs, better transport and social provision, so much discussion, imagination and financial resource are being invested in endlessly revisiting and memorialising traumas of the recent

past. Expressed through structures and processes of commemoration, memorial and inquiry, almost every aspect of public life in the North is increasingly informed by the quest to establish a consensus on history, to as it were fix a formally agreed set of meanings and, somehow sort out yesterday's problems, tomorrow.

From its inception the Belfast Agreement has placed disputes around interpretations of history at the centre of contemporary political life in the North, as in 1998 British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, announced his government's intention to set up a judicial inquiry into Bloody Sunday. Beyond seeking some point of agreement on the facts, the aim of the inquiry, stated in Blair's 1998 parliamentary address, was to 'establish the truth about what happened that day' (my italics); not for the straightforward purpose of either laying charges against, or clearing the names of, individuals and institutions, nor to open up a war of ideas, public analysis and debate, but in pursuit of consensus and reconciliation as the basis for 'building a secure future for the people of Northern Ireland'.

Five years and £127 million pounds later, as the journey from truth to reconciliation appears increasingly fraught and uncertain, one thing at least is clear: historical truth is not neatly pinned down, nor can it easily be measured against immovable standards of judgement, fixed in the here and now. 14 people died after British paratroopers opened fire on demonstrators in Derry on 30th January 1972. That much is certain. Some argue that the Paratroopers acted criminally, others that they acted as they did because they believed their standing orders justified it. For republicans, Bloody Sunday was simply an inevitable consequence of British policy in Ireland, a policy of military containment, which later sanctioned state sponsored assassination, covertly through collusion with paramilitary groups or openly through a policy of 'shoot to kill'.

Whatever your politics, it is hardly unreasonable to acknowledge that Bloody Sunday took place within an historical and political context. For friends and families of the dead, Bloody Sunday, no less than Bloody Friday, La Mon or Enniskillen, will always remain a tragic and painful reality. The rest of us, untouched by private anger and pain, having no authentic claim to victimhood, must ultimately recognise these acts of violence as matters of historical fact. How we understand, interpret or ultimately respond to these facts, entirely depends on our politics, how we view the society we live in and the kind of future we desire.

Interpretations of the past are continually shaped in the arena of political action and debate. As society sets new goals and standards, so the judgement of history is always reserved in the light of things still unknown or yet to come. Post conflict, as institutions of the state reorganise and re-present themselves, arguments around events like Bloody Sunday remain profoundly significant in the contribution they can make towards deeper analysis and understanding of the new political landscapes.

However, these arguments belong in the realm of live public debate, outside fixed terms of reference, where meaning may continuously be challenged and subject to scrutiny. Institutionalising questions of historic legitimacy within the

North's political structures simply promotes a process of never ending dispute and political stalemate.

Furthermore, in mediating between institutions and their detractors or victims, the formal judicial inquiry may actually undermine democracy, sidelining real public debate and shifting political power from the electorate and those they mandate into the hands of un-elected, supposedly neutral, referees. Far from challenging the state and its institutions, judicial inquiry opens up new points of contact between the state and an increasingly marginalized public.

On 14th July 1789 the citizens of Paris stormed the Bastille, hated symbol of the despotism and oppression of the ancien regime. Within two days of its fall, the National Assembly ordered that the prison be razed to the ground, so the people might rejoice that 'grass grew where the Bastille stood'. Post conflict Belfast is a long way from revolutionary France and perhaps in these uncertain times it might be better to reserve judgement on the 'future of the Maze', turning our minds instead to the project of building a better future for all of us who remain in its shadow.

Myths about loyalism and racism

by Patricia Campbell

Many have sought to analyse recent unprovoked attacks on ethnic groups and non-nationals living in some areas of Belfast. Not all of the analysis has been as objective as it might have been. ‘Broad brush’ painting of the picture is the legacy of three decades of seeking to trivialise republican militarism and loyalist sectarian violence as two sides of the same coin. Such analysis is flawed and is an injustice to those in Ireland who have opened their hearts and homes to non-nationals.

“We don’t want everything and anything here using our houses as baby factories” ” said the woman from the loyalist Village area of Belfast to RTE’s Prime Time. She was ‘back to camera’ and referring to intimidation and assault on Chinese families in. The Village is a deprived loyalist area in South Belfast bedecked with Union flags, and murals of balaclava clad gunmen and other art intended to depict loyalty to the British crown.

The Chinese couple had just moved into the Village and the birth of their first-born was imminent when a gang of loyalist paramilitaries smashed their windows and launched a brutal attack, causing them to flee the area. Newspapers reporting the incident published photographs of the victims and injuries bore testimony to the savagery of the attack. Unfortunately this was not the first such treatment meted out by loyalist paramilitaries. Up to 30 ‘ethnic minority’ families and individual non -nationals have been forced to flee their homes in the last year. Members of the Chinese, Pakistani, Ugandan, Romanian, and Filipino communities have been targeted in recent attacks which are becoming increasingly vicious in nature. The Prime Time programme highlighted the growing problem of racist attacks and evictions perpetrated by loyalist paramilitaries.

In spite of this, a Queens University academic expressed the view to the programme that racism was not “exclusively” a loyalist phenomenon and that Republicans were as likely to behave in the same way. Such a viewpoint bears no resemblance to experience on the ground and is typically a British establishment analysis seeking to propagate the notion that there is no fundamental difference between loyalism and republicanism.

Nothing could be further from the truth and available evidence clearly demonstrates otherwise. The Chairperson of the Anti Racist Network, David Carlin, told Fourthwrite that “ “racist attacks and evictions are common place in loyalist working class areas but there are no reports of such attacks in Nationalist/Republican areas.”

A report in Britain’s Observer newspaper highlighted that while Chinese immigrants in Northern Ireland were pondering their future, their countrymen and women in Dublin were celebrating the Chinese New Year and enjoying a four-

day festival. The contrast between Dublin and the loyalist working class areas in Belfast could not be greater.

Loyalism is intrinsically rooted in notions of ethnic supremacy and has ingrained within it a racial elitism, which dates from the at least the 17th Century when the order 'To Hell or to Connaught' issued throughout the Cromwellian Plantation. Again in 1790's, Peep-o-day boys carried on the policy of expulsions and employed murderous force against local Catholics in order to exclude them from employment in County Armagh. Thousands of Catholics became refugees as the Peep-o-day boys formed the Orange Order to preserve Protestant privilege. The idea of uprooting Catholics continued post-partition as thousands of nationalist families were burned out of their Belfast homes by loyalist mobs. Similar events occurred more recently continued with the burning of Bombay Street in 1968.

There is no dynamic of this magnitude within Irish republicanism for racism or evictions. It is no surprise therefore that the evicted Chinese families found shelter in the mainly Nationalist/Republican West Belfast. While some non-nationals certainly experience racist comment, it is clear there is no orchestrated campaign within the republican/Nationalist community to oust people from their homes because of their ethnicity. Sinn Fein is proactive in promoting race tolerance and work closely with the Irish Solidarity Network, which in conjunction with the Trade Union movement organised a rally at Belfast City Hall to coincide with UK Holocaust day. Political representatives from a wide range of parties attended.

David Ervine, leader of the loyalist PUP, was present, as were representatives of UDA-linked Political Research Group, though both groups have faced allegations of involvement in recent racist violence, their spokespersons have denied any loyalist paramilitary link. That the leader of the UVF in South Belfast is alleged to have been "stood down" amid pressure from the Anti-Racist Network and the threat of losing funding for an ex-prisoner group, is perhaps a glimmer of hope that the some within loyalist para-militarism have at last recognised the need to act properly. It should be the earnest hope of everyone concerned with development of a broad non-sectarian left that such realisation within loyalism, however late, can be encouraged and built upon.

Review by Mags Glennon

Battle of Venezuela

by Michael McCaughan

Published by Latin America Bureau £7.99 Available Jan 21. by

Hot on the heels of the award-winning Irish documentary The Revolution will not be televised, comes The Battle of Venezuela, a new book in which Irish journalist Michael McCaughan brings audiences up to date on the remarkable events taking place in this oil-rich Latin American nation. The author explains how President Hugo Chavez caught the imagination of the Venezuelan people and analyses his 'peaceful, democratic, Bolivarian revolution', inspired by independence hero Simon Bolivar.

The book also investigates the failed coup of April 2002 when Chavez was kidnapped and held incommunicado by dissident army troops only to be returned to power by an unstoppable popular reaction. The book examines the anti-Chavez media monopoly which played a crucial part in that failed coup, stirring up hostility to the president and censoring all evidence that the deposed leader was being held against his will, and against the will of the people.

But what has happened since? What has become of the 'Bolivarian revolution' which promised to turn Venezuela into a first world nation within ten years? What has Chavez achieved since being elected in a landslide vote in December 1998? What is the opposition up to since the failed coup and the subsequent 65-day general strike that virtually bankrupted the country?

McCaughan tussles with reactionary hotel owners and police chiefs, visits radical new rural resettlement programmes, chats to urban gardeners, soldiers, businesspeople, domestic staff and journalists in a wide-ranging and accessible account of President Chavez's Bolivarian project.

This is a critical moment in the extraordinary career of Hugo Chavez and this book offers a unique insight from a direct witness to the unfolding events. Michael McCaughan has spent the past two decades travelling throughout Latin America, writing for the Irish Times, Guardian and Sunday Telegraph Arrested by the Mexican army in Chiapas, (June 1994) dodging bullets in Paraguay, (March 1999) and exposing corporate Irish misdeeds in Belize and Colombia, the author has been on the front line of contemporary events and has an unparalleled grasp of the issues at stake.

McCaughan has visited Venezuela several times since President Chavez assumed office in December 1998, witnessing the devastating floods in Vargas state, the rewriting of the nation's constitution, pro and anti government street protests and above all, examining President Chavez's 'peaceful, democratic revolution' with its promises to improve the lives of the majority poor.

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