

BRITAIN IN IRELAND, IRELAND IN BRITAIN

by Anthony Arblaster

The response of the British Left to the Irish crisis, which has now lasted for nearly a full decade, has not been impressive. There has, for example, never been a full-scale debate on the subject by a Labour Party Conference, and the Labour Party, then in opposition, failed to oppose, let alone campaign against, the introduction of internment without trial or charge in Northern Ireland in August **1971**. It may be said that the Labour Party as an institution hardly deserves to be considered a part of any 'Left': nevertheless, its record on Ireland is significant. Enough local Labour Parties felt strongly enough about the American war in Vietnam, and the Labour Government's support for the American war, to ensure that the issue of Vietnam was extensively and hotly debated at party conference. The efforts of a minority of Left-wing **MPs** and activists have never succeeded in generating a similar response to the war in Ireland, although, unlike Vietnam, that war has been the direct responsibility of successive British governments. It has proved consistently difficult to campaign effectively on the Irish issue. Even the shooting of **13** demonstrators in **Derry** on January **30, 1972**, failed to shock any substantial section of British opinion into an awareness of the true nature of the British Army's role in the conflict. I remember that the protest demonstration over Bloody Sunday in Sheffield was met with silent hostility by the people of this working-class city.

There has also been a marked lack of serious and sustained research and debate. The absence of substantial articles in both the *Socialist Register* and *New Left Review* is the clearest evidence of this. It is noticeable, too, that not only the bulk of the pamphlets but also most of the important books on the Irish question that have appeared in the past nine years have been the work of Irish writers.' This is in no way fortuitous. Ireland, North and South, matters to the Irish as it does not to the mainland British, and it is clear that the **British Left** has been infected by the essentially imperialist attitudes of neglect, indifference and impatience which have marked the entire history of Britain's relations with Ireland.

It would be surprising, too, if the British Left had not been affected by the insidious mixture of misinformation, lack of information, and propaganda both overt and covert, which have characterised the British

news media's reporting of events in and connected with Ireland in the past nine years. A basic suspicion of the 'capitalist press', and of broadcasting as an arm of the state, is not enough in such circumstances. One simply needs to *know more* than British audiences generally have been told in order to realise how thorough and effective these processes of news management have been. No one who has seen anything of the *Irish Times'* coverage of 'the troubles' can fail to be struck by the contrast between the wealth of information in its columns and the meagre and sensationalist coverage in the British press, not excepting the so-called 'quality' papers. With the occasional exception of *The Sunday Times*, there is not a single London newspaper which has had either the will or the courage to resist the intensive manipulation of information which has been practised by and on behalf of the British Army in Northern Ireland. All the media have been subject to heavy pressure not to publish material damaging to the forces of 'law and order', to the point where even the exposure of official brutality, murder or torture is unscrupulously construed as an act of support for the 'gunmen' or 'terrorists'. I do not think the extent of the censorship, and self-censorship, of the media over Ireland—in the Irish Republic now (thanks to the one-time socialist, one-time liberal, **Conor Cruise O'Brien**) as well as Britain—is as yet fully **appreciated**.² I mention **these** matters, because I believe that the Left, despite itself, exaggerates its own immunity to such manipulation, and also because they have played so large a part in creating a general climate of ignorant, embittered, and often hysterical chauvinism in which it has been exceedingly difficult to mount a sustained anti-imperialist campaign. The control and censorship of information and opinion must also be given due weight when we come to consider the political lessons which the British and Irish Lefts need to learn from this protracted crisis.

But before returning to this theme, both the systematic misrepresentation of the issues and the confusion of views and attitudes on the Left make it desirable to spell out what I take to be some of the central and structural features of the present crisis.

What took place in Northern Ireland between **1968** and **1972** was not primarily a sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Still less was the heart of the storm the sporadic war between the British Army and the Provisional **IRA**. The essence of the crisis was the mass uprising of the substantial Catholic and nationalist minority in the province against a system of oppression and discrimination which had been operated against them by the Unionist state for nearly fifty years. This revolt had a modest and **peaceable** beginning in the form of the Civil Rights movement, which was partially inspired by the similar movement in the southern states of America. Three things were significant about this initiative. In calling itself a movement for civil rights, it was explicitly endeavouring to be non-sectarian, to be open to Protestants as well as Catholics. Secondly, it was

also explicitly seeking to avoid the 'border' issue, the issue of the legitimacy of the Northern Irish state itself. Thirdly, it was committed to a strategy of non-violent demonstrations. It was thus a 'moderate' movement, which consciously sought to avoid re-opening the old quarrels that had divided the North since its inception.

But given the context in which this movement was operating, it was virtually inevitable that it would fail. From the beginning it was denounced by Unionist leaders as a Republican plot and a front for the IRA, and its demonstrators and marchers were assaulted by the Royal Ulster Constabulary as well as by non-uniformed Protestant gangs. The two communities began to polarize, with the Protestants rejecting even the modest steps towards reform proposed by Terence O'Neill. When this period culminated in the Protestants' armed assault on the Falls Road in August 1969, and it was discovered that the IRA's move away from armed politics in the 1960s had left the Catholic ghettos of Belfast defenceless against attack, whether by Protestant gangs or the British Army, the re-emergence of an IRA committed to armed struggle (the Provisionals) became inevitable.

The futility, in that context, of a struggle conducted solely in terms of peaceful demonstrations was confirmed rather than contradicted by the intervention of the British Army. The British myth about the role of the Army is that it originally stepped in, and remains there, in order to keep two warring tribes of Irish bigots from slaughtering each other. Initially this illusion seemed plausible even to the Catholics themselves, grateful for any barrier against the depredations of the RUC and its 'supporters'. But the function of this army, like any other, was to keep, or to restore, 'order'; and this meant specifically re-establishing the authority of the Unionist government of the Province and putting down the Catholic revolt against it. Hence the weight of the Army's operations was directed against the Catholic communities, not merely because they were 'the sea' in which the 'fish' of the IRA swam with comparative safety, but also because it was the Catholic uprising which had to be crushed if the existing political system was to be maintained.

It says much for the depths of anger and determination beneath this uprising that, despite the 20,000 troops sent to prop up Brian Faulkner, despite internment, despite all the bloodshed, despite the cold-blooded murders of Bloody Sunday, the Catholic revolt finally compelled the British Conservative Government to 'suspend' Stormont and end more than fifty years of Unionist rule. I still believe that the suspension of Stormont in March 1972 might have been the decisive turning point in the crisis. It was a blow to the Protestant hegemony which left the 'loyalists' temporarily stunned. Had the Provisionals responded more positively; had the British government followed it up more promptly. . . As it was, the continuation of the bombing campaign to its hideous climax in the summer of that year,

coupled with the intensification of Army operations against the Catholic communities, gave back to the 'loyalists' the confidence which they had momentarily lost. Safe in the knowledge that the British Army would continue to do the job of keeping the Catholics 'in their place', they were able, through the general strike of May 1974, to destroy the British government's timid and inadequate attempts to devise a new system of government for the province.

It is not too much to say that the past three years, and even the past five, represent a stalemate which is basically political rather than military. If the minority have blocked the restoration of Protestant supremacy—at least in its old form—the majority are determined to block any other political resolution of the conflict. But—and this is crucial—it is only the continued, indefinitely sustained presence of British armed might which enables them to do this. In a word, the British military presence is not part of the solution; it is part of the problem. So long as the British Army is there, terrorising and chastising the Catholic communities, so long will loyalist intransigence continue. It is only under the meaningful threat of a British military withdrawal that the loyalists will come to their senses, and be compelled to accept that the days of institutionalised Protestant hegemony and discrimination are over once and for all. And that is why the demand for British military withdrawal is an essential part of any truly progressive political programme for a resolution of the Irish crisis. My brief summary of developments in Northern Ireland since 1968 was inevitably tendentious. Nevertheless I believe that a proper understanding of those developments along the lines that I have sketched points unavoidably to this as one central political conclusion.

Having said that, I must also add that I am not convinced that the Left, either in Britain or Ireland, generally gives enough weight to the 'problem' of the Protestant majority in the North. If it is true that writers like **Conor Cruise O'Brien**, in so far as they recommend accepting the indefinite partition of Ireland, have nothing to offer to the Catholic minority in the North; it is also true that most Left-wing commentators who sympathise with the Irish nationalist cause have no reassurance to offer to the Protestants. It is simply not enough to point out that they are a minority within Ireland as a whole, and ought to accept the will of the majority (if this *is* their will) that Ireland be unified. Such a formulation is as unconvincing as the equally plausible (or implausible) demand of loyalist leaders for the restoration of 'democracy' (i.e. majority rule) in the North. In both cases there is a foolish attempt to use an apparently democratic formula to gloss over a substantial part of the history of Ireland.

The Protestants of Ulster are hostile to incorporation into a united Ireland, as they have been throughout this century. To say that this hostility is ill-founded, that it is partly the product of ceaseless

indoctrination and propaganda, and partly the result of conscious imperialist contrivance by the British ruling class (as represented by Carson and Lord Randolph Churchill), is true, but it does not dissolve the problem. It is too readily assumed on the Left that pointing to the effects of ideology or indoctrination is the same thing as abolishing them. This is not so. The fears and bigotry of the Protestants may be based on myth and ignorance, but they are real for all that, and must be reckoned with. It may be added that there are also some good and genuine grounds why Protestants and the small number of secularists in Northern Ireland should resist absorption into an Irish state which is so unhealthily responsive to the reactionary attitudes of the Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy. But even if this were not so, allowance will have to be made, within any perspective that looks to the eventual unification of Ireland, for the wishes, fears, prejudices and, indeed, rights of the 900,000 Protestants of north-eastern Ireland.

Finally I return to the political lessons of the crisis. These are much more serious than is generally appreciated, and are only partially disguised by the fact that Ireland has never become a party issue in Britain. For reasons of space, they can only be briefly enumerated here. There is first the fact that the collapse of the Unionists' control of the province is only one element in the strikingly rapid disintegration of the unified political structure of Great Britain. Between them the Irish crisis and the extraordinary success of Scottish nationalism bid fair to put an end to the unity of the United Kingdom. The impact of these developments, not only on the British political parties, but also on the British political psyche, has not yet been seriously examined or assessed.³

Secondly, the Irish crisis has provided the excuse for a large number of ominous steps towards the 'strong state', in the Irish Republic as well as Britain. I have already mentioned censorship, self-censorship and news management. The readiness with which a supposedly free press has bowed to these pressures only underlines the dangers here. Besides these there have been substantial departures from the norms of the 'rule of Law'. In Ireland courts without juries have been set up, through which people can be convicted and imprisoned without open evidence having to be provided. In Northern Ireland first the notorious Special Powers Act of 1922, and subsequently the hardly more liberal Emergency Powers Act of 1973 have given the authorities all the scope they need to detain and imprison people without due trial. In Britain the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which was stamped through Parliament in 24 hours after the Birmingham bombings of November 1974, enlarges the power of the Home Secretary to deport people without having to provide reason or evidence, and allows the police to detain people without charge for up to a week. This measure, like other repressive legislation, was said to be purely 'temporary' when it was first introduced for a six-month period. But it has

remained on the statute book ever since, and there is virtually no prospect that it will be removed.

Thirdly, the experience of Northern Ireland has had an immense impact upon the British Army itself, politicising it and re-orientating it towards a new and even more sinister role—that of intervention in domestic political crises. Just at the point when its last imperial commitments seemed to be fading away, intervention in Ireland has provided the Army with a new role, and one which it has taken up with energy and enthusiasm. It has used its time in Northern Ireland to acquire the experience and develop the techniques appropriate to this new role. And the luckless people of that province—the Catholics above all—have been made the guinea-pigs or rats in this monstrous laboratory **process**.⁴ They have been the victims of the new techniques and weapons of crowd control, interrogation and torture. It is on them that the Army has accumulated a huge mass of detailed information, which is officially justified as 'intelligence'. Northern Ireland has accustomed the British Army to think in terms of combatting what is sweepingly termed internal 'subversion' rather than external aggression. It has learnt a great deal, and acquired a perhaps unprecedented power and political autonomy. It would be naive indeed to imagine that it will un-learn all that when it finally returns to its barracks on the British mainland.

Such warnings are conventionally dismissed as 'alarmist'. I cannot agree. On the contrary it seems to me foolishly myopic to fail to see the extent to which always fragile liberal political traditions and freedoms have been corrupted and undermined by the Irish crisis, in Britain as much as in Ireland itself.

NOTES

1. I am thinking of the excellent historical analyses produced by Liam de Paor (*Divided Ulster*) and Owen Dudley Edwards (*The Sins of Our Fathers*), to say nothing of the many topical studies by John McGuffin, Andrew Boyd, Eamonn McCann, Henry Kelly, Conor Cruise O'Brien and others.
2. There are important articles on censorship and news management by Anthony Smith in *Index*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 1972, and by an anonymous correspondent in the *New Statesman*, December 31, 1971, and some examples of distortion and suppression are mentioned by me in a letter to *The Listener*, January 6, 1972, and a review in the *New Statesman*, March 3, 1972. The list of films on Ireland banned from British television is now a long and distinguished one.
3. Although it is fair to add that I write before the publication of Tom Nairn's *The Break-up of Britain*, which should prove to be an invaluable study.
4. Sceptical readers are referred, for more detailed accounts, to John McGuffin's *The Guinea-pigs* (Penguin 1974) and to *The Technology of Political Control* (Pelican, 1977) by Carol Ackroyd et. al., Part I and chapters 8, 11, 15 & 16.