

Fourthwrite

For a democratic socialist Irish republic

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Editorial

Press Freedom

The huge controversy surrounding publication of the now infamous cartoons about the prophet Mohammed has raised the question of press freedom across the world. At a local level, a riot that developed out of counter demonstrations staged against the 'Love Ulster' rally in Dublin has placed the freedom of expression issue in an Irish context.

Freedom of expression and freedom for the press are fundamental requisites in a democracy and any attempt to restrict them should be resisted as a matter of principle. While certain legal restrictions will always exist in terms of slander, a huge danger lies in creating exceptions to the rule on the grounds of causing offence or outraging public taste. Irish people should always keep in mind how a spurious rationale was used in an effort to justify censorship under Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, how this distorted Irish politics for a quarter century and in the opinion of many, actually prolonged the northern conflict.

Real freedom of expression can only be assured when the unpopular is tolerated since it takes little effort to guarantee publication for the approved. The best sanction against offensive material is simply to exercise ones parallel right to call publicly for a boycott of the offending publication or speaker.

Freedom of expression and the press also raises another question relating to the ability of all to be heard. Very little freedom of expression exists where only the powerful and wealthy are heard and where they can almost say what they wish without regard for accuracy. Immediately after the above mentioned Dublin riot, a front page story in the Sunday Times (Ireland edition) wrongly claimed that the Independent Workers Union (IWU) had distributed leaflets encouraging people to attend the counter demonstration. Next evening, the newspaper's Ireland editor went on RTE's Questions and Answers show and repeated this incorrect claim. The Sunday Times brushed arrogantly aside the union's protestations, while RTE didn't even bother answering calls from the IWU. The behaviour of the Sunday Times and RTE in this instance is also a denial of freedom of expression; the difference being that they are so powerful only their victims notice.

While a reasonable case might be made for exercising some form of sanction against the offenders mentioned here, a better cure for this problem would be to democratise the mass media. The first step in this process is to make the general public aware of the need to do so, then agree on how this might best be accomplished and thereafter campaign to have the proposals implemented. Modern technology is making broadcasting and publishing much easier and accessible to the ordinary person and there is, for example, a community radio scheme in operation in the Republic that could very well be expanded into something more far reaching that would broaden access to the airwaves. Ideas such as these could be developed and built on while simultaneously demanding access to the main, state broadcasting agencies that remain such huge opinion formers. Freedom of expression has to be understood also as freedom for all to join in the debate on an equal basis.

Assessment

100 dead British soldiers

A hundred dead British soldiers in Iraq already and in all likelihood more will die before the war ends. The very hopelessness of the British position was underlined by the release of a photograph by the Ministry of Defence of Prime Minister Tony Blair posing beside a smiling Corporal Gordon Prichard a few weeks before the soldier's death.

In a party so well attuned to publicity and image as the British Labour Party, we can only guess at the agony it must have caused the PM's press office when they realised that Blair had been pictured so obviously posing with the deceased. Being publicists for the party, they would have known only too well that the 100th soldier to die was going to draw very large attention. They must have cringed when they realised that the late corporal had left such a firm link to the man who had ordered him to the region. Under normal circumstances, the publicity machine would have worked overtime to separate the government from the consequences of its actions. With Blair standing beside the unfortunate squaddie in one of the last times he was photographed, there was no escape.

A public relations setback is of course of minor significance in the context of a large and brutal war. One hundred British dead is also of lesser significance when compared to the vastly greater numbers of Iraqi casualties in this vicious conflict where even by the most conservative of estimates, over 25,000 citizens of that unfortunate land have died.

Nevertheless, the declining fortunes of one of the principle promoters of the war, epitomised in the photograph of Blair and the corporal must eventually force to British disengagement from the conflict. The war is not popular in Britain and all that is currently sparing the government is the fact that a professional army is viewed as volunteers who accept the consequences of conflict.

Eventually however, as ongoing revelations about British Army brutality in Iraq and the story of US barbarism in prison camps around the world continue, people in the UK will become reluctant to support a patently unjust cause. With the British public uneasy, US anti-war feeling will increase and the departure will get underway.

Britain will once more tail-ends Washington but this time as it retreats from its misguided Iraq adventure and leaves the scene. Moreover, the legacy of British Army brutality and occupation of an ancient and proud country will survive long after they have gone and long after the name of Corporal Gordon Prichard has long been forgotten by anyone apart from his closest relatives and friends.

Even the Obnoxious

By Anthony McIntyre

The imprisoned Nazi and historian David Irving is not some one who revises history in the light of new material. He is a falsifier of history. He brings to historical narrative what a fascist skinhead thug brings to inter-race community relations. He is a holocaust denier. He challenged Deborah Lipstadt in court on the grounds that the accusation of holocaust denial she had flung his way stained his character. Lipstadt destroyed him. From that point on his credentials as a provider of alternative history has been in tatters. Those who have since gone to hear him have mental faculties as perversely impaired as his own.

Lipstadt proving in public forum that Irving was a holocaust denier was an important move in deconstructing the character of Irving and the integrity of his work. Austria jailing him for being a holocaust denier is a step too far. He should be allowed to deny the holocaust. It is in his denials of the holocaust that the atrocious event becomes even more real in our minds. The more a feverish liar distorts in order to dispute the more we are reminded of the lies used during the holocaust to prevent its existence getting out, and the lies used since to minimise it.

David Irving should never have seen the inside of a prison cell. In fact the Austrian authorities could have considered providing him with a license to run a travelling circus and allow him to take it to wherever he wants. Grant him full freedom to travel Austria widely spouting his 1989 views for which he now lies in jail, that Hitler knew little about the Holocaust, that the Auschwitz gas chambers never existed, and that the Nazis were blameless for Kristallnacht. for which he is now imprisoned, that the gas chambers did not exist. People then could see the Nazi clown in his ridiculous splendour. Jailing him is the equivalent of burning his almost thirty books.

Seeking to rubbish the vile views of Irving is an admirable practice. Seeking to silence them is a dangerous. It privileges some kind of free speech over another. It is corrosive of democratic culture which if it is to retain any vibrancy must be able to cope with the weeds that by necessity will always grow within the garden of democracy otherwise it is not democracy at all. It becomes managed, tutored, castrated.

It is not Jewish people who will revel in the jailing of Irving, but those who value his imprisonment because it curbs the very free speech that is so necessary for people to stand up and say again and again that the holocaust did happen. Individuals may but society should never wish to arm itself with the totalitarian certainty that brooks no dissent and makes Holocausts possible.

The cartoons

A matter of free speech or Islamophobia

by Pauline Hadaway

The Muslim Association of Britain & Muslim Council of Britain lead a demonstration in London on February 11 to protest against the publication of cartoons in Jyllands-Posten, a centre right Danish newspaper. In contrast to a noisy demonstration in London the previous week and violent protests sweeping across the Muslim world, the Feb 11 demonstration was characterised in the media as quiet and dignified. Whatever the mood of the demonstrators however, the message remained the same, publication of the satirical cartoons should have been suppressed because they were racist and intentionally insulting to Muslim people, being part of an ongoing 'war against Islam'.

Political responses to the commotion created by the publication of the now infamous cartoons have generally been framed within arguments of free speech versus religious intolerance, where free speech is understood as a key part of the western tradition, while religious extremism is seen as synonymous with Islamic cultures. In other words, what we are seeing, so the argument goes, is a clash between two irreconcilable cultures.

Of course, freedom of speech is not a cultural category in the sense of expressing western attitudes or codes of behaviour, where people can take a joke, appreciate irony or are simply more comfortable with differences of opinion. Freedom of speech is a political concept and the right to express ideas is something that people all over the world have struggled and sometimes died for, always in the face of opposition from powerful elites. The right to free expression won an important place at the heart of progressive political movements emerging in the wake of the Enlightenment, as ideas, opinions and argument replaced hierarchy, tradition and deference as the currency of public and political life. In other words, the assumption that free speech is a specifically western virtue (or vice depending on your point of view!) is not only arrogant, but misses the point.

Throughout the twentieth century, wherever people struggled for democracy, free speech became synonymous with political freedom, German revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg defined free speech as freedom to express oppositional and extremist views, not simply ideas that do not offend. The right to free speech cannot be partial, for it is based on a principle of, in Luxemburg's words, 'freedom for the other fellow'. Yet somehow in recent years, the most damaging assaults on the principle of free expression have originated as much from the inheritors of western democratic traditions, as from religious fundamentalist or conservative reactionaries.

As the Muslim Association of Britain was calling for a ban on expressions of 'Islamophobia', Britain's Labour government was arguing for laws to outlaw expressions of 'religious hatred' and the 'glorification of terrorism'. Not so much a clash of civilisations as two equally authoritarian bodies singing of the same hymn sheet.

Discussing the Danish cartoon protests with a Palestinian colleague from East Jerusalem, I asked him to explain the violence of the Muslim response. He was quick to point out that for many ordinary Arabs and Muslim people, anger towards the publication of the cartoons was not religiously motivated, but more an expression of political frustration. In this sense the cartoons were simply 'the straw that broke the camel's back'. He also suggested that this anger although directed at the West, might well have arisen from a sense of despair and alienation from political processes closer to home, where corrupt and authoritarian governments and oppressive theocracies symbolically attack western values while complying with the western powers in the on going 'war against terror'.

It's an interesting observation, for it suggests a parallel between political responses in the Islamic world and the West, where populations project their anger and cynicism outwards, expressing fears of Islamophobia or Islamic terror, rather than taking on the hard political issues at home.

A principled defense of free speech- including speech we find hateful- has to be at the heart of any progressive political movement and we in the West are doing no favours to people struggling for political freedom and democracy around the world by giving ground to censorship at home or abroad.

More censorship in the West simply strengthens the hand of authoritarian leaders in the Muslim world to censor their own citizens, while shifting politics out of the arena of open public debate back towards an era of conspiracy, secrecy and deal making between unrepresentative elites. In standing up for free speech we are not attacking Muslims but supporting human rights and political freedom for all.

Dublin riots

By Mags Glennon

There is something profoundly satisfying about observing the unbridled outrage of the Irish middle class. Well not the actual entire class itself, a boring enough bunch. More specifically the representatives and spokespeople for the establishment, and especially when they are caught unprepared for events and must try to analyse them retrospectively to their own, and their paymasters, satisfaction.

On February 25th a bit of rioting took place in Dublin, leading to the cancellation of a 'Love Ulster' parade that was planning to grace the capital's streets. The windows on a few commercial premises were smashed, some missiles were thrown at the cops, a couple of cars burned and the streets were blocked for a few hours. A dozen people received hospital treatment for minor injuries. No one died, World War Three it was not. However the riot was successful, in that it stopped the Orange march – hence the need for 110% opposition from all political, media and economic mouthpieces.

The night before the march Jeffrey Donaldson, who walked out of the Good Friday talks in 1998 before leaving the UUP in a hump and joining Paisley's gang, was interviewed on radio going on at length about 'tolerance', 'inclusion' and 'minority rights'. He was followed by Ruari O Bradaigh, who was obviously nonplussed by the unexpectedly liberal Donaldson rhetoric. However the change of line by loyalist political representatives has been in the making for several years now. Unionists have realised the political capital to be made from assuming victim status and have been attempting to outflank Provisional Sinn Fein in this regard. After the riots wee Jeffrey was reported to have opined "There is a Republican minority who don't want a Unionist about the place". In the world of loyalist spin Brookeborough's old anti-Taig invective is amended to present Unionism as the underdog, oppressed by the nationalists. While the falsity of this sound-bite victimhood may be obvious to those with more than a goldfish memory, it is clear that some commentators will eagerly seize on the theme; for instance recently Kevin Myers of the Irish Times has been propounding the bizarre notion that the Troubles were sparked by the 26 counties' commemoration of the 50th anniversary of 1916 in 1966.

The intended 'Love Ulster' March has been presented, and perceived, as many different things. Primarily it is a vehicle for Willie Frazer of FAIR (Families Acting for Innocent Relatives) to expand his one man band beyond the rather nasty little sectarian website he promotes and so gain some foothold for Unionism within the politically fashionable 'victim' milieu. Why it was necessary for this process to adopt the form of a march in Dublin is less clear. If the victims of violence involved had wished to meet with political parties or other interest groups in Dublin, or hold a commemoration at a relevant spot, or a press conference to highlight their concerns, it is highly unlikely anyone would have objected and their cause would still have gained media exposure.

During the post mortems an inkling of the real reason behind the march emerged from a Unionist MLA interviewed on TV who repeatedly referred to the event as a 'parade', not a 'march'. A march is primarily a protest event against the authorities, but this Orangeman defined a 'Parade' in the same manner as he would in the 6 counties – namely as a coat trailing exercise. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the fact that one of the 'Kick the Pope' bands, which had intended to lead the parade, concluded the day with their own private march along a few yards of an empty Kildare St. The issue involved was not victims at all, though some of the participants may have genuinely attended to mourn relatives. It was just the familiar and wearying old loyalist obsession of Orange boots marching on 'Taig' streets.

While various commentators tried to present the march as merely a normal 'demo' - and the objectors as "sectarian" and "fascists" - the truth was clear from several TV reports which described the march as a "Protestant" event. Imagine the outrage if any other political or protest group based itself solely on the victim status of people from just one religion? The media, determined to convey their own abject loyalty to the establishment and the police,

failed to examine any sectarian motivation for the march. Similarly the political parties rabbitted on with their usual cod liberalism, refusing to acknowledge the right of anyone to politically oppose the far right and sectarian views of the Orange Order. Just because the sashes were left at home for the day did not mean the organisers ceased to be Orangemen.

The contempt of the middle class establishment for the working class is so ingrained in the 26 counties that it is rarely commented upon, other than obliquely as in the 'humourous' Ross O Carroll-Kelly column in the 'Sunday Tribune'. That the opinions of the fictional Southside rucker bugger Ross might actually be merely a slightly exaggerated form of their own prejudices does not seem to occur to the media 'opinion formers'. However what the establishment rarely reveals is its naked fear and hatred of a roused working class.

Predictably enough the most visceral anti-Republican hatred and snobbery was evident in the coverage of Independent newspapers; 'well-oiled opportunists', 'commanders directing their forces', 'frighteningly ignorant sectarian mob', 'football hooligans', etc. One writer in the 'Sunday Blueshirt' even identified a particular Inner City Dublin way of smoking a cigarette! Our old friend Kevin Myers made it quite clear when he wrote "Somewhere out there in the undergrowth of our housing estates prowl the feral forms of Sinn Fein which regard the real violence and real killing of 1916 as the ideal behavioural template", the animalistic imagery drawn straight from 'Punch' magazine of the 1860s, to arouse fear in readers.

A more sober and accurate reflection was offered by Vincent Browne who wrote that "a factor in the riots was the alienation of a sizeable segment of Dublin working class youths from society and from Gardai in particular". Contrary to the intellectual snobbery of media commentators the rioters (opportunistic looters excluded) are politically educated, their views just do not happen to coincide with those of the establishment. This working class alienation from the State has proved a profitable electoral furrow for Provisional Sinn Fein in the past decade, but how long this remains the case is questionable given that party's desperate attempts to distance itself from the disturbances.

On the day itself Sinn Fein TD Sean Crowe was in attendance, calling the protesters "gurriers" and demanding that they "go home". Obviously a totally different Jack Crowe from the one involved in certain on-street activities at the British Embassy in 1981! Later in Leinster House he stated the riots were an absolute disgrace and that "Those who took part misused the name of Irish republicanism and Irish nationalism, but they were anything but Irish republicans or Irish nationalists in the real sense. This was a tiny and totally unrepresentative minority, a mixture of people on the fringes of micro-political groups, football hooligans and drink-fuelled opportunists. They were a rag bag who saw an opportunity to create havoc and they took it."

Crowe was also previously quoted as saying that any member of Provisional Sinn Fein convicted of involvement should be expelled from the party – quite an amazing sanction considering the blind eye the party has been willing to turn to past and current thuggery and criminality within the ranks of its movement. The micro-establishment party would appear willing to abandon members to the tender mercies of the Guards and McDowell's Free State 'justice' system. Crowe's neatly turned Dail rhetoric echoes directly the ranting of the tabloid editorials and a desperate desire to confine the definition of republicanism only to those who agree with him. No wonder most of the papers were willing to absolve Sinn Fein of the blame and to contrast "Respectable Sinn Fein" with 'Republican Sinn Fein'.

The political point is not a personalised one of getting at Sean Crowe or even the general membership of his party. It has been clear for at least the past decade that Sinn Fein has been engaged on a long and careful trek into the establishment, indeed the party has been congratulated for trooping it's supporters up the garden path with it. What was remarkable about the majority of the young Republicans – particularly the Celtic fans – rioting in Dublin was that they were not dissidents.

In the past decade Sinn Fein has concentrated on promoting its politics and merchandise among working class youth who follow Celtic. While few would actually be members of Sinn Fein the aim was to create a cultural milieu of support, hence the ballad sessions and chants of 'Sinn Fein' and 'Ooh, Aah, Up the 'RA'.

These young people have been encouraged to support Sinn Fein's politics and to oppose sectarian marches in the 6 counties. However when they organise politically to oppose an Orange march in their own town they are denounced as "gurriers" by someone they would see as a leader.

Obviously Sinn Fein themselves are aware of the political views of the Celtic fans, but were willing to dump on them from a height in the media and the Dail, which would seem to indicate the party feels strong enough to dispense with this area of its support in the further march towards respectability. Clearly the decision of the self proclaimed 'Republican Family' to abandon armed struggle has now been expanded to include opposition to civil disobedience actions as well.

When is policing not political

by Margaret O'Neill

An old question that the Irish used to ask was when is a policeman not a policeman and the answer was simple - never. In exactly the same way, you might ask the question; when is policing not political and the answer is exactly the same. Policing is always political.

When a police force enforces certain laws, they do so at the behest of the state and this in turn reflects the ethos of that regime. The laws on private property that the police in Cuba enforce are very different to those governing private wealth in the United States. The reason is obvious. One state declares everything except personal property as being held communally while in the other country the right to hoard vast quantities of private capital is deemed to be absolutely inviolable and in both cases the police forces will do exactly as their government orders.

There is only one exception to this rule and that is where there is a police state and that is still political policing, only the chief of police decides what politics to enforce directly.

There is something very dishonest, therefore, about the current Sinn Fein campaign against what they call 'political policing'. Their plan is probably to wring a few cosmetic concessions from the British government and insist that these mean an end to what they say is 'political policing'. In reality all they want to do is to be able to join the policing boards and have a fig leaf to cover their recommendation to young republicans to join the PSNI. What a rotten trick.

Whenever the twain shall meet

An interview with Eamonn McCann

Three years ago Eoin O'Broin of Sinn Fein rebuked Fourthwrite editor Tommy McKearney and left-wing political activist Eamonn McCann for suggesting that Mr O'Broin's party would be prepared to enter coalition with Fianna Fail and tolerate a centre-right economic agenda. Fourthwrite now interviews Eamonn McCann and asked him to reflect on the current state of Sinn Fein in relation to the centre-right.

FW: In light of their recent Ard Fheis, do you still believe that Sinn Fein is willing to enter into a coalition deal with the centre right parties in Dublin?

EMcC: Yes, I would have no doubt that Sinn Fein is capable of doing a deal with any of the centre right parties and I believe that coalition government in the south with a party of the centre right is the logical destination of the journey that they are now on. When I used the phrase that they are a centre right party I was referring to something quite specific. What I said, and would repeat is, that if we are to judge political parties on the basis of what they do when they get the opportunity, not on the basis of the policies they espouse, but on the action that they take in office, then it seems to me that Sinn Fein could be said to be a centre right party in relation to economic matters. I said that their economic performance in the Northern Executive, which is the only experience we can go on. As far as the Sinn Fein party is concerned and on any conventional analysis, the policies that they implemented then were of the centre right.

They went along with the drift toward public/private partnerships (PFI's). Martin McGuinness and Bairbre De Bruin, dropped the woman's right to choose issue like a hot potato and indeed had to be taken to court by the Family Planning Association of Northern Ireland to Ms. De Bruin to issue guidelines. They weren't even asking her to change the law or to introduce a bill, but to clarify the circumstances in which doctors and others in the Health Service in the north could terminate a pregnancy, which she refused to do. That case is still outstanding after all these years despite policies on a woman's right to choose being passed by the party's Ard Fheis. That is the best evidence that we can have as to what a party would do in office.

The circumstances are different, of course, in the south. There wouldn't be semi-compulsory coalition in the south. It would be a much more voluntary exercise than it was in the north. Nevertheless, what we can say on the basis of the northern experience is that Sinn Fein has got no objection, in principle, to the type of centre right economic policies which Fianna Fail, for example, would be perfectly happy with.

FW: Surely in the light of Sinn Fein's recent opposition to the Bolkestien agreement, Sinn Fein would be able to push Fianna Fail to the left?

EMcC: If Sinn Fein and Fianna Fail go into office together it will be on the basis of economics which Fianna Fail can accept. Let us keep in mind, in discussing the possibility of Fianna Fail/Sinn Fein coalition, that the leader of Fianna Fail has declared himself to be a socialist. The leader of Fianna Fail, he said that he was against the Iraq War, which cannot be reconciled with everything he has done to facilitate it. So we are dealing here with people of infinite subtlety and suppleness.

There might well be tensions between people in and around Sinn Fein and the leadership, were they to go into a coalition, but Sinn Fein is also a party of great discipline. Discipline forged over many years. Hard struggle in the north, which demanded discipline, when you didn't think too much about your politics and just followed the leader.

It is quite likely that Sinn Fein will get around 15 seats in the next election and will do better than most pundits expect. They will be very disappointed if they don't take two seats in Donegal, for example. I think they will be quite a substantial party after the next election.

I think it is possible that they and Fianna Fail together could get a majority and if the figures and the arithmetic are right I think that they'll go for it.

FW: How might impact then on Social Partnership arrangements?

EMcC: It should not be very different to what it is at the moment and the tensions within and surrounding the social partnership at the minute are not going to go away, irrespective of who signs what. GAMA, Irish Ferries, the building workers,...a whole series of things produces the gathering anger that forced Dunnes Stores, for example, to back off in north Dublin recently.

That sort of anger is out there, it is unfocused at the minute and incoherent in many ways but it is there and the key question in relation to the social partnership and another deal, seems to me to be whether the discontent at grassroots level finds a focus and finds political ...and by political I don't mean single political party, I mean an organised focus.

If it does then I think we are in for a rough ride in industrial matters, irrespective of who is there.

FW: Mick O'Reilly of the AT&GWU made a proposal prior to last year's Labour Party conference that would effectively have meant a form of re-alignment on the left. Green's, Sinn Fein, the Labour Party, the Socialist Party and a number of left-leaning independents would form a block in Leinster House...would that offer a real alternative in your opinion?

EMcC: It is certainly an intriguing prospect that Mick O'Reilly suggested. Yet the parties that he mentioned, the two largest of them anyway, that is the Labour Party and Sinn Fein, are both parties who have a pragmatic attitude toward coalition with right-wing parties. So he is suggesting that they might come together with smaller groups possibly and individuals in a left alternative. I'm not sure how left it would be. I'm not quite sure what things might be achieved, say, if Gerry Adams and Pat Rabbitte were to form an alliance. It would be full of tension and what would be in it for either party? The practicalities of it escape me.

It would be more constructive to suggest discussing a programme on which they might unite. That is where the discussion should be focused, a programme of no coalition with right wing parties and one in defence of union organisation, and no partnership either. If we are talking about that then let's see who comes on board. That seems to me to be a constructive way to go about it.

FW: How do you think things should be progressed at the moment?

EMcC: There is a need certainly for unity on the left but the question which arises on what programme. There ought to be a left alternative, so that people whether they are in Sligo or Waterford or Dublin or Donegal or Dundalk or wherever, that everybody should have the opportunity of voting for a coherent left wing approach to the problems facing us. It doesn't need to be done - and ought not to be done - on the basis of trying to get everybody to agree on a philosophy or even a detailed programme.

But an electoral alliance based on half a dozen propositions should be possible. A programme centring on opposition to social partnership, opposition to anti immigration law, welcoming immigrants with full rights, support for all workers in struggle, opposition to corruption and absolutely crucial, - right at the start of it would have to be no support for any coalition with a right wing party, no support for any government dominated by right wing parties.

It should be saying that it will not support Fianna Fail or Fine Gael and would not go into government with them and won't vote for a Taoiseach from either of these parties. This half way house in Irish politics where you stay outside of coalition but you vote for them in crucial divisions (specifically in the election of Taoiseach) in order to get the government on their way is something we must have none of.

When you talk about left unity, I envisage such a platform including people who might not regard themselves as being on the left at all.

People who have been going around the country speaking to various campaigners, like Frank McBrearty, the Rossport Five. People who by any conventional definition are what Europeans call left wingers, but who don't see themselves as that at all and would say 'I'm not a socialist'.

I think the structure of a left block should be loose. My experience, particularly in the north over the past few years leads me to believe that it is futile and a waste of time and energy trying to get individual left wing groups to agree to come together to some formal arrangement.

However, an electoral alliance is something simple, where you don't stand against one another and where you could stand whether you are Socialist Party or SWP or whatever you are, on the campaign for this or that. The key thing is not to get a united slate for an election. The key thing then is the extent to which that slate would represent real struggle and real voices on the ground and grassroots organisations.

That is the sort of unity that matters and I would like to see the electoral strategy as being part of building that grassroots unity across the country.

Successful Trip to the USA

Report by Matt Siegfried

A recent speaking tour of the East Coast and Midwest of the United States is described by Vice President of the Independent Workers Union, Patricia Campbell as “a real success” and one of the most exciting and politically satisfying experiences abroad in her many years as a political and trade union activist.

Ms Campbell started her tour, which was sponsored by the US socialist group Solidarity, in Philadelphia addressing fellow trade union and radical activists. A packed schedule in Detroit brought her to the attention of left-progressive political talk show, widely listened to and hosted by Peter Werbe. Thousands of US listeners heard the Vice President of the IWU express the merits of building an independent union in Ireland. The Tyrone woman explained how the IWU was established two years ago because the “mainstream” trade union movement in Ireland is now so conservative and timid it is afraid to challenge the bosses and the state.

She reminded listeners that this drift and the development of a social partnership were akin to what is happening in the USA. Ms. Campbell said that she had met with trade union activists in Detroit who were at the centre of resistance to the continued betrayal of the bureaucracy of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and unions whose decline corresponds to their continued drift towards “partnership”. It was to resist this drift that the IWU was formed in Ireland.

On the issue of democracy within the trade union movement she said, “workers should be in control of the unions, not bureaucrats”. She went on to explain that members paying for representation should get representation. “Technically speaking”, she said “paid representatives are the employee of those paying for their representation and they should therefore take their direction from the union members.”

When challenged by the broadcaster that many listeners may take the view that her socialist thinking was out dated she gave a powerful and spirited response. She made the point that any rights workers had left were not given to them but they were hard fought for by our predecessors and it is up to us to ensure that their struggle was not in vain and that those rights are upheld. She said; “you are the workers, you are the people who got up this morning to teach the children, to serve the food, to drive the trucks, or to tend the sick, and every thing else you can imagine. You are in the majority. You should have the power”

While in Detroit she met and addressed a range of different organizations and groups, which included women’s groups, college students and a very inspiring and informative meeting with key leaders of Detroit’s Palestine Office. Ms Campbell was shocked to learn that around 16,000 Muslims and Arabs have been deported from the United States in recent years while 3,000 are missing and unaccounted for. This meeting was also important in highlighting the similarity of the difficulties in rebuilding a radical social movement for change in the seemingly diverse worlds of struggle; Palestine, Ireland and the United States.

A Solidarity sponsored event at the International Institute of Detroit gave an audience of veteran Irish republican activists, young people and radicals the opportunity to hear Patricia speak on the failures of the Irish “peace process” as well as what is next for social justice movements in Ireland. During the question and answer portion of the event, the discussion turned to the work of the Independent Workers’ Union and class politics in a divided society.

The Tyrone woman was an honoured guest at Eastern Michigan University as part of their program to celebrate Black History Month; Patricia was the only non black speaker in the month long program. She compared the African American Civil Rights struggle with that in Ireland. She drew parallels between Rosa Parks, a black woman who refused to give up her seat on a bus in Alabama in the late 1960s and Annie Mary Gildernew a Tyrone woman who squatted into a house in the late 1960s. Both women did what they did out of principle she said.

Ms Campbell also commented on the racist nature of the southern Irish State, pointing out that rich Asians were invited to come to Ireland while hundreds of poor Africans were being deported. She commented that this was particularly shameful given Ireland's history of emigration and the racist attitudes that confronted Irish people in the land of their immigration.

When asked from the audience what she would like to see happening in the USA she made the point that far be it from her to come in to any country and tell them what to do, but she would, however, recommend the establishment of an Independent Workers Union. She also said that she would like to see the Black communities finishing off what wasn't completed in the late 1960s and 70s. "Since touring Detroit I am reminded of how race and class functions in the US; that black people do not have equal or civil rights." In the United States class as an issue was laid bare in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

She finished her three week tour in New York City and Connecticut where she met fellow trade union activists, transit workers (who had recently shut down New York City before the holidays in a heroic strike for their own and future workers and pensions and job security) and long time Irish republican activists in the city. She gave a talk at the union hall for Broadway musicians that was co-hosted by the important US workers' resource Labor Notes to discuss "Workers Rights in a Global Economy".

Her final engagement was as guest speaker at Central Connecticut State University. Here she gave talks to student audiences on the Irish Question and Revolution. She updated those present on the situation of the current political process in which she described as a 'failed strategy'. "The republican movement has been taken over by the ideology of radical nationalism, and that nationalism has come to terms with the British State, they have embedded themselves with the establishment and they are now parked with the rest of the establishment," she said.

The trip has laid the basis for continued collaboration and solidarity between socialists and trade unionists in Ireland and the US. Patricia and the comrades from the United States look forward to that work. Patricia has been invited to, and will attend, the 25th Anniversary Commemoration of the 1981 Hunger Strikes in New York City. As well as that she will attend the bi-annual conference of Labor Notes as a representative of the IWU in Detroit which draws thousands of militant and reform-minded trade unionist from across the US and around the world.

Patricia Told Fourthwrite: "I met so many wonderful people and I finally got to meet regular contributor to Fourthwrite, Matt Siegfried. He and his committed colleagues made this very worthwhile trip possible. In an era of reactionary politics I am inspired by their commitment to justice, socialism and international politics. They are true activists and comrades. It will be people like Matt who will ensure that this era is only temporary.

If only the little children of Iraq could see the people who brave sub zero temperatures to hold their vigil every Saturday at Ann Arbor calling for an end to US occupation of Iraq".

Who won at Irish Ferries?

by John McAnulty

The mass mobilisation of a substantial section of the Irish working class in support of Irish Ferries workers on 9th December last was followed rapidly by a settlement of the dispute and by claims of victory by the Trade Unions

Was the settlement a victory? The issue is quite important as it will decide the future evolution of the struggle of the working class for some time to come. If the campaign was a victory then ICTU do have a viable strategy and an alliance with the union bureaucracy appears a realistic option. If Irish Ferries was not a victory then the union leaderships have been fighting a sham fight and continued attempts to build an alliance with them is simply an expensive way of committing suicide which leaves the working class defenceless.

Following the deal SIPTU Vice President, Brendan Hayes claimed: "The Union has been successful in ensuring that the threshold of decency has been defended and that vulnerable migrant maritime workers have the protection of Irish law... One of our key objectives was the payment of the Irish minimum wage and this has now been achieved." "The terms and conditions for both officers and ratings will far exceed those originally proposed. A framework agreement which will legally protect all employees – irrespective of the flag under which the company registers its vessels – has been agreed," Collins added.

All of this is a definition of victory as anything less than what the company first demanded. From this perspective the defeat of British workers in the Gate Gourmet dispute was a stunning victory. For the union bureaucracy and their supporters 'victory' is wages slashed in half, conditions of service torn up, the company offering a redundancy (in reality a worker replacement) deal that had been on the table from the beginning, the reflagging of the ships with the 'legally binding' guarantee that Irish employment law would apply.

Only the last element could be thought of as any kind of defence for workers in the company, but it has all the signs of a face-saver for the unions. Why would Irish Ferries fight to the death to reflag and then give up the very thing that reflagging gives them – the ability to drive wages and conditions to their absolute minimum? An unpublicised 3-year no-strike clause puts the remaining workers in the company in handcuffs when the company move to redefine the deal later on.

How could defeat be snatched from the jaws of victory following the mass mobilisation of Irish workers on 9th December? What we have to understand is that the mobilisation was under the control of the union bureaucracy. It did not represent a break from the decades of social partnership with Government and employers.

The political line of the bureaucracy was perfectly expressed by the Labour Party, who marched under the banner 'Partnership, not piracy' – ignoring the fact that it was partnership that had weakened the workers movement and created the piracy.

The aim of the December mobilisations was threefold. It shored up the position of the union leadership with their rank and file. It enabled the leadership to get back in control of a situation that actually only became a crisis through spontaneous action by workers occupying and blockading the ferries and it lastly was a show of strength aimed to squeeze more from the negotiations.

With this perspective, the union leadership were not adopting mass mobilisation as a strategy, nor moving into conflict with their partners, but using a tactic of limited and tightly controlled mobilisation as a counter used in their real method of operation – behind the scenes diplomacy with government and bosses. They quickly closed down the mobilisations and began the drive for a new partnership deal.

The problem for workers is that the union's strategy did not result in any gain for them or even effective defence of existing conditions. Rather it had ICTU rubberstamping the bosses attack and demobilising the resistance. Yet Irish Ferries is simply the first wave in a storm of deregulation, privatisation, wage cuts and job losses sweeping across the country.

To defeat the coming offensive the workers will need the power of rank and file mobilisation demonstrated during the ferries dispute. They will also need ways of overcoming the disinformation, demobilisation and betrayal of the ICTU and SITPU leaderships.

Suspicious minds

by Siobhan Ní Dhuibhir

The recent furore about convicted sex offenders being allowed to work in schools has started another Labour Party over reaction and has once again told us to be afraid of everyone and trust no-one. Is that really the type of society we want to live in?

The issues raised by the recent stories about the monitoring of sex offenders and the vetting system employed to do so, is the latest in a long line of incidents that are used by the Government to invoke fear and loathing of each other. It is a completely anti-humanist view of the world and is creating a society that is not only afraid but more and more reactionary. Who are sex offenders and what is their level of risk to children generally?

Are they able to be treated and change their behaviour or will they always remain a risk? These are the questions that a rational debate might address and society generally might be reassured that those who work in this area including the police, prisons and probation are in control of the situation. They might also accept that in order to maintain civil liberties and democratic values, that a small amount of risk is worth accepting. Unfortunately, that is not how any of these debates are conducted and it is not just the media who are to blame for that.

The media and Western Governments have very cosy relationships at the moment. The media are guilty of massive self censorship and passive acceptance of Government lines on most issues as well as sensationalising events to get the Government to react. However, for Blair and other powerful leaders to blame the media for getting things out of perspective and forcing them to respond to public opinion is not a plausible explanation of what is going on. The West is experiencing a crisis of political confidence and therefore, lurches from one public opinion debacle to another so they are reacting rather than implementing a political vision or ideology. They don't have a political ideology to implement so they create crises at home and a scary enemy overseas.

The worst outcome of this lack of political ideology is not only the fearful, anti-human society that it is creating but that we are all party to it and internalise a lot of the negative messages almost without realising it. Therefore, we are not attacking the Government for their lack of political belief and vision but are involved in single issue campaigns based on fear and powerlessness. Now, I almost long for the days of Thatcher for at least I knew she had a political vision and ideology that I could disagree with and fight against! The next time you are listening to a story about the latest crime or danger try and analyse it from the view of a humanist who is still trying to believe in the ability of people to change things for the better and maybe you will feel less afraid and more able to challenge.

Standing on the Backbone

By Alex Mac Robb

With the ending of its four-month cease-fire, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) Central Committee adopted a document in which it announced its intention to launch an offensive known as, "Standing on the backbone and hitting the head". The backbone in question refers to the Monarchist State's major highways and suburbs, while the head refers to the strategically weak links of the enemy, in the capital and regional headquarters.

This unilateral cease-fire that had begun on 3rd September last year had allowed the party to initiate a program of mass mobilisations scheduled to end along with the cease-fire on 3rd December. The party's declared agenda was the final overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the People's Republic of Nepal. This campaign involved countrywide propaganda with a view to drawing more and more of the masses to the Maoist program.

With 80 percent of the country, including most of the countryside in Maoist hands, Nepal's King Gyanendra, who, in February last year attempted to stabilise his authority by dismissing parliament, has now succeeded in driving the country's parliamentary parties into open opposition against him. While the People's Liberation Army's advances had been causing him to increasingly confine the Royal Nepalese Army to barracks, the Monarchy took advantage of the cease-fire to go into areas where it had previously been unable to patrol, conducting a killing campaign of those it considered to be Maoist sympathisers.

In spite of such provocation, the CPN (M) maintained and extended its cease-fire until January 2nd when, in a statement announcing the resumption of combat, Chairman Prachanda stated: "It would be not only impossible but suicidal to extend the cease-fire in the face of the fascistic new activities of the Royal Army... We also want to repeat that we will assist as far as possible the peaceful movement of the seven political parties".

It was late last year that the opposition alliance of the seven parliamentary parties and the CPN (M) signed a 12-point memo of joint struggle against the monarchy. After the cease-fire both these forces unleashed combined blows against the monarchy, through both the People's War and widespread street demonstrations.

The new military offensive of the CPN (M) and clashes between demonstrators and the police in Kathmandu and other major cities have been on a scale and level of violence not seen in decades. While the BBC reported extensive government losses when the PLA ambushed an RNA patrol south of the capital on 21st January, huge demonstrations rocked Kathmandu itself, police using water cannons, tear gas and batons against protesters.

Clashes between the RNA and PLA were also reported in villages 50km south of Pokhara, a city to the west of the capital. Declaring their intention to boycott the monarchy's attempts to hold municipal elections on the 8th February, the PLA continued to inflict serious losses on the RNA in battles across widely separated areas. By the 27th January more riots led to the government introducing curfews to retain control.

On the anniversary of the king's coup on the 1st February, the PLA took over the district headquarters in Palpa, central Nepal the RNA arsenal being captured with no civilian casualties. On the election day itself, the PLA launched attacks in Dhankuta, in eastern Nepal, and in Kailali district in the west.

That same day, the RNA opened fire on an anti-monarchy demonstration in the south-western city of Dang. Due to the widespread boycott, there were no elections in a quarter of the country's 4000 municipalities, the BBC estimating that only 10 percent of voters had cast their ballots.

The following day, in the Nawalparasi district, Central Nepal, the PLA destroyed an RNA convoy on the Makendra highway leading to the capital, some of the RNA soldiers captured in Palpa taking part in this action. Some RNA soldiers captured in Nawalparasi also asked to stay with the PLA when they were released in the presence of journalists and human rights representatives. Once again, rioting rocked the capital.

On the same day as the elections, the Washington Post reported that, "... some Nepalese journalists and analysts have begun to speculate about the odds of a military coup, or perhaps a hurried departure by the royal family in the dead of night, spelling the end of the troubled Hindu dynasty... Late last year, Gyanendra travelled to several African countries, prompting speculation that he might have been scouting a potential refuge."

Faced with the re-emergence of revolutionary communism on the world stage and the fact that the CPN (M)'s parliamentary adversaries are now treating the party as a legitimate political force, the US Ambassador, James F. Moriarty, has stated his country's concerns. Declaring that the US continues to oppose any government involving the Maoists,

Moriarty claimed that the parliamentary parties might come to regret the, "clammy embrace of a violence-endorsing totalitarian movement". Chairman Prachanda however, unimpressed by the familiar declarations issuing from Washington, echoed Mao Tse-Tung himself recently when he asserted that: "The right to rebel against feudal atrocity is the greatest human right of the Nepalese people at this time".

Fighting for Democracy, Independence, and Socialism

by Steve Bloom

'For a Democratic Socialist Republic'. These words grace the masthead of Fourthwrite. If we include (as seems appropriate) in the idea of "democracy" the question of national independence, then this captures the sentiments of freedom fighters in many countries besides Ireland. And yet, based on the experience of the 20th century, one might well conclude that genuinely merging the struggle for democracy and national independence with the struggle for socialism is one of the most difficult things anyone has ever tried to accomplish. The goal of this article is to pose the question: Why should this be true? Is there anything that can be done about it? ...

Steve Bloom

In Ireland, as the struggle for independence grew stronger during the 1970s and early '80s its pro-socialist component grew weaker. Clearly this is not just an Irish problem. During the same period in South Africa, as the African National Congress moved closer and closer to power, that organisation and its ideology moved further and further from any social and economic goals that would put it in conflict with the maintenance of capitalism (or with the global neoliberal agenda).

During the 1960s in Palestine there were strong pro-socialist currents within the liberation movement. By the time the Palestinian Authority was established and given a small slice of power—to help control mass sentiment in the West Bank and Gaza—these currents had withered to virtually nothing.

And more recently in Brazil the overwhelming majority elected Lula president in 2002, believing thereby that they were taking a step toward both independence from foreign domination of their country and a more egalitarian society. But the actions of the Lula government in power have fallen far short of such expectations, attempting to engineer a historic compromise with the native elites and the imperialist powers rather than engage them in any kind of serious struggle. Very little has actually changed, nor is there any real prospect for change in the future so long as Lula remains president.

More generally, if we look at the anti-colonial struggle since the second world war we could note dozens of examples of processes where the establishment of "national independence," without challenging the grip of capitalism domestically or the "world market" internationally, has led to something that is, in fact, only a shell of independence. Throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America we can see "independent nations" that have economies, and even formal governments, which are essentially clients of other states—those that control most of the wealth and military power in the world.

There is one recent counter-example that is worth looking at as well, however: Venezuela. Here the government of Hugo Chavez, in the process of fighting to win real national independence from US domination, has begun to develop a more and more openly socialist ideology. Some look at Bolivia today and see a similar potential after the election of indigenous peasant leader Evo Morales as president of the country. And if we go back almost half a century it is reasonable to assess what happened in Cuba as a process of winning both national liberation and moving toward a socialist society—an example that still stands as a beacon for others, especially in Latin America.

These counterexamples point to another side of the reality we are trying to grapple with, and may give us some insight into a deeper understanding: As a combined struggle for national liberation/democracy and socialism begins to develop, it is precisely a visible commitment to egalitarian principles on the part of its leading political cadre that can best mobilise support at the base, among the working masses, thereby strengthening the fight for national liberation in a way that cannot be achieved without such a commitment. Clearly, had there been no process of this kind, Cuba could never have withstood a combined economic, ideological, and military assault by the USA for so many decades.

Nor could Chavez effectively resist the counterrevolutionary efforts of Washington and the Venezuelan ruling elites (armed forces) today.

But such a realisation, given the reality of the world we live in, only leads us back to our original question: If the combined process is so strong, why are there so few examples of success since the second world war? Here I think we can point to a number of general factors:

While the most conscious elements tend to understand that the struggle is a combined one—for both national liberation and socialism—there is, almost invariably, a significant layer among both the masses and any leadership that will not. The elements of national oppression, separated out and considered in themselves, are most likely to animate this layer, shaping its ideology and consciousness. So long as consciousness remains focused solely on the fight for democracy/national liberation, there is a strong danger that winning formal national independence will be perceived as a successful culmination of the struggle, no matter what the actual social content of that independence turns out to be.

Those who currently hold both economic and political power over the nation in question (whether an imperialist country formally or their clients among the resident elites) will tenaciously cling to power as long as they can. However, if and when their position becomes genuinely threatened by a mass movement, they are prepared to sacrifice political power if they must so long as they can do so while still maintaining economic power. In reality, maintaining their grip on economic power will almost always allow them to control and dominate political processes.

A current ruling elite that is prepared to act as described in point 2 can lavish a leadership of the national struggle that is willing to compromise with substantial money, political power, and prestige. It can also use ideological tools to “spin” the process—often convincing both the mass movement and the former leadership of the national struggle that they have not compromised anything fundamental, merely “entered a new stage.”

Even those who understand that the struggle is a combined one—for both national liberation and socialism—often have difficulty trying to establish an appropriate strategic balance between these factors. This is especially true because the appropriate balance is specific and unique to each unfolding process, and will shift as the process unfolds. Too often pro-socialist forces have tended toward abstentionism when a particular struggle develops in ways that stress its “national liberation” aspect, thereby ceding leadership of the national struggle to those who may be actively opposed to socialist goals. At other times a socialist current can mistakenly place itself in opposition to leaders who start out with a predominantly nationalist ideology, but who are capable of learning from the movement itself and coming to socialist conclusions. (We note, for example, the outright hostility many on the left expressed toward Chavez in Venezuela during the earliest stages of the process there.)

One element that has contributed to our ideological difficulty has been the distortion of socialist ideology in the USSR during the 1930s (and other countries subsequently) that became identified as “communism” and “Marxism” in every-day discourse. Thus those who want to talk about “socialism” in relation to national liberation struggles today must overcome a legacy that identifies “socialism” in the popular mind with a failed bureaucratic and totalitarian model.

Another factor that affects each and every case is, clearly, the overall relationship of forces, in a social-military sense, with imperialism generally and with the USA in particular. Some argue that a level of national independence can be established that does not directly challenge capitalist property, thereby avoiding a direct military threat from the USA, whereas any effort to move toward an egalitarian economic system would severely escalate the danger. Such a viewpoint cannot be lightly dismissed, since the problem is real enough.

We can point to Cuba, however, which shows at the very least that it can be done. True: Cuba caught the US military machine disarmed ideologically at first, and therefore unprepared to deal with the situation until it was already too dangerous.

But the process in Venezuela also, clearly, cannot be resolved through purely military means—so long as the masses are prepared to mobilise in defense of their democratic choices. This is one key factor: the level of preparedness of the mass movement to defend itself, and the nation as a whole, against outside attack. As the experience in Iraq demonstrates, even in a country where there is no mass mobilisation around a perspective of socialism, a determined indigenous resistance with even a modicum of mass support is difficult to defeat through purely military methods.

And if there is a credible possibility for resistance in Cuba, Venezuela, and Iraq taken individually, that possibility grows qualitatively with each additional nation that joins in any contemporary axis of resistance. How much greater would the possibilities for all nations engaged in this kind of struggle be, for example, if Brazil, or Argentina, or South Africa, or Ireland were to join Cuba and Venezuela in directly challenging the domination of profit domestically, and of the world market?

What conclusions can we draw from considering these factors? Clearly, they help us to understand what we are up against in the effort to combine national liberation with socialist revolution, and why this has been so difficult historically. The task before us is to consciously develop a cadre that understands the reality we confront. Leaders are needed who will not sell out for personal gain and who will not compromise the stated social goals of a movement in the name of “national independence”—when that means capitulating to the global status-quo. At the same time we cannot reject any and all compromise since every real revolution must compromise on secondary factors in order to achieve its primary objectives. One key is, clearly, learning how to tell the difference between these two things. I know that I have only scratched the surface of this problem in these notes. But it is my hope that what I have written might stimulate others to contribute additional thoughts and thereby represent a small contribution to developing the broader understanding that we need.

The night Bobby Sands died

by Patricia Campbell

We got to the H Block office in Coalisland around 8pm on the evening of May 4th 1981, Bobby Sands was on the 66th day of his hunger strike and he was in a coma. Reports of his condition were coming in from Belfast. It was countdown now to his death. Unlikely that he would survive the night, we had resigned ourselves to the fact that he was going to die. Even if Thatcher relented it was too late for him now he would surely be brain damaged if there was intervention at this late stage.

We sat in the office, enough space for us all to meet and share collective thoughts, which engulfed us. We were the young people of Tyrone; Colm McGirr who was to die two years later was there that night. He was shot dead by the British SAS in 1983. This was the office we spent most of our days now. No plush carpets or modern furniture, just the bare essentials, chairs to sit on, a desk, a gas heater and one telephone to communicate with a world that was watching us with curiosity. This was the office we opened for Bobby's election campaign a few weeks previously. It had been the height of activity. We had sat up to the wee small hours handwriting envelopes to every address in the area asking them to vote for Bobby Sands.

The H. Block office was one of the focal points in this part of Tyrone for electioneering activity. It was here we shared the laughs and tales of devilment and it was here we worked from morning to night to get him elected. The world's media had been here. We had written on the outside wall 'Bobby Sands MP' on the day he was elected. Exhilarated and jubilant that day, we had won. We believed his life would be saved because the people of Fermanagh/South Tyrone had democratically spoken. The Brits would have to see sense and concede the prisoners demands. The whole nightmare would be over – not so! Now we were sitting in this office preparing for the long night ahead, waiting for Bobby's death.

The call came shortly after 1.17am, the official time of his death. Bobby was dead. The sense of sadness was unspeakable. Even though we were on vigil waiting for his death we were devastated none the less. The office got busy the phone was constantly engaged one call after another. A US journalist called to enquire of Bernadette's reaction to his death. "We're sure she must be as sad as we are" the journalist was told.

Bernadette McAliskey, a mother of three young children at the time communicated with us from home. She was recovering from her wounds following an attack on her and her husband by loyalists. British death squads were systematically murdering prominent members of the H Block Committee. Bernadette and her husband miraculously survived an attack a few weeks earlier, but despite her need to convalesce she continued to be active in the campaign.

Reports were coming in about the sounding of bin lids and rioting in Belfast. In contrast, Coalisland was asleep. We finally closed the office at 5am. As we locked the door a police car came out of the police barracks which overlooked the office. They drove slowly by. We knew our every word and moves were being monitored and we knew what fear was but we weren't afraid.

We assembled in Coalisland Square the next evening for the laying of wreaths and prayers. There was a large attendance; with black armbands and black flags the mood was sombre. Bernadette wasn't able to make it she was otherwise engaged. She chose and left instruction for me to read out to the crowd, one of Bobby's writings, 'The Lark and the Freedom Fighter'. It is one of my favourites and is special for me to this day.

The late Oliver O'Neill, a leading H Block campaigner was in charge of proceedings that night. He was a deeply religious and spiritual man. In the months that followed, Oliver insisted that the rainfall at the funerals of nine more hunger strikers was Mother Ireland shedding a tear for her brave sons. Oliver in his 40's advocated peaceful protest at all times.

He kept us young ones in line. When proceedings were over that night many people dispersed. There was an eerie silence and a feeling of expectation.

Then it happened – like a swarm of bees' dozens of young masked men came running through the town. They had with them a homemade trolley fashioned from a sheet of wood with pram wheels cleverly fixed beneath it, to convey bricks, which they had taken from the local brickyard. There was a piece of rope attached to pull it along. Oliver stood with outstretched arms in front of the barracks begging the young lads not to attack. He couldn't contain the tide of anger; he might as well have been trying to stop a tsunami.

The young men started to pelt the Barracks with bricks and petrol bombs. We knew it was time to get out of the crossfire. Some of us stood at the edge of the town listening to the sound of deadly plastic bullets being discharged with hate from the RUC guns. The sky was alight and we feared for our brothers, friends and neighbours. We felt powerless that night. In the years that followed we learned to turn that powerlessness into empowerment and there are those of us who still have that sense of resolve to this day.

Memories of the 1981 Hunger Strike will be continued in the next edition of Fourthwrite

British Intelligence's biggest setback

Fifty years ago, British Intelligence was rocked by one of the worst blows it had suffered in its long history. Two of its top agents, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean presented themselves to the international press-corp in Moscow and declared that they had decided to relocate to Moscow in order to promote 'better understanding between the Soviet union and the West'. In other words, they had escaped to the USSR before their cover as Soviet agents had been discovered by their employers in London.

The defection of Burgess and Maclean to the communist block, greatly damaged a whole host of long held British upper class illusions. The pair had been educated at Cambridge, were from the ruling elite, spoke with posh accents and were viewed therefore as being utterly reliable, loyal to the Crown and above suspicion. To a certain extent, British Intelligence had been built upon these type of assumptions and when the pair of Cambridge graduates turned up in KGB protection, an entire era ended. It took a period of time of course before the full impact of what had happened was understood.

There was a great reluctance among the ruling class in Britain in general and its security service in particular to recognise just how compromised its structures were. There was, however, an uneasy feeling that other Soviet double agents were still within the security service and these fears grew among suspicious intelligence personnel, when later in that year, Britain foolishly embroiled itself in a disastrous war in Egypt. Several British Intelligence officials feared that the USSR appeared too sure that the rift between Britain and the USA was the real thing and not an elaborate bluff.

Their fears were proved correct seven years later when one of British Intelligence's most important officers - head of counter intelligence, Kim Philby - also crossed over to the Soviets and let it be known that he had been working for them for over thirty years. Philby was not the last. Anthony Blunt was also revealed to be a double agent in 1979. Were there others in the ranks? Difficult to say. Spies rarely reveal their existence voluntarily and some are never exposed

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