

Escaping an historical trap

The problem is wrongly stated, in my view, when the call is for the removal of British troops. British troops are in Northern Ireland because there we have a malfunctioning political unit.

It was relatively peaceful from Partition to the time of the Civil Rights Movement, but incredibly unjust and unequal. Then there was a peaceful protest asking for one person, one vote, equality in housing, and equality in access to jobs, and people were attacked and burned out of their houses because they joined that peaceful democratic protest. The Northern Ireland state looked on or joined in.

It's because of that that British troops were sent in, and because of that that the IRA were reborn. The IRA had practically gone out of existence after its Border Campaign in the '50s, but the violent response to the civil rights movement led to the re-establishment of the IRA by public demand.

Soon we got internment, and the troops moved against the nationalist community.

The call for the withdrawal of British troops is an inadequate and muddled demand. What we have to have is a new political settlement in Ireland including the removal of British troops, and that has to be done in a responsible way that minimises disruption and the risk of violence.

The first stage is the maturing of the political debate in Britain beyond the sort of instinctive aspiration to withdrawal that is reflected in the opinion polls.

Then, I think, you give a commitment to British disengagement — without a time limit, that's my own view. The way I see it is that you might win it on the left, then in the labour movement, and get into a position where the British Labour Party would fight a general election on a commitment to organise a disengagement from Ireland.

The Partition of Ireland has made the situation very complicated. You can't pretend that it's a straight decolonisation. It's more complex.

You have to look at Britain's most irresponsible decolonisation, and that's Palestine. Look at all the suffering and mayhem there's been because of Britain's irresponsibility. If anyone says it's all imperialist to talk about the detail of how you go, I'd just ask them to look seriously at Palestine, and see how much better Britain could have done by all the people who live there.

But you turn a historical corner when you get that far, that you've got a British Labour government elected on a commitment to disengage itself from Ireland. The Protestant Irish will know that that is what the British people say.

They know it anyway. They discuss



Clare Short MP talked to Workers' Liberty about Ireland. She has been the central figure in the new 'Time To Go' campaign

the idea that one day there'll be a united Ireland — they just argue to defer it, "not in my lifetime."

You would begin the process of constitutional talks, with the British government, the Irish government, and all the parties in Northern Ireland, talking about the civil and religious liberties that would have to be secured. I think the ideal is a new constitution for the whole island of Ireland, though I know that Haughey has proposed what he calls a Scottish solution. Scotland has a different legal system and a different education system as one part of a united country, and that's an option for Northern Ireland to be negotiated over.

You begin the process, at the same time as those constitutional talks are going on, of uniting the transport system, agriculture, energy and other infrastructure. And you'd get into a "virtuous circle". Nationalist paramilitary activity would cease. The IRA would stop their campaign. So you could get rid of all the repressive legislation and the Diplock courts, and start releasing some of the prisoners from both communities. You could create a momentum of positive hopefulness.

Then you move as quickly as you can. I don't think you can put a deadline on it. You have to disengage responsibly, in a process of cooperation, consultation and new constitution-building.

But it isn't necessarily the only option. And if you did go for it — would the region be the Six Counties? Would it be the old Ulster? How much would there be decentralisation of power and a risk of continuing discrimination?

Federalism is a good option to be considered. But there are lots and lots of different forms of federation.

Part of the fear of the Protestant Irish — and they are Irish — is that the new Ireland will keep them down as they know they treated the nationalist people of the North.

But there's a lot of evidence against that if you look at how the Protestants of the 26 Counties have got on. I think the record of the 26 Counties is a good record.

The Protestant Irish are in a terrible historical trap which it is wrong to blame them for. Of course, they were part of the violence that led to the Partition of Ireland, but an enormous part was played by people in the British Establishment in achieving that.

They have been put into a situation where they have a statelet based on a sectarian headcount which gives them privileges but with the constant fear that they'll lose those privileges. All the discrimination flows from that. And in the best scenario of a new constitution, they'll be released from that and rediscover proudly the fine heritage they have in the United Irishmen and so on. They'd also get the end of violence. Britain has successfully "Ulsterised" the conflict, and the British state is represented by people recruited in Northern Ireland. They are the ones who are dying, which I think the IRA are failing to understand. They are in error to continue to attack people from the Protestant community as representing the British state. Their tactics are in error to achieve their object of a united Ireland.

But that violence would end. The Protestants would be released from a sense of international isolation. And I believe that the role they would have in building a new Ireland, a more pluralistic democracy, would be very significant.

Within the context of withdrawal it is extremely likely that there would be a growth in Loyalist paramilitary activity. There's already been some growth of it since the Anglo-Irish Agreement. You would expect more. You would need the forces of the British state to contain that.

There's an enormous number of legally held guns in the hands of the Protestant community, and there's the UDR, a big regiment of part-timers, all with their weapons at home. All of those weapons would have to be called in and those forces stood down. And there would have to be very serious job creation measures for people who would lose jobs with the security forces.

You would have to try to contain and minimise the risk of violence. The chances of doing so would be immeasurably greater because it would be understood that the British people have voted and no-one can ignore historical reality.

There is a worse case scenario of civil war and repartition. I admit that. But there are major differences between disarming the Protestants and disarming the Catholics.

Most of the arms in the hands of the Protestants have been given to them or licensed to them by the British state. That's never been the case with the Catholics. So the cases are different — unless you're going to suggest that the whole of the UDR would join in some

sort of armed uprising, which I think on the scenario of pull out instantly and leave nothing behind is a real risk, but not if it's managed properly.

When a historical corner has been turned, people know it has been turned, and they don't go on fighting forever.

And the Protestant Irish, because a lot of them do have privileged positions, have a lot to lose if there is mayhem. A vast proportion of the community would have a much higher interest in negotiating their place in the new Ireland which they know is coming than in mayhem.

The possibilities of a dissident minority engaging in paramilitary activity are very high. There's a possibility you'd get general strikes. But I think the failure of the Labour Government to stand up to the 1974 general strike was a historical disaster that could have been avoided.

No-one can guarantee that there won't be a horrible upsurge in violence. But no-one can guarantee that there won't be a horrible upsurge in violence under the present settlement. With the economy of Northern Ireland as bad as it is and getting worse, it's a mistake to assume that the present settlement couldn't lead to an escalation of violence.

In the Protestant community there has been a lot of discussion and examination of the possibility of an independent Northern Ireland. But the economics don't add up, and they know it.

Say you did get a lot of conflict and violence and movement of people and further burnings-out. There is still the question of how Britain is going to behave. Is Britain going to recognise a de facto repartition and agree to continue the present subsidy to Northern Ireland? Or is it going to use its economic power to prevent it?

And it's very unusual for people to fight for a backward step. The whites in Zimbabwe said they would fight to the last drop of their blood, but once they knew they had lost they cooperated in the constitutional talks. So I think an independent Northern Ireland is enormously unlikely, and that if Britain makes it clear that there will be no recognition of that state and all subsidies will end, it wouldn't happen.

Look at the reaction to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. I couldn't support the Anglo-Irish Agreement because it entrenched the undemocratic nature of Northern Ireland, but it is the first time since Partition that the British Establishment has not kow-towed to Unionist protest on any proposed constitutional change.

The Unionists organised all the resources of their community in absolute unanimity against the Agreement, and there were threats of bloodshed. The British state stood firm and didn't give in, and here we are!

So I think the argument that you have to keep the present constitutional settlement going because of the Protestants' threat to create a bloodbath falls down. Their bluff has never been called.

The bluff was thoroughly called in the case of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and we might not like it, but it has settled down.

Desmond Greaves

Desmond Greaves, who died last year, was for half a century a very important figure in Irish left wing politics.

He ran the Communist Party's Irish organisation in Britain, the Connolly Association, and edited its monthly paper, *The Irish Democrat*. For decades that paper was sold on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings in cities like Manchester, Liverpool and London in the many Irish pubs where the uprooted Irish gathered to meet their own kind and drown their sorrows.

It is still sold, much diminished in confidence and influence, and probably in sales.

In Manchester, around 1960, we'd think badly of ourselves if half a dozen of us sold fewer than a thousand *Democrats* on a Saturday night tour with a new issue through the teeming pubs of Rusholme and Moss Side.

Young Irish people coming to England were warned in Catholic Truth Society pamphlets and in speeches from Irish pulpits to beware the lure of 'the Connolly clubs' whose zealots would meet them off the boats and seek to ensnare them in the politics of 'godless Communism'.

Meeting them off the boats was a myth, but for sure we met them in the pubs. Unfortunately the idea that we were preaching communism to them was a myth, too.

If you hadn't been told otherwise, you would have mistaken the *Irish Democrat* for a mainstream Irish nationalist paper, a *Fian-na Fail* paper maybe, complete with one of its 12 pages given over entirely to nationalist songs. If you knew your way around politics, you'd be tipped off that it was some sort of Stalinist paper by words like 'progressive', and by such foreign policy angles as praise for the 26 Counties' refusal to join NATO.

People did find their way to the Communist Party by way of the Connolly Association, though the traffic often went the other way too (me, for instance). One of our perpetual complaints was that we couldn't mobilise the CP's Irish members, except for occasional resolution-mongering at trade union branches. They integrated too easily into the labour movement, and were lost to Irish concerns through absorption and assimilation.

Great chances were thrown away to create an Irish communist cadre out of malleable people caught up in the flux of forced emigration from an underdeveloped to an industrialised society which confronted them freshly and starkly with the realities of class slavery. Instead of educating them, the CP and the Connolly Association were merely parasitic on the existing nationalist sentiments of those Irish they reached — rather like the far-left groups today, though with rather more excuse.

Yet Greaves did influence Irish politics, and help shape what has happened in the last 20 years. In his books and pamphlets he preached a sort of left-slanted populist Republicanism, stiffened with Stalinist dogma about a two-stage Irish revolution — first the 'completion of the bourgeois revolution' through unification, then a struggle for socialism. The message was that only the working class and small farmers could be consistent Irish nationalists, and therefore Republicans had to turn to 'the men and women of no property'.

This fusion of Stalinist dogma and Catholic-Irish radical nationalism was first made in the 1930s, when the Irish CP counted for something, and the Republican

movement too. It was championed by a Stalinist-influenced segment of the Republican movement, the 1934 'Republican Congress', which soon declined.

The Stalinist-led London branch of the Republican Congress started Greaves's paper, first called *Irish Freedom*, in the late '30s.

Such politics all but disappeared in the '40s and '50s, when Republicanism was smashed in the South, and what hadn't been smashed was very right-wing. You would find it only in odd memoirs and pamphlets by Paedar O'Donnell and George Gilmore, and, much diluted, in Greaves's publications.

But in the 1960s Greaves's work played a big role in convincing the then Republican movement to try to repair its fortunes by making a fresh populist appeal to the 'people of no property'. That turn helped generate the Provo split in 1969-70; today, twenty years later, the Provo leaders have come round full circle to similar ideas.

And not just the Provo leaders — the idea of populist nationalism as authentic Irish working-class revolutionary politics is dominant also in the far left groups, who thus owe a debt to Greaves, the Buonarrotti, the link man between them and the '30s.

For the Stalinist-populist '30s is, though they don't know it, where much of the politics of the would-be Trotskyist groups on Ireland originates. All they add is a bit of incoherent verbiage about 'permanent revolution' and the assertion (for which no evidence is or can be cited) that it will all lead to socialism, somehow.

Greaves's books testify that he was a man of immense learning in things Irish. He was the author of the first full-scale biography of James Connolly (1961), and of books and pamphlets on Liam Mellows, Wolfe Tone, Sean O'Casey and others. They stand out in a field of left-wing literature characterised above all by the crassest ignorance. Contrast them, for example, with Paul Foot's recent pamphlet, whose author doesn't know that there was a second Home Rule Bill in 1893 and indeed, crams his text with so many errors that you can't be sure that it is a typesetting mistake when he writes of Ireland's 36 counties.

But Greaves's career proved that, necessary though it is, knowledge is not enough.

He remained all his life within the framework of ideas he picked up in the Stalinist movement of the '30s. He never advanced, despite his learning. That was Greaves's tragedy. Insofar as he helped shape radical Republican politics, Greaves's political tragedy is also a part of Ireland's unfolding tragedy.

Sean Matgamna

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