



Bloody Sunday, January 1972

Ireland as it seems and as it is

By Paddy Dollard

THE single most striking thing about Ireland in the 27 years since the British Army assumed direct control of a Northern Ireland that was disintegrating into sectarian pogroms and civil war is this: despite much talk, much marching and much resolution-mongering, and despite the fact that there is a powerful working-class movement in Ireland, the labour movement and the left in Britain has had no appreciable effect on events in Northern Ireland.

The left has had no real grip on what is going on in Ireland, or what might happen in the future. Though much fine work has been done on Irish history by academic historians since the "Troubles" began, it has had little impact on the left.

The serious Marxist left, and those who base themselves on the fine traditions of Irish republicanism — those of Tone, of Connolly, even of Pearse — need first of all to understand, and spread understanding of, the

real situation in Ireland. The following examination, in propositions and counter-propositions, of the Irish question at the end of the 20th century, is offered to help in that work.

The fundamental conflict is between the Irish people and British rule.

In Ireland there are two quite distinct peoples: the "Ulster Protestants", or Anglo-Scots Irish, and the Catholics, or Gaelic-Irish. The fundamental conflict is between these two segments of the Irish people. Religion serves only as a symbol of conflicting national or communal identities, so that Protestants of very different theological views (or none) are still British-Irish, and atheists from Catholic roots are still Irish-Irish.

Britain controlled Ireland for centuries, employing great violence. They used the conflict between the communities and sharpened and poisoned it. The Catholic-Irish majority rebelled. In the late 19th century the Liberals, then Britain's second

major party, came to favour limited Home Rule for Ireland. They formed an alliance with the Catholic-Irish bourgeois nationalists. The Tories allied with the Protestant-Unionists, and played the "Orange card" against the Liberals.

The Protestant-Unionists, considering themselves British more than Irish, did not want to be a minority in a Catholic-dominated Ireland. Believing that the Liberal British government could be relied on to coerce Ireland's Protestant minority into a united Ireland if necessary, the Catholic-Irish bourgeois nationalists gave no serious thought to working out a settlement with the other, Protestant, Irish.

Both Irish groups were subordinate allies of powerful British factions. Britain came close to civil war on the question of Home Rule for Ireland on the eve of World War 1. In the upshot the Liberals betrayed the Catholic Irish. They agreed to cut the country in two, and on Tory-Unionist terms.

The way they did it poisoned and worsened the conflict between Protestant-Irish and Catholic-Irish. For forty-odd years, between 1921 and the late 1960s, the conflict was subdued because the Northern Ireland Catholics had been so heavily beaten down, but it blew up again as soon as the Northern Ireland Catholics began demanding elementary rights.

Our governing principle must be self-determination for the Irish people as a whole: majority rule.

There is no such thing as the Irish people as a whole. There are two peoples. To propose "self-determination for the Irish people as a whole" without any means of making it "a whole" thus means asserting the right of the bigger people to control over the smaller.

If the principle applies according to which the Catholic Irish claimed and largely won the right to secede from Britain, then it must logically apply within Ireland too, for those who proclaim a distinct identity against the rest of the Irish islanders. Secession is undesirable where populations are heavily intermingled, and we advocate reconciliation within a federal united Ireland rather than "Protestant self-determination" by way of a repartition which would certainly be bloody and bring great suffering to local minorities trapped on both sides of the new border. But a Catholic-Irish claim to conquer the area where the Protestants are a compact majority, in north-east Ulster, can claim no democratic legitimacy.

THE fundamental problem is the British military presence. Northern Ireland is an artificial and unviable political unit. It would collapse without the prop of British troops, and the way would be opened to a settlement.

The borders of the present Northern Ireland state were drawn to engineer a Protestant majority in an artificially large area. It has a Catholic majority in large areas outside the Protestant heartlands of Antrim and Down. British governments have implicitly recognised that Northern Ireland is not a tenable or viable political unit by imposing direct rule almost continuously since 1972; local self-government would be likely to break down in a civil war.

But the existence of the compact Protestant community in the north-east of the island is no artificial contrivance or fig-

ment of British policy. After a sectarian civil war the Protestant area would be smaller, but it would exist. Eamonn de Valera and other Republicans long ago abjured the idea of trying to unite Ireland by force, because they recognised that it could not work. A civil war would result not in the removal of the Border, but in shifting it north and east — and making it permanent.

A united Ireland is the solution.

It is no sort of progress to free half a million Northern Catholics from oppression by making one million Protestants into a minority which is, or feels, oppressed. The Northern Catholics are right to fight against oppression. But doubling the number of those who feel oppressed is no answer.

There is no answer, no alternative, no way out.

We propose a federal united Ireland with local self-rule for the Protestant north-east, and confederal links between Ireland and Britain. We want to help socialists and trade-unionists in Northern Ireland to create a Labour Party which can unite Catholic and Protestant workers round social demands and a programme of consistent democracy recognising the rights and fears of both communities. Socialists must reach out to the Protestant workers, strive to organise and mobilise them, to undercut the Protestant bigots.

We demand of the Provisional IRA that it calls off its military campaign. We oppose British and RUC repression; we want troops out as part of a political settlement. In the last analysis, only working-class unity in Ireland will allow real progress to be made out of the tragic blind alley into which Northern Ireland has corralled its people, Protestant and Catholic alike. And only a programme of consistent democracy — coupled with social demands — can enable socialists to build working-class

unity.

The only answer is to forget the national question for now and try to get working class unity by building on the joint actions of Protestant and Catholic workers for working-class demands like wage rises, and against killings.

Limited bread-and-butter unity should indeed be sought and cherished. But it shatters easily whenever the "constitutional question" arises: the relationship between Protestant Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland. The rare but much-cited cases of unity — 1907 and 1932 — prove this. Immediately afterwards the workers fought each other on sectarian-constitutional lines. Workers' unity for more than trade-union goals is impossible without an agreed programme spelling out how Protestants and Catholics can live together in peace on the island.

If the root problem in Ireland is the conflict between Protestants and Catholics, then the solution is for the Protestants to have the Northern Ireland state, reformed of course.

A former Northern Irish Prime Minister once called it "A Protestant state for a Protestant people". But that, pointedly, is not what it is, or not only what it is. It has also been a Protestant state for a very large number of Catholic people. Over 40%

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Protestant anti-imperialism? Unionist demonstrators burn effigy of Thatcher, 1985

of the population are Catholics who would prefer to be part of an all-Ireland state. They are a majority in half the land area of the 6 counties! They are a bigger minority in Northern Ireland than all the Protestants of all Ireland would be in a united Ireland.

Northern Ireland is not a viable political entity. For the 50 years before 1970 the Catholics were treated as second-class citizens in Northern Ireland, discriminated against in housing, jobs and even voting rights (in local government).

Their first revolt was not an IRA-type military campaign, but a movement for civil rights modelled on that of the US black movement of the 1960s. That's the measure of how badly off they felt.

There have been reforms since the 1960s, and there could be more. Northern Ireland is not perfect, but it is viable. A solution could be reached within the existing Northern Ireland framework, at manageable cost.

Northern Ireland is a Bosnia in the making. It is not a viable political entity. British troops can keep the lid on it, but at the cost of perpetuating and worsening the tensions. If that lid were taken off, the result would be sectarian civil war and bloody repartition. Repeatedly the Northern Protestants have shown themselves willing to fight rather than become a minority in a Catholic Ireland.

Reform is necessary. The problem is that the British state has granted an Orange veto over fundamental changes in the position of Northern Ireland.

The Orange veto is ultimately dependent on the power of the Orangeists on the ground and on the credibility of their threat to use force. And the Catholics have had a veto, based on their power to resist, over any return to a Protestant home-rule government in Belfast. The "vetos" reflect the intractability of the conflict between the two Irish peoples. They do not create it.

The main problem is the Protestant resistance to reform. The only answer is to face them down. The Protestants would not resist a

serious, determined drive to do that.

To do what? To implement what reform? A substantial Irish-based movement for a democratic settlement might indeed be able to face down the Protestant bigots. A drive to push the Protestants into a Catholic-dominated united Ireland would be resisted fiercely, and by more of them than just the bigots.

In 1911-21, Irish Protestants fought all-Ireland Home Rule, and the densely concentrated Northern Protestants finally settled for a fall-back position: partition. They allowed the disbanding of the 'B-Specials' in 1969 — to have them replaced by the Ulster Defence Regiment (now Royal Irish Regiment). They allowed the abolition of Belfast home rule (in 1972) — to see it replaced by the direct rule of the British state, which they regard as theirs. In May 1974 they organised a powerful general strike which defeated the British government's 1973 power-sharing agreement, including tentative links with Dublin through a Council of Ireland.

Even today, despite the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, which they detest, the Protestants still think that the British state is their state. Threaten to put them as a permanent minority in an all-Ireland Catholic-controlled state, and they will certainly resist, guns in hand. Northern Ireland has the most heavily-armed civilian population in Britain, and probably in Europe.

If Northern Ireland collapsed into civil war, the Catholic-Irish would win the war, and it would be a small, quick war. The impasse would be broken, a solution would be reached through a united Ireland, and at manageable cost.

The Catholic-Irish could win a civil war only if all Catholic Ireland were mobilised and concentrated on the task, and probably not even then. It would be no small, quick civil war! In fact, Catholic Ireland would not mobilise — the South has given scant support to the revolt of the Catholics in Northern Ireland over the last 20 years.

Civil war can be avoided or minimised by British troops disarming the Royal Irish Regiment, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Ulster Defence Association, and the Ulster Volunteer Force before they leave.

Such disarming would pitch the British army into full-scale war with the Protestants. It would mean vastly more British troops, and for an indefinite period ahead. The British withdrawal would be very slow and bloody, if it ever came at all.

We should just press to get British troops out now and let the Irish have their way.

Britain set up the wretched Northern Irish framework in the first place and defends it now. We should not take responsibility for the British army in Ireland or anywhere else.

But opposition to British troops does not mean that we call on the British ruling class to pull out and create a Bosnia-style chaos. Neither, incidentally, do most people in Ireland. Very few Northern Irish Catholics call for immediate troops out. Sinn Fein and the IRA do not. They want a negotiated British withdrawal.

To say "Bosnia" if Britain withdraws is to assign a progressive role to British imperialism, and British imperialism cannot be progressive in Ireland. It is a matter of principle for socialists to agitate for Troops Out Now, whatever the consequences.

We want to destroy the British state and replace it with a more democratic working class state. But we do not go around shouting "smash the state". That's for when the working class is ready, willing and able to take over. Collapse of the state into chaos and civil war, as in the former Yugoslavia — that is no way forward for the working class.

From a socialist, working-class point of view, even a bourgeois democratic imperialist state can be progressive in its own territory in comparison to, for example, the emergence of warlordism if the state collapses before the progressive alternative is ready to replace it. It is in the interests of the labour movement to maintain bourgeois democracy against fascism, and also against chaos which would block progress and work

against the emergence of the progressive alternative. We do not defend the British army, but the British state in Northern Ireland is better than all-out sectarian civil war and warlordism on the model of Bosnia.

Britain cannot be progressive in Ireland.

A million Irish people insist that they are British. To say "Britain cannot be progressive in Ireland" begs the question of their rights. Do not the British-Irish have a right to "occupy" their part of Ireland? Who has a better right? Those who were driven out of that part of Ireland 300-400 years ago? Those who claim affinity with them or to be their descendants? Then what happens to the British-Irish?

THE Ulster Protestants are a privileged settler caste. Their refusal to go into a united Ireland represents only bigotry and the desire to lord it over the Catholics.

Many Protestants are guilty of bigotry and irrationality, and they have lorded it over the Catholics. But it is perfectly reasonable for a minority not to want to submerge itself. Southern Ireland is heavily Catholic-confessional.

In decades of mass poverty and unemployment an informal system grew up in Northern Ireland of reserving certain jobs for Protestants and discriminating against Catholics. Fear that in a united Ireland they would lose the protection such discrimination gives them is a big consideration with Protestant workers.

Of course socialists oppose such discrimination. We advocate a trade union campaign against it.

But many Protestant workers can and do oppose discrimination while still feeling themselves different from the rest of the Irish and without ceasing to fear and reject a united Ireland. Defence of privileges is not the only consideration for Protestant workers in opposing a united Ireland, or even the main one. Preservation of their own felt identity and tradition, and refusal to submit to a majority they consider alien, are central.

The idea that there are two Irish peoples, or two nations, is an artefact of imperialism, an idea coined by Tory ideologists in the 19th century to justify their opposition to Home Rule.

In practice, all the nationalist and republican groups believe that there are two distinct peoples, and see themselves as representing the "nationalist people". The SDLP have a more benign variant of this attitude, but the Provisionals treat Unionists (that is, the overwhelming majority of Protestants) as an enemy people and claim the right to bomb or shoot as many of them as "necessary." Supposedly left-wing and socialist republicans have unapologetically engaged in sectarian attacks (Dalkey, 1987). The Protestants are the bad, pro-imperialist Irish, at least until such time as they renounce their own separate identity. This ideology, with the belief, sincere or hypocritical, that the Protestants will be "assimilated" if Britain goes, is both wishful thinking and a denial, gun and bomb in hand, of the Protestants' right to decide for themselves.

The fact that there are two peoples compels recognition, open or mystified. Open discussion is the only way to work out a democratic response.

"To dismiss all feelings of national identity as just stupid prejudice is ultra-left. To condemn Protestant-Irish feelings of national identity, but cherish and flatter Catholic-Irish feelings of national identity, is hypocritical."



Orange marchers confront the RUC

Whatever they say about it, the fact is that the Protestants are Irish. There are no real differences between them and the Catholic-Irish except those erected by stupid prejudice.

Is the Protestant identity contestable? So, for long, was the idea that the Irish majority were a nation separate from the British with whom they intermingled and shared a language and much of their culture. It was denied by British nationalists and even by the apostle of liberating European nationalism in the mid-19th century, Guiseppe Mazzini. Mazzini was wrong because the majority Irish felt themselves to be a separate nation. The Northern Ireland Protestants say they are British. Self-defined identity is decisive, not geography.

The Protestants may see themselves as different, but that's prejudice and we should have no truck with it.

Should socialists also tell the Catholic-Irish that their feelings of being different are just prejudice? We combat nationalism by advocating and trying to create a consistently democratic framework which undercuts national and communal grievances or fears, not by overriding or ignoring those grievances or fears.

To dismiss all feelings of national identity as just stupid prejudice is ultra-left. To condemn Protestant-Irish feelings of national identity, but cherish and flatter Catholic-Irish feelings of national identity, is hypocritical. To argue for Protestant-Irish workers to see themselves as citizens of the world, sharing more in common with Chinese, Czech or Chilean workers than with Protestant-Irish bosses, is one thing. To tell them that they must identify with the Catholic-Irish as against other nations, or stand condemned as hopeless sectarians, is another.

Ireland is oppressed by British imperialism. Southern Ireland is a neo-colony. Northern Ireland is occupied by British troops.

Southern Ireland is fully independent politically. In 1922

26 counties of Ireland achieved dominion status within the British empire, the same as Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, which were effectively independent states. By the mid 1930s De Valera had broken the ties to the British monarch and was openly and accurately describing the Irish state as an independent republic in external association with the British empire. It was formally declared an independent republic in 1949.

Britain gave up its remaining military bases in southern Ireland in 1938. Ireland remained neutral in World War 2. The Republic is today formally Britain's equal within the European Union, pursuing separate policies. This is full self-determination, to the extent that it is possible for a small state, occupying a relatively privileged position in the world and integrated as a partner into one of the great imperialist blocs.

Southern Ireland has one of Western Europe's weaker capitalist economies. But it is not a colony. It is ruled by the Irish capitalists. And most of the foreign-owned companies in Southern Ireland today are US, German or Japanese owned, not British.

WHATEVER about the economics of Southern Ireland, Northern Ireland is occupied by British troops. It is Britain's oldest colony.

Northern Ireland is an unviable unit. But the majority of the people in it want Britain there. Northern Ireland has been part of the English or British state since the 12th century — earlier than the union of the Scottish and English crowns, and five and a half centuries before the Act of Union between England and Scotland. The majority of the people there consider themselves British, though their ancestors have been in Ireland for centuries.

Partition brought many injustices for the Catholic minority, but even so, the relationship of Northern Ireland to Britain is not one of a colony seized by an alien power against the wishes of the majority of the people concerned.

Britain must have economic and military motives for retaining control of Northern Ireland.

Economically, Northern Ireland is a drain on British capitalism, to the tune of over £2 billion a year. British capitalists have more profitable relations with the independent South than with Northern Ireland. And in no way does Britain's military presence in Northern Ireland help British capitalists' profit-making in the South.

When Ireland was partitioned in 1920, it was still very important to Britain militarily. Britain kept naval bases in the South too until 1938. But since World War 2 Ireland has become less and less important to Britain.

Britain must really want to stay in Northern Ireland, otherwise it would have pulled out long ago.

The 1964-70 Labour government in the mid-'60s started edging towards reform and, perhaps — the exact story is in dispute — moving towards a united Ireland. They pressed the Protestant parliament in Belfast to treat the Catholic minority better. When the effete and inept Tory-Unionist politicians in Northern Ireland tried to comply with British demands, there was a Protestant bigots' backlash against them, led by Ian Paisley and with heavy working class Protestant support.

Britain had to step centre-stage and take direct control in 1969, when serious fighting broke out between Protestants and Catholics in Derry and Belfast. Civil war in Ireland would do Britain no good, especially as it would certainly have reverberations in, for example, Glasgow. Governments do not just scuttle and run, if they have a choice.

Britain fears the upsurge of radical politics in Ireland which would follow from the removal of the two main blocks to progress: partition, and the British military occupation.

A settlement which eased the communal conflict in Ireland would improve the prospects for working-class unity and socialism — in the long term. The British government does not have a Marxist view of the long term. If they could get it easily, they would be happy with a quiet withdrawal and a united Ireland.

They can not get it easily (in part this is because of their own brutality and blundering, which has helped to poison the Catholic-Protestant conflict). A cut-and-run withdrawal which unleashed all-out civil war would lead to repartition and a great worsening of the prospects for the left in Ireland.

What matters most of all is to see the British government defeated. Defeat in Ireland will weaken and destabilise the British government.

Britain has liquidated the greatest empire in history with few domestic convulsions. It withdrew precipitately from India, Palestine and Aden without domestic crisis. But it can't survive defeat in Ireland? Ireland will be the last straw that breaks the camel's back? The idea is stupid beyond belief! The British state would gain from a withdrawal from Ireland as long as that withdrawal led smoothly to a settlement and not an Irish civil war which could well spread to parts of Scotland.

The idea that the defeat of the British government matters more than anything that happens in Ireland is also British parochial nationalism of the most shameful and irresponsible sort. The nationalism is back to front, inside-out, negative, but the indifference to Ireland brands it plainly for what it is.

The Provisionals fight imperialism, and so should be supported, whatever the details and complications. Their aim is to free Irish people from British coercion.

That isn't really true, although the Provisionals occasionally shoot British soldiers and set off bombs in London. They proclaim the goal of uniting Ireland — which can only be done by the consent or conquest of the Protestants. Yet they behave so as to outrage and inflame the Protestants. They act against all persuasion and, representing a minority of the Northern minority and with small support in Southern Ireland, they can scarcely hope to conquer the Protestants. What do they think they are doing?

They are working to compel Britain to coerce the Protestants. War-weariness aside, that was the rationale behind the ceasefire of 1994: they thought that their pan-nationalist alliance with the SDLP, Dublin and America could push Britain into strong-arming the Protestants. They expressed it in code: "Britain must join the persuaders". Nationalists could think this meant a word in Protestant ears, yet any such "word" from Britain would destabilise the Protestants, and be followed either by a British retreat or by force. The Provisional IRA "fights Britain" to compel Britain to coerce one million Irish into a united Ireland, or some stage towards it. They demand a "British solution"!

The Provisionals represent a political step forward, a working-class political alternative to old-fashioned middle-class nationalism.

They are a petty-bourgeois political formation. They have now abandoned most of their "no politics" principles, and many of their leaders want to abandon "physical force on principle". For what? There is no mystery about it. Gerry Adams and his friends want to become mainstream bourgeois, albeit Catholic community-based, politicians. They have had many predecessors, who started with "the IRA gun" and wound up as jobbing politicians — Fianna Fail, the main bourgeois party in the South, for example.

Revolutionary politics is not the same thing as physical force. Especially in Ireland. There, the most reactionary bourgeois parties in the south (the two main parties) began as physical force parties. Revolutionary politics is a matter of programme and class. We judge these people from the point of view of working-class socialism.

The Provisionals continue the policy of the middle-class Irish Home Rule party in the years before World War 1 when they operated as a tool of the Liberal Party, making no effort to reach a democratic modus vivendi with the Irish minority because they expected the Liberals to coerce the Northern Ireland Protestants.

Like it or not, the Provisionals' approach has produced results where patient, peaceful political agitation achieves nothing.

Britain will not do what the Provisionals want. The maximum policy of both Dublin and London was set out in the February 1995 White Paper: slow, piecemeal movement towards links between Northern and Southern Ireland, on the model of the process which has shaped the European Union over nearly 40 years.

And even if the Provisionals' expectations from Britain were less deluded, their policy would still be false — and not anti-imperialist in any way! They confuse geography with people. The mechanical unity of the state replaces the Republican unity of the people.

The Provisional IRA began in 1969-70 as a right-wing sect committed to the gun and bomb on principle, and pretending that the problem was Britain and not a division within the people on the island. Their military campaign pushed tens of thousands of Protestants into the arms of the bigots and mili-



The Provisionals had immense illusions in the ability of a pan-nationalist alliance to force the British government's hand

tarists of Unionist fanaticism, who organised a mass armed militia, perhaps 35,000 strong by 1972 (there are one million Protestants in Northern Ireland so to get the equivalent figure for Britain you'd have to multiply by 55). The Provisionals could not possibly win. Irish unity could and can only be got by consent. The IRA campaign pushed that consent further away. That is the main result they have achieved.

Socialists must always side with the oppressed and their representatives. That means backing the Provisionals, even if critically.

We blame the British and the southern Irish bourgeoisie for letting Northern Ireland fester for so long in conditions of sectarian discrimination and mass unemployment. But identifying the Catholics as the oppressed does not settle all questions, nor absolve us of the responsibility to give honest accounts of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois politicians who lead the organisations of the oppressed in Northern Ireland.

The Provisionals are entitled to fight fire with fire, to respond to the Protestant killers.

Yes, if that is what they do! It is not what they do — fundamentally. The real situation in Northern Ireland is one of Irish opposition to Irish unity. The logic of their politics leads the IRA to shoot Irish Protestant workers as “collaborators”. They put a better ideological and political gloss on it than the Protestant-Unionist killers do, and, as a rule, their people believe the ideological slant — but the pseudo-Republicans too go in for sectarian killings.

Socialism is the answer.

The answer to what? Yes, socialism is the only answer to the chaos and cruelty of capitalism, which underlies the tensions in Ireland — but only the working class can make socialism, and the Irish working class cannot make socialism while it remains grievously divided by the national/communal

conflict. Socialists need answers to that conflict, and collective ownership of the means of production is not in itself an answer.

Even if the working class could take power despite its crippling divisions, once in power it would still need a policy for dealing with the divisions in the Irish people. Such a policy could only be that of the 1917 Bolsheviks for dealing with national and communal divisions: consistent democracy, the fullest possible freedoms, limited only by conflicting claims, for peoples and fragments of peoples to join or leave existing states, or to set up states of their own. In Ireland now that could only be some form of autonomy for the mainly Protestant areas in a federal united Ireland, which would probably have to establish closer links with the British state which the Protestants still identify with.

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