

"Open The Windows": AWL and Labour Briefing, 1995

Discussion of the ill-fated cooperation agreement between AWL 'supporters and Labour Briefing in 1995.

'The Spanish war has probably produced a richer crop of lies than any event since the Great War of 1914-18, but I honestly doubt, in spite of all those hetacombs of nuns who have been raped and crucified before the eyes of Daily Mail reports, whether it is the pro-Fascist newspapers that have done the most harm. It is the left-wing papers, the News Chronicle and the Daily Worker, with their far subtler methods of distortion, that have prevented the British public from grasping the real nature of the struggle. The fact which these papers have so carefully obscured is that the Spanish government (including the semi-autonomous Catalan government) is far more afraid of the revolution than of the fascists'.

'In England, in spite of the intense interest the Spanish war has aroused, there are very few people who have even heard of the enormous struggle that is going on behind the Government lines. Of course, this is no accident. There has been a quite deliberate conspiracy (I could give detailed instances) to prevent the Spanish situation from being understood. People who ought to know better have lent themselves to the deception on the ground that if you tell the truth about Spain it will be used as Fascist propaganda'.

'The most disgusting thing of all is the way the so-called anti-Fascist press in England has covered it up... The New Stateman, having previously refused an article of mine on the suppression of the POUM on the ground that it would 'cause trouble', also refused to print the review as it 'controverted editorial policy', or in other words blew the gaff on the Communist Party... Whatever you do don't believe a word you read in the News Chronicle or Daily Worker. The only daily paper I have seen in which a gleam of truth sometimes gets through is the [Daily] Express...'

George Orwell

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Open the windows!

Notes on the dispute in Briefing

By Tom Willis and Jack Cleary

'Having shown first that everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever... there is contained a specific conception of the world, one then moves onto the second level, which is that of awareness and criticism. That is to say, one proceeds to the question - is it better to 'think' without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? In other words, it is better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment?

Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality?' Antonio Gramsci, 'Prison Notebooks', p.323-4.

The forces that grouped themselves last summer around LLB, the successor to B, are on the point of split after only a few months of collaboration in the new journal. Collaboration between those who produced the old B, the majority on the LLB EB, and those of us, a substantial majority of the forces around LLB, who joined with them then, has more or less ground to a half. Is final separation unavoidable? How did the present situation come about? The following notes will attempt to answer these and other related questions.

The merging of forces for a new LLB

We joined with the comrades of the old 'B' in June 1995 on the understanding that we would work together with them to produce a new journal and to build a left wing in the LP and the trade unions, a left wing which would be non-sectarian, non-dogmatic, and democratic in its organisational structures.

We would be united by a common general purpose and by specific immediate day-to-day projects. Of course, both sides knew that there were many points of disagreement which would not quickly disappear. How would the new collective deal with political disagreements? By open dialogue. Commitment to intra-left dialogue was one of the pillars on which the new collective would be constructed. Without that the regrouping of forces would have been unthinkable. Without that, we knew that it would quickly and inevitably fall apart.

The collective we would build would have to be a discussing, disputatious, thinking new left. We thought to avoid the usual kitsch-Trotskyist consequence of disagreement - ceaseless internal war for dominance, or split - by removing the engine of disruption and split which is built into all small left wing groups that subscribe to the prevalent kitsch-Trotskyist conception of 'democratic centralism', the suppression, to one degree or another, of minorities. In the collective around the new LLB there would be consistent democracy.

In the kitsch-Trotskyist model - which is in fact Stalinist in origin - every disagreement poses the questions: who will rule; who will suppress, and who will be suppressed? In the new LLB, we fondly hoped, this question could not arise because any minority would always continue to have the right to argue its case: debate would continue in the pages of the new LLB.

It was, of course, understood that where it was necessary for the collective to engage in some action - standing a candidate for office in the LP, for example - the right to criticise an action would take second place while that action was in progress.

In practice, this came down to agreement that LLB magazine would be a free and open forum: 'Minority rights would be guaranteed. This meant space for minority opinions in the journal. This would include a right of reply, but not be limited to it... an editorial policy of open discussion and controversy, rather than a heavy-handed mechanism of 'majority line statements', 'right of reply', etc.' [written agreement of 30 March 1995: see appendix].

Thus, we merged with B on the basis of what seemed like an agreement - with GB and MM specifically, and indeed GB personally drafted the gist of it - for consistent democracy in

functioning, as outlined above, and specifically, the expression of this consistently democratic approach in an open-forum B.

We repeat: without that agreement the fusion of forces would not have been thinkable, and all of us knew it and said it.

The majority and minority on the new EB

Though our supporters are four or five times more numerous than those of B - and if level of day-to-day labour-movement commitment is brought into the calculation, perhaps eight or nine times as numerous - and thus our comrades would be the main group selling the joint publication, we agreed to be a minority on the LLB EB. Why?

Two reasons. First, to reassure the existing supporters of B. Most of them have been marked, politically and psychologically, by membership in one, or more than one, of the kitsch-Trotskyist groups. (There is a predominance of people who have been through the Mandeliste groups).

Some are people who have erected broad general conclusions on the inadequate foundation of a narrow personal experience, tending to blame their bad experiences on "Lenin", without having devoted much time or energy to study of the real, as distinct from the mythical, Lenin, or to the reasons why the 'Trotskyist' archipelago is the way it is. Some broke from one or other of the kitsch Trotskyist groups because they rejected what, other things being equal, would be the good side of those groups - commitment, purpose, discipline, seriousness in politics. Some have a 'you can't fool me' organisational cynicism that is a form of naivety - the naivety of the man or woman who thinks there is nothing higher in life than chiselling and gouging and stopping others doing it to you. You can't fool them - or talk politics with them.

Most, however, paradoxically, have rethought nothing politically: politically, the old B tended to be a compendium of the conventional wisdom of the 'Trotskisant' left, on everything from support for the Provos in Ireland, through root-and-branch rejection of the European Community, to accepting, as an axiom of working-class internationalism, commitment to the destruction of Israel.

These people needed to be reassured that we, 'democratic centralists' and 'unorthodox' Trotskyists, would not gobble them up or impose heretical political positions on them, using our actual majority of the regrouped forces to gag them in the time-dishonoured kitsch-Trotskyist fashion. We agreed to give them the ultimate practical assurance of remaining a fairly small minority on the EB for the indefinite future.

Though we knew it put a great deal of responsibility for what happened on the good will and good sense of the majority, this inversion on the EB of the relationship of forces in the country was acceptable to us because 'taking over' B against the will of the incumbents was not part of our project here, and because the agreement on democratic functioning in the new LLB seemed to remove the basis on which an EB majority might try to misuse its power. If the 'minority' - or in this case the majority of LLB supporters, under an EB which reflects not the existing LLB collective but the pre-fusion B group - can not be stifled, as it normally is under kitsch 'democratic-centralism', then you do not have the frantic 'do or die', 'you must be hammer or anvil', 'crush or be crushed' driving force of kitsch-Trotskyist factionalism. Or so we hoped.

It is, we believed and believe, possible to disagree, and yet to apply in one collective the good old formula: 'Unity in action, dialogue about our differences.' But that, of course, presupposes that all those involved have common goals and purposes that give them reason to behave responsibly, seriously, and democratically in the common enterprise.

Democratic centralism?

In fact, the formula outlined above, for the functioning of the LLB collective, in any case, corresponds more or less to our own idea of democratic centralism. That is how we ourselves function and have functioned - the files of our old weekly testify to it. There we have conducted free debate, with each of our comrades free to express a personal opinion, on a whole variety of subjects over the years, testify to it. We long ago came to the conclusion that

most of the organisational carry-on of the kitsch-Trotskyist groups is not only politically senseless but also very far removed from the ideas of Lenin, on which the kitsch-Trotskyists claim to base their organisational practices (see, for example, the attached article by Lenin). 'Centralism' for us consists in the ability to act together effectively in the class struggle.

The occasions when we act as a centralist collective must, of course, include factional conflicts. What did that mean for the new LLB? How, in our view, would our democratic-centralist group interest interact with the rest of LLB?

We thought (and said in writing: see appendix) that our commitment to co-existence in LLB ruled out functioning as a factional formation on a day-to-day basis. The normal freedom of our comrades to express minority views in our own public press would pass over into our collective relationship to LLB: minority opinion in our ranks would as far as we were concerned have the same freedom of expression in LLB as in our own group press.

Thus, for example, at the EB discussion on Ireland, we had one member present who disagrees with our position on this question and agrees with the broad left consensus: that is, with the majority of the LLB EB. No factional "whip" was put on this comrade, as under kitsch-Trotskyist 'democratic centralism' it would have been, forbidding her to express her own opinion on the political questions in the discussion, or limiting her to our 'internal' meetings. Despite the factional atmosphere, we took it as normal that a comrade with a minority opinion had the right to speak her own mind. Of course, we retain the idea of disciplined common action; but it does not normally have any proper application in questions like this. What it meant in the given situation, for example, was that had she disagreed with us - she did not - on the issue of an open LLB, she would still have been expected to vote with us, or at least abstain.

Thus, it seemed to us that the agreement we made about the functioning of LLB did not contradict our own norms of organisation, but expressed them in a new way. We saw it as an experiment in constructing a much broader and looser version of the 'pluralist-without-dissolving-into-social-democracy' revolutionary-socialist organisation which our own group is too.

The arrangement with the old B had, finally, for us the positive attraction that, given the range of political opinion within the new LLB collective, serious discussion would have to develop in and around the new publication. How could such a variegated collective regulate its affairs without it? In a fruitful and unusual way, the new collective would be a microcosm of the broader left, and might produce the discussion and dialogue which, usually, is shamefully absent between the components of the left.

The nature of the old B

In fact, all our hopes and expectations were almost immediately disappointed. All that we had, or thought we had, agreed about the open and democratic functioning of the joint collective vanished like morning mist.

We had negotiated with GB and MM; one or two others were also involved at some points, DP, for example. We had the gist of the open-forum guarantees we sought in writing from GB (30 March 1995, and discussed and agreed by a meeting in MM's flat a few days later, see Appendix 1) - but in retrospect, it is clear that we 'undernegotiated' the fusion of forces. We failed to pin down details. The explanation for that is essentially the same as the explanation for our willingness to be a minority on the EB: we thought things would evolve naturally within the framework of broad democracy outlined above and that the details would, in the bye-and-bye, take care of themselves. We thought that those who ran the affairs of B, in the first place GB and MM, had negotiated with us in good faith and would attempt to abide by their written and oral agreements. If they did not, no amount of detailed negotiation would avoid shipwreck.

In part, we misunderstood the nature of the old B grouping, and the peculiar character of its leadership. Of course we could 'see' some of the peculiar characteristics of the old B EB; but we misjudged the extent, depth, and pervasiveness of what we saw.

The old B leadership is one that functions not through open discussion and the plain statement

of issues and facts, working to win over people who have different ideas and, where that is not possible, to define the differences clearly and objectively, the better to be able to collaborate for common purposes despite the differences. It functions by way of manipulation, dissimulation, private clique 'factionalism', and string-pulling behind the scenes. It is a leadership whose concern with politics is defined by one dominant concern: to keep in line with the consensus identikit 'left' around them as it is at any given moment. It has no concern with shaping, or contributing to the development of, that consensus. Its 'project' in politics is limited to the production of a journal with a circulation of a few hundred, and one which, as MM put it in a document for the LLB EB, does not even aspire to 'propagate a world view'.

Our relationship with B was unavoidably at first a relationship with a few of those leading people. We had to rely on them to 'carry' their comrades. We soon discovered that we could not rely on them to keep their word or even their signed agreements.

At the B AGM we "discovered" that though GB and MM - the latter with some reservations, the former talking 'Trotskyist to Trotskyist' - had made agreements with us, they had not even properly explained what was going on to most supporters of B, let alone won them to the project. GB had smugly assured us that it was 'inconceivable' that he and MM, united on an issue, could ever fail to get their way with their B comrades - but this, so we soon discovered, was not confidence of being able to convince those comrades but confidence that they could 'put it over' on them.

When we attended the B AGM, we were more than a little nonplussed by the lack of frank dealing with B's supporters on the part of B's 'leading comrades'. Manipulation and pulling fast ones on our own comrades is not our way of working. We did not find it congenial to "go along" with GB and MM here. But we went along. Why? We thought: they know their own organisation. It is not for us to try to impose a different approach on them now. These are the comrades we will have to work with, and on whose goodwill the collaboration depends. Ways of functioning, too, would "evolve" in the life-processes of the merging of forces we had agreed on. Together we would learn to do things differently in the new collective, with more open politics and candour, less manipulation.

The first breaches of faith

It took some time, beginning with the AGM, for it to become clear to us that it would not be so. We did not rush to conclusions.

The first breach of faith by GB and MM occurred at the B AGM: they broke the written agreement of 30 March 'that existing members of the B EB should not constitute a majority, would probably be no more than one third of the [new] EB, and hopefully would be down to 25% of it' (we would have 25%; the rest would be "independents"). We nominated only a handful of people for that EB. We kept well within our quota and within the agreement. They did not. Apart from us, almost the entire 'new' EB was 'old B'. Worse, the EB was not elected on a basis of politics or even of personal competition. It was a 'scratch' EB, with most of its members representing nothing but themselves. In fact, GB and MM 'packed' the new EB as tightly as they could. Everyone willing to stand was "elected"; indeed, some of the "names" on the EB which appears in print are people who long ago ceased to have any connection with the magazine. A number of others do nothing or almost nothing in politics except attend EBs.

The collapse of the agreement on the new EB at the AGM was a bad sign; but it did not seem of much consequence except as a bad sign. We took it as likely that we would be the political minority in any case, that the majority would be "identikit left" on things like the European Community, Ireland, the Middle East, attitude to Stalinism, etc. Numbers would not add power to the arguments they could deploy in the open and democratic LLB we had agreed to help produce and sell.

The second breach of faith by the old B's leading comrades soon followed the first, growing out of it naturally. We found ourselves from the first faced with an EB majority which proceeded to rediscuss things we thought had been settled in the negotiations, initially the title and other details of the joint publication.

The breach of faith here consisted in the fact that those who had negotiated with us did not

oppose such procedures. Indeed, in rescinding agreements made with us they sometimes took the lead. (And with some visible relish, too: the psychopathology of 'power struggles' in small groups made itself felt almost from the start). Their relationship with MPs, councillors, and high-profile journalists might be that of fawners, yes-men and general purpose sycophants but here at least they could 'Take the Power' and strut with it! It was, at first, reassuringly childish.

This, though, annoying, still, at this stage, involved only secondary issues. It was the first clear indication that the irreplaceable structures of agreement were crumbling; but we chose not to draw sweeping conclusions. Yet.

The character of the EB majority

We were, however, puzzled. Their fear of our numerically larger, and possibly fiercer, group, and their desire for 'safeguards' in the common journal, had dominated the negotiations. We had agreed to everything they wanted as reassurance, and more. When we had assured them - and we were able to cite our normal practice in our own press as proof of sincerity - that our members would participate freely in the discussions that were likely to develop in B, we were thereby assuring them that for the political life of LLB we would in effect dissolve our group into its individual components.

Yet here they were, recklessly using their EB majority as if they positively wanted to drive us into factionalism in self-defence, seemingly hell-bent from the start to push the new collective into the never-ending kitsch-Trotskyist cycle of conflict and split.

This behaviour was, we thought, partly to be explained by the rag, tag and bobtail character of the EB. This was no leadership of a political tendency, selected over time for reasons of work done, knowledge acquired, or commitment demonstrated, and possessing the skills and experience needed to hold a complex political organisation together. Those of the old B leadership - GB in the first place - who had set out long ago to build a serious organisation had proved unable to build anything but this ramshackle rag-tag-and-bobtail affair. Nor was the EB a group of people possessed of any driving sense of common purpose and a job to be done.

Worse than that. In fact, this EB collective is not only an ad-hoc, largely 'accidental', body, but, from a Marxist point of view - and the collective we thought we had negotiated was to have been Marxist - it is a heavily depoliticised one. For most of its members, their best notion of 'politics' is labour movement routine and the consensus politics of the broad left. They are not all that interested in broader political questions, or in political discussion. That has all been taken care of by the old Trotskyist groups and by the Benns and the Skinners. (And lest you think this is an exaggeration: in the EB, MM argued that we did not need to make socialist propaganda, or educate new socialists in the Marxist basics. Why not? Oh, groups like the SWP would do that! He said that in plain English). Here too the EB is curiously like a parody of a kitsch-Trotskyist sect for which all answers and most questions were long ago settled, and for whom discussion is not only 'a petit bourgeois luxury' but something dangerous, irritating, disturbing and destabilising. The EB co-chairs, each in her own way, epitomise this strange reality and will do to illustrate the point.

One of them, Sue L, was not, we guess, privy to the negotiations - her name would evoke venomous reflex contempt from GB - and she was hostile to the fusion. A one-time IMG'er, she is a bigoted anti-Leninist and she is normally vociferously uninterested in politics. As chair of EBs, she would repeatedly express her opposition even to recognition that the fusion had taken place - and without contradiction from those who had negotiated it. MM said the same thing: no fusion had taken place, we were told. That too was a breach of faith. Even though it is true that MM was more reserved than GB, he did see and endorse the written agreement of 30 March.

In the course of chairing the meetings, SL would make little anti-Leninist demagogic speeches. Thus, she made a heated protest - from the chair - towards the end of one early EB that had dragged on a bit over its allotted time. She denounced those (it was plain she meant us) who made it difficult for a single mother like herself by going on and on - about politics.

The most alarming thing about this, perhaps, was that it was all preconceived, taken straight from the handbook of right-wing Labour anti-'Trotskyist' demonology, and modelled on

speeches she would have heard about Militant's alleged behaviour in LP wards and witch-hunting articles from the Labour establishment which she would have read in the press. It would have been out of order in most circumstances and here she was chairing the meeting!

In this case it was blatantly unjust. The meeting had spent most of its time discussing a general paper by MM about LLB. In a big meeting, there were only three or four of us, and one of the undersigned did not speak! (Having ascertained that Mike MM's document was not to be voted on, I did not think it 'constructive' to bog us down in a detailed discussion about what seemed to be harmless, albeit pretentious and disoriented, waffle).

A comrade of ours, MT, is in the same local Labour left caucus as SL, and has heard the same thing there: 'I'm tired from work. I didn't come here to hear all this political argument'.

On the one occasion she let herself discuss the political issues that came up - Bosnia - SL seemed to us to be one of the most sensible people on the EB. But for practical purposes her good sense was buried under a mountain of prejudice and the self-righteous sectarianism of the professional anti-sectarian.

SL, let us repeat, though co-chair, was probably not kept informed of the negotiations by GB or MM. The other co-chair, Dorothy M, was certainly privy to GB's and MM's negotiations, and present at some of them. DM's politics are best characterised - and here she is representative of the dominant tendency of the left on this question - by her contribution when we finally got a token discussion on Ireland. Shamelessly she trotted out the trick-logic argument of those who for emotional reasons or from a desire to keep in line with 'powerful' forces want to back the Provos without having to justify it by political argument. Surely, she said, solidarity with the Irish meant that the left here had to follow the lead of Sinn Fein/Provisional IRA, whatever it might be. There was nothing more to say. Essentially we had no right even to discuss the issue. It is trick logic because in fact, to arrive at any opinion at all, including DM's, you have to think about Irish politics and you have to side with some Irish views against others - the Provos against the SDLP, for example. A whole series of political judgments, and not just general 'solidarity with the Irish struggle', are implicit in the dictum: our only right is to back the Provos.

Dorothy M is an intellectual by trade, and thirty years in politics! Her politics - like those of most of the vociferous people on the EB - are the unreflecting left-consensus politics of the labour-movement routinist for whom 'political life' is committees and mechanics and who on all broader questions operate by auto-pilot. Their implicit assumption is that 'the politics' will all somehow work out for the best. Such a posture is, of course, sometimes a fallback for people who have an underlying feeling of defeat in the ideological struggle against the bourgeoisie.

One of the mysteries of this business is how Dorothy M and others ever thought they could coexist without political discussion with people like us, who take an old-fashioned Leninist view that 'it' will not necessarily work out for the best. Who believe that those who call themselves Marxists have the responsibility to pose political questions clearly, with as much sharpness as necessary. By doing that we increase the chances that things will work out for the best. By failing to, we lessen the chances of ultimate working-class victory.

The Irish question emerges

The next breach of faith occurred at the September EB, and was accompanied by abuse of her position as chair by DM. The trigger was Ireland.

Everyone knew that there were differences on Ireland in the new LLB. The editorial board majority accept the pro-Provo politics of the Labour left; some of them bring to it a residual fervour rooted in an old kitsch-Trotskyist fantasy that what has been going on in Ireland for the last quarter of a century is 'the permanent revolution'. We ourselves once thought it our primary duty to 'support those fighting the British government'; our group is the only one in Britain to have experienced an armed police raid on its headquarters in connection with Ireland (September 1973). More than a decade ago we re-evaluated, facing up to the fact that the Northern Ireland question is fundamentally an intra-Irish communal/national conflict.

We believe that in that conflict both peoples on the island have rights which socialists should

support. The Protestants too are victims of a situation long ago created by the British ruling class. Working-class politics in Ireland can only be built on a basis of mutual acceptance by the peoples on the island. That means compromise, reconciliation, agreed democratic solutions. We advocate working-class unity on the basis of a social and democratic programme which includes a federal united Ireland, with as much local autonomy for the Irish (Protestant) minority as is compatible with the rights of the Irish majority. There is no progressive significance in the Provisional IRA campaign. It cannot liberate Ireland. If it developed according to its own inner logic the PIRA military campaign could only lead to sectarian civil war, possibly on the Yugoslav level, and very bloody repartition. Socialists cannot extend blank-cheque support to the Provisional IRA or to its political front, Provisional Sinn Fein. We welcomed the ceasefire. We did not support the Provos when they were pursuing their military campaign; we do not support them now that they are going into straight bourgeois politics.

At the very end of the September EB, as we were about to break up, DM proposed that LLB lend its name to an appeal for immediate 'all-party talks' to which various bodies and LP dignitaries had already put their names. No warning of this proposal was given. The appeal originated from a Provo 'front'.

For that reason we would not have chosen to put our name to this statement. Of course, we are emphatically for all-party talks. However, like so much else in the very slick Provo propaganda, the appeal was not all it seemed. The demand for Britain to proceed to 'all-party talks' when the Unionists, representing the majority of Northern Ireland's people, would certainly boycott them, is nonsensical: they would not be all-party talks! To sign the appeal was not just to back the idea of all-party talks: it was to boost the Provos' campaign for a London-Dublin-Washington settlement imposed on the Protestants. This is a reactionary fantasy - to suppose that Dublin, Washington, Brussels, and British 'persuaders' will coerce the Protestants on behalf of the Provos - and inconceivable in practice. It would involve the British state conquering one million Protestants, and treating them as it treated the half-million Catholics in the 1970s. It will not happen. We should not want it to happen. A vast distance separates such politics from consistent democracy and the fight for working-class unity, that is, from working-class politics.

It was certain that we would be in a minority in an EB vote on such a question; but it was fundamental to the fusion of forces that such a position would be established not mechanically but after discussion of the issues: that the publication would 'have an editorial policy of open discussion and controversy, rather than a heavy-handed mechanism of 'majority line statements', 'right of reply', etc.' (document of 30 March 1995).

The new EB had not discussed Ireland at all, ever. (Probably the old EB had not discussed it for a very long while, either: certainly the magazine had carried no discussion). When we objected to DM's proposal the cry went up from a number of people: 'It is our established position'. On that basis, and against our protests that this procedure was unacceptable to us - two of us, amidst the uproar created by our insistence that the issue should be discussed, protested loudly on our feet - the EB voted to add its name to the appeal put out by the Provo front. It was a turning point for the EB. We could not continue like this.

It should have been plain to any EB member capable of thinking about it that beyond a certain point we would not peacefully let them go on abusing - or, anyway, disruptively and arbitrarily exercising - the powers of the EB majority. Yet they quickly proceeded to rescind, first by arbitrary action of the editorial sub-committee, and then by majority EB vote, the very basis of the fusion of forces.

Perhaps most indicative of the political nature of B is GB's comment to us afterwards: 'What are you getting excited about? It's too late to add our name to it. The vote means nothing. ' He was right that it was too late. What it meant was that the breaches of faith, the disregard for the procedures agreed, explicitly or implicitly, had reached the point where we would not peacefully 'go quietly' any more.

The EB majority tears up the essential bases for unity

For the October issue, discussion material had been commissioned on Ireland. But the editorial

sub-committee, late in September, refused to print the commissioned material. It would shock B's regular readers, they said. GB said he found Patrick M's article 'deeply offensive'. It would be 'offensive' to criticise or evaluate Sinn Fein, or even look coolly and analytically at it. After toying with the idea that the article might be printed with a heavy editorial disavowal, the sub-committee voted, on MM's proposal, to remit the whole painful issue to the next EB.

The reader will find Patrick M's article as an appendix. It will be clear that if such a painstakingly reasonable article - and, as it happens, one written by a Northern Ireland socialist from the Catholic community - is unacceptable, then no serious discussion is possible.

There were many other smaller but worrying day-to-day problems with the editing of the magazine. MM objected to "traditional left bureaucrat-bashing" in the trade-union coverage (apparently referring to criticism of Lew Adams of ASLEF), with the clear implication not that he would contribute some contrary view but that, if further annoyed, he would demand a stop to the "bureaucrat-bashing". No attempt was made to argue that what was said was wrong, or to refute our contention that honest accounts of the events and processes in the unions are a necessary duty to working-class struggle. Articles on students, youth, and welfare-state campaigning were repeatedly "lost" or dismissed as 'unsolicited'.

A response by MT to DP's three-part discussion article on the lessons for socialists of the collapse of Stalinism had its publication postponed, issue after issue, from April right through to today. (Though, as it happens, MT holds to a 'state-capitalist' analysis of the Stalinist phenomenon, a position held by not many of our comrades. This was no 'official communication' from us). An editorial sub-committee decision for equal treatment of the contributions on Bosnia was overturned by arbitrary last-minute changes in page lay-out.

It was plainly necessary to sort out what was what on the EB. This was done at the October EB. After a discussion, a motion was passed which rescinded the lynch-pin of the tie-up embodied in the new publication, "LLB". The EB majority voted to set strict limits to discussion of political differences and to the scope for expression of the opinions of the majority of LLB supporters.

A resolution was moved and passed spelling out a basic 'principled' position which B would carry on Ireland. It amounted to systematic and uncritical regurgitation of Provisional Sinn Fein/PIRA propaganda. [See appendix]. The conclusion was this: 'The democratic rights of comrades that do not share this view should be protected. Minority views should be represented in the magazine but the space they occupy should be determined by their minority status and they should be presented as a debate with the LLB position. The right of reply on the letters page should be unconditional but decisions on the coverage of minority views in the main body of the paper will be made by the Editorial Board'.

That was the 'careful' version for publication. Orally, in the EB meeting, members of the majority talked of a 'ratio' for the EB minority (and LLB sellers' majority) of 'one in four' or 'one in five'.

The issue here was not one of presentation. On our proposal it had been agreed in the negotiations that we would never have demurrals headlined, "Statement by the Central Committee" (or whatever) or "by the LLB minority". Discussion would be by way of articles, signed by individuals. The publication "would have an editorial policy of open discussion and controversy, rather than a heavy-handed mechanism of 'majority line statements', 'right of reply', etc." (written agreement of 30 March 1995). This aspect of the agreement had been reported, and with some enthusiasm, by MM to the B AGM. We had pressed for it to be carried out - no heavy-handed editorial warnings to label minority views - on Bosnia, where we had the majority view and objected strongly to the minority (pro-Serbian) view.

What the October EB decision meant in practice soon became clear. At the editorial sub-committee GB told TW that Patrick M's article would not be admissible for publication in LLB even as part of the minority quota. "Slagging off the Provos" was beyond the pale. He would resign if it were printed.

After that point we stopped paying the subsidy we had agreed to provide for LLB - for the open and pluralistic LLB that the entrenched majority had decided would not be produced.

Somebody suggested raising the slogan, 'No taxation without representation', but, for fear of being called 'rotten liberals', we decided not to! It is typical of the people who run LLB that when asked by comrades outside London what the trouble is, they have replied: 'It's all about money'. No it isn't, on either side.

The question arises here as elsewhere; did GB not know our politics when he negotiated with us? Certainly he did.

The parodists of kitsch-Leninism

Thus, in October, LLB claimed its place in the Big Book of satire-proof kitsch-Trotskyism and burlesque-Leninism: an unrepresentative, essentially London, gathering, voted to reduce the majority of the paper's sellers to the status of second-class citizens, with fewer rights on the paper than any labour-movement or journalistic dignitary who would deign to throw something its way. As we said above, these are people who have recoiled from kitsch-Trotskyist organisational practice, but mechanically and unthinkingly. They have not worked out, as we have, viable and serious alternatives to the sectarian styles of organising; they have only given up on the work of building an effective socialist movement and taken refuge in B. And thus they wind up burlesquing what they denounce.

In the well-known story, a man sees Death in the market-place, panics, gets on his horse, and rides away to Samara. Death turns to a companion: 'That's odd. I just saw so-and-so here. I have an appointment with him tonight, in Samara'. That parable sums up the experience of the 'anti-Leninists' in B. Theirs is the 'anti-Leninism' of people who think that Leninism is tyrannical because it is overriding political purpose, confronting a serious organisation's members with imperious logic, and for that reason reject Leninism not only in its parodic kitsch-Trotskyist degeneracy, which is all they know or can imagine, but in all its forms. They have the edgy contempt of would-be-but-not-quite 'insiders' for those who swim against the prevailing currents on the left. They reject the very idea that the left must reconstitute itself after the long Stalinist ice-age, critically evaluate its history, and once more work out a clear working-class world view.

Bosnia

If the "second-class citizenship" resolution had come from a revolt of the majority of the EB, duped and manipulated by GB, MM, DM, DP and BG into a fusion they did not want - and there was certainly an element of that - then there would not be much to say. The business would be just one more proof that GB's style of manipulative politics is not a good idea. But, essentially, that is not what happened.

The people who negotiated the agreement have a direct responsibility for what happened. On one level, as we have seen, they even organised it. How is this to be explained?

We pushed LLB - by an EB vote, but it was our pushing that secured it - off the fence and into plain support for Bosnia. Previously B had been silent for a long time, and before that had hedged its bets. The B leadership's operational principle is to bow to the prevailing wind on the left, and here it faced a situation in which powerful figures on the left, notably Tony Benn and Dennis Skinner, are, monstrously, pro-Serbia. The wish to avoid conflict with them had dominated B over three and half years of genocidal conflict in Bosnia, despite the pro-Bosnia inclinations of many comrades.

We started with a different approach - that we had a right and a duty to think the issue through for ourselves, according to what is right on working-class and democratic principle, and to say it out loud. With the support of DM, SL, SF, etc. we won an EB majority for a clear defence of the rights of the victims of Serbian aggression.

Immediately, the pressure of the pro-Serbia left made itself felt. Benn devoted much of a big speech at a Conway Hall meeting on the war in former Yugoslavia to denouncing LLB. Naturally, MM and GB felt very uncomfortable; GB told MT that never in the 15 years of B's publication had anything they printed caused so much trouble, except perhaps their mild criticism of the IRA after the Brighton hotel bombing in October 1984. Two or three B supporters resigned; others were unhappy.

This 'sensitised' GB and his associates to the likely consequences of an open democratic LLB - the LLB which they had agreed with us to produce - in which opinions inimical to the conventional left could be freely expressed, on Ireland, Europe, Israel, etc. They panicked and backpedalled. Remember that these are people who let their politics be imposed on them by outside pressure, who explicitly say that LLB should not propagate a world outlook of its own, that is, consistent and coherent politics of its own.

The divisions in B itself also played a role. It is an unstable entity. To either the first or the second EB we attended MM, absent, sent a letter threatening to resign if the EB licensed the setting up of even the loosest local LLB groups. Instead of backing SF, whose inclination there and then was to make an issue of MM's "parliamentary" procedure - "I'll resign if I don't get my way" - we looked for compromise. In any case, though we wanted local LLB groups, we thought that to proclaim the right openly to organise around a hard-left network was dangerous for LLB's LP legality.

MM was afraid, he said, of LLB groups being artificially cut off from a broader left in some localities. This would be reasonable - if such a left existed. We proposed that we take the issue case by case, area by area. Where a really broader left - and not two or three Outlook supporters with different badges on their lapels - existed or was possible, we would be part of that; where not, we would set up LLB groups. In fact, though, even after the C4 campaign, a broad left is organised almost nowhere. In practice the issue was whether we should try to organise supporters around LLB, or not.

MM's threat alarmed GB - when MM sneezes, GB gets pneumonia; when he itches, GB breaks out in a rash. When GB preached the need to placate MM, one of the undersigned commented that you couldn't stop someone determined to resign unless you were prepared to give him unquestionable control, and no group could do that without becoming a cult. GB was visibly startled by this.

And GB and company evidently felt that, having got the boost from fusion, the old B people could now with impunity tear up agreements. They had the EB majority and, moreover, we had nowhere to go if we wanted a Labour-Party-legal publication. Madeleine K said this in plain English at a meeting of the editorial sub-committee, in the presence of GB and others, and was not contradicted.

The issues now: the political differences

LLB is now in a crisis. We have tried to explain how it arose. What are the substantive issues? The political differences can be spelled out briefly. The undersigned and our comrades have, as we are told by the LLB EB majority, ideas on certain questions that fall outside the left consensus. That is true, but it is not new; it was true when we negotiated with the leading comrades of the old B.

On the European Union, we want European working-class unity and a working-class campaign for a democratic Europe, including a sovereign European Parliament; we reject little Britain (capitalist little Britain, in fact) as impossible and undesirable. On Ireland, we want working-class unity and consistent democracy; like the mainstream Irish left, we do not believe that socialists, in Britain or in Ireland, should parrot the communal militarists of the Provisional IRA or support its front organisations. On Israel/Palestine, we advocate self-determination for both the peoples in pre-1948 Palestine. The Palestinian Arabs have the right to an independent state where they are the majority; we defend Israel's right to exist, and believe that socialists should not support Arab-chauvinist attacks on the Israeli-Jewish people. We have no time for such nonsense as support for Serbian imperialism, nor patience with those who would temporise on this issue, as B did for years. For Marxists to trim their sails on a question like this to a Benn or a Skinner is to proclaim themselves morally, as well as politically and intellectually, bankrupt. We reject the idea that Stalinism in any of its forms was ever to any degree progressive or post-capitalist. (We believe that B's lead article of two years ago, lauding Peru's ultra-Stalinist 'Shining Path' movement, is an extreme example of what the critical-Stalinist inclinations of the old B can do to your brain.

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We do not propose to bind LLB to our ideas on Europe, on Ireland, on Israel/Palestine, on

Stalinism, or on Bosnia. We do insist on our right to express our ideas freely and on a basis of rough equality.

What issues must be resolved if LLB is to progress?

Democracy

1. Democracy. Democracy is either token and decorative, or real and functional. LLB is only apparently democratic.

The AGM can in the nature of things decide very, very little. The same is true of the enormous EB. One of us has been on the National Committee of an organisation of a couple of thousand people, doing many sorts of work, and on the committee that ran Catholic Derry behind the barricades after the state forces were driven out in the autumn of 1969. Neither committee was bigger than B's EB, and the Derry committee was probably smaller; both had less elaborate procedures and structures, and, unlike B's EB, their decisions affected what people did, throughout the labour movement or in a large part of a city. The present LLB EB is a sort of inflated "National Committee" - but it is a head without a body. It is like a GC - with no constituency party. It is a piece of mimicry and mummery - a substitute for real politics.

The EB has elaborate procedures and rituals, and in those private procedures it uses up a large part of the total time and energy that B activists or semi-activists devote to politics. It does not actually control the publication, except in the broadest outlines: no committee that big, meeting monthly, weeks before publication date, could. The EB may propose; the editorial sub-committee disposes.

The editorial sub-committee is not what it seems, either. Who is in charge? MM is "Political Correspondent", which means that he has a fixed (possibly even hereditary) right to write the editorials. Even where he is unhappy with the approach, as in the shift in line on Bosnia, he has the fixed personal right to write the editorials. This would perhaps be all right with someone who does not resent having his work amended (as it had to be on Bosnia) to fit a majority EB line. But MM visibly resented it then. It was an aspect of LLB's "Bosnia trauma".

There is no clear chain of designated, democratically agreed, accountable, editorial control. To a large extent the final shape of the magazine, and even of individual articles, is determined by who is in the office at a given moment, by personal force of character, and, often - though those who have never seen it in operation may be forgiven for doubting our word on this - by who can lay hands on an article at the latest moment. This is the experience of one of us who was an "editorial worker".

The role of GB here is indicative. Andrew C, one of those who resigned over Bosnia, has described GB as B's "proprietor", and so has SF. That is essentially true. The magazine is produced in GB's house (which is also his professional office); it depends heavily on the facilities and staff of his office, and on his money.

GB is by trade a solicitor, a fixer. He is good at it, obviously enjoys it, milks it for excitement and drama. He talks about the publication as his 'baby', and not in jest, but with a catch in his voice. It has become for him an end in itself, not a means to a political end: politics is secondary, or lower down the scale. He pulls the strings, acts as universal go-between and manipulator. Yet nobody elected him to this role. There is no elected position that corresponds to the role he plays. Nor is he accountable to anybody for what he does. Most of it is hidden-hand stuff. He does what he likes and what he can get away with.

Despite the elaborate rituals, LLB is an organisational chaos, and real democracy requires structures and accountability.

Mysticism and cultism

2. Cultism. At the EB various ideas were aired by MM, BG and others, to the effect that LLB was a journal of the broad left, not a journal of its supporters who sell and finance it. Therefore, it did not matter that the new LLB EB majority represented a minority of the actual supporters in the country; they represented The Left.

Conversely, the majority of LLB activists did not politically represent The Left. They were out of

step with The Left. Therefore the majority was not entitled even to equality in LLB. It was right and proper that, for example, celebrities and dignitaries of the labour movement and bourgeois journalism who partake of the politics of The Left should have more rights in LLB than the minority on the EB and the majority in the country.

We have tried carefully not to caricature this argument. It implies that some people in the group have the role of shamans or high priests, able, by some process of their own, to divine what "the politics of The Left" are. Right now, for example, is Benn, with his ridiculous nonsense on Serbia and Bosnia, representative of The Left? Who represents The Left on the European Union - the caricature little Englander, Dennis Skinner? Eamonn De Valera has been much mocked for once saying: 'When I want to know what the Irish people think, all I have to do is look in my own heart'. So it must be with MM, GB and their friends.

In rational politics, and in a rational and democratic system of organising the supporters of a journal, such questions are determined by reason and argument. In the projected new LLB - so we thought the negotiations had ensured - they would be determined by the supporters and interested readers or observers partaking in discussion. But here, in the real LLB, some people are deemed to know instinctively or innately, or are given the right to determine, by means outside of reason and argument (certainly outside of reason and argument with those who sell and sustain the journal), what the politics of The Broad Left are, and what therefore the politics of LLB must be. They know, and they have the right to protect their perception from the possibly rough hands and arguments of even the supporters of the publication, even from a majority; they have the right to suppress that majority, because they represent something higher, the Broad Left. In the real world - in the real relationship of these real people to the real broad left, in so far as one exists - this is a rancid mixture of megalomania and self-consolation.

The ad hoc majority of the EB is proclaimed to be an irremovable priesthood - a priesthood that does not have to argue on equal terms with dissenters, or, if it chooses, does not have to argue with them at all. It communes with 'The Left', or 'looks into its own heart', and that is enough. This is the politics of mysticism and cultism.

If we knew the history of B - and we did: Appendix 4 - why did we ever get into this venture? We were favourably surprised and encouraged by the negotiations early in 1995. MM and, even more so, GB seemed genuinely to believe that the old B had come to the end of the road. In fact, GB said explicitly that it was on the verge of coming to a dead stop. They seemed ready to try something new, wider, more pluralistic and more ambitious.

When MM said that a new journal would not be worth doing if it were only a merger of us and B, that it must be something much broader, a journal of the whole left, we agreed that we should try to draw in other people besides us and the old B group, though we explained that we could not see any possibility of creating the 'mass-circulation' journal MM seemed to be talking about. He seemed to be indulging in fantasies about B as a left-wing New Statesman that, to us, had no obvious connection with B or any likely new publication. If he made such mass circulation a prerequisite, then, since it could not be organised at will, the logical conclusion had to be to stop the old B and to proceed with nothing new. He drew no such conclusion. His talk seemed to be harmless 'wouldn't it be nice if' waffle. Let experience decide what could be done!

We thought we had surmounted the difficult. Hindsight suggests that we misunderstood We thought the days of the gross delusions and fantasies about labour movement 'power' associated with the old GB/CK 'Labour Take The Power' group were gone. We did not realise that the delusions had been transmuted from CK's 'power' fantasies into MM's mainstream-press fantasies.

In the old B, MM and GB saw, not what we saw - the magazine of a small group which had failed to find anything to say beyond the conventional wisdoms of the left. Even though few people outside the London B circle saw it their way, for them B was already a journal of the whole broad left. Its self-submergence in the left consensus was a virtue, not a defect or an admission of defeat by those who still called themselves Trotskyists. (GB would, in passing, admit to defeat in the 'Trotskyist' project he had embarked on long ago: however, there was

always the future...) And so they can now be happy to make LLB a replica of the old B, the same old B which a year ago they said was at a dead end.

They misunderstood too, perhaps deliberately, and certainly without excuse. We reminded them again and again in the negotiations that we would insist on arguing our ideas in the new magazine.

Kitsch Leninism

3. "Anti-Leninist" kitsch-Leninism. The saddest thing, perhaps, in this experience, is the way the most vociferous anti-Leninists, people who have "taken the cure" for sectarianism, nevertheless in their own roundabout way wind up creating in LLB now a caricature of that uncivilised and irrational "majority" gang-rule typical of the degenerate kitsch-Trotskyist groups. Within a short time of fusion they have generated a full-scale factional conflict.

No: no progress will be made in organising a serious revolutionary left, rooted in the labour movement and the working class, and functioning as a rational self-regulating collective, except on the basis of open discussion and rational discipline. Just to slough off the formulas - and with them the sense of purpose - of the kitsch-Leninists takes you nowhere: it is necessary to learn the real lessons of the kitsch-Leninist experience, or otherwise you merely repeat that experience in a grotesque parody.

The left is in a bad way. To a large extent it deserves to be. It is grossly infected by the poisons deposited during the long decades of Stalinism. Therefore, the left must be remade. No-one will do it if we do not. The left needs to eradicate kitsch-Leninist politics and organise the sort of open debates and dialogue we thought we had agreed to have in LLB. The left needs debate and discussion now like a half-stifled person desperately needs oxygen. Open the windows!

The purpose of LLB

4. The purpose of LLB. Central to what has happened is the fact - so it seems to us - that GB and company have no purpose in politics other than to survive, mouthing whatever politics 'The Left' throws up. LLB thus has more the character of a hobby than of a purposeful political enterprise.

Against this, we say that the job of a publication like LLB is to organise a political tendency in the labour movement - to organise the left in the LP and the TUs, to educate it in Marxism and to help it fight the class struggle.

Such a tendency has two interlinked functions. It helps fight and organise the class struggle at every level - economic, political and ideological - and it groups, regroups, sifts, clarifies and organises the socialists, trying to create an effective socialist collective, an ongoing organisation permanently geared to fight for socialism. It is regulated by the rhythms and needs of the class struggle. Such a collective must have the discipline of conscious Marxists, not the solidarity of a gang; it must have a living democracy in its internal affairs and in its relations with the labour movement, or it will get lost, as all the sects get lost, and have no way of reassessing and rectifying itself.

The ideas of such a collective cannot be considered as unquestionable either because Trotsky said something similar, or because we do not dare get out of step with what we see as the broader Left.

We believe that a serious socialist journal and the collective around it should be organised neither on the pattern of a reformist clique, nor that of the Stalinoid kitsch-Trotskyist mini-dictatorships, but democratically, flexibly (on the model, we would say, of the real Lenin; but we need not agree on that). To that end we negotiated what we thought was agreement on democratic functioning and non-abortive ways of handling political differences and disputes. We have proposed ways of developing LLB by local groups, trade union fractions, etc. Against that is counterposed what? A LLB run by a self-selected sect of semi-priests who interpret and mediate 'the Labour Left'; in fact, a journal like the pre-fusion B, which makes no attempt to present a rounded socialist outlook.

MM spelled it out in a document for the EB. "We are not producing a general current-affairs magazine. Our aim is not to propagate a world view. We are a magazine by and for labour movement activists, with a socialist perspective" ('Some thoughts on the content and presentation of the new magazine').

This modest aim - essentially a hobby journal for (some of!) its supporters rather than one with a broader purpose and a coherent political culture - is supplemented in EB discussions by bizarre fantasies of developing LLB into something like the New Statesman. EBs are regaled with Fleet Street gossip. Celebrities are invoked and sometimes entertained in B's pages. Politics does not come into it.

The creation of a clear, coherent political current is - as MM said in the document to the EB - no part of the LLB EB's business, because it might interfere with their relations with the purveyors of the dominant ideas on the left, the Benns, the Skinners, and various left journalists. The LLB EB do not realise it, but thereby they reject the very rudiments, the foundations, on which serious Marxist politics and organisations were elaborated in the past, and by way of which alone, if historical experience be any guide, they can be re-elaborated for today.

The "first and second class citizens" resolution was moved by BG, and that was appropriate. In BG the two essential trends in B fuse, so that he is the representative EB member. He is essentially inactive, apart from coming to some EBs; and he is one of the three or four remaining representatives of the political culture of the strange pseudo-Trotskyist sect that used to be led by GB and CK, whose bizarre slogan, "Labour Take The Power", was removed on our initiative from the new publication. This group, as the discussion over "Labour Take The Power" showed, have learned nothing and forgotten nothing, losing only their old energy, hope and purpose. Revive them a little, and they are what they were.

BG subscribes to a strange secretive cultist notion of politics, as he explained to the EB, justifying his proposal and arguing why we should not even want to express our disagreement with dominant left opinion on Ireland. One should not argue unpopular politics. One should stay with the consensus. He explained that he himself had backed Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, but kept silent for fear of giving offence. This is a world of pretence and make-believe, combined with grubby 'practicality' and endless readiness to bow down to the powerful and the prominent. It has only the thin mists of fantasy to connect it to revolutionary politics.

What is perhaps the worse example has already been referred to: the litterateur Ronan Bennett's criminally stupid piece two years ago, featured on the front page of B, in praise of the Peruvian Pol-Pot-ists of the "Shining Path". (Incidentally, the same Bennett recently offered - how seriously we do not know - to clear B's debts, pointedly at the same time expressing unhappiness that our criticism of the Provisionals might appear in LLB. Source: GB. An inescapable question arises here, and supporters of LLB might feel entitled to a clear answer: is LLB for sale?).

A journal could deserve to exist for many different reasons or combinations of reasons. It can have vital reports, pioneer new ideas, demolish and help bury old ideas, act as a forum where important issues are debated. Which of these reasons justifies LLB, run as the EB majority currently wants it run? None of them. In their self-image, the modest, little-read LLB - which normally prints neither important reports, nor thought-provoking political articles, nor serious discussion - is lost sight of in fantasies about the "big time". And the truth is that the fantasy LLB they talk about, written by dissident Fleet Street journalists, would not be of much use or interest to serious activists.

To one who knew the old CK/GB B, the current B's dependence on MM's grapevine gossip and fantasies about Fleet Street and Wapping is reminiscent of the old B's fixation on the 'power' of local-government Labour leftists like Ted Knight and Ken Livingstone. They are groupies and vicarious participants still. The new dependence is no more productive than the old.

5. Do we defer to and passively reflect the Left?

Here the quotations from Orwell and Gramsci at the start of this article sum up the difference between ourselves and the EB majority. In fact, in political terms, LLB is a repository of the

stale prejudices and moth-eaten baggage of the 'world outlook' of the old left, much of it Stalinist in origin and content. Their ideas - except for a few daft ones like 'Labour Take the Power' - are mechanically imposed on them by the left environment. They know this and are proud of it. Theirs is not to reason why.

Serious Marxists - those who want to build an organisation now, to analyse and discuss the experience and problems of the working-class movement and its left wing, working towards the recreation of a mass socialist labour movement - have a different approach. We accept responsibility for ourselves and try to think for ourselves. The most deadly answer to the nonsense of the would-be shamans and priests of the EB majority, the would-be interpreters and all-too-accomplished worshippers of the 'great men' and women of the conventional Left, is there in the picture painted by Orwell of the left in the mid-'30s.

Orwell found nearly all the equivalents of Benn, Skinner, etc., of that day, and the equivalents of MM and GB, too, purveying, in varying dilutions, the Stalinist lies about the Spanish civil war, in which the Stalinists organised the bourgeois counter-revolution in the anti-fascist Republican areas. He found the broader left of that time - not only the outright Stalinists, but also those (like Kingsley Martin, the editor of the then very influential *New Statesman*) who bowed to the public opinion created by the Stalinists and the Labour Left - to be a pestilential swamp of lies and corruption. People like Stafford Cripps and Aneurin Bevan, with their support for an alliance with Liberals and 'progressive' Tories in a Popular Front, were, as Trotsky pointed out, in class terms to the right of Labour's right-wingers like Herbert Morrison, who rejected the Popular Front; just as those today who back the Provos, or Saddam Hussein, are to the right of decent liberal-minded reformist workers. Those then who took the approach to 'the left' of today's LLB EB - and there were lots of little groups who did so, some 'critically' - backed the politics of Stalin to one degree or another.

Today we look back with respect and some gratitude on the Orwells and with contempt on the broad left of that time. Orwell and the Trotskyists were howled down and persecuted, their ideas excoriated and stifled. It would be foolish to claim that because our ideas are unpopular with the mainstream left today, therefore they are correct. The other claim can, however, safely be made. Today we still have a left still swamped and waterlogged with Stalinist prejudices and shrouded with the pestilential vapours given off by various 'anti-imperialist' chauvinisms (Catholic-Irish, Muslim, Arab-nationalist, etc.), a left in which a good basic class-struggle, worker-loyal man like Dennis Skinner is on some key questions indistinguishable from an old-style Tory nationalist. If we set out slavishly to follow the left-wing fashion, ruling out our own thinking and observations from the political process, then it will be a miracle if we do not go wrong. The leading comrades of B, who slavishly followed Ken Livingstone through all his GLC sell-outs, could testify to that, if they would, from their own experience.

In one of his letters George Orwell describes how, in a restaurant, he deliberately sat with his back to Kingsley Martin, the long-time editor of the *New Statement*, who, knowing better, purveyed lies and half-truths and covered for the bigger lies so that he could retain popularity 'on the left'. I could not, wrote Orwell, bear to look at that face, which conveyed to me only corruption and the moral decay of the false left.

In relation to the conventional left now, we take Orwell and the Trotskyists of Trotsky's time, whose analysis he reflected, as our model; do the leaders of the LLB EB majority really want to take Kingsley Martin as theirs?

The future of LLB

6. The future of LLB. To put it brutally but truthfully - B was an entity to which mortally-wounded or suicidal old kitsch-Trotskyists went to die, an 'elephants' graveyard' of the left. GB consciously organised B to catch such people. The rumour of someone dropping out - no matter why - from *Outlook*, for example, caused visible joy and excitement if there were any chance of co-opting him or her. GB and his friends circled round the serious left, looking for the sick, the weak, or the wounded. Maybe it was all they could do, given their numbers and lack of political weight.

But the sick and wounded bring their sicknesses and prejudices; they bring their grievances;

usually, they have left their hope and political purpose behind them. Too often, they bring stark failure either to comprehend their own experience as the revolutionary socialists they set out to be, or to shed the often nonsensical prejudices of kitsch-Trotskyism. They retire. They give up the ghost.

B is a hospice; what the labour movement needs is a school of socialism, able to train and send out people, especially young people, with hope in their hearts and fire in their minds to propagate a socialist world outlook and to win the labour movement and the unorganised working class to it.

What to do now

7. What do we want? What do we intend to do? We negotiated a possibly viable relationship with the old B. It broke down, not because it could not have worked, but because GB and company reneged on it. It might still be the basis for common work. Only an Annual General Meeting can now restore that work.

At such an AGM we would still, subject to proper guarantees, consent to be a minority on an EB committed to a democratic LLB. We would insist, however, on the implementation of the clause in the March 1995 agreement which provided that the old B EB would be no more than 33% of the new EB, and that independents would make up the bulk of the committee.

To put it candidly, it is not clear to us that any of these things can be achieved. The amount of effort involved in an attempt to sort out LLB might be more constructively expended elsewhere. The game may not be worth the candle. This much, however, we submit, is clear: if LLB is to have a future better than being a little hobby-journal for a few people who have lost all serious political purpose, than only an AGM which calls the present EB majority to order can secure that future.

Appendix 1: the basis of merger

(Written agreement drawn up on 30 March 1995 and agreed by a meeting a few days later).

The main text was drafted by GB:

1. GB stated that the purpose of creating structures for the Editorial Board and the production of the journal were: (a) to produce an effective journal, and (b) to satisfy the component parts of the journal. MT indicated that the preconditions for agreement were (a) political common ground, and (b) political goodwill. In the absence of these no constitutional arrangements would be effective.
2. It was accepted by MT that [our side] should constitute no more than 25% of the EB. This should be in the form of an understanding rather than part of a written constitution. It was also accepted by GB that existing members of the B EB should not constitute a majority, would probably be no more than one third of the EB, and hopefully would be down to 25% of it.
3. The Editorial Board would be accountable to an AGM at which the same understanding, as indicated above, would apply.
4. Minority rights would be guaranteed. This meant space for minority opinions in the journal. This would include a right of reply, but not be limited to it....

An additional note was drafted by MT, but also agreed:

There is also an informal understanding that usually, on routine matters, [our side] does not operate on the EB as a bloc... Publication to be punchy on key issues, where EB is pretty united. On other issues it will have an editorial policy of open discussion and controversy, rather than a heavy-handed mechanism of 'majority line statements', 'right of reply', etc....

This agreement was reprised by MM in a document put to the EB: 'I would suggest we actually demarcate a key section of the magazine every month for 'right to reply' - anyone unhappy with anything written in previous issues will get the space to sound off. Such a regular feature will help promote debate and act as a tangible guarantee of democracy and openness. It also has the advantage of assuring any group which finds itself in a minority on the EB that its views will not be silenced'.

Appendix 2: the article LLB would not print

What is the significance of the logjam in the Northern Ireland peace process? The British government insists it is the failure of the Provisional IRA to give up their weapons which is the main block to talks. Sinn Fein insist even more loudly that the British are being obstructive, that they are demanding an IRA surrender and reneging on commitments given before the ceasefire. Socialists should examine these claims with an independent and critical eye because both are superficial explanations of the real situation.

Superficial, because there is partial truth in both version. The IRA will not give up their arms in advance of talks and it should not be impossible for anyone, even the most pro-republican socialist, to see why that might the entire Protestant community anxious and suspicious and, more to the point, unwilling to sit down to talks with them. But the Catholic community is anxious too, and in terms of population figures and numbers of armed, trained killers (RUC, RIR), they have more reason to be fearful. No-one is talking of decommissioning RUC arms because, once again, the British government's position takes no account of the relationship most Catholics have to the Northern Ireland state.

Equally, the British government appears to be reneging on an understanding that talks involving all parties including Sinn Fein would follow a ceasefire which proved to be durable. The demand for decommissioning, in advance, given the delicate situation inside the Provisionals and given most examples of similar peace processes, seems almost calculated to offend republicans.

To see only this in the British position, however, is to miss the point. The British government has no inherent interest in delaying or sabotaging the Irish peace process. Quite the opposite. John Major has to fight a general election within the next eighteen months, with very little in the way of policy successes to boost his chances. Northern Ireland will never be a key issue in a British election, but the Tories exploited to the limit Major's role in the ceasefire and will be keen to play the same tune again in the general election. A failed peace process would be a disaster for them.

The Tories' failure to call all-party talks stems from one basic reality. They could not get the representatives of the Protestant/Unionist community to attend. They would not be all-party talks and so nothing could be resolved.

The Sinn Fein reaction to this reality, for they recognise it even if they avoid talking about it, is bizarre when you think about it. The trouble is that most of the left refuse to think about it.

Sinn Fein demand that the British government convene the talks anyway and let the Unionists decide whether to turn up. If they don't the talks should go ahead with full UK and Irish government participation and presumably any agreement should be presented as a new agreed settlement of the Irish questions. This is a policy which, for all its superficial reasonableness, is deeply anti-republican and anti-democratic.

Republicanism in Ireland is, in essence, the project of uniting the people of the island across the religious/communal divide to win political democracy, of which independence from Britain was only one part. It was born out of the events surrounding the French and American revolutions as a modernist, rational movement. Understandably bitter at the undemocratic partition of the island in 1921, modern-day 'republicans' have long since abandoned that tradition. Righting the wrongs done to the Catholics and getting the Brits out have been the central ideas driving the republicans for the last 30 years.

The real problem, of which even partition is only a symptom, is the chronic communal division within the island; the real republican programme should be to undercut and destroy that division. Since at least 1921 that had to mean communal compromise on the national question; above all, a programme which recognised fully the rights of majority and minority populations in any political settlement. The Provisionals have, however, evolved into a narrow communal organisation completely incapable of grasping the real nature of the problem.

Hence they organise activist campaigns and lobby the great and good in Dublin and America with demands which are entirely beside the point. The British should talk; the British should

release all of our prisoners (not loyalists); the British should pull out of our country. The people republicans really need to talk to are represented by a difficult, truculent, suspicious leadership, a leadership who are being obstructive. But these people, the Protestant/Unionist Irish, are not even being seriously addressed by the modern followers of Wolfe Tone.

Nearly every new act by Sinn Fein seems calculated to drive them into the hands of Paisley and Trimble. This happens not because Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness act in bad faith, but because they are politicians shaped entirely by their environment, bourgeois nationalists who believe that uniting the island of Ireland is somehow separate from and more important than uniting the people of Ireland. They can sustain this fantasy only because they believe that the key to uniting Ireland lies not with the Irish working class, Protestant and Catholic, but with the British government.

The present logjam reflects the depth of division and mistrust after 25 years of sectarian conflict and a pointless military campaign. The Republican movement have decided to pursue the same political objectives with a different strategy.

Socialists should reject the strategy of Sinn Fein and refuse to give it credence. We look to the Irish working class to develop a democratic settlement of the national question. We judge any other settlement by the standards of full democracy, including minority rights; and we place no confidence whatever in Major, Clinton and Bruton.

Appendix 3: October LLB EB resolution

Principles: Labour B supports the struggle for a united Ireland. The partition of Ireland undermines working-class unity. We believe that the struggle for a united Ireland is inseparable from the struggle for socialism and that the end of partition is precondition for socialist advance.

Labour B does not characterise the struggle in Ireland as a communal conflict. Socialists do not place an equal sign between Republicanism and loyalism. We do not take a neutral position on the Irish struggle we wish to see an end to British rule in Ireland.

We wholeheartedly reject the bipartisanship of the LP and its embrace of the unionist veto.

Practice: The bulk of our coverage should be directed at: - Debating differing views on the Peace Accord (Bernadette, Sinn Fein, SDLP, etc.) but the editorial position should support the talks, insist on a place for Sinn Fein at the negotiating table and argue that the LP should fight for the British Government to join the ranks of the 'persuaders'. - Achieving a British withdrawal. - Covering the human, civil rights and other issues such as employment and other forms of economic discrimination, shoot to kill, strip searching, use of plastic bullets, wrongful imprisonment, anti-Irish racism, PTA, British support for loyalist gun men, return of Irish political prisoners, etc. - Giving Sinn Fein a voice in Labour B to speak to the British labour movement in their own words.

The democratic rights of comrades that do not share this view should be protected. Minority views should be represented in the magazine but the space they occupy should be determined by their minority status and they should be presented as a debate with the B position. The right of reply on the letters page should be unconditional but decisions on the coverage of minority views in the main body of the paper will be made by the Editorial Board.

Appendix 4: 'Labour Take the Power'?

For ordinary users of English, "Labour Take The Power" means "Labour form a government", expressed in quaint words. ("Take", as opposed to win the election? "The Power", as opposed to merely forming a government?) For the initiates, it carries the secret coded "Marxist" message: Labour [Wilson's, Callaghan's, Foot's, Kinnock's, Smith's, or Blair's Labour Party!] take the state power on behalf of the working class [translation: Labour smash the army, police, civil service, and parliamentary system, and replace them with soviets and a workers' state]. This idea could not belong to the world of rational politics, but to the world of magic and mumbo-jumbo.

When the crisis over pit closures in late 1992 led to big demonstrations, CK booked Central

Hall Westminster so that he could fill it with miners who would then, at a signal, move a few yards up the road and 'take over' Parliament. This lunacy was rejected by B: in fact, however, similar millenarian notions, without the details or immediacy of CK's projected 1992 coup d'etat, were at the heart of the "Labour Take The Power" sect all through its existence.

When we debated with them in late 1972, CK explained: "If a general strike occurred in Britain, Benn or someone would call an emergency LP conference... in order to take matters into their own hands... Revolutionaries should attend such an emergency LP conference and put 'Labour Take The Power' - we would expose the LP leaders and we would say 'we are the Labour Party'.

"We would rally the conference to march on Parliament and take over. "This is the only way in which one can carry out the seizure of power". [From minutes of the debate published in the Internal Bulletin of 'Workers' Fight'].

The words "Labour Take The Power" are the ghost of those ideas - encoded, mystified, abracadabra-ified.

Though CK never as far as we know booked a pub near Labour Party HQ so that they could gather and then pop across the road to take over the Labour Party, the basic ideas of the CK/GB group, when it was a revolutionary tendency, were always borderline crazy at least. Their peculiar cluster of millenarian ideas, magic mantras, and emotion-saturated words with private meanings, were originally the distinguishing marks of a revolutionary group. They were, however, not only that. They were a thick haze of delusion through which the group saw the world around it. What they saw was not what other people saw. The affairs of the labour movement were 'interpreted', 'ideologised', transmuted - but only in their heads, alas! - into 'evidence' and early manifestations of the revolution. Paradoxically this led the group to integrate itself into and accommodate to a labour movement routine that was anything but revolutionary.

They had their private glosses and fantasies about what was going on to sustain them. CK or GB at a constituency GC could see things that nobody else could see; but that was all private fantasy or publicly encoded in 'secret-meaning' formulas like 'Labour Take The Power'. They happily combined Labour Party routinism with exuberant revolutionary perspectives. Just as, on the level of world politics, they, like the whole post-Trotsky 'official' Trotskyist current of which they were part, were committed to the notion that the 'World Revolution' was advancing and therefore identified Stalinist revolutions as the 'actually-existing' (deformed) manifestation of working-class liberation, so their ultra-revolutionary fantasies about the actually-existing British labour movement led them to misunderstand radically what was happening, to misidentify and mislabel things and people.

If Cervantes had invented CK and GB, he would have had them on their knees kissing windmills mistaken for heroic knights. Real life had them fawning to Ken Livingstone, mistaking the games he played in the Greater London council for serious class-struggle politics. Their fantasies led CK, GB and others to play the role of sycophants and rationalisers - come to think of it, 'priests' would be a possible world to describe their role here - for the local government left of the early 1980s, and for for Ken Livingstone even when Livingstone was visibly hooked up with the Healyites, who were visibly in the pay of the Libyan and Iraqi governments. What were the local government left doing? Actually, they were running Labour local government pretty much as usual, but with left talk and contributions to 'politically correct' causes. No, said B, they are 'taking the local power', and if there are shortcomings in what they do, it is because we have not put enough 'power' behind them.

They backed Livingstone and covered for him right up to the final ignominious collapse in 1985. They have never drawn up any balance sheet of that experience, except to praise themselves for their non-sectarianism and for not cutting themselves off from the Labour Left.

The history of 'Labour Take The Power' and the political grouping associated with it goes back to 1969 or 1970.

It was originally a would-be Trotskyist grouplet, the RCL, formed circa 1969-70 by the merger of a splinter from the IMG (predecessor of Socialist Outlook) and a splinter from Militant. It got the name 'C - by taking over the 'SC' movement, which had been launched in a feeble attempt

to build a rank-and-file base for the parliamentary Labour left. Its politics were in essence those of Militant, given a more revolutionary and urgent tone.

Militant believed that the labour movement, including the Labour Party, was ripening towards the socialist revolution. The Labour Party would be radicalised, there would be a 'mass left wing', the right wing would be sloughed off, and the left would continue radicalising until 'the Marxists' - Militant - dominated it. Then there would be a peaceful revolution, by way of a parliamentary Enabling Act.

Militant's conclusion from this was to make general socialist propaganda about nationalising the top 200 monopolies. For them, the 'revolutionary' perspectives were always something for the not-quite-immediate future: in the meantime, the job was to wait, embed themselves in the labour movement, make propaganda, and eschew premature or impatient initiatives. The C group, under the leadership of CK, turned the perspective into an immediate, speeded-up scenario. By way of the right slogans, the 'process' which Militant foresaw could be made to happen quickly, dramatically, 'now'. The essential slogans here, in the early 1970s, were 'Prepare The General Strike' (The General Strike, not merely a general strike), and 'Labour Take The Power', which was the Militant slogan, Labour Government on a Socialist Programme, converted into revolutionary idiom. The General Strike would erupt; Labour would be forced to call an emergency conference; the revolutionaries would oust the reformists and lead Labour to smash capitalist power.

CK would orate and fantasise - and he was very good at it when he was on a 'high' - as if the idea of the revolutionaries taking over the Labour Party and then taking over Parliament (based on Militant's perspective) was something that could happen straight away, by the will of a few people.

In the early 1970s, up to maybe 1974 or 1975, events seemed to give their ideas some credence. Then the Wilson government succeeded in demobilising the left and deflating industrial militancy; Northern Ireland settled into a long war of attrition. CK and GB went into retirement or semi-retirement, concentrating on their professional and personal lives. The group fell into the hands of people (chiefly ex-SWP) much chastened by the downturn. The slogan 'Labour Take The Power' was converted from an expectation of immediate revolution into a rationalisation for a soft, accommodating routine in the Labour Party. Devotees of half-truth, the group took the idea that the real development of the mass labour movement is decisive, and concluded that, for a tiny group like theirs, this meant not propaganda work and a struggle for clarity to help the movement develop, but submergence in the movement. They should not 'rock the boat' through propaganda - except for the magic, talismanic, 'Labour Take The Power'.

CK and GB came back to life in 1978 when, on the initiative of one of the undersigned and others, the left held a sizeable conference and set up the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory. Talking to one of us at that conference, CK could not contain himself, talking in wide-eyed wonder about what 'power' we had accumulated.

Some time in 1979, the group's majority expelled CK and GB for disruption, because CK made a wild speech somewhere. They and some others now formed the 'C minority'. This group had an immediate impact on the left when, breaking a silence of some years' duration, they put out their first publication. This was 'My Sex Life', a pamphlet in which CK told of his courtship and marriage, and of his psychical impotence and which pocket Ann put the contraceptives in as she went off to meet her lover. There was something for everybody. The insensitive could mock and laugh, the prurient indulge themselves, alert political scientists pigeon-hole one more strangemanifestation of sectarian paranoia, and Freudians feel that they had at last uncovered the root and stem of this group's obsession with 'power', with taking, grasping, worrying at, THE POWER!

The SCLV's platform had called for 'no rent and rate rises'. After the Tories won the 1979 election, and cut local government funding, many of the Labour local government leftists to whom the C s looked up as people of 'power' used rate rises to evade both immediate cuts and direct struggle against the government. We argued for struggle. Both C majority and minority argued for rate rises 'to buy time to prepare'. They complained that by keeping the SCLV to its

platform commitment we were sectarian: we should take our lead from the 'broad left', not from the democratic deliberations of SCLV supporters.

They had full and unrestricted scope to argue their views in the SCLV paper 'Socialist Organiser', but in late 1979 they pulled out. 'Socialist Organiser' continued to be a broad paper - Ken Livingstone, for example, then a left-wing councillor in Camden, and a strong supporter of rate rises, still wrote for it - but both C factions turned elsewhere.

The C majority very soon went over to the soft-left (now hard-right) Labour Coordinating Committee. The minority led by CK and GB launched B in early 1980. It was a journal tied to a very specific project: getting left-wing Labour candidates selected for the Greater London Council election due in May 1981. Round that project it gathered a sizeable readership and circle of friends.

When a Labour GLC majority was elected, and Ken Livingstone took the leadership, the journal exclaimed excitedly 'London's Ours'. On the contrary, they were 'London's', or rather Livingstone's. They rationalised and provided 'revolutionary' glosses for all his retreats, right up to his final ignominious collapse and rallying to Kinnock in 1985. On the way and in passing, they made probably the most positive contribution to the class struggle of their whole political lives, by helping us to launch the Mineworkers' Defence Committee, which rallied support for the great miners' strike at a national level. But their original 'Trotskyism' had now transmuted into something indistinguishable from social-democracy trimmed with private millenarian fantasies expressed in code ('Labour Take The Power').

By 1985 the C minority group, never much of an organisation, had disintegrated completely - or so CK told us at the time - leaving only, like the Cheshire cat's smile, its once-fervent slogan 'Labour Take The Power' on the cover of a journal produced by a group without much distinctive political shape. The magazine now had not even that addled sense of purpose that it had had when promoting the GLC left. An experiment in collaboration with Outlook in 1986-90 ended with both sides going their own way again. Outlook had been willing to let the old B group shape the paper, even to the extent of leaving the daft 'Labour Take The Power' slogan on the cover, but eventually lost patience and (foolishly) became more interested in the abortive attempt to launch 'socialist' as a new broad-left paper. The B group went back to their old routine, relieved (as they explicitly told us at the time) that they could operate again as a circle of friends, knowing and trusting each other, without risk of outside disturbance. The circle was now no longer a politically-defined group, but much more a resting place for people who had spun off from one or another of the would-be Trotskyist groups and who had not found it convenient or congenial to absorb themselves entirely, as such spin-offs usually do, in trade-union or Labour Party routine, or in domestic or careerist preoccupations.

Appendix 5: the real Lenin

'Freedom to Criticise and Unity of Action' - Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.10. p.442

The editors have received the following communication signed by the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

'In view of the fact that several Party organisations have raised the question of the limits within which the decisions of Party congresses may be criticised, the Central Committee, bearing in mind that the interests of the Russian proletariat have always demanded the greatest possible unity in the tactics of the RSDLP, and that this unity in the political activities of the various sections of our Party is now more necessary than ever, is of the opinion:
'(1) that in the Party press and at Party meetings, everybody must be allowed full freedom to express his personal opinions and to advocate his personal views;
'(2) that at public political meetings members of the Party should refrain from conducting agitation that runs counter to congress decisions;
'(3) that no Party member should at such meetings call for action that runs counter to congress decisions, or propose resolutions that are out of harmony with congress decisions'.
(All italics ours).

In examining the substance of this resolution, we see a number of queer points. The resolution says that 'at Party meetings' 'full freedom' is to be allowed for the expression of personal

opinions and for criticism ('1), but at 'public meetings' ('2) 'no Party member should call for action that runs counter to congress decisions'. But see what comes of this: at Party meetings, members of the Party have the right to call for action that runs counter to congress decisions; but at public meetings they are not 'allowed' full freedom to 'express personal opinions'! Those who drafted the resolution have a totally wrong conception of the relationship between freedom to criticise within the Party and the Party's unity of action. Criticism within the limits of the principles of the Party Programme must be quite free (we remind the reader of what Plekhanov said on this subject at the Second Congress of the RSDLP), not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings. Such criticism, or such 'agitation' (for criticism is inseparable from agitation) cannot be prohibited. The Party's political action must be united. No 'calls' that violate the unity of definite actions can be tolerated either at public meetings, or at Party members, or in the Party press.

Obviously, the Central Committee has defined freedom to criticise inaccurately and too narrowly, and unity of action inaccurately and too broadly.

Let us take an example. The Congress decided that the Party should take part in the Duma elections. Taking part in elections is a very definite action. During the elections (as in Baku today, for example), no member of the Party anywhere has any right whatever to call upon the people to abstain from voting; nor can 'criticism' of the decision to take part in the elections be tolerated during this period, for it would in fact jeopardise success in the election campaign. Before elections have been announced, however, Party members everywhere have a perfect right to criticise the decision to take part in elections. Of course, the application of this principle will sometimes give rise to disputes and misunderstandings; but only on the basis of this principle can all disputes and all misunderstandings be settled honourably for the Party. The resolution of the Central Committee, however, creates an impossible situation.

The Central Committee's resolution is essentially wrong and runs counter to the Party Rules. The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organisations implies universal and full freedom to criticise, so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action; it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the unity of an action decided on by the Party.

We think that the Central Committee has made a big mistake by publishing a resolution on this important question without first having it discussed in the Party press and by Party organisations; such discussion would have helped it to avoid the mistakes we have indicated.

We call upon all Party organisations to discuss this resolution of the Central Committee now, and to express a definite opinion on it.

Appendix 6: Ireland

IRA activities are based on the poisonous lie that the problem is 'British-occupied Ireland', with the implication that the Protestants simply do not matter. And indeed the Provo leaders' entire strategy now is based on a British - or British-Washington-Dublin - solution imposed against the will of the compact Protestant Irish minority in north-east Ulster.

This is less even than bourgeois democratic politics; it has nothing in common with Wolfe Tone Republicanism. It is narrow Catholic communalism, based on a minority of the Six Counties Catholics. The PIRA war - being an attempt to 'unite' Ireland by force, and not by agreement - became inevitably and primarily a war against other Irish people. Because the effective opposition to a united Ireland consists of one million Irish people, therefore the Provo campaign inevitably came to involve anti-Protestant assassinations.

Certainly socialists should talk to and debate with Sinn Fein/PIRA. We have done that far more than the old B ever did. We have regularly had Sinn Fein/PIRA speakers to debate with us at our annual summer school. We have published their statements and debated with them in our press. Dialogue, and debate, yes - but for socialists to accept an obligation on principle to back the Provos in whatever they do or say is not only to abandon Marxist attempts to understand the world but also to renounce elementary working-class politics.

On Ireland self-righteous ignorance and indifference is typical of a whole layer of the British

left. The vast amount of serious historical research on Ireland in the last 20 or 30 years - before that, Irish historiography had scarcely moved out beyond myths and one-sided chronicles - is a matter of indifference to them. Where the real proletarian left in Ireland has moved away from the Catholic-nationalist middle-class myths, the British left holds to them even more tenaciously than does the politically sophisticated wing of the Provo leadership. The dogma that people in Britain are British chauvinists if they even discuss internal Irish affairs, that we have no right to do anything but follow the lead of the Provos, is a particularly crass example.

If people who hold to that dogma should bother to learn real Irish history as distinct from Catholic middle-class mythology, what would they make of such a thing as James Connolly arguing in the Scottish labour paper *Forward*, before World War 1, that the British labour movement should try to get the British Liberal government to force payment for MPs into the constitution of the projected Home Rule Ireland, against the express will of the Home Rule Party at Westminster? Was Connolly a 'British nationalist'?

The argument which DM and much of the left use was middle-class nationalist moral blackmail against working-class politics then - when it was used by the Liberal Party and the Ramsay MacDonald-style Labour leaders who, like the Irish middle-class Home Rulers, were a tail of the Liberals - and it is no better now. It can never be the attitude of serious British or Irish socialists.

A terrible case in point here is GB. GB tends to be taciturn on political questions. At the October EB he was unusually forthcoming: support for the Provos was, he said, a central defining question for the left, and would continue to be for the foreseeable future. Now GB is one of those few who - like us - solidarised with the Provos against the British state in the early '70s, long before it was fashionable on the left and when it carried (or we had reason to think it might carry) some risks. Evidently he has learned nothing from the 23 year Provo war.

He reckons that uncritical support and mimicry of the Provos must define the left for the indefinite future, even now that they have gone into mainstream bourgeois politics. Provisional Sinn Fein/IRA (no-one who knows the structure of 'Republican' organisations will for a second believe that Sinn Fein is a really independent or autonomous organisation: it is not) is a communalist organisation based on a minority of the Northern Ireland Catholic minority. Its maximum Northern Ireland vote was 42 per cent of the Catholic minority, over a decade ago. It is popular now in the South, but electorally its support has been less than two per cent there. Gerry Adams and his friends are moving into bourgeois politics. Even if the ceasefire breaks down, what they want to do, and how they see themselves, is sufficiently clear. Their political purpose is to force Britain and Dublin - backed by Washington and Brussels - to coerce the one million strong Irish Protestant minority into a united Ireland.

Their demand that the British should become 'persuaders' is a thin code for this. Nobody can believe that mere words from the British government will 'persuade' the Unionists; and anyway no socialist, democratic, republican, or anti-imperialist could want to delegate the job of persuading Protestant workers to the British Tory government. The demand that Britain 'join the persuaders' is a disguised call for Britain to 'sort out' one million Irish people.

In their approach here the Provos stand in a long line of Irish bourgeois politicians, back to the days when the Home Rule party disdained to seek an intra-Irish democratic settlement with the Protestant minority because they expected that their Liberal allies, that is, the British government, would coerce them if necessary.

Most of the Provo war has been directed against Irish people of the minority (and Six Counties majority) community. Their drive for an immediate united Ireland, by conquest if necessary, cannot succeed. Even if it could, what 'anti-imperialist' significance could it possibly have? The resulting united Ireland would be no less integrated into the European Union and the networks of world capitalism than the present 26-county state: it would only replace one oppressed minority (the Catholics in Northern Ireland) by a larger one (the Protestants in all Ireland).

Almost 100 years ago, in 1898, James Connolly was able to point out the pattern in Irish history that bourgeois and petty-bourgeois revolutionaries, committed to the gun in theory and practice, repeatedly proved themselves to be abject bourgeois and petty-bourgeois

conservatives when they came 'down from the hills' and engaged in social politics. Much of 20th century Irish politics is the repeated unfolding of this pattern. There is a large number of revolutionary nationalist groups that, abandoning the gun and 'revolution', showed their true class colours. Both the main Irish bourgeois parties originate thus, Fine Gael from the majority of those who fought the war of independence (1919-21), Fianna Fail from those who then fought the civil war (1922-3) against the compromisers. Much of the IRA of the 1930s, led by one-time chief of staff Sean MacBride, formed a party, Clann na Poblachta, in the 1940s and joined a coalition government. The IRA of the 1950s formed the Workers' Party and then the Democratic Left, which is in the present Dublin government...

The political path Adams and his friends are treading has already been worn deep and wide. Despite the occasional left talk of some of their representatives, the Provos are likely to prove worse than some of their predecessors on the road Adams wants to travel: they are defined by a narrow and more or less explicitly communal base in the North, in a way that none of those predecessors were.

It was wrong, nonsensical - and we were wrong - to believe socialists should subordinate their own judgment to supporting the Provos against 'our own' government. Even so, support for an armed sect based on oppressed people is one thing: support for Gerry Adams' politicking with Bill Clinton, John Bruton, and John Major is another.

It seems to us that GB could not, on the facts, sustain his position. If we are wrong, that can only be determined by reason, discussion, and argument. The idea that the British working-class movement and the left simply do not have the right to discuss these questions, but must worship Adams and his friends - that is political self-evisceration, political suicide. It is also an express betrayal of reason in politics.

The level of unreason prevalent in the LLB EB was demonstrated when TW rhetorically asked its members what they wanted in Northern Ireland: who, he asked, would be willing to shoot down the Protestant workers to force them into a united Ireland? To our astonishment, three people put their hands up - one of whom had recently retired hurt after ten years in the SWP. Come to think of it, an honest show of hands there would probably have had more than the three honest idiots putting their hands up.

These people are vicarious Catholic-Irish nationalists - not socialists who back the nationalist movement with the necessary socialist and working-class reservations we have towards all nationalism. Some of them leave you wondering if it is not because of, rather than despite, the 'glamour' and 'revolutionary buzz' of the savage violence of the Provisional IRA that they are attracted to it.

Appendix 7: a discussion on Ireland with Tony Benn

Early this year [1994] Tony Benn tried to get the House of Commons to accept a Bill committing Britain to withdraw from Ireland. He has tried to move the same Bill - modelled, he says, on the Bill which paved the way for Britain's relinquishment of sovereignty in Palestine in 1947-8 - a number of times in the past, with equal lack of success.

On Ireland, Benn, who was a member of the British Cabinet when the troops were put on the streets in August 1969, and now is a fervent advocate of 'Troops Out', sees himself as the living embodiment of a very old tradition in mainstream British politics, the Liberal Home Rule tradition.

He is proud to recall - he did it again on Newsnight on 31 August, the day the Northern Ireland ceasefire was announced - that his grandfather was elected as a Home Rule Liberal in 1892, the year Gladstone got a majority for Home Rule in the Commons only to have the House of Lords veto it, and that his father too was a supporter in the House of Commons of Home Rule and then of Dominion status for Ireland.

John O'Mahony reports on a discussion with Tony Benn

Mark Osborn and I went to talk to Tony Benn earlier this year. We found the man who has been the most important leader of the mainstream left of the labour movement in his house in Notting Hill Gate, where the basement has been transformed into paper-crammed offices.

Despite his 69 years, Benn, who was first elected to the House of Commons in 1951, seems youthful and vigorous. Beginning amicably enough, the interview very quickly became an antagonistic debate.

As regular readers of Socialist Organiser will know, we believe that only some form of federal Ireland, with local autonomy for the Protestant-majority area and linked loosely to Britain and to Europe, can provide a basis for ending the present bloody impasse and building Irish working-class political unity. We condemn Britain's record in Ireland, we side with the oppressed Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, we believe that no viable or democratic settlement is possible within the botched Northern Ireland unit, and we are for British troops out - but we believe that troops out has to be linked to a political settlement. Without a political settlement, 'troops out' could only trigger a drive for 'Protestant self-determination' and thus bloody civil war and repartition.

We outlined to Tony Benn why we thought the left was confused and why it was important to discuss Ireland from first principles, as it were. 'In one way you represent not only the Labour left, but a whole tradition from way back. How do you see the central problem in Ireland?' It's a complicated problem. It's a problem of the British conquest of Ireland. It's a problem of settlement in Ireland. It's a problem of economic interest at one stage, which I think has disappeared, in fact I think it's now quite the opposite.

It's a defence problem because of the attitude of the British during World War Two. And the American attitude has been firstly one of protecting Western approaches from the U-Boats and then seeing there was not an independent Ireland between themselves and the Red Army. There's a religious element in it. There's a big class element in it, and trying to disentangle the ingredients of it and make sense of it all is quite complicated.

I think one of the reasons it's difficult is because the question of Irish unity and the question of British jurisdiction are separate questions and they always try to present them as the same question. My understanding is that now the British want to get out. The Americans have got no interest apart from having an Irish-American population which is pro-nationalist in general terms. The British have no economic interest in it.

Mr Major allegedly depends upon [Unionist leader James] Molyneaux, but I don't think that is a factor because actually they are never going to bring the government down and end up with a Labour government, so therefore Major is absolutely free to do what he likes. There will be no revolt against him. The last thing any Conservative wants is an election. So, Major is totally secure.

Dublin has no interest in taking over the North. The last thing they want is to find Ian Paisley sitting in the Dail and Loyalist paramilitaries working in a United Ireland. Sinn Fein know you can't force the North into the South. I was trying to unpick it all and see if the bits of the jigsaw puzzle weren't starting to become apparent.

If you are going to get a settlement, first of all you've got to have talks between the two communities in the North. That is absolutely essential. Hume has talked to Adams but now we've got to get Sinn Fein talking to everybody else. If you want the British out, you've got to think what the long term relationship is going to be. It is important that the exclusion orders and the Sinn Fein ban, which is now almost irrelevant, are removed.

And when the British government says that it has no economic or selfish interest in Northern Ireland, it must make it clear that there will be a point when British jurisdiction ends. The Bill which I've introduced puts this point at 31 December 1999 - simply to put a marker so that people are starting to move to a new perspective. The thing that has got to be tackled if it is an Irish question - which it is very largely - and if the British occupation is no longer an issue, then how do you get things going?

What I've given is a sort of tour of the ingredients. I think it's very important to understand all these different elements if we are going to be helpful and useful.

And in the end it is of course class, however you look at it, the poor Protestants and the poor Catholics, and the opening up of the possibility of some class unity within the context of an Irish solution. Then, if the North sorts itself out, its relationship with the South is less of a problem. You can imagine all sorts of arrangements. I don't think that is a problem. The

problem is the extrication of the British and the beginning of some serious discussion in the North about its future. I've telescoped it all, and it's very simplistic, maybe, but that the way my mind is working.

We asked Tony Benn briefly to outline his Bill for us.

It's the fourth bill I've introduced on this point of view. I introduced the first one in 1983, then another one while I was out of the Commons (somebody did it for me), then again in 1984 - basically the same Bill every time.

It's a unilateral act of revocation of jurisdiction. It was based really on the precedent of the Palestine Act of 1947 which simply said that on a certain date, British jurisdiction ended. The latest one has had the date pushed forward to 31 December 1999. But in my opinion, in order to create a framework within which meaningful talks can go on within the North, you have to have a clear date set by the British government after which the Irish have to resolve matters.

'You know what happened after the Palestine Act? War, massacres, struggles for territory?' But you have to see the alternative. We've had 25 years of bloody war.

'Very low-intensity war'.

That's an argument for staying and putting it right. But if there was a date when British jurisdiction ended, one of two things would happen - either there would be a massacre or there would be a settlement.

'Wouldn't it be a massacre?'

I don't believe it would be for one minute. It's not in the interests of anybody to kill anybody else. What is the interest?

'In Yugoslavia, before it broke up, probably the majority wanted a federation as the most rational thing. Then it fell apart - and the tough guys in the various communities set the pace. They forced people targetted by communal and national opponents to line up behind them. Why would that not happen in Ireland?'

In order to have a massacre, you have to have support for a massacre. What support would there be? There'd be the gunmen, but what interest is there? If there is a massacre you bring somebody else in, you don't bring the British in.

'The UN?'

Well, Dublin suggested that in 1969 and I picked it up and used it. But the British troops are the problem. They have no peacemaking role. They have an enforcement role.

We put it to Tony Benn that there is not only the much-discussed Protestant veto, but a dual veto. The Protestants have a veto on a united Ireland; and, since the abolition of Stormont and the failure to establish a replacement in 1975-76 there has been, in effect, a Catholic/IRA veto on Protestant majority rule in Northern Ireland.

After all, the policy followed by Stormont broke down. The reason we sent in troops in 1969 - I was in the Cabinet at the time - was that the B Specials were attacking Catholics, so we were going in allegedly to assist the Catholics from the oppression that was coming from Stormont. But it didn't take five minutes for it all to turn back into another period of repression.

If you talk to Labour ministers involved in Northern Ireland, they will say 'We agree with you. We've got to get out of Northern Ireland. But you can't say it'. You had a double standard. People thinking one thing privately and saying another thing publicly.

'So you were saying privately in 1969 that Britain should get out?'

In effect, yes. I put it in a paper, I rebuked myself for having left it so long, and sent it to Mason and Callaghan at the end of 1978, saying isn't it time we discussed Ireland. But we never discussed Ireland. There is no interest in Ireland in Britain, no interest in the Cabinet in Britain.

If the Protestants could be absolutely assured that they weren't to be forced into the South, as they can't be, then I think there's a possibility of some discussions going on in the North, and I feel that's what we should be working towards.

'You say that the Protestants can't be forced into the South. So if Britain withdraws, or declares it's going to withdraw, what then? Suppose you're wrong? Suppose there is a sort of Bosnia. What happens then? You think the solution is the UN?'

Well, it's a bit of divide and rule. We are there to protect a million working-class Protestants. I've never known the Tory Party to be interested in the working class in Britain, Northern Ireland or anywhere else, so I didn't ever think that argument was true. But there is a great desire for peace. You may say it's only a limited, low-level terrorism that's going on, but it's killed a lot of people and frightened a lot of people.

'I meant they can live with it'.

Well, or die with it, of course.

'I mean the British Government can live with it'.

Well, the British Government can and can't, but it's very expensive. I think there is another factor entering into it. The Treasury must be saying 'why the hell are we spending all this money on war in Northern Ireland? We can't win'.

Talk about a peace dividend! The biggest peace dividend pro-rata in the world is Ireland, because you've got two militarised states and huge poverty.

'But I can't understand what basis you have for believing there would not be a civil war and repartition'.

Well, you've got to tell me why there would be.

'Because of what you said yourself. The Protestants can't be forced into a united Ireland'.

This is the absolute confusion, that Irish unity and a British withdrawal are the same thing. They are totally separate issues. I'm saying, until it's clear that the British are not going to seek to exercise jurisdiction, serious discussion will never go on.

'But are you saying that the sectarian civil war which would certainly follow within Northern Ireland would not matter?'

I don't accept that it is inevitable. It's the argument every Unionist has always used. I'm not saying that you're putting yourself in that position.

But if that is the argument, then frankly the conflict will just go on for another 500 years.

'The problem is, the Northern Irish Protestant people say they're British'.

Yes.

'If you put it to them, they say they're British. That being so...' But Benn saw where that was leading and interrupted.

Well, they're all members of the European Union, aren't they? We're all citizens of a single union now, so, in a sense, the question of nationality has been totally dissolved. The Queen now has to have a vote! She can vote in the European elections this summer. So even the monarchy has been removed by the European union.

'Whatever the legalities', I replied, 'in real terms nationalism is very powerful, especially in Ireland, and the Northern Protestant Irish say they're British. They are also a compact majority in north-east Ulster, though not in the whole Six Counties. They are a clear majority in about half....'

Well, that's the doomsday scenario, repartition.

'The question is, from what principled point of view should those Protestants be forced out of the UK?'

On what principle...?

' They say they are British'.

But who partitioned them? We did. By the bullet. We created the Northern Ireland state. It's very easy. I could create a little republic of 12 Holland Park Ave and say we don't have to obey any external laws because there is a 12 Holland Park Ave veto. 'I'm not paying the poll tax or

the TV licence'. And you would say that's democracy? That isn't democracy at all.

Clearly Tony Benn likes old movies. This was reducing the Northern Ireland question to the old Ealing comedy, 'Passport to Pimlico.' I continued: 'There is no comparison. In Northern Ireland there are one million people who say they are different from the rest of the Irish. They are Irish, but they are a different sort of Irish to my Irish'.

Well, they are Scottish settlers, actually.

'Scottish and English settlers - 400 years ago'.

Well, it's a mixture. There is a Protestant minority in the South. There's a Catholic minority in the North. There's a Protestant minority in the whole of Ireland. There's an Irish minority in the whole of the UK. Once you start playing the minority game, then I think you are in a difficulty.

'But you see, they are a minority. Gladstone talked about some form of...home rule for the Protestant entity too. He didn't do anything about it.' I put it to Benn that the radical tradition in which he stands has a bad record. 'The root problem now is that, as you say, Britain's imperialist considerations have more or less gone away, but the division between Irish people remains. It was there before British politicians started playing the Orange card, and it remains now that they have more or less stopped. If you get the British to pull out without a political settlement, there is no reason why you won't get a Protestant/unionist drive for self-determination'.

It depends how you see it working. You could imagine circumstances where the North was self-governing without the British troops, then working out a relationship with the Republic.

'The present Six Counties unit could not hold together. It would fall apart. The North would dissolve into civil war. The two communities are clearly divided, though interlaced geographically. There would be Bosnian-style ethnic cleansing'.

I understand that. I know you are approaching it from a totally different perspective. But what you are saying in effect is that the Partition was right, it has to be sustained, and the troops have to stay.

'No, I'm not. Listen to what I say'.

Well, that's how I read what you say. You say the Partition was to take account of the cultural identity of the North. It was a funny Partition because it included a lot of Catholics who couldn't be put back into the republic.

'It was an imposed partition, not a democratic, intra-Irish settlement'.

Because it was done by the Black and Tans and the British. It never was intended to have any ingredient of democracy in it. It was a gerrymandered state which hasn't really worked, and you are saying that if we now were to try a new approach, then it would dissolve into massacre on a Bosnian scale. Now, if you're right about that, and that is the view that some people have taken, then it's quite clear the status quo must go on.

'No, the status quo can't go on. I didn't say that the North represented democracy. I said that the Partition was imposed by Britain, imposed by a Cabinet containing people who had been Unionist, anti-Home-Rule rebels in 1914. It was particularly brutal, so much so as to destroy their possibilities of a viable 'Protestant' state. There is a democratic element, but it's smothered by the vast size of the Catholic minority, which is now over 40%. In a sense, they were so greedy that they destroyed the possibility of a long term settlement'.

Well, you are pointing to a repartition, then.

'I'm not sure I am. I'm pointing probably towards the idea that the only basis for a united Ireland is a federal Ireland'.

Well, that's what Trotsky said about Yugoslavia in 1911. But then a federal arrangement is not so very different, not so totally incompatible with a withdrawal of British jurisdiction.

'British troops out is a good idea, as one part of a solution. What concerns me is that on the

left it is presented as a single demand promising, in and of itself, a solution - not only a solution, but a united Ireland. People think it means a united Ireland, and it doesn't. It can't'.

I've never said it does. I've said that you must differentiate between British jurisdiction and Irish unity, as totally different questions. They are absolutely different.

Sinn Fein know you can't force the North into the South. You can't do it, they know that. That's the big change that's occurred. Everybody has crossed the Rubicon.

The British don't want to remain. Dublin doesn't want to take it over. The Loyalists don't want to go into the South, and Sinn Fein know they can't force them in. You are facing a new situation here.

A federal arrangement might be the right answer, but the only reason I don't advocate it is that then I'd be saying how the Irish should govern themselves. The two communities in the North have got to sort out their problems.

'The status quo and work for a political settlement?'

The status quo plus a political settlement is just saying the IRA should give up their weapons and come and sit round the table.

'Wouldn't you say that?'

My own opinion is, with the likelihood is of loyalist violence, you have to face the reality of IRA violence, and the IRA violence is there. Major is saying 'Give up your weapons, sit round the table and it will all be all right'. The problem there is that Adams could say that tomorrow, but it wouldn't happen.

That was a quick and surprising this-is-my-side response from the ex-Cabinet minister. Now he checked himself, when I asked: 'You don't think there is any prospect of an IRA ceasefire short of a British declaration to get out?'

Well, I don't know. I am a believer in non-violence. I'm not an advocate of violence. The reality is that there is a very strongly entrenched group of people who think that Partition was wrong.

'Isn't there a big element here also of Nationalists wanting land where there has been a different community for three or four hundred years?'

I understand what you are saying, and I've met lots of people who have said it, in the Labour Party and the Conservative Party.

'Is it true?'

Yes. Which is roughly, there will be a massacre if you get out. Stay and hope it all quietens down. It's a perfectly permissible argument, but you have to live with the consequences of your own decision.

'You say that you wouldn't presume to tell the Irish how to govern themselves, and thus you would not advocate some federalist solution. Against that there is the fact that many Northern Ireland people say they are British; the fact that Britain is now in control; and the fact that by pulling out without a political settlement Britain would be making decisions for the Irish people.'

'Isn't it better to accept those facts and be positive, and for Britain to seek a realistic solution based on the recognition that there are one million people who would fight to control their own area of Ireland. You base your Bill on Palestine. You know what happened there. Britain abdicated, and the Jews and Arabs set to fighting for control of hills and towns and advantageous positions.'

On that basis you would have stayed in India in order to avoid partition.

'Would anyone seriously dispute that Britain might have withdrawn from India in a less bloody fashion?'

The point is that, unfortunately, major transfers of territory can lead to trouble. If I were to accept your argument, which I don't for one minute because you are putting forward John Major's view - on that basis you would have stayed in Palestine. You'd have had a bloody great war there. You would have stayed in India and maybe partition wouldn't have occurred and so on. I just don't think that is a tenable position.

'There is at least one difference' I pointed out. 'Neither in Palestine nor in India were the people British'. Benn wouldn't have that. Yes they were, he said, just as British as the Northern Ireland Unionists.

Well, they were. They were in the British Empire.

'They were not British'.

They were. They were British citizens. Their passport said 'British Citizen'. They were exactly the same, and there were a lot of people in India who didn't want us to go.

I remember meeting a Maharajah in 1931 when he came here. He was British. He had been given honours by Queen Victoria. The issues over the withdrawal from Empire was like the Falklands. I mean, your argument is a justification for the Falklands war.

'But I put it to you again, there is a difference'.

I don't think there is any difference at all, not the slightest bit of difference.

'It doesn't matter, then, that one million people in Ireland are British in reality and say they are?'

What you've got to do is find a way that safeguards their interests without 20,000 British troops being there and repressing a minority which is growing - you say it's 60%, I don't know - probably with birth rates and so on.

'There has been quite spectacular growth recently'.

Maybe in 50 years time there will be more Catholics than Protestants.

'But that doesn't solve anything, because the Protestants would still say: we have a distinct identity and we will not surrender it'.

You say it wouldn't. Look, I do understand what you are saying, and you are putting a perfectly fair argument to me. It is an argument that is identical to Major's argument, though approached from quite a different perspective.

'But one can't say that because Major says it, it must be wrong...'
I'm not complaining. I fully understand it.

'Even Major may sometimes be right!'
Well, fair enough.

Afterword

Benn was now impatient to be done, and plainly we had taken it as far as we could go. As we left I found myself reflecting on the oddities of politics and thinking back to 1975, after the Labour Government introduced the Prevention of Terrorism Act in response to the terrible Birmingham pub bombings.

With a handful of others, I organised the first public demonstration against the Prevention of Terrorism Act in London. The atmosphere was one of heavy repression - the offices of Workers' Fight, forerunners of Socialist Organiser, had been raided by armed police at the end of 1973 - and uncertainty: we did not know how severely they would use the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Having chosen to keep an Irish passport, despite many years in England, I seriously feared deportation, and we discussed contingency plans to meet it. And here I was now being called a Unionist by a senior member of the government that brought in the Prevention of Terrorism Act to enable the police to hold Irish people in jail without charge or trial and to deport them! I thought once more that Benn's belief that he embodies the British radical tradition on Ireland is indisputably true.

He was a member of the Government that put the troops on the streets in 1969, and of the Government that surrendered to the Orange general strike in 1974 and brought in the Prevention of Terrorism Act at the end of that year. He was still a member of that Government when from 1976 they withdrew the political prisoner rights conceded by the Tory government

after 1972 and thus sparked the struggles in the prisons and internment camps of Northern Ireland which lasted for years - with men wrapped in blankets through five-year sentences because they refused to wear prison clothing - culminating in the hunger strikes of 1981, when ten men died.

In fact Tony Benn combines the old imperialist-Liberal attitude to the Northern Ireland Protestants with a British-nationalist attitude to Ireland as a whole. Unlike many on the left, he knows that British withdrawal without a political settlement can not lead to a united Ireland. He asserts that the Northern Ireland entity could survive and find a new harmony if Britain abdicated - not come to resemble Bosnia or Palestine in 1947-8. But there is no evidence for this, nor any rational reason for believing it: Benn's attitude, in practice, comes down to indifference to the consequences for Ireland.

There is a very revealing vignette in Tony Benn's diaries for 1979, at the last meeting of the Labour Cabinet which had lost the general election. The man now so impressed with Gerry Adams's international reputation chats to a friend, and they photograph each other for posterity. The friend is Roy Mason, the Northern Ireland Secretary who brought savage repression to the ghettos and whose abolition of political prisoners' rights turned the jails into hell-holes.

Socialist Organiser's difference with Tony Benn is not that we are 'Unionists', but that we are concerned fundamentally with two things: with the unity of the Irish working class, and with creating the conditions for that unity by way of a consistently democratic approach to communal and national conflict.

Our principles were summed up long ago by Lenin's Bolshevik party: 'In so far as national peace is in any way possible in a capitalist society based on exploitation, profit-making and strife, it is attainable only under a consistently and thoroughly democratic republican system of government... This particularly calls for wide regional autonomy and fully democratic local government... on the basis of... national make-up of the population, etc.'

We are not Unionists, and we are not Irish nationalists, but socialist republicans in James Connolly's tradition. We rejected, as those in our tradition have rejected before us, the idea that progress can be won by making one million Protestant Unionists into the alienated minority in a 32 county Ireland that the Catholics are in the Six Counties.

We reject the old Home-Rule/Liberal approach of trying to ride roughshod over the Protestants - and we reject its present resurrection via an international 'pan-nationalist' bloc of the Provisionals with Dublin and Washington. We reject the policies that came after the Liberal approach of the 1960s and 1970s Labour governments collapsed - surrender to the worst Orange elements and betrayal of the Six Counties Catholics. We defended the Six Counties Catholics against the British state long before Gerry Adams had attained the international status that so impresses Tony Benn.

We advocate a political settlement that will allow our class to unite to build an Irish workers' republic - a federal united Ireland, with autonomy for the Protestant-majority area, and closer links between Britain and Ireland to reassure the one million people in the Six Counties who say they are British.

The British liberal tradition on Ireland

Some readers have questioned our scathing comments on the British Liberal/radical tradition on Ireland. Didn't the Liberal Party try sincerely to give Ireland justice we are asked? Yes, but just as the British Liberals and Tories solved Ireland's land problem in a bourgeois way - substituting small peasant landlords for the big landlords - they did everything else in a bourgeois and even a bourgeois imperialist way too.

Thus they recreated the 'Irish Question' in its present form even while they 'solved' it in the old form.

Nor is it unjust to link Tony Benn to the British Liberal tradition. He is proud to claim that tradition as his own and to recall that his grandfather was elected as a Home Rule Liberal in 1892 and that his father later followed suit.

You cannot talk to Benn on Ireland without the feeling that you are also dealing with that whole tradition. Behind Benn, the foremost left-wing advocate of immediate and unconditional British disengagement from Northern Ireland, stand, politically as well as genetically, generations of British liberal politicians, whose traditions on "the Irish question" he rightly sees himself as continuing.

Let us acquaint ourselves with that tradition. We need only to look at certain of its high points to appreciate what it is. In my view it is - despite all the good intentions its various supporters have had - a treacherous tradition, and one which has corrupted British and Irish radical politics.

It is not democratic, not consistently democratic. It disregards the Irish Protestant minority and instead looks for a deal between the British state and the Irish Catholic middle class. This approach corrupts the Irish nationalists, encouraging them to rely on British power to deal with the Irish minority, and betrays them, because in fact the British state will not coerce that Irish minority.

First, let us go back to the year nineteen hundred and twelve. The Liberal Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, dependent for its majority on the votes of the 70-odd Irish Nationalist MPs who sit in the House of Commons, has reluctantly brought in a Bill to give Home Rule to Ireland - to all Ireland, which, as one entity, will be ruled from Dublin by a government whose powers will not be a great deal larger than those possessed by, for example, the then London County Council.

That the Bill will pass is certain, for in a bitter struggle Asquith's Liberal government has recently destroyed the veto which the unelected House of Lords used to have over the decisions of the House of Commons. Now the hereditary peers can only delay the implementation of legislation by two years.

In fact the 1912 Home Rule Bill would never become law. In the two years up to the outbreak of the World War in 1914, there will be a large-scale semi-rebellion against "Home Rule" led by the Conservative and Unionist Party. There will be plausible talk of imminent civil war in Britain on the "Irish Question".

Backed by Tories all over Britain, tens of thousands of Protestant men in Ulster will arm and drill and pledge themselves on oath to refuse to be ruled by a Dublin government based on the Irish Catholic majority. In 1914, faced also by a mutiny of British officers serving in Ireland, who refuse to be used to coerce Protestant Ulster, Asquith's Liberal government will buckle.

Until 1914 neither the Liberal government nor the middle-class Home Rule Irish nationalists had been prepared to consider any special provision, such as local autonomy, for the Protestant Irish minority. They had proceeded on the assumption that the Irish minority would submit to a decision by the London government, or face coercion by Britain to make them submit. This reliance on British power was central to the calculations of the Irish middle-class Home Rule politicians, who felt safe in their alliance with the "Great Liberal Party". They had reduced themselves to its tail for more than 20 years in the expectation of decisive future benefit. They had also exerted pressure on the British labour movement - the early Labour Party itself being also very much a tail of the Liberal Party - by way of the big Irish electorate in Britain, insisting that it give uncritical support to Home Rule/Liberal policies.

Now, faced with a revolt led by a big part of the British upper classes, and therefore supported by many army and navy officers, the Liberals declared themselves in favour of the partition of Ireland. Shortly afterwards, the Home Rule Party, whose leader was John Redmond, agreed to accept Partition - "temporarily". When war broke out, the issue was put on ice for the war's duration.

Move on now to the Old Bailey, in June 1916. Britain is at war. The Liberals are still in the government, but now it is a coalition Government which includes the Tory-Unionist leaders - Bonar Law, Edward Carson, F E Smith - who, up to the eve of war, had organised rebellion and created private bodies of armed men to suborn the sovereign British parliament. The "Easter Rising" of the Irish nationalists in Dublin, which broke out in late April, has been suppressed.

Even Patrick Pearse, the titular head of the Republican government proclaimed by the Dublin

insurgents, had, at the beginning of the Home Rule crisis, been content to accept the limited Home Rule the Liberals were offering. He had been propelled to a belief in physical force by the example and the success of the Orange-Tory rebellion. So had most of the other insurgents. Pearse and fourteen others, Irish labour leader James Connolly among them, had been shot out of hand by the British Army after they surrendered.

Now thousands of nationalist Irish men and women have been interned. At the Old Bailey, the last of the leaders of the Rising, Roger Casement, is on trial for high treason.

Having gone to Germany to seek aid for the Rising (the Orange-Unionists had been importing guns from Germany up to the outbreak of war), Casement had landed in Ireland from a German submarine two days before Pearse and Connolly turned out in Dublin, intent on stopping the Rising, which he believed to be foredoomed without serious German help. Captured almost immediately, he had been shipped to London, thus escaping the summary fate of Pearse and his comrades.

On trial for his life this admirable Irish nationalist - probably the most bourgeois of the leaders of the 1916 Rising - faced as his chief prosecutor F E Smith.

Who was Smith? Smith, whose recklessness in fomenting resistance to the Liberal Government up to the very eve of war had made him especially notorious, was now Attorney General and a member of the British Government!

Across the courtroom, Casement, once a prominent British civil servant, who had, like all the Home Rulers, backed and relied on the Liberals, faced Smith, who had helped organise the successful rebellion against the Liberal Government on behalf of the Tories and their Irish allies. The Irish nationalist was in the dock - and would shortly be hanged - and the Tory Unionist was his accuser, with the concurrence and backing of his Liberal colleagues in government, who had so blithely betrayed their Irish allies and clients.

The confrontation between those two men in that courtroom symbolises and sums up an entire epoch in modern Irish history.

Move on now to our last stopping point in this brief survey. It is the summer of 1921. The world has changed greatly. The British Government is negotiating with the representatives of an outlawed Irish parliament, Dail Eireann. In 1919, on the basis of a decisive victory - 73 out of 105 Irish seats - in the December 1918 UK general election, the nationalist MPs had seceded from the Westminster parliament and declared Ireland to be a sovereign and independent republic.

For two years the British Army and special British killer squads, such as the "Black and Tans", have continued to occupy all of Ireland against the will of most of Ireland's people. They have waged a war of terror and repression against the supporters of Dail Eireann and against the Irish guerrilla army which defends the Republic.

Despite an unbridled campaign of indiscriminate burning and killing, Britain has been unable to quell nationalist Ireland. There is a powerful international outcry against the "Black and Tan terror". The US Congress has voted in favour of Dail Eireann and against Britain.

Britain is still ruled by a coalition government, but now, though Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, is leader of one of the segments of a Liberal Party that has shattered, the Tory-Unionists are the dominant power.

Britain's choice is to escalate repression to the level of rounding up large parts of the nationalist Irish population in internment camps - they have contingency plans for this - or to make a settlement. Under threat of a renewal and escalation of the war, Britain blackmails a majority of the Irish representatives into agreeing to abandon the Republic, to concede that the King of England is still King of Ireland, and accept the status of a "Dominion" in the British Empire (with powers much greater than those on offer from "Home Rule" before World War 1). Britain forces them to accept Partition - "temporarily". By now there is already a functioning Home Rule Unionist parliament in Belfast.

With the Lloyd George Liberals as their front, the pre-war Tory Unionist rebels - Bonar Law is still party leader - win for their Orange allies a partition settlement which creates a Catholic

minority in Northern Ireland of about 35 per cent, bigger than the Protestant Unionists would have been in an all-Ireland state.

The Catholics were a majority in Fermanagh and Tyrone and in Derry, Northern Ireland's second city. It was a brutal imperialist settlement rammed through by the rebels of 1912 in alliance with one wing of the Liberal Party against which they had rebelled.

From their own point of view it was to prove very stupid. Today its consequences - the Catholics are now 45 per cent of the population of the Six Counties, and in twenty years could be a majority - make the Northern Ireland unit unworkable. But that is small comfort to its victims, Protestant and Catholic.

What have we learned from our hop, skip and jump across early 20th-century Irish history? That Irish history is entwined, enmeshed, and interlaced with British history.

That Ireland as it is today has been shaped by conflict between Irish "factions" allied to Britain whose fate to a large extent was determined by the constancy or lack of it of their British allies: the Tories keeping faith with their allies, the Liberals betraying theirs.

In their dealings with Ireland, the Liberals corrupted the bourgeois Irish nationalists - before they betrayed them - with the promise that they could, once the Liberals prevailed in London, rely on the British state to coerce any Irish minority that resisted Home Rule. They thereby removed any incentive for the Irish nationalists to seek a democratic modus vivendi with the Irish minority. Instead of applying consistently democratic principles to the internal division in Ireland, the Liberals tried - until faced with revolt - to ignore the legitimate concerns of the Irish Protestant minority. They encouraged the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie - who, like all bourgeois, were eager to seize any advantage they could get - to do the same.

Though Gladstone, who committed the Liberal Party to Home Rule in 1885-6, talked privately of some federal arrangement to accommodate the Protestants, nothing came of it. After Gladstone's Second Home Rule Bill passed the Commons and was thrown out by the Lords, the Liberals became wary of Home Rule. In 1906 they had a big House of Commons majority but there was no Home Rule Bill - not until they lost their majority in 1910 and could govern only with the votes of the Irish MPs.

Then, faced with revolt, they buckled and began the first moves to impose a British imperialist partition which rode roughshod over the rights of the Irish nationalists, and particularly those condemned to be second-class citizens in the "Protestant state". They allowed the Tory rebels of 1912-14 to get the best deal for their own.

The Liberal approach blew up in their faces in 1912, and their brutal though tentative imperialist approach to the Irish minority gave way to a determined, traditionally British, imperialist dealing with the Irish majority in 1914 and after. And - to reiterate - so thoroughly had the Liberals transmitted and transplanted that approach into the morals and politics of the Irish Catholic bourgeois nationalists, corrupting a segment of Irish nationalist opinion, that they created a current which still flows through Fianna Fail down to the Provisionals today. While denouncing Britain fiercely and defining British occupation as the central problem, nevertheless they still look to Britain to coerce the Protestants.

The political corruption was not confined to Irish bourgeois politicians. During the quarter-century of Liberal/Home-Rule alliance it was made an article of faith in radical circles and in the Liberal-allied early Labour Party that the left did not have the right to do other than back the dominant Irish Nationalists: anything else was British chauvinism. The revolutionary left then rejected such an approach. James Connolly castigated the Home Rule Nationalists in British papers such as "Forward". For example, when it seemed that the middle-class Home Rulers would have no payment for MPs in their Dublin parliament in order to hinder the development of an Irish Labour Party, Connolly urged the British Labour Party to insist that the Liberal Government write payment of MPs into the Irish constitution, forcing it on the Irish bourgeois nationalists. Yet today it has become an article of faith on the revolutionary left that we must echo the Irish nationalists. This corruption too comes from the "Liberal tradition" on Ireland.

There were, of course, Liberals who took different stands at all these turning points. The story

could be continued into more recent times and into the experience of the Labour Party. But we have seen enough to understand Tony Benn's background on Ireland. Among other things, it helps explain Tony Benn's own strange history on the modern Irish 'troubles'.