

Ireland after Eniskillen

By Tony Benn MP

Many people were shocked by what happened at Eniskillen; but also by the response to it. For a while we were told it was not possible to discuss the question of Ireland. Ken Livingstone was given the full media treatment. I know what it's like. The media used this treatment to avoid discussing the issues. They didn't want to discuss Ireland — they wanted to discuss Ken Livingstone.

Another purpose of this treatment is to distract people's attention from the long historical background, without which it is quite impossible to understand what has happened. If we're going to make progress — and I think we are — we must excavate some of the background to the struggle.

One of the things missing in modern British politics is the radical tradition that goes back to before the birth of socialism; the opposition to militarism, the opposition to imperialism, the opposition to the dictatorship of the mind. This is readily apparent when discussing the 'Irish Question', as it is called.

In 1892 my grandfather stood as a Liberal and a Home Ruler against the Tory President of the Local Government Board, as it was then called — the Nicholas Ridley of the day. In response the Tory, Ritchie, said:

"To vote against the government of the day would be a vote for civil war, for anarchy". That was in 1892. And when the London County Council was set up the Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt refused it control of the police on the grounds of "Irish terrorism".

This argument has gone on and on. At the time of the Black and Tans in the '20s, my father moved an amendment to the King's Speech condemning the coalition government for having handed over to the military authorities an unrestricted discretion in the definition of punishment of offences and frustrating the prospects of an agreed settlement to the problem of Irish self-government.

I think that it's important to root this in history. Those who forget history are condemned to repeat the mistakes of history.

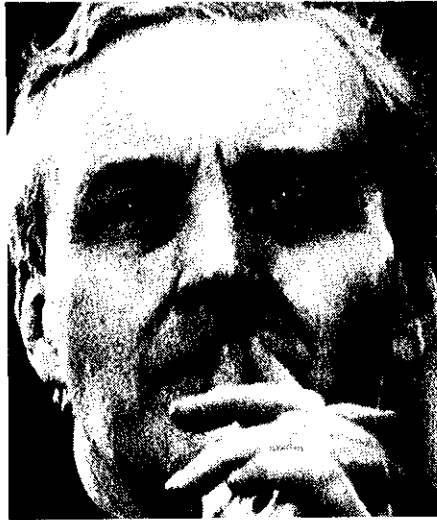
The continued British occupation of Ireland takes away the liberties of the British people as well as those of the Irish people — their rights to live a full life in independence and unity. We therefore have a common interest in finding a way to end this mutual tragedy as soon as possible.

Public opinion in Britain is well ahead of the political leadership on this matter as on so many others. Millions of people realise that if there is ever to be peace there must be a negotiated settlement to

the war — after the decision to withdraw has been taken. The violence in Northern Ireland indicates the urgency for a negotiated settlement.

The partition of Ireland was itself the product of a British Government policy of the ballot and the bullet under which the Black and Tans were sent in to undermine the clear majority vote for Irish independence after the First World War — a policy opposed by Labour then as it should be now.

Since then there has been a succession of failures. The dispatch of British troops in 1969 failed, so did detention without trial, power-sharing, Diplock Courts,



strip-searching, direct rule, use of CS gas and plastic bullets and the Anglo-Irish deal — these have all failed in their purpose as recent events have shown.

Meanwhile Northern Ireland has been used as a testing ground for methods of control which have been used on the mainland at the expense of our civil liberties.

The question we have to face is not whether, but when, how soon and under what conditions British withdrawal takes place. The starting point must therefore be the setting of a fixed date for that withdrawal to which we would adhere and for discussions to begin with everyone in the North to work out what will happen once Britain has withdrawn.

That is why the Campaign Group of Labour MPs has decided to present a Bill in the House of Commons to terminate British jurisdiction in Northern Ireland, to campaign around that Bill with working people in both our countries so we can all liberate ourselves to build a decent and fair society in Britain and Ireland.

That's a summary of our position. Now let's look at some of the objections we will face when advocating this view.

The first problem is that there is a basic contradiction in the position of those who say we were there because we are involved

and it is part of the UK.

There's an awful lot of ignorance in Britain about Ireland, encouraged by the media. And it's an awful thing to say but when there's no violence, there is no discussion — when there is violence, you can't discuss it. If anyone tries, they're greeted with a yawn or a broad sigh.

Another argument used by Labour people is the argument about democracy. That the republican movement in the North is a denial of democracy. Of course, the reality is that Lloyd George denied the democratic vote by the use of enforced partition.

There has been no vote and none is contemplated, in which the Irish people as a whole would be involved — or the British people for that matter.

We are told that there should be no talks with republican leaders, but everyone knows that even the Conservatives have had talks with republican leaders. A recent PLP meeting was designed to be a drum head court martial to deal with Mr Ken Livingstone. Yet Clive Soley, our former front bench spokesperson met Sinn Fein, Merlyn Rees met Sinn Fein. We are misled into assuming that there have never been talks — it's an important point to make.

Then there is the argument that you cannot talk to terrorists. The word 'terrorists' is a term of abuse to describe those with whom you disagree. According to Mrs Thatcher the ANC are terrorists. According to President Reagan the Contras are freedom fighters. According to the British Establishment the people in Afghanistan are freedom fighters. Our history has it that the Free French in World War II who blew up restaurants with German soldiers were freedom fighters. The term doesn't stand up as an argument.

If you want to get rid of violence you have to deal with the political problem that underpins it. To argue that anyone who wants to hold talks with republicans is stimulating violence is to speak an absolute untruth. That is doing the opposite of what has to be done — to seek a political solution.

They've even come up with a new Oath of Loyalty. This sort of thing goes back to 1681 — there's a long, long history which we have to expose and understand.

When they say it's impossible to dispose of the Protestants who don't want unity they forget that in World War II Winston Churchill offered Dublin unity without consulting Stormont. A Tory PM went much further than Ken Livingstone in saying to Dublin, "You can have the North, provided you enter the war."

Without the presence of British troops everyone in the North would be able to face the problems more easily in the light of their own situations.

The other argument is that Dublin



doesn't want unity. But, of course, partition creates two states whose structures depend on the border. The politics based on the border lie at the root of many of the problems which face Ireland.

Then there's the argument that there would be bloodshed if Britain withdrew. The fact is that there has been bloodshed for many centuries. When the troops went in in 1969 there was a proposal from Dublin that a UN peace-keeping force be sent in.

I've believed for a long time that Mrs Thatcher's interests are the same as those of the British Establishment when Carson could threaten a revolt. She wouldn't spend £1 billion a year on that basis. The reason is that with the present Irish constitution you'd have a non-aligned Irish state. But if the Republic joined NATO tomorrow the British would be out much sooner, because that would be an adequate substitute for the British army there now.

Then we come to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which I voted against. It was a fraudulent agreement which pretended to be all things to all people. It hinted that it recognised an all-Irish dimension and at the same time recognised the veto. My opinion is that although I opposed it and think it won't work it confirms the recognition by this government of a special position there.

But also, it was done to win the support of the US and the EEC to the partition of Ireland and the fact that this was thought to be necessary is an indication of the weakness of Britain's international posi-

tion. I think the deal will soon be shunted into the long list of failures on Ireland.

Now I come to the position of the Labour Party itself on Ireland and right back at the beginning we had a position of outright opposition. After the war we got dragged into a bipartisan position on Ireland. Many efforts were made to drag us out of that position and we did make a move towards a break with bipartisanship and now with support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement we're back in a bipartisan posture.

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It is time for us to renew the campaign for British withdrawal. We've always been told you can't raise the Irish question because it is difficult and divisive, but if we had adopted a clear position a long time ago we would have made some real progress.

We must remember that Northern Ireland has been a testing ground for weapons and methods of repression that we've seen employed in the UK. About ten years ago Time magazine had an interview with a British officer who said that all British soldiers must be brought here to prepare them for what must be done on the mainland.

The military's minds are now on the instruments of domestic control. We saw that in the miners' strike. It is only when

this is made clear to people that we will make progress.

What we need now is a clear decision to withdraw. Some want this done immediately. Personally I think we need to set a date and adhere to it. The Bill we are going to propose is based on the Palestine Act of 1947. That is the only precedent, where a British government unilaterally decided to terminate its interest in Palestine. There was a date fixed and it was adhered to. The terms of the Bill are based on those of 1947, designed by the best parliamentary draughtsmen of the time to be most appropriate for the protection of British servicemen during withdrawal.

I don't doubt for a moment that there would be problems in pursuing such a course. But I think that is what we should go for. I think the reaction would in general be a positive one, but if there were peace-keeping problems the one army in the world least equipped to deal with them would be the British Army whose withdrawal we would be announcing.

In campaigning for this we should see it as a joint enterprise. We are campaigning for the liberation of Ireland/Britain and of Britain/Ireland. We should get away from the bloodshed which has characterised our relationship and move to one of cooperation for the development of a decent society there and here.

I'm absolutely certain that whatever the reaction of the media and the Establishment that before the end of this century we shall see that withdrawal take place.

Tony Benn gave the LCI Miriam James Memorial Lecture.