

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BWB-21  
People's Democracy in  
Northern Ireland

300 First Ave., Apt. 6-H  
New York, N. Y. 10009  
31 August 1970

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

What student political groups had tried with little success in other countries--to work within the established system and elect one of their own to political power--the student-led People's Democracy in Northern Ireland accomplished by sending Bernadette Devlin to Westminster. That was in April 1969, in a by-election that the articulate young civil rights champion hesitated to enter because she "didn't want to get caught up in parliamentary politics...to give people a chance to say, 'Look, the PD are political careerists like anybody else.'" This June, the 'bold Bernadette' stood for election again, and she bettered her 1969 election tally by almost 2,000 votes, but without any overt support from People's Democracy.

What began as an upswelling of interest for civil rights issues among students at Queens University in Belfast, and progressed through some of the bloodiest and least-understood riots in the riot-torn world of 1968 and 1969, has now evolved into a tightly-knit socialist group of young laborers and students working at the grass-roots level in factories, slums and small towns. But People's Democracy rejects electoral contests as "pointless at the moment," since "nominating socialist candidates should be only a tiny fraction of our total activity."

Intrigued by Miss Devlin's description of politics in Northern Ireland in her book, The Price of My Soul, and eager to examine student political activity there, I visited Belfast for several days just prior to the June elections. To an outsider, the religious conflicts that color Northern Ireland's economic and social problems seem almost medieval. Religious wars in the civilized British Isles in the 20th century? What a peculiar idea...yet the ecumenism and tolerance that are preached and generally practiced in other parts of the Anglo-Saxon world have not yet enlightened Ulster, the six northern counties of Ireland that refused to join the Republic of Ireland in 1921 when it broke away from Great Britain. The Emerald Isle is predominantly Catholic, and indeed the 5% Protestants in the 26 counties of the Republic suffer some discrimination under the "special status" given the Catholic Church there. But Ulster is two-thirds Protestant, and for more than 40 years it has been governed by the Unionist Party of old-line Protestant aristocrats, who keep power under the old stratagem of divide and rule. By feeding Protestant fears of the one-third Catholic minority, the conservative Unionists have successfully prevented the emergence of any broad radical or liberal party, and have persuaded the majority of their countrymen that politics equates with religious loyalty.

In Ulster, religious differences are fed with mother's milk, and schools, clubs, social organizations, trade unions, jobs, neighborhoods all separate along sectarian lines. The demarcation is so ingrained that Ulstermen even claim to be able to spot

a Catholic or Protestant on sight--Catholics are said to be sloppy, lazy; the Protestants clean and industrious. Such attitudes bring idioms into the language-- "When you tidy something up, it looks more Protestant," one young man told me. Another said that atheists are labeled as Catholic or Protestant atheists, according to which church he was born into and then rejected.

In terms of the current civil rights struggle, Ulster could be compared to the Southern United States of the 1960's. The Catholics are the "niggers," kept out of jobs, housing, votes; the Protestant workers, only slightly less deprived economically, are the "rednecks" or "poor white trash," whose badge of superiority is their Protestant religion; the most virulent of these are the Orangemen, comparable to the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens' Councils. In this context electing Bernadette Devlin to Westminster was roughly the equivalent of Georgians sending Julian Bond to the U. S. Congress.

But such comparisons get sticky. As Liam de Paor, a Dublin historian, writes in the introduction to his excellent Divided Ulster: "In Northern Ireland Catholics are Blacks who happen to have white skins. This is not a truth. It is an oversimplification and too facile an analogy. But it is a better oversimplification than that which sees the struggle and conflict in Northern Ireland in terms of religion. Catholics and Protestants are not quarrelling with one another (most of them) because of matters of theology or faith. There is no burning urge on either side to convert the other to the one true faith, nor does a member of one side strike a member of the other on the head with a club in the hope that he will thereby be purged of his theological errors and become a better candidate for heaven...The Northern Ireland problem is a colonial problem, and the 'racial' distinction (and it is actually imagined as racial) between the colonists and the natives is expressed in terms of religion."

To explain the colonial and the religious problem, we must take a look at Irish history, where the custom of Protestants lording it over the native Irish Catholics goes back to 1609. That was the year England sent Scottish Presbyterians over to colonize the Plantation of Ulster. "The Irish were the first colony," explained Kevin Boyle, a law professor at Queens University who was an early leader in People's Democracy. And they were an uneasy, hostile one. "While you people over there were getting rid of old George, we decided to try it too, but our revolutions never succeeded."

Indeed, the system of Protestant landed gentry and underdog Catholic peasantry survived a series of rebellions, one of them led by a Protestant, Wolfe Tone, in 1798, which included the oppressed of both religions fighting against the merchants and landowners. The last national effort to end British control, the Easter Rising of 1916, also produced the first socialist leanings. Labor leader James Connolly, now a hero among Irish socialists, armed his workers and allied them with the Citizens and Volunteers Army that held the center of Dublin for a week. But communications to supporters in other parts of Ireland failed, and the defeated revolutionaries were executed. After the bloodshed, England was persuaded to pass a "home rule" law offering independence to Ireland but dividing it as well, awarding the six counties of Ulster a semi-independent status with their own parliament in Stormont and with deputies at Westminster.

Maintaining their ties with England did little to better the average Ulsterman's economic position. Unemployment has been chronically high; the average household income is £ 4 a week below that in England. The traditional industries

of agriculture, linen and shipbuilding have all declined. In their place, the Unionist government has followed a policy of enticing foreign (mostly American) investment, thereby extending the economic colonization beyond Great Britain. Living standards are miserably low. Almost half the houses in Ulster have no baths or hot water, one quarter have no toilets and one fifth have no running water at all. Emigration among the Catholics remains high; "loyalist" payrolls from local governments help to shield Protestants from the bane of unemployment. In the Catholic majority area of Fermanagh last year, only one out of 68 school bus drivers was a Catholic; and although the Catholic birth rate in Fermanagh is higher, their majority decreases by 200 every year through emigration.

After the Belfast and Londonderry civil rights uprisings in 1968 and 1969, the Unionist government promised to put through a one-man, one-vote policy by the 1971 elections. Until then, votes are apportioned according to ownership of property. "Only householders have a vote in local elections," explained Miss Devlin in her book. "Subtenants, lodgers and adult children living at home are all without the vote, and thus a quarter of the electorate is disenfranchised (until, as the government now promises, 1971)." When the vote reform is put through, local housing councils should no longer be able to perpetuate their Protestant (usually) or Catholic majority by building houses and awarding tenancy according to religion.

With such gut issues as housing, employment, voting rights to fire them up in the civil rights campaign, the People's Democracy movement plunged right into the political fray, with little of the theorizing or philosophizing on more abstract educational and social aims that characterized student movements in Germany and France. "We've been much more involved in outside society than German students or the others," Kevin Boyle told me when I sought him out at his office shortly after arriving in Belfast on a sunny June day. "We've made the transition that other student groups are still talking about."

But People's Democracy, he pointed out, was never really a students' group in terms of university politics. Their first meetings were held at the university and many students were involved, but PD was never interested in "student power" demands. Indeed, Queens University still has not experienced the sit-ins and strikes that disrupted many British universities during 1968 and 1969. Conquering the university first is not a socialist philosophy anyway, says Boyle. "This 'revolution through the vice-chancellor' philosophy only reflected the complete isolation of students in the local community."

But the university did spawn the working class radicals who headed People's Democracy, and Boyle maintains that Westminster's introduction of the welfare state is a factor which contributed to the civil rights uprisings in Northern Ireland. Emigration rates were higher before Westminster established "the dole." Providing free tuition in grammar schools and universities also allowed more members of the working class to get an education. And it's been just these working class Catholics who emerged as the leaders of the civil rights and then the People's Democracy struggle. Bernadette Devlin's father was the Cookstown roadsweeper's son, who had to go to England to find work as a carpenter. Kevin Boyle's father was a dustman.

"I think that's significant--the lack of emigration kept the radicals here, a group of people, educated, thoroughly disaffected with the situation. And when the civil rights explosion came, they moved right into the forefront," said Boyle. The Civil Rights Association was formed in 1966, and people like Boyle, Eamonn McCann, Michael Farrell and Bernadette Devlin--not part of the CRA but young men and women who were, or would become, socialist supporters of the civil rights struggle--

observed their first peaceful protest meetings. "I had just come back from Cambridge," recalled Boyle, "and was on my way to America, where I had a job in Chicago. Most of us had been kicking at Northern Ireland for a while, but it wouldn't seem to give."

The situation "gave" after a march at Derry on October 5, 1968, in which police brutality galvanized the attention of the world on the Ulster conflict. Derry galvanized Queen's University as well. On the following Tuesday, when the new university term began, Miss Devlin relates: "I went up to Belfast thinking I had changed, and I found that everybody had. The atmosphere at Queen's was joltingly different. The silence barrier was down. Derry was being talked about in the lecture rooms, in the tutorial rooms, in the snackbar at dinner, in the cloakrooms, in the showers, in the bar...People were talking and thinking about the society they were living in, not as an intellectual exercise, but realistically and emotionally, and as if it mattered." In that atmosphere, following a student march through Shaftesbury Square which was turned back by the extreme rightist followers of the Rev. Ian Paisley, People's Democracy was born.

PD, recalls Boyle, "sloganned the grievances and put out leaflets. The fact that students took a stand on civil rights"--quiescent students who had never shown political interest before--"put an edge on the issues, encouraged people to take part. We had a plan to 'enlist the people.' We'd have someone from PD come into every community, say, one or two students who came from there, and hold a meeting. PD was obsessed with direct democracy, we'd hand the mike around to anyone who wanted to speak. Bernadette and I had the idea that you'd have PD all over the north. But we organized so many committees that they didn't know how to work."

PD soon ran afoul of older civil rights leaders who thought the students' ideas of agitation, propaganda, non-violence and direct democracy wouldn't work. They wanted to have parade marshals who would keep out extraneous elements; the PD concept was that a demonstration is "the demonstration of everyone who turns out, not just your organization. You should consult people and get their support for non-violence, and ask them if they agree to letting a committee make decisions that they can't be consulted about."

The civil rights groups realized, nonetheless, that PD was a force to be reckoned with after the Derry march, said Boyle, and he and Farrell were elected to posts of leadership. Conservative voices, however, complained that PD was "red," and "when we began to talk about housing and jobs, tension increased." After a second summer of violence in the ghettos of Belfast and Londonderry, much of the student enthusiasm for PD fell away. "A lot were shocked. More than a thousand families burned out, dozens killed. They came back and said 'maybe we're responsible for this.' They were scared, so PD broke down as a student movement."

One of the students who broke with PD is Rory McShane, a gregarious young solicitor-to-be to whom Boyle introduced me when we walked over to the Student Union for lunch. McShane describes himself as "just a person returned to normality and sanity. I think PD is on a quick trip to nowhere. It has become too introverted, too obsessed with theory." But McShane didn't desert politics when he left PD--for the few weeks prior to the elections, he was part of an ad hoc organization supporting Miss Devlin.

While we ate our sandwiches and drank beer, McShane jumped on Boyle for PD's decision not to publicly support Bernadette. "We're not theoretically opposed to elections," Boyle retorted, "but we feel elections should be just one part of

politics. Working in a constituency is bogus when you just work for election. Working in a constituency should mean that the candidate will be responsible to the constituency. Instead of meeting the press in Westminster, Bernadette should bring them back here with her so she can show them the problems. She's admitted she hasn't been in Mid-Ulster enough."

People's Democracy backs Bernadette, he explained, but they feel other relevant work has to be done, "not just to seek a short-term advantage...in the next five years, if we haven't built a good militant socialist organization, there won't be any change." The impression he left was that five Bernadettes could be elected and the situation would remain the same unless a socialist organization provided some real opposition to the Unionist government in Ulster. "I don't think we're going to have a socialist republic in five years. But I'm talking about a socialist organization for the 32 counties that will be the voice of the people...you must give them a thing to be recruited into. Ideally, I'd like to have a mass vote for socialist candidates to the two parliaments." And by socialist Boyle means none of the totalitarian governments conjured up by Western eyes. "The socialist governments like China and Russia are not socialist at all. They're just another way of organizing an underdeveloped country."

McShane dismissed Boyle's arguments with a brisk reminder that he was off to the hustings, so I asked if I might tag along. We planned to meet Bernadette in Stewartstown about 8 p.m., but McShane had to go by his home near Newry, pick up some clean shirts, and sign his apprentice papers with a local lawyer, indicating he would work with him for three years and then be accepted as a solicitor. He'd had quite a bit of trouble finding a job, he explained to me as we drove through the Irish countryside. "I've been in student politics for four years--I chaired the first PD meeting and was president of the Students' Representative Council at Queens. I ran a civil rights campaign against banning the Republican Clubs at Queens in 1966 (Republicans support a 32-county Irish Republic, including Ulster); we formed a club in defiance of the ban and made the government look foolish and ridiculous. The ban was a farce. Then I was involved in PD too. I graduated a year ago in arts and politics, then did a year's post-graduate work in sociology. I've had a hard time getting a job because of my political work. Nobody would touch me. I tried to go into journalism, but the local paper in Belfast belongs to Lord Thompson. I guess they got a call from London that said 'hands off.' I hadn't planned to go into law, but it's a good field. And I can stay in politics...maybe I'll run for office myself one day."

We had a cup of tea at his parents' home just a few miles from the border in County Armagh, and his father--a builder and a Republican--talked about the "bold Bernadette."

"I hope she pulls through," said the elder McShane, "because she's anti-Unionist, but she'll never get anywhere with her radical socialism. Ireland is a land of farmers, and they're all capitalists." Republican sentiment is strong among the Ulstermen near the border, he explained. "The government had planned to open up a part of a scenic route through a forest here yesterday, and they wanted to fly the Union Jack. The local citizens told them, 'if you do, you won't have any forest to fly it over.' So they postponed the opening. They had 6,000 British troops in here to forestall any trouble. There are 8,000 British troops in Northern Ireland now, but that wouldn't be enough to handle any real trouble."

Back on the road, Rory told me about Bernadette's campaign. Four candidates were in the race--two who call themselves anti-Unionist, but who "don't count--

they're just in there to try and split the vote." The Unionist candidate and Miss Devlin's real opponent was Neville Thornton, "who accuses her of being soft on Republicanism, of causing trouble in Londonderry. He says she hasn't been in the constituency enough."

Miss Devlin, he continued, campaigns on a program of non-sectarian politics, proposes a 32-county socialist republic, attacks the large landowners and the large factory owners. "The people appreciate that she's the most articulate anti-Unionist voice," he said. "And it's been less of a violent campaign than the one 14 months ago. In Castle Derg people threw eggs and bottles at her in 1968 and in Tabernmore one guy had a gun. But this time there's been only some wild heckling."

One heckler in Tabernmore asked her why she went to America to raise money--if she were a socialist, why didn't she go to a socialist workers' country like China or Russia or Cuba? Her reply, said McShane, was that she could perhaps have gone to Cuba, she thinks that's not yet a workers' country, but they're trying; but she doesn't consider Russia or China a workers' country. Besides, it's dollars that are the currency that can help the people in Northern Ireland. Another man asked her about Yugoslavia, and she told him that there are some interesting experiments in workers' control in Yugoslavia, but that's not socialism either.

"Bernadette's problem is that she wants to remain independent," McShane said. "She has to say 'this is what I've done for Mid-Ulster,' and as an independent she can claim neither the Labor nor the Tory achievements. But she had her say in getting rid of the B-Specials (a private Unionist army, all Protestants and recruited from the Orangemen), and the Ulster Defense forces."

Our conversation turned to student politics, and McShane told me that Queens University students are "miles behind as far as student participation, control of curriculum and faculties are concerned. We might have some demonstrations along that line this year. But in 1968, when People's Democracy was formed, we talked about student power. Most students then were interested in the civil rights campaign and it would have been counter-revolutionary to deflect interest from that onto student power."

We arrived in Stewartstown about a half-hour before the Devlin group were scheduled to appear. A tiny, obviously poverty-stricken farming town, it reminded me of a deserted mining town I remember from my early childhood in Appalachia. Perhaps a dozen empty stores fronted on the hard-dirt square, which was graced only with a statue to soldiers killed in World War I.

Since we'd had no supper (that seemed the appropriate word in Stewartstown, instead of dinner), McShane inquired where we might get some sandwiches and we were sent to a shabby house next to a run-down hotel. "I haven't got any sandwiches made," the middle-aged lady in a torn apron informed us with a weary but friendly air. "But if you'd like tomatoes and a cup of tea, just have a seat." We took seats at one of the two oil-cloth covered dining tables, and I looked around at the flowered wallpaper, the buzzing flies, the corner cabinets filled with silver utensils, all smelling musty and old and reminding me of my grandmother's back in the hills of Tennessee.

After tea, McShane and I went across the square to wait for Bernadette, meeting, by chance, a classmate of his from Queens whose parents operated one of the local taverns. We were invited into the kitchen for more tea and sandwiches--they were

obviously well-to-do compared to the lady with the tomatoes--where they chatted about how the Devlin supporters had better watch the polls to be sure the dead people didn't vote for the Unionist candidate (it seems the voting registers are not up to date, and voting a dead man's name is common practice).

Waiting for Bernadette was like waiting for Godot. Some thirty people assembled on the square by this time were as disappointed as I to hear one of the Devlin campaign workers announce that she had been forced to meet with her legal advisor. She had found out that afternoon that the sentence on her trial for inciting riots last summer would be announced on Friday, the same day as the election results would be made known. But McShane heard another reason for her no-show, that Miss Devlin had also refused to come to Stewartstown because her local supporters had not been able to guarantee her a speaking platform, not even the bed of a truck, and she was afraid of being stoned.

After another hour or so of driving through the backroads of Mid-Ulster, we arrived in Arbaugh, where Miss Devlin was scheduled to speak at 10:30 p.m. We pulled into the parking lot of a community center with a big sign in front announcing "Bingo Tonight," and waited until the calls of "I 23, B 14" ended. Some 150-200 people meandered out of the building and milled around outside waiting for Bernadette. When some made a move to go, McShane grabbed a bull-horn and asked them to stay since Bernadette Devlin's caravan was just pulling in down at the crossroads.

A few moments later she worked her way through the crowd--tiny, not pretty but spirited-looking and earnest, dressed in a blue two-piece knit dress. She waited while Paddy Devlin, an MP from the Falls in Belfast, warmed up the crowd. "Bernadette Devlin is the people's candidate," he said, "and only apathy can defeat her. I know the people don't come out to vote," he told the crowd, all Catholics, "because they think their votes are wasted. But you should give her a 10,000 majority and send her back to Westminster. The sacrifice our communities have made won't mean a thing if the Tories get back into Westminster." Another speaker told the crowd that "she is known throughout the world as someone who represents the interests of the common Irish people."

Then it was time for Bernadette. Kicking off her shoes, she climbed in stocking feet onto the hood of a car and took the bull-horn. "I stand here as I stood here 15 months ago," she told them, "to tell you what I believe in...the kind of life that will make Irish people live as equals, to live at peace within our own country. I want to say loud and clear--I am a socialist. Every ordinary, working person must also be a socialist. That's not some kind of extremist, not someone who says you'll behave in the same fashion. I want to tell you what socialism really is."

Then she launched into an expose of Unionist sell-out policies as typified by Ireland's large inland eel-rich lake, Lough Neagh, which James Chichester-Clark (the Unionist aristocrat who is now prime minister) sold to a Dutch-English company called the Toome Eel Fishery Company. Local fishermen who live around the lake have been squeezed out by the Toome company. "Where are the people who own Lough Neagh?" Miss Devlin asked in outraged tones. "It's not the Irish. The people here are slaves of the Toome Fishery. The Dutch and the English sit and grow rich from the people who fish the Lough Neagh."

The only solution, she said, is for "the fisherman to stand with his neighbor against those who oppress them. The farmers must unite in farming cooperatives, and the same must be done by the factory workers." Turning to the broader economic situation in Ulster, she said the Unionist government exports £500 million every year, yet returns to Northern Ireland only £150 million pounds. "That money comes

from your labor. The government is taking L5 notes out of our pockets and giving us a penny in return."

"We want to keep our people here," she said, alluding to the high emigration rate, "and to do that we have to keep our money here. I don't promise you any miracles," she concluded, "but I promise you hope for the future."

The crowd applauded wee Bernadette and some crowded around to promise their votes on election day. She seemed tired (by this time it was almost midnight), but she hurriedly planned a picket at the Chief Justice's house in Belfast the next day to protest the Unionist maneuver of delivering sentence on the day the votes are counted, then climbed into a car to return to her campaign headquarters. She promised some citizens of Stewartstown, who like McShane and I had come to hear her speak in Arbaugh when her Stewartstown appearance was cancelled, to arrange a stop there before election day.

The next day I walked through the riot areas of Belfast--Shankill Road and the Falls--and saw the grim poverty in which both Catholics and Protestants live. I talked with a printer who was out washing his car, a man who said he'd been a liberal Unionist candidate in the last election, but was defeated.

"The Unionist party has been infiltrated by Paisleyites," charged Robert William Guilfoyle, "and I wouldn't doubt but what there's been a deal (to put up no Unionist candidates where Paisleyites--supporters of the extreme rightist Free Presbyterian minister--are on the ticket)." Although he had no use for Paisley, he was equally vehement about Bernadette Devlin--"Devlin hasn't done any good--we need constructive criticism. They have no party, they're interested in an image for themselves." Nor did he have any kind words for student support of civil rights. "My contention is that all the students get out of the state they should be forced to pay back. Students should be seen and not heard, they get everything paid for them. But the students didn't have anything to do with the reforms. It's the people themselves. One is getting all the fat, the other all the lean."

The Ulster working man, according to Guilfoyle, is getting uppity, and that's what's causing the trouble. "Give the worker a fair deal, and now he thinks he's entitled to more. The workers should respect their trade unions, and the trade unionists should be paid more. They do a good job. What's the use of having a dog if you're going to do the barking?" But Guilfoyle doesn't like all the reforms, such as the promised ban on job discrimination. "It's not right for them to tell me who I can employ."

Further down Shankill Road, I talked to two Catholic women in a butcher shop of the Unity Flats housing project. The project hasn't accomplished its purpose, which was to integrate Catholics and Protestants. Catholics frequent the Catholic-owned stores, Protestants buy from Protestant shopkeepers. I asked the women what they thought about the British Army, if armed soldiers patrolling the area disturbed them. "Of course we want the Army here, especially if we have children," replied one. "It means our lives."

But a Protestant working man had a different view. "The barbed wire and the barricades don't help as a tourist attraction," he said. "You wouldn't want it outside your window, would you? I think it only increases the tension." Then, pointing to a pile of rubble at the end of one street in a Protestant area, he said, "They're piling that up for a bonfire on July 11--when the Orangemen celebrate the Battle of the Boyne."



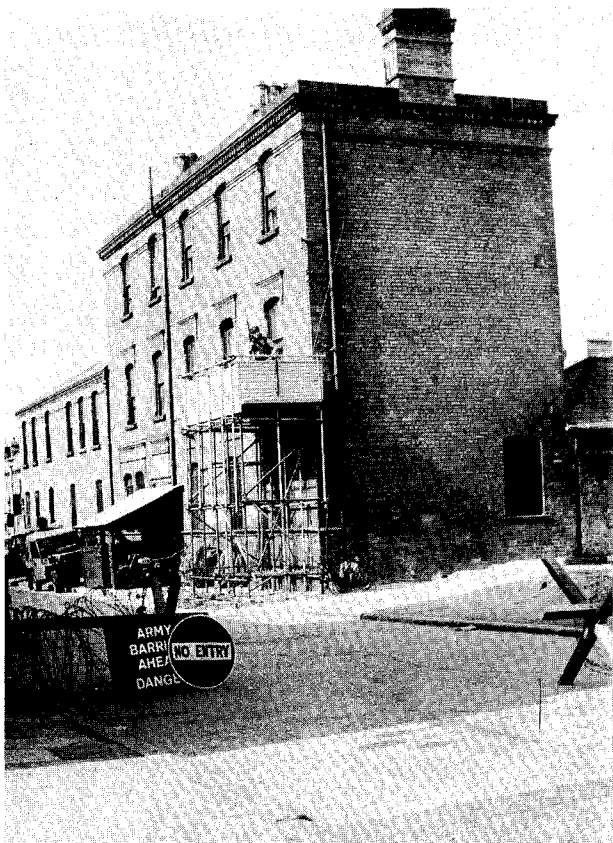


Stewartstown--

Waiting for Bernadette

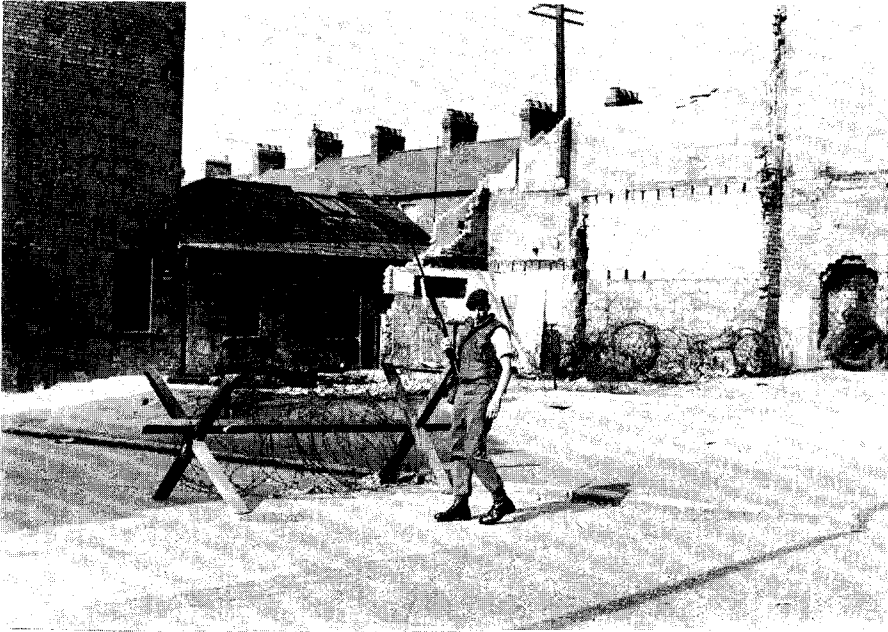
Unity Flats--

Where soldiers keep  
an uneasy peace



Barricade off Shankill Road

It was easy to tell that I was in a Protestant area--some of the dingy row-houses flew grimy and tattered Union Jacks; others had an English coat of arms in the window or a picture of the Queen; and on the walls were painted "Welcome Ian Paisley...No Surrender."



On Sunday I attended morning services at The Martyr's Church on Raven Hill Road, the Free Presbyterian church at which the Rev. Ian Paisley preaches to his flock of well-scrubbed, white-gloved (even the children) and flower-hatted Christians. The taxi driver who put me out across the street from the church cautioned me to pull my skirt down as far as I could--the Paisley parishioners don't approve of the mini-skirt fashion--and said I'd better not let on that I had anything to do with the press. "I drove two reporters and a photographer from a London newspaper here not too long ago, and they turned them away at the door."

Trying to look my most pure and demure, I took a seat on the back row between two white-haired ladies, who kindly offered me a Bible at that point in the service when congregation and minister join in reading the Scriptures. During the prayer which followed I screwed up my courage and took out my notebook as surreptitiously as possible. "Oh, Lord, bring down Harold Wilson's government," bellowed Paisley. "He's promoted a program of permissiveness and there'll be nothing left of Protestant Christian imagery if Harold Wilson's government wins--the forces that are against us cannot be compared to the power of the Lord."

The prayer concluded, Paisley continued in the same vein, cheered on by occasional amen's from the congregation. "I believe the Lord is going to give us the victory," he said. "I'm glad that Enoch Powell is coming out in the open...thank God for honest men who are prepared to go out on a limb. God's people have left the politics of this country to the devil, but God has called us to this conflict. We're in the battle, it's a hard fight, but there's a God in heaven."

Eventually Paisley began to preach about Daniel, a man who "walked with God" and "could make immediate decisions." But he continued to put in plugs for his view of the Christian spirit--"some jellyfish say Christians shouldn't break the law, but I obey God rather than man when man's law is against God." Later in the sermon he betrayed a narrow interpretation of God, when he promised to protest an ecumenical meeting at which Protestants and Catholics would meet at the Canterbury Cathedral. "When that happens in England, God help this nation," he lamented. "When that happens it means this nation is going back to popery, going back to the devil."

It was Communion Sunday, but I left after the sermon and didn't break bread with the Paisleyites. I recalled Bernadette Devlin writing that "there are very few Christians in Northern Ireland" And then she quotes an American who had said that the most interesting thing about Holy Ireland was "that its people hate each other in the name of Jesus Christ."

The public baths, as well as the pubs, cinemas, and virtually any kind of entertainment are closed on Sundays in Belfast, so just for some diversion--as well as the chance to talk to some People's Democracy members--I was glad to join a PD picket line in front of a public bath in a poorer section of the city that afternoon. A group of five PD members turned up with hand-lettered posters ("No Splash on Sunday") and planned to march in front of the building. But when the bath supervisor and his wife (a charming old white-haired couple who shook hands all round through the bars that closed off the building) engaged the young socialists in discussion, explaining that he was all for opening the baths on Sunday too, and at lower prices, but when would he have a day off?--the group decided to move down a block away from the bath and picket there, answering questions if any passerby chanced to wonder what the "No Splash" signs had to do with a clothing store.

While we walked Martin Rogers, a law student whose family is working class, explained another project that PD was then supporting--a strike at cement factories in two towns near Belfast. Cement Limited, the owners of the factories, he said,

had made £6 million profit last year, of which £1,650,000 went to the shareholders and the remainder was reinvested into a new plant. But a new cement factory, the workers maintain, will mean redundancies or no overtime. The workers who manufacture the cement now receive £13.16 a week, as opposed to a wage of £18.10 for workers who use the cement at a building site. "They've been striking for twenty weeks and they only get £5 a week strike pay, so PD is trying to help them out," he said.

Boyle had told me earlier about some other PD projects--a series of "folk-ins," at which PD members rented a bus and drove ghetto children for a picnic on one of the country estates of the Protestant aristocrats; folk festivals within the slum communities in which PD tries to point out the validity of the Irish culture for both Protestants and Catholics--a sort of "Irish is beautiful" approach; and a housing action committee started in one of the Catholic slum areas, with the hope that a Protestant committee can also be formed, and then the two can work together.

And Eamon O'Kane later cleared up some of my questions on the Lough Neagh fishery dispute of which his friend Bernadette had spoken: "Lough Neagh is Europe's richest and largest inland lake, and it has a good eel yield. A few years ago Chichester-Clark sold the lake to a Dutch and English consortium, who have the sole right to sell eels from the lake. The fishermen fought the case through the House of Lords, but they lost. Because of the agitation, however, a fisherman's coop was set up and they bought themselves 1/5 share of the company, for £85,000. Toome bought the whole lake at £150,000, and they've made back their investment in four years' time. The fishermen's coop was supposed to be able to set up marketing facilities, but they've become increasingly poor. People's Democracy is leading a campaign for expropriation of the lake, but the fishermen's association can make it difficult for any fisherman who cooperates with PD. They issue the licenses, so anyone who protests the present arrangement can lose his license. PD had a sit-in in the offices of the fishery company, but that's about as far as we can go. Now it's up to the fishermen."

In all of my talks with PD members, I was impressed with their Realpolitik approach to the Ulster situation. They gave the impression of having done their homework--they knew the facts and figures, and the parameters of possible protest. They seemed determined to stick it out through a long educational program on socialist goals.

O'Kane, a PD member who is a teacher at a Belfast school, told me that he felt the Realpolitik approach was peculiarly Irish. But the civil rights struggle, he added, had now broken down in the face of the historic religious differences. "Civil rights was a hammer. The harder you hit it, the more you drove the wedge between the classes." Until workers of both religions can be persuaded that their problems are caused by economics, by the greed of capitalist-Unionist factory owners and landowners, he said, the problem will just increase.

In The Price of My Soul, Miss Devlin states the problem clearly: "Our system is one in which the basic divide is thought to be along religious lines, in which it is quite rational for a man to believe he is sentenced to unemployment for the crime of being a Catholic. But he is not. He is sentenced to unemployment because there are not enough jobs, and there are not enough jobs because investment is made on grounds of profit, not on grounds of people's needs."

But convincing the poor of the difference is "a barrier that's the most intractable," said O'Kane. "The people of Connolly (the first Irish socialist) didn't do it. But a workers' republic would bring the socialist on its tail." PD

already has support from the Catholic working class, he said, and some tenuous links with shop stewards of both religions. "They see us as radical Republicans," he laughed, and we'd rather see ourselves as radical socialists." Although the local press gave liberal coverage to PD during the civil rights struggle, the movement is content to work behind the scenes now. "You can't be like a traveling circus."

O'Kane feels the Labor government's intervention--although it has brought promises of reform--has emasculated the civil rights fight. "They have a good schoolmaster attitude, pat you on the head and expect you to quit being rowdy." A study by two British social scientists--R. S. P. Wiener and John Bayley of the London School of Economics--produced the same conclusion. "The intervention of the British peace-keeping force there left the Roman Catholic minority isolated and 'put an end to all immediate hopes of reform,'" according to a New York Times report yesterday on the study. The scientists said further, "The arrival of the British Army (after civil rights marches had proved effective), however, changed the emphasis of the dispute into one of 'law and order.' The very first priority of the British Army in Ulster was to insure law and order, but this was exactly the first priority for the Catholics' previous attack...It seemed to legitimate the Protestant backlash; the Catholics, unable to protest any longer, had to watch the election of Ian Paisley and the establishment of a powerful Protestant bargaining position. The Catholics, therefore, found themselves in a worse position than when they had started and a situation had been created where protest was automatically regarded as extremism."

Nonetheless, O'Kane calls it a half-full instead of a half-empty bottle. "Even though the tide has receded, the level of consciousness has been raised. You can talk about socialism now, and that's a step forward." With all its problems, O'Kane prefers the easy-going Irish way of life. "We have all the virtues of strict Protestantism, but still we're not the grasping materialists I imagine American society must create. It's okay to work overtime to get more drinking money... that's sane...but not to get a color television set or a new car. Most of us are not as status conscious as that." And the socialist movement in Ireland doesn't face the language barrier that German students do with the working class. "We have no difficulty in talking to the workers. I live in the same area where I was brought up, and I still go to the same pub."

That night I attended a People's Democracy "educational session" along with some twenty students and workers, and heard a PD member offer a detailed study of the labor movement in Ireland. The conclusion he reached was that "labor is hopelessly inadequate in Ireland. The labor movement has reflected sectarian politics even down to the present day, and is reformist, not socialist. There is no fight against capitalism. Our perspective should be to win the class-conscious workers away from the labor movement to a socialist movement."

After the meeting I had a chance to talk with Mike Farrell, probably PD's leading ideologue and a professor at a Belfast technical college. I asked him if PD considered itself a pacifist revolutionary movement, since they had tried to support non-violent tactics during the civil rights marches. "We support the right to self-defense," he said, "so that ended any pacifism for PD, but the general attitude is we'd prefer a peaceful revolution." Then why reject the prospect of infiltrating the parliamentary system? "We've decided against putting up candidates now, because elections should be a tiny fraction of our total activity. That's our objection to

Bernadette--she disappeared after her election and we had no control over her. We're supporting her now, but we won't be content with just voting. We want to form a socialist organization."

Since Bernadette has been in Parliament, and since the birth of People's Democracy, have the people in Northern Ireland come to look with less fear and more understanding on socialism? I asked. Farrell explained that the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising four years ago had occasioned a revival of interest in James Connolly and his writings. "When I was in the university, we heard only that Connolly was communist. But now he's widely talked about, and some people wear Connolly badges. But communism is still a dirty word. It's still identified with Stalin, and there's very little understanding here of Mao."

Does PD try to stimulate a theoretical discussion on Marx, Lenin, Mao, Castro? "We say we're in favor of the Bolsheviks, and that Lenin was a good fellow. But we're trying to avoid a situation where some PD members lead the others. We've avoided talking about Cuba and China until some who don't know about it have a chance to catch up. When you think back five years and know you couldn't talk about socialism at all, we're not worried about it. Even the Catholic cardinal here described himself as a socialist, and there are a few priests who are pseudo-Marxist." The talk of socialism went so far, in fact, that some backlash set in and some reactionary bishops are preaching against it, he added.

Farrell foresees a long road for the PD movement, with a possible fascist takeover of Northern Ireland from the Paisley forces before the conflicts are resolved. "It's possible for Paisley to get rid of Chichester-Clark, to go back to a Salazar setup with secret police, and to outlaw Republican parties and the People's Democracy. A united, modernized Ireland closely tied to Britain is in Westminster's interest--the industry in both South and North now is controlled by Britain--and there have been occasions, such as Rhodesia, where British imperialism has backed down. We don't know whether Britain would fight Paisley."

But Farrell predicts that any neo-fascist state would have a short existence, since "that would drive the Protestant working class to desperation and then we'd unite." He mulled that situation a bit and then added, "but we don't want confrontation on religious lines. It could erupt into a religious civil war. We wrung concessions out of the government last year. What we'd like to see is a confrontation between the workers and the Paisleyites, so they would see that Paisley doesn't agree with strikes, that he's anti-working class."


Farrell said that although some trade unions are sectarian, the general trend of labor unions is toward integration, and therefore People's Democracy is interested in gaining trade union support. "The leadership of the unions are right-wing or communist, but they don't link industrial militancy with political activity. The Irish Communist Party is nationalist first, socialist second. They've taken over the Republican movement. We're for socialism first. We rivaled the Labor Party with our own May Day march, and some said it would be dangerous, but we did it so we could show working class power. That brought us into contact with some trade unions. Our hope is to get the support of the already class-conscious Protestant workers through the trade unions, then get to the rank and file."

I asked Farrell if he thought student politics was an important area for PD. "When you have a situation outside that affects housing, jobs, lives," he answered,

"why concentrate on ephemeral things like the university? Some branches of PD are entirely working class. We're glad to have student support--students are very popular among the Catholic working class, but among the Protestants some think the students are pigs." I told him I'd noticed that most of the Irish students I had met were not the long-haired, bearded types associated with the left in Germany and other countries. Farrell's reply: "When you've got something constructive to do, you don't need to grow long hair to show your discontent with society."

People's Democracy now has an active membership of 300, and support of 2,000. They're a serious lot--as Boyle said, "it's no longer a bandwagon; you could get shot. We plug away at socialist issues wherever we find them." In his pamphlet, Struggle in the North, Farrell put the case this way: "Agitation for jobs and houses must reach a limit within the economic system in Northern Ireland. A stage will be reached when higher wages and social investment threaten current profit levels and the constant drain of profit to Britain. A choice will have to be made: between capitalism and socialism, between continued exploitation by British imperialism and breaking the British economic stranglehold. That choice could not be made alone because the six counties are economically unviable. The struggle for socialism would mean snapping the link with Britain, overthrowing the rotten capitalist system, discarding the border, and rooting out British and U. S. economic imperialism in both parts of Ireland. It would mean, in fact, the struggle for Connolly's Socialist Republic."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Bright". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial "B".

Barbara Bright

Received in New York on September 1, 1970.