

## TOWARDS A UNITED IRELAND

*Daltín Ó Ceallaigh*

The Republican Movement's policy on a British position on a united Ireland, at the time of the commencement of the Period of Armed Conflict (PAC), involving engagement between the Irish Republican Army and crown forces, specifically the British army, in the north in 1971, demanded British departure from the six counties. Over subsequent years, it evolved to demanding a specific date in the not too distant future for departure, to Britain becoming a persuader for Irish unity, to at least declaring in its favour.

The historical background to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 pursuant to the Good Friday Agreement lies in the Government of Ireland Act 1920 (known popularly as 'Home Rule'). 'Home Rule' left the United Kingdom (or 'Union') intact; it was a devolutionary measure which gave only restricted powers to Ireland in the shape of two parliaments for six and twenty-six counties, respectively, with the possibility of a largely consultative Council of Ireland for the entire island. Following the War of Independence and the Treaty, Home Rule was confirmed as only obtaining in respect of six counties in the north-east, while the other twenty-six counties became the Irish Free State, thus leaving the United Kingdom, while assuming dominion status in the British Commonwealth.

The Government of Ireland Act was scaled down gradually, following the onset of the armed conflict in the north. It was replaced entirely by the Northern Ireland Act in 1998, pursuant to the Good Friday Agreement. On the question of national sovereignty, its novelty was in providing for a border poll in the six counties which could definitely lead to a united Ireland. The Act states that a poll will occur "if at any time it appears likely to him [the British-appointed Secretary of State for the north] that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland." But the means by which such an apparent likelihood would be ascertained are not spelled out. Moreover, if a poll is held and, from a nationalist point of view, is lost, a second poll cannot be held for another seven years.

The Northern Ireland Act is a positive advance on previous British legislation as regards the north, while still leaving the Act of Union currently in place in regard to it. But, by itself, the Act lets the British off the hook of formulating a definitive policy of its own on Irish national sovereignty. In addition to the Act, republicans should still be demanding that Britain favour Irish unity and become a persuader for it, both politically and materially. Politics is not just about persuasion; it is also about pressure. And the two need not be in conflict with each other. This holds true as regards unionists. Otherwise, one could end up with an approach to Irish unity redolent of Official Sinn Féin and its renamed successors. Pressure as well as persuasion is especially necessary, because unionism is essentially a bigoted, supremacist creed veering towards fascism among the loyalist working class.

Another demand which should be raised by republicans is that a referendum be held in Britain on the continuance of the union with the north. All the opinion surveys which have been conducted in Britain indicate an overwhelming majority for ending the union with the north, although not necessarily in favour of a united Ireland. That would be left for the Irish to sort out.

As for Orangeism, while the Reformation tradition of the around 900,000 Protestants in north-east Ireland and others in the 26 counties should be respected, Orangeism is quite another matter. The Reformation began in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and was a challenge to the Roman tradition which, among other things, was seen as scripturally distorted and materially corrupt. Monarchist Orangeism, however, emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland in opposition to nationalism whose adherents were mainly Catholic; it was and is sectarian and reactionary and should not thus be confused with Reformationism. Indeed, there are Reformation Protestants who reject it on those grounds. For republicans to accept Orangeism as a legitimate part of 'the cultural life of the nation' is thus profoundly mistaken.

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