

## From Civil Rights to the Good Friday Agreement: A Conversation with Eamonn McCann

*The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Belfast Agreement recently passed not with a bang, but with a whimper. With Stormont again collapsed, few could muster any great enthusiasm to celebrate this milestone. One of the chief critics of the Agreement, and the sectarian structures it enshrined is veteran socialist activist and journalist Eamonn McCann. Seán Mitchell sat down with Eamonn to discuss the Agreement and the conflict which preceded it. An abridged transcript of the conversation has been produced here.*

**SM. Thanks for sitting down with us Eamonn. There has been plenty of revisionism around both the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Agreement and the centenary of Northern Ireland before it. Given this context, it might be useful if you start by giving us a sketch of the roots of the conflict known as the “Troubles”.**

**EMcC.** The causes of the conflict are rooted very deeply in Irish history, and certainly can be traced back to the formation of the Northern Ireland state. As we know, the treaty that ended the War of Independence was based literally upon drawing a line around the area of Ireland which could

reliably be counted on to be majority unionist—a majority in favour of retaining the link with Britain in other words. The Northern Ireland state was designed, and its boundaries were set, according to a perceived necessity to maintain a Protestant/Unionist majority. It is worth remarking in passing that there was a distinct faction of Unionism, which included its principal leader, Edward Carson, that did not initially favour partition, and instead wanted to retain the whole of Ireland within the union and the British Empire. A reminder that partition was as much the result of imperialist pragmatism as some deeply-held identity or allegiance.

The effect of partition in the North was to leave the Catholic community isolated from the rest of Ireland. As a result, Catholics were subjected to systematic discrimination within jobs, housing, and the electoral franchise. It’s remarkable how many young republicans, and some not-so-young republicans, will tell you that Catholics didn’t have a vote. This wasn’t true. In the North, the great difference was that only householders and their spouses could vote in local government elections for councils

and corporations. In order to get a vote in local government elections, you had to have a house—to give a person a house, therefore, was to give them a vote. Unionists were manipulating the boundaries and gerrymandering an artificial majority for the unionist people, including through the sectarian allocation of housing, and as a by-product of that, Catholics were disadvantaged in local government. That took a grotesque form, particularly in Derry, where two thirds of the electorate might vote for Nationalists or anti-unionist parties more generally, and yet, the artificial boundaries yielded a unionist majority on the Council. This was obviously unfair and a glaring anomaly, and when I was growing up in



Eamonn McCann, speaking at an event in the Bogside, April 1969.

Derry, it was probably the first political thing I learned: that we in the Bogside were discriminated against when it came to votes, and therefore in the distribution of public finances.

Everybody in the Bogside knew this. We lived in very poor conditions, in damp slums, with water running down the walls. And when people talked about these conditions, they would relate it to the discrimination of Catholics. As I recall it in Derry, partition and the whole system of gerrymandering was a very practical thing, experienced in access to housing and in access to jobs. There wasn't a single Catholic employed in the Guildhall—the centre of

local government in Derry—until the outbreak of the civil rights movement. Not one, in a majority Catholic city, and the leaders of the Unionist party and the local Orange Order boasted about this.

**What about the situation of the Protestant working class in places like Derry at this time?**

Contrary to what some Nationalists might tell you, the system whereby householders alone could vote in local elections obviously meant that Protestants who weren't householders wouldn't get a vote either. When left-wing candidates would go canvassing in Protestant areas like Irish Street or the Fountain in Derry, they would constantly be faced with people on the doorstep saying, "You're complaining down there in the Bogside about housing and jobs, aren't we in the same position?" And this was largely true. Up in the Fountain the conditions weren't all that different from conditions in the Bogside. Poor, working class Protestant people didn't benefit from discrimination.

The Orange Order and the Unionist Party offered Protestant people a sense of having a stake in the Northern Ireland state. Orangeism offered a lifestyle, and a colourful backstory, for the Protestant people. If you are living in a damp house and a dead-end job, the colour and noise and the celebratory triumphalism of

Orangeism could be very attractive to people. And it was quite common to hear Unionist leaders in the public arena tell Protestant people that "You are lucky that you have Northern Ireland," because you could get certain benefits from the British state. To some extent this was true, but it didn't answer the question of the disenfranchisement of working class people in a democracy.

The marginal advantages that Protestant working class people had in access to jobs and housing didn't mean that they were well off—they were poor by any standards. Indeed, by the standards of comparative areas in Britain, they were often worse off than their counterparts on the other side of the Irish sea. If you're poor, sometimes that's when you reach for that vigorous symbol of your community and a heroic version of your history. This is why you had this peculiar convergence of proletarian resentment at poverty combined with a pride in the loyalist and Orange tradition. Unionism and Orangeism might seem like a rather quaint outlook on the world in 2023, but in a distorted way it seemed to make sense if you were a working class person in some bleak, run-down, crumbling slum.

**This powder keg exploded in the late 1960s with student protests, the civil rights movement, and the violent reaction of the state. Can you explain how this all developed?**

The revolt of the 1960s cannot be understood other than in the general revolt against oppression and injustice right across the world. It is not a coincidence that the civil rights movement emerged here in the North around the time of the civil rights movement in the United States, or that the student movement here paralleled what was happening in continental Europe and many other places. Northern Ireland is not special in that regard.

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It is worth remarking in passing on the role of students in the revolt here. This wasn't something that happened overnight, it wasn't a thunderclap. It was the result of trends and material changes in Northern Irish society over previous years—stretching back at least to the Education Act of 1944, which opened up a route to higher education for many working class people. This wasn't some act of benevolence on the part of the ruling class. Indeed, its architect was Rab Butler, a right-wing Tory, and the whole policy reflected capitalism's increasing need for an educated workforce. Typically, it wasn't enacted by the Unionist administration—

who didn't like the idea of free education open to all—until three years later. It wasn't just the idea of Catholics coming into education that angered them, though that was in the front of their minds as well. The idea of the dirty, unwashed, proletarian masses coming from their ugly teeming houses into further education actually insulted Unionist leaders and the assumptions that many of them had. Nevertheless, people like me were beneficiaries of this.

In a deeply divided society, students were one of the few coherent groups who were to some extent insulated from surrounding society, and who had an outlook of “doing well” in a way that those who did not have access to third level education did not have. I do not mean to exaggerate the opportunities given by third level education at the time, but it meant that if you were a Catholic working class person, or the child of a Catholic working class family, you could aspire to move higher and do better than your parents had.

The first person to go to university in Rossville Street, where I come from, was Paddy Doherty. The very fact that I can remember Paddy, and where he lived, will tell you what an unusual thing that was. It was the talk of the street: “Did you hear Paddy Doherty is going to university.”



Battle of the Bogside in Derry, August 12 1969

A year or two later it was John Hume, and then a few years later people of my age went to university.

University offered an escape, and the space and time to be able to develop a political perspective on the wider world and not just our own little parish. There was a certain breakdown of religious loyalties there, and it was from within the student milieu that radical organisations like People's Democracy emerged. This relative privilege of students at the time—free time and simple things like access to clubs and places to meet to form organisations—afforded them the opportunity to take to the streets and to be inspired by their contemporaries in many countries around the world. If you were an unemployed

person in the Bogside you couldn't do that. So, you had the rise of a layer of Catholic working people who could be more confident in society than their fathers or mothers, who had the time and space to think and organise, were more confident about making their voices heard. My father and his brothers and my mother and her siblings were very bright people, quite capable of what used to be called "book learning", and yet they couldn't make any progress in society. But I and others of my generation could, and suddenly at places like Queens University you had a hubbub of political thinking, and could be inspired by things like the Black Panthers.



**To some extent, Republicanism and the IRA were a marginal current in the initial period of radicalisation you discussed above. But as the conflict developed, radical socialist forces and those who led the civil rights movement would be eclipsed by the Provisional IRA. Can you explain how they emerged?**

There is a notion spread by contemporary Sinn Féin and some of their academic and journalistic outriders that the civil rights movement awakened the republican consciousness of the Catholic community that then took the organisational form of the Provisional IRA with appropriate adjustments in strategy and so on. That's simply not true. The idea that the emergence of the IRA was inevitable, that it was natural, that it was something that the mass of Catholics embraced as if it were their historical mission—none of that is true. The Provisional IRA didn't emerge until three years after the formation of the civil rights movement, and it didn't develop into a serious force until a few years after that.

The Provisional IRA emerged in some respects as a proper and honest reaction to the brutality of the state and the unionist government. The aggressive and brutal attitude of the British state towards the Catholic community—people being beaten

up, arrested, and even killed—eventually this became the major issue that dominated people's lives and thinking. In my memory of it, in Derry, the Provisional IRA emerged as the people said, "this civil rights movement is going to go nowhere, you're not going to get justice, you're not going to get democracy and equality within Northern Ireland, because of British imperialism and its role in Ireland." And therefore, the only rational response was to take on British imperialism. And this wasn't an abstract thing: British Imperialism was standing in uniform with a rifle at the end of your street.

After a number of atrocities by the British state, the practical logic of traditional republicanism—that you cannot get justice from the British state: "we will have to take them on and drive them out"—had a real validity to many people. It wasn't necessarily the ideology of republicanism that attracted them, therefore, but their day-to-day experience.

Father Denis Faul, a very conservative priest who was also chaplain to many of the young people who had been arrested for rioting and for armed actions and heard their confessions and had some insight into the thinking of republican prisoners, once told me that many of them had not joined up because of the republican vision but

because “they had witnessed their own mothers being insulted in her own kitchen.” That kind of thing was quite common during armed searches and the like, and he said that people would be quite understandably enraged by that. He said “there’s no point in protesting or raising questions in parliament about that.” If you are 16 or 17 and you see this happening, it seemed like there was no way you could deal with it other than saying “Give me a gun and I’ll shoot the fuckers.”

The other important thing about recruitment to the Provisional IRA, and it was an echo of what Father Faul had said about people joining the IRA because of the treatment of their mothers, was the defence of areas and their streets. If the British Army comes to the Bogside, and they are arresting people and “keeping the peace” as they would put it, then it’s obvious that there was going to be resistance to that and over time people got used to fighting the state.

Eddie Gallagher, who was second in command in the IRA in the 26 counties at the time, once told me that “them boys from Belfast are not real republicans. They are fighting for their streets.” Think about the internment raids, when the Brits came in, and snatched people, broke into their homes, took people off, some of whom I

knew very well, and took them off and locked them up—no charge, no trial, no nothing; the excuse simply being that “we know things about you and that means you’re a criminal.” Imagine the rage that followed that, imagine the anger that followed that. I remember in the hours after the internment raids, there was a meeting at the corner of the Brandywell Road in the Bogside, that had been called at a couple of hours’ notice, and practically the entire area was there—men, women, and children were out. This was a communal insult to the whole community. People were not going to stand for that.

After Bloody Sunday, the response became “Defend the area”—that became the slogan, “Don’t let them come in again.” And that was the context in which the Provisional IRA recruited in large numbers, rather than in ones and twos, or from people who came from traditional republican families.

It was those circumstances that laid the basis for the Provisional IRA. It’s important to keep in mind that there were other formations thrown up in these political convulsions. You had the Official IRA, for example, which in Derry was the stronger republican group for a period.

### **Why did the Provisional IRA surpass those other groups?**

Eddie Gallagher is an interesting example. He was adjutant to the Chief of Staff of the IRA in the 26 counties, who readers might know as one of those who kidnapped Dutch businessman Tiede Herrema. I got to know Eddie, he was a lovely fella. He is from Donegal, and had come into the Provisional IRA by a curious route.

He was working for a building contractor in England and was a union man and a shop steward. He came back to Belfast, not to join the IRA, but because the company he was working for gave him a job in West Belfast. Eddie was driving to work in Andersonstown one morning, and there was a car just in front of him and its exhaust blew and backfired. This was quite a common thing in old cars, and the soldiers in Andersonstown, without a check or anything, opened fire and killed a man. Eddie resolved then and there that he wasn't going to stand for this.

Eddie being something of a militant in the Trade Union movement was not minded to join the Provisional IRA—he wanted to join the Official IRA, which was viewed as more left wing. And he told me he had gone around Donegal asking people “where do I find Official Sinn Féin?” and he could never find them! And he joined the Provos as a second-best option.

So, there was political chaos for a period. There were only half a dozen or so in the Official IRA in Derry in the late 60s. I believe they had one gun between them! And then suddenly they were in the middle of what was being called a war. Many of the people who joined the Provisionals in Derry had been in the Official IRA. But they joined the Provisionals because they believed in shooting back. And more and more, particularly after Bloody Sunday, what the Provos were saying matched the mood of the mass of the Catholic working class—far more than the quiet perspective offered by the Stickies and the Communist Party.

The Official IRA gradually settled into a reformist perspective. Of course, some people in the Official IRA came to resent their leadership who they thought were missing the pace of events and the mood of the people, and asked why they weren't giving as militant a lead as the Provisionals.

And that gave rise to another split in the Official IRA, and the formation of the Irish Republican Socialist Party, whom offered themselves as an alternative to the Provisionals, but also to the meek and mild and abstract Stalinist leadership of the Officials. So, for a while you had an ideologically chaotic situation in the North, for about 18 months, maybe two years.



**As well as the Civil Rights Movement, there was an established Communist Party and a Northern Ireland Labour Party. Why did people turn to the Provisionals rather than the organisations of the left?**

There were a number of categories on the left. The members of the Communist Party would have very much counted themselves as fighting the class war, but when it came to things like civil rights and the national question, they had a very abstract, reformist and straightforward perspective: first of all you had to have democracy in the North, and only then you could begin the process of fighting for a united Ireland, because a democratic system would open all sorts of things up, and then once you had a united Ireland you could fight for socialism. This was the *stages theory* and it was as simple and as basic as that. And that theory formed the basis of the politics of the Officials as well.

There were other left-wing organisations as well. There was the Northern Ireland Labour Party, which I was a member of for several years, which was the equivalent of the British Labour party, and was associated, though not affiliated, with British Labour.

It had a similar attitude to the British Labour Party to politics: keep things quiet, don't do anything to alienate people, especially don't do anything to alienate yourself from trade union officials. The credibility of the left in the North, and the credibility of the trade union movement in the North, and class politics more generally, was deeply damaged, to put it mildly, by the behaviour of the labour movement and the trade union leadership.

The trade union bureaucracy sees their job as negotiators and they see themselves running the working class movement as the guardians of the trade union movement from what they see as alien ideas. They didn't want any of those "mad Trotskyists" like People's Democracy, they didn't want any of that. And that chimed with a lot of right-wing people in the trade union movement who didn't want the trade union movement lured into the struggle in the streets, and who believed that the movement should be led by themselves with all their experience of negotiating and selling out people right, left, and centre.

To give you an example of this, on the evening of Bloody Sunday, there was a special meeting of the Derry Trades Council called to discuss what to do about the situation in Derry—13 people had just been killed. Of those 13 people killed, 7 were members of trade unions, a

remarkable statistic given the fact that you didn't have that kind of proportion of trade union members in the general population. So, whatever the reason, Bloody Sunday hit the trade union movement hard. But when Derry Trades Council met to discuss this, at the end of the long meeting they passed a resolution "regretting the events in our city this afternoon" and wishing the wounded a speedy recovery. And this kind of response to state repression was repeated over and over again. The trade union movement didn't react strongly, if at all in some cases, to the introduction of internment. Who would look to them for leadership after that? They made themselves irrelevant in their pursuit of respectability. And the left is still suffering from that to this day.

The traditional left, as you might call it, failed the test of the civil rights movement and the response of the British state. This aspect of our recent history hasn't been adequately recorded or analysed. The trade union leadership, and the Communist Party, had a considerable presence in the civil rights movement, and were driving it forward according to their stages theory—democracy first, then you took on the state, then the class struggle for socialism. If you think of that perspective, and the way they saw the future, the key task was to reform Stormont. In fairness to the Communist Party, they had helped found the civil rights

movement in 1966. But once the war started, to put it in rather crude terms, the idea of fighting to democratise Stormont did not seem to meet the needs of people—it was not urgent enough to meet the needs of the young working class people whose politics were being shaped by the struggle against repression on the streets. The semi-abstract approach of the Communist Party of creating a democratic Northern Ireland, and thereby of the leadership of the civil rights movement because of their particular influence within it, didn't match people's experience on the ground.

There were some people who were breaking from that reformism and saying "look, the situation on the streets is such that we just can't persist" with the sort of stately, patient perspective of the Communist Party and others. And that is what also underlay the split between the Provisionals and Officials. That split was not contingent on an ideological break, it had to do with strategy in the here and now, and how you dealt with the British Army on your streets.

### **What about the forces of revolutionary left?**

Yes, you also had a revolutionary left, that thought in terms of militant class struggle, who saw themselves in line with groups like the Black Panthers. Looking back on it, this existing left was swamped by events.

This revolutionary left wasn't bound together in one organisation. In that ideologically chaotic situation, there was a radical left inside the Official IRA; there was a radical left in the trade union movement; there was the student left associated with People's Democracy. So, there were fragments of a revolutionary left, that would sometimes merge, or interpenetrate, but it was very difficult to get a coherent line.

And I have to say that the influence of student radicalism was not positive it seems to me, or it was not only positive—there were problems with it: the idea of spontaneous upsurges without a political vehicle. There is dogmatism in Stalinism, there is a dogmatism in republicanism. There began to be a new, somewhat less coherent dogmatism around the student and revolutionary left—against the idea of organisation, of party organisation in particular, and against the idea that differences on the left should be argued through.

Of course, it's easy to see in retrospect, and as the years went by, it was easy to see where it had all gone wrong, but a lot of it was a product of the time. In retrospect, the absence of a single organisation of the revolutionary left was a major weakness. There was revolutionary organisation: scattered groups that sprung up

spontaneously in different places, often hooked into the civil rights movement or the student movement, but there was no single coherent organisation.

To put it in very basic terms, there weren't even weekly or monthly meetings of people trying to work out socialist strategy—there were different groups doing it in isolation, but no single organisation. And communication was much more difficult in those days: if you wanted to talk to someone in Belfast, you had to go to Belfast. Hardly anybody had phones, and phones were quite rightly seen as insecure, and we knew this because telephone operators told us so. And there was also the crisscrossing of loyalties with the different revolutionary factions in Britain. A lot of the political differences on the left in Britain, which ultimately had nothing to do with Ireland, would set up sort of rivalries that could sometimes become quite bitter. So that made for difficulties as well.

There was plenty of opportunity for little flurries of left wing militancy right across the North. What there wasn't was the emergence of a single, viable revolutionary organisation.

**How does the IRA and Sinn Féin begin to move from a position of Armed Struggle to sitting in government at Stormont?**

The Northern Catholics had a long history of campaigning for equality. What they wanted more than anything was the biggest boot off their necks, the British Army. At no time in history did a majority of Catholics in Northern Ireland vote for an armed struggle for a united Ireland. That's worth repeating, because it sometimes suggested that all Catholics in the North, angered by their treatment by the British, swept over into support for republicanism and thereafter wouldn't accept anything less than a united Ireland. It was never like that.

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One of the main slogans in the early days of the civil rights movement was that "we want British rights for British citizens." I heard that said again and again. I remember Gerry Fitt, republican labour MP in Belfast, speaking outside the Guildhall in front of a very enthusiastic crowd and saying, "We want the same rights for the people of Derry as are enjoyed by the people in Doncaster; we want the same rights for the people of Belfast as are enjoyed by the people in Birmingham." Loud cheer! But this was a very low bar, wasn't it? Birmingham wasn't exactly a social paradise. Saying we want the same rights for Belfast as Birmingham was a very low bar, and you could get quite respectable types in Britain to agree to this proposition. But it was very popular. It took

the response of the Unionist state to change that.

During the H-Block campaign, I remember Gerry Adams saying that only people who supported armed struggle could lead the civil rights movement or the H-Block campaign. But he had to drop that position because the vast majority of ordinary people didn't see it like that. And I think you can see the IRA's switch to a "peace strategy" and to the abandonment of armed struggle even around then. This switch is presented, particularly by Sinn Féin, as the IRA leadership pushing people along with them and away from the path of armed struggle. And they still say it today: that it was the courageous leadership of Adams and McGuinness who led people on the path of peace. This is absolute nonsense. There is no basis for this. What happened is that the IRA brought itself into alignment with where the people already were. That's the key to understanding the peace process and how people who said that "the only language the Brits understand is bombs and bullets" were later saying that we have to work within the confines of the existing constitutional arrangements.

And the Brits loved that. There's nothing an imperialist ruling class loves better than hearing their opponents proclaiming "we want peace." Under Blair, Sinn Féin very

quickly became the British establishment's favourite party because they were going in the right direction as they saw it. Mark Durkan, former SDLP deputy leader at the time of John Hume, described to me how in a meeting with Tony Blair just after he was elected in 1997, he complained to Blair how disappointed he was that the British government was favouring the IRA in negotiations over the SDLP. And Mark said Blair looked up from his desk and replied, "well Mark, the thing is you don't have any guns." Blair and his people loved the whiff of cordite, they liked the sense of danger—they'd far rather be talking to Martin McGuinness and Gerry Kelly than boring people like Paddy Devlin and John Hume. And that helped ease the way into them accepting that they had to develop a position that helped to bring the IRA into the fold.

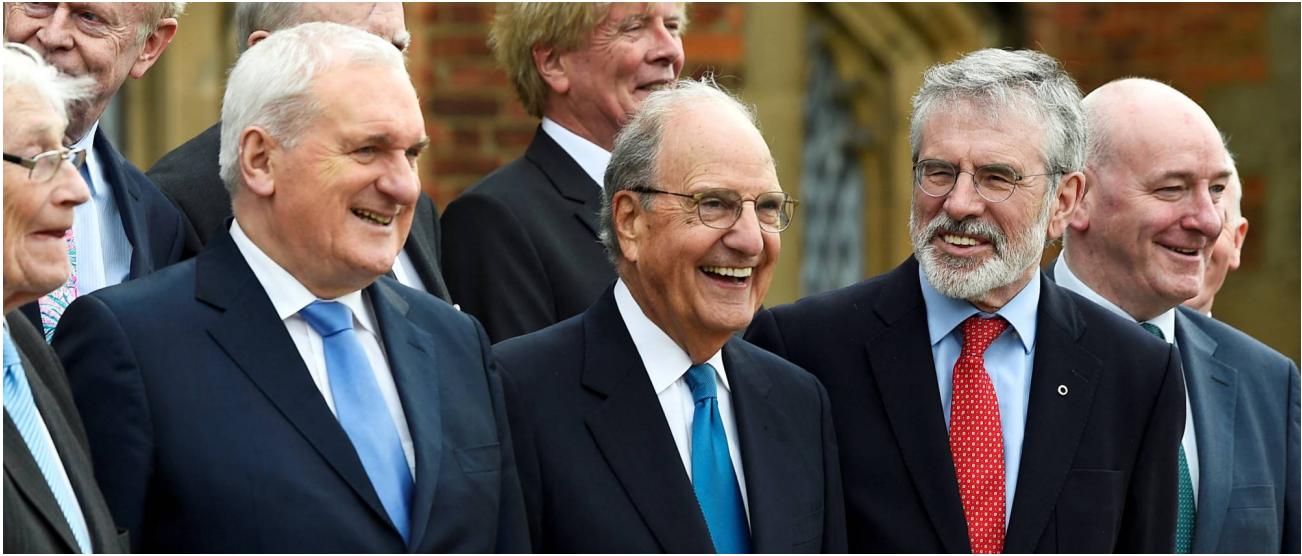
If you think back on it, Unionists and the British government were concerned when the Clinton government gave Gerry Adams a visa to come to the US. In reality, that was part of a process to tame the IRA and Irish republicanism and to lure it into constitutional politics. So, there were different cynical motives. The Blairites like to present it now as them all having a terribly great commitment to peace—that didn't apply in the Balkans or the Middle East, though, did it?

### **In 1998 the Belfast Agreement was signed. Can you explain the context?**

People wanted peace. Peace was very popular. And the Belfast Agreement was popular, no question about that, because it promised peace and prosperity. And also, people were just pissed off and angered about people being killed and wounded in these pointless fucking shootings and bombings that had no obvious political goal, in this kind of grinding low-level war. Peace was preferable to that.

After the signing of the Belfast Agreement, the first big development in Derry, to symbolise this new era of peace and prosperity, was a gathering, on the steps of the Guildhall, with John Hume and David Trimble standing shoulder to shoulder, to announce that American arms manufacturer Raytheon would be opening up a factory in Derry. John Hume was particularly enthusiastic about this, and the way he saw it, this was good for the development of Derry—as it would bring jobs to an area long-blighted by mass unemployment. I remember standing with Dermie McClenaghan and looking at one another with bewilderment and saying "to cement the peace we will get an arms company?" There you had the contradictions between the narrow interests of local politics and the broader interests of the international working class.





**You were a firm supporter of peace, but you were a critic of the Belfast Agreement itself. Can you explain why?**

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The strategy adopted by all architects of the Agreement—and this goes for George Mitchell and the Americans, Blair and the British, Bertie Ahern and the other flotsam and jetsam opportunists of bourgeois politics involved—was that peace for them simply meant peace between Catholics and Protestants. Now of course there is a way in which that makes sense. But from a socialist point of view, that was an inadequate way of looking at things. Because what it amounted to was getting all the Protestants together in a Unionist bloc, all the Catholics in a Nationalist bloc, and then getting them to negotiate, supervised by the Americans and the British. The problem with that was you in effect set up two separate electorates, to elect a champion for the Catholics/

Nationalists and to elect a champion for the Protestants/Unionists. If that is the basis for moving forward, then it follows, that any abrasion at the interface between the Catholic representatives and Protestant representatives has the capacity to spark off a new confrontation. Therein lies the instability of the Good Friday arrangements.

All of us make predictions in politics. I've made plenty of them, and many of them I got wrong. But one of the things I got right was on the eve of the Agreement I wrote that the Agreement is pre-programmed to deadlock and the "possibility of abrasion at the interfaces generating new conflagration will be a permanent feature of the system." And it turned out to be true. Of course, no one wanted to see that—including the British and American establishments and the Unionist and Nationalist parties—but it

was built on an internal contradiction from the start.

**I believe you coined the phrase that the Agreement was built on “institutionalised sectarianism.” Is this correct?**

Yes. And that’s not so much an analysis as a statement of fact. The whole set up at Stormont was based on the idea that you had to have a majority of Protestants and a majority of Catholics to form an Executive, and that you had to have parallel consensus or a weighted majority. And that’s why until very recently you had no room for a third force in politics. The fact that the Agreement set up politics, formally based and written down, on balancing the competing interests of Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist, means that it’s always better that you have a militant leading your tribe. If its two tribes competing, you don’t want someone who is namby-pamby representing your community against the other, and thus, the SDLP and the UUP have been marginalised. In effect, they have been marginalised by the machine that they set in motion in the Belfast Agreement, which favoured people who stood at the extremes, or who stood for a more strident expression of the particular communal interests of one side or the other.

Now I don’t think you needed any great degree of foresight to see this. I know others, including commentators and historians who agreed with me. But to say it at the time, to say “this won’t work”, was a very difficult thing to do. So, in all sorts of ways the Belfast Agreement didn’t meet the needs of the moment. But it’s very difficult in that situation to build an alternative because people would ask you, “what’s your position on the Agreement, on improving it, or safeguarding it?” And to say, we think the Agreement is wrong, that we don’t think there is a basis for a lasting peace here, and specifically a lasting peace that will deliver for the working class—that was quite a difficult argument to make. Indeed, it’s still a difficult argument to make. As socialists, we take an independent view, based on class, and not simply on having a position between Orange and Green.

I think I have been proven right in that regard, but at the time, to say the Agreement won’t work was the least popular thing I’ve ever had to say in Derry. But then again, all these years later, here we are: where is the happy and prosperous Northern Ireland with everyone living in peace and harmony? It hasn’t arrived.

**What about the DUP? They initially opposed the Agreement, but less than a decade later were in government with Sinn Féin?**

Well of course, the DUP in its first iteration saw no reason for an Agreement and thought that what they were dealing with was just a gang of terrorists misrepresenting themselves as the authentic leaders of their community. The DUP opposed reform in order to maintain their position that there was no need for change and what was needed was the strengthening and reinforcement of the existing constitutional arrangements with Britain. But by saying that, the DUP put itself outside the emerging consensus.

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The DUP knew that to win and maintain a majority of the Protestant working class, and certainly to win the allegiance of the dainty Protestant middle class, that they couldn't just go along and say "kill the fenians". Just as Sinn Féin's move from armed struggle to constitutional politics can be seen as them adapting themselves to the current consciousness and ideas of the Catholic working class, you can also meaningfully see the switch of the DUP's from one of "destroy the Agreement" to sitting in government with Sinn Féin in the same way. They had to moderate their position over time.

The conventional history would have it, that after a protracted period of conflict, eventually leaders emerged—Paisley on one side, McGuinness on the other—and they sat down and chuckled together and then brought the people together.

Absolutely not. The reason why McGuinness and Paisley sat down together is that they both knew that the future of their political parties and their political philosophies depended not on fighting with one another, but peaceful competition between the two. They relied on each other in a distorted way. Paisley could claim, of course, that a peaceful way forward would involve an acceptance by nationalists that the constitutional situation would remain exactly as it was.

The Belfast Agreement was based on the freezing of differences. What it promised was war by other means—not to overcome the conflict, but to freeze it. And that didn't work out, partly because then, as now, not everyone can be fitted into the neat categories of Nationalist and Unionist.

**Today the limitations of the communal structure set up by the Agreement are clear to see. What do you see as the alternative for working class people?**

It seems to me, what we have to say is that the unity of working class people cannot take place within the contours and confines of the Belfast Agreement—it cannot be

done, because of the way it is established on the basis of the “two communities.” It seems to me, therefore, that if we don’t rise up together then we are in trouble. We need the whole working class to rise up together. And then we have to have a political vehicle that is going to carry that forward.

We have to ask ourselves, then, what are the conditions in which we will have people coming together and fighting together for a progressive outcome. If you look back on the history of this place since partition, and ask yourself the question: on what occasions have people come together across the sectarian barrier to fight together. Has this ever happened? When did it happen? Why did it happen when it happened?

These are the questions we must ask, and there is no difficulty in answering them. When did Catholics and Protestants come together in common array: in 1907 with Larkin, in 1911 with Connolly, in 1932 with the Outdoor Relief Riots, and in many other smaller campaigns and struggles ever since. In all of these, we have seen thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of Catholics and Protestants linking arms to seek a progressive outcome.

Every now and again there has been a vibrant unity of Catholic and Protestant workers. It is not true that we have been

forever divided. Some people say “well it’s always been like that”—that there is this hatred, handed down by history into relations between Catholics and

Protestants. This is not true. It has never been true. But what is true, is that without a different political pole of attraction, things will work out that way.

And if you identify the conditions and the occasions when Catholic and Protestant workers united, you can better map out a future favourable to working class people. And it’s not difficult to do. In the health service demonstrations and strikes, for example, we have seen tens of thousands of people standing together in the midst of all the worries and expressions of despair about sectarianism in the North. There is nothing new or remarkable about that.

Some people think working class unity is a distant aspiration—on the contrary, it has happened over and over again. Therein lies the key to building real, revolutionary working class politics. It’s not that it will happen automatically. It’s that unless you begin with that understanding you will find it very difficult to build a working class movement. Working class unity sounds very grand and distant—in fact it’s not grand, it’s dead simple, and it’s already happening.