

THE ROAD TO PEACE

FROM DOWNING STREET

TO BODENSTOWN

DECLAN BREE T.D.

INTRODUCTION

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Declan Bree is a Socialist Republican who has taken up the challenge of exploring the options for progress in Northern Ireland, once coercion is no longer a factor. He recognises that the Downing Street Declaration represents an important change in the political architecture which, if genuine dialogue between all parties to the conflict can be brought about, points to ways of developing a new framework. That framework, to be successful, requires the creative involvement of the Protestant community. There is need for a discussion to open up on the focus of involvement which the new architecture makes possible and Declan Bree's statement of his views are a valuable contribution to this process.

This paper, delivered first at the Jim Gralton Commemorative Week-end School in May 1994, reviews the evolution of British policy from a discussion paper, "The Future of Northern Ireland", published in 1972, to the position reiterated in the Declaration of 1993 that Britain has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Ireland. An examination of the phrase "self-determination" then follows with reference to constitutional law and the United Nations which concludes with the question "How can we develop the politics displayed in the Hume-Adams initiative into a broadly based

campaign for a secular national democracy?"

Among the issues engaged by the paper are:

- What is the basis of legitimacy?
- How is a consensus to be structured and interpreted?
- What is the basis for a generous relationship between fluctuating majorities and minorities?
- How can we disarm paramilitaries and move from the space of violence to the space of peace?

There are many issues where my own analysis would not be too different from that of Declan Bree. There are also areas, strategies and tactics, where I would differ.

All of the issues raised are worthy of debate. I particularly welcome the inclusion of the capacity which an open, democratic, participatory, cultural and linguistic policy has for building a set of communities at peace.

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From Downing Street To Bodinstown

From the standpoint of the democratic principles of the Republican Congress and the lessons to be learned from that period, I want to examine core aspects of the Downing Street Declaration and explore the possibilities for progress in the current situation by those who aspire to a progressive and secular All Ireland Democracy. Also I want to explore a set of proposals for political action which might bring that aspiration closer to realisation.

Does the Declaration form a basis for a democratic settlement of the Irish Question? At the heart of the Downing Street Declaration is an attempt to square the circle of the two conflicting claims as to who should make the laws and exercise sovereignty over the North. The British claim is embodied in the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and subsequent British legislation up to and including the Northern Ireland Constitution Act, 1973. The Irish claim is enshrined in Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution which assert the right of the Irish people to exercise sovereignty over the North

but recognise that they do not yet exercise sovereignty in fact.

The Declaration does not contain any new ideas about how the North should be governed but is "*based on a number of key principles articulated by the two governments over the past twenty years together with the adoption of other widely accepted principles...*". These widely accepted principles refer to that part of the Declaration which the Financial Times described as a form of words "formulated to reconcile the Nationalist demand for self-determination with the British guarantee of the unionist veto in the North."

Two aspects of the Declaration need to be critically examined:

1. The re-iteration by the British Prime Minister that Britain has "*no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland.*"
2. The meaning of the formula: "*the exercise of the right of self-determination by consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South.*"

What are the British interests in the North? They certainly have no economic interest in the area. In the current financial year, the Northern Ireland Office will spend £7.4 billion in public expenditure. In addition the British Department of Defence will spend £500 million on security there. The tax contribution of the Northern economy to the British Exchequer is approximately £3.4 billion per annum. Therefore the British are spending £4.5 billion more on the North than they collect in tax revenue. The return on British private capital invested in the North is only a tiny fraction of this subvention.

There is no longer an Ulster based property owning Ascendancy with close links to the dominant echelons of British society. In the past this Ascendancy, which was mainly English, was dominant on the Boards of larger firms as well as being in prime positions in the state machine. Unionist political elements are no longer a key component of British Conservatism.

The military significance of the Six Counties is probably totally non-existent since the end of the Cold War and its importance as a military training ground has probably also had its day.

However the British ruling class policy on Northern Ireland is based on fundamental interests and concerns. These have remained fairly constant since the early 1970's. The present Lord Whitelaw was the first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He said that a change in the Irish border would be a dangerous precedent for other parts of the UK. In October 1972, the government produced a discussion paper, **The Future of Northern Ireland**, which Mr. Whitelaw claimed "*places the Northern Ireland situation in the wider context of certain unalterable facts of life - political, economic and military - which must fundamentally influence any settlement.*"

The Paper stated that the UK government has three major concerns in the North. Firstly, that it should be at peace and not in such a disturbed state as to weaken the whole Kingdom. Secondly, the area could not be allowed to become a drain on the overall UK economy. And thirdly, the area could not

be allowed to become a danger to the integrity of the UK.

Since 1972 the "unalterable facts of life - political, economic and military" have all changed totally. Both Ireland and Britain joined the EC, economic borders have been abolished in the new European Union; the communist system collapsed and the Cold War is over. There has never been a single year since 1972 when the North was at peace. It has been in such a constantly disturbed state as to destabilise or weaken the whole Kingdom. It has become an economic basket case, an ever growing drain on the overall UK economy.

Nevertheless, British policy in the North has been dictated by a determination to maintain hegemony over the "British Isles". The same British determination to maintain the "integrity of the UK" has led the Thatcher and Major governments to strenuously oppose proposals for self-government for Scotland and Wales.

The national minorities in Britain have never been in the camp of property but rather in the camp of social progress. The fear of a combination of class and national democratic struggle in Britain was a sub-text through British history since the middle of the last century. If the Irish situation was ever allowed to get out of control it could be a potential catalyst which might destabilise the carefully balanced state machine and the socio-economic power base which the British ruling class built up over many centuries. This fear remains a potent factor in the thinking of sections of that class.

The main reason given for British policy in

Ireland is that a majority of the population want the area to remain part of the UK.

I would make two points in response to this which, of course, is factually correct. Firstly the Six County area is not a legitimate basis on which to count minorities or majorities. Secondly, a majority of the protestant people of the North of Ireland have not always been unionist and may not be in the future.

Everywhere in the world where political entities have been constructed on a sectarian headcount, whether of religion or colour or race, democracy is undermined, and instability, violence and bloodshed always follows. In South Africa, before Apartheid crumbled, the old regime tried to create a South African state with an artificial white majority by herding the black population into new puppet states, the Bantustans. Now that that has failed and the rights of the majority cannot be denied, the fascist AWB want to carve out a new "White Homeland" within the new South Africa where whites would be a majority.

In Bosnia, Serbs, Croats and Moslems could not be distinguished by nationality, race or colour, by language or (before the collapse of Yugoslavia) by geographical area. The three populations were intermingled throughout Bosnia and there was a high degree of inter-marriage. The primary distinguishing feature was religion. Here we have a case of three minorities. The Serb minority was not prepared to consent to live in a state separated from Serbia proper. The Croation minority preferred to live in a Greater Croatia rather than an independent

Bosnia. And the largest minority, the Moslems, did not want to be dominated by either a Greater Serbia or a Greater Croatia, and so opted for independence. Yet all three groups were happy to live peacefully side by side in the old Yugoslavia.

Once Yugoslavia collapsed, the glue that held the Bosnian factions together melted. There was no democratic consensus for an independent Bosnia and the terrible mistakes made in its formation led to the worst sectarian slaughter seen in Europe since the Second World War.

Similarly there is no democratic consensus for the existence of the Six Counties either as a separate political entity or as part of the UK. As long as we base our politics on majorities and minorities defined in a sectarian way, then everybody loses - all the people of Northern Ireland, the people of the Republic and the people of Britain. The majority/minority presentation of the Northern situation is a two-edged sword for the Protestant community.

It can be used to justify re-Partition as a majority of the population in the three Counties west of the Bann are nationalist. Elements of the loyalist paramilitaries are already coming to accept this scenario in what they describe as a Doomsday situation. They are prepared to jettison most areas west of the Bann and conduct "ethnic cleansing" against Catholics on the Bosnian model in areas where they believe a protestant majority can be permanently secured.

Equally the majority/minority argument can be used to justify the exclusion of the whole of Northern Ireland from the UK. In every opinion poll

taken in the last decade, the majority of British people have expressed support for British disengagement from the North.

At the same time it has to be said that there is no democratic consensus within the Six Counties for the area to be subsumed into the present Republic of Ireland state. But, like Bosnia, Northern Ireland is too narrow a framework within which a democratic solution can be found. A wider framework is needed within which to build a democratic consensus, which may take a long time.

The core question is not about majorities or minorities but about developing a framework within which the protestant community can willingly play a creative part in building a sovereign independent nation-state untainted by any whiff of Catholic domination. The primary stimulus for shedding these majority/minority blinkers would be a Dublin/London agreement for British disengagement with positive political and financial support for the transition period. The existence of the unionist veto is the trap which keeps Northern protestants and in particular the working class in the grip of bankrupt demagogic politicians and paramilitaries.

Does the Downing Street Declaration provide such a framework? No it does not, but it does change the political architecture insofar as it points to ways in which we might arrive at such a framework following genuine dialogue between all parties to the conflict. When the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed in 1985, the British government effectively recognised the right of the Irish government to a voice in the way affairs in the North are managed.

At the same time the Irish government accepted that *de facto* control of the North by Britain would only change with the consent of the majority of the North's population. This position is re-stated in the Downing Street Declaration. Despite this, it is clear from the Declaration and from statements by British government Ministers that Northern Ireland is not like any other part of the UK. There is no way in which a British government would accept the right of a foreign country to express its views on internal affairs in any region in England, in Scotland or Wales. Both the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Declaration spell out a clear message that Northern Ireland is really a foreign place.

Neither the governing Conservative Party nor the Labour Party - the government in waiting - are opposed in principle to British disengagement. Secretary of State Patrick Mayhew stated that it is possible to envisage a situation at some stage in the future where Britain might withdraw. The British Labour Party goes further with its policy of actively developing a process of encouraging Irish unity by consent. And in Dublin, for the first time ever, we have a government which is not afraid of the prospect of Irish unity, which does not engage in simple minded anti-partitionist rhetoric safe in the knowledge that it will never have to do anything about it, which does not seek to impose a confessional state or even a southern political ethos on the people of the North, and which is committed to finding a path to unity on the basis of dialogue, consent and secular-democratic principles.

We have never had such a situation before.

British thinking has shifted from a position of opposition to Irish unity under any circumstances (up to the 1950's at least, British records show that they would oppose Irish unity even if the majority in the North wanted it) to one of resistance to withdrawal on the assumption that the resulting turmoil would be highly destabilising and may lead to a bloodbath. But this objection is not an argument against withdrawal - it affects the timescale, interim arrangements and the manner of withdrawal.

Is it reasonable to look upon the protestant population of the North - or even a significant minority of them - as an undifferentiated mass of blood-thirsty, sectarian bigots who will turn on their catholic neighbours and hack them to pieces as soon as the British declare their intent to withdraw? This suggestion is a dreadful insult to that section of the Irish people who first and most enthusiastically embraced the principles of republicanism enunciated by Wolfe Tone - the Presbyterians of Ulster.

It is an insult to the 300 protestant workers from the Shankill Road who marched to Bodinstown with the Republican Congress in 1934 under the banner: **Wolfe Tone Commemoration 1934 - Shankill Road Branch - Break the Connection With Capitalism**. It is an insult to the protestant businessmen today who are building economic bridges with the South, to the mutual benefit of all, and who say, some publicly, many more privately, that they believe a United Ireland is inevitable and that they would have no difficulty in doing business in a new Irish state.

Five years ago most of us thought that the opposition of the White minority in South Africa to equality and full democracy was even more rigid and unalterable than the opposition of unionists to a United Ireland; that they would flee the country rather than succumb to democratic rule. Look at the change that has come about since the democratic elections. Only a tiny minority of whites supported the racist Terreblanche and the AWB. Most have stayed to build a new South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. They have discovered that democracy holds no threats, only opportunities, for them provided they can keep their jobs and their farms and live in peace. The ANC gave them these guarantees. There have even been cases of AWB members going over to the ANC.

Now I want to turn to an examination of the phrase "*self-determination*" in the Declaration. There has been much confusion about the meaning of this term. The Declaration supports the right of the Irish people to self-determination. However, the unionist veto, which it also supports, denies the right of the nationalist population of the Six Counties to self-determination. Does the term refer to self-determination for the people of the island of Ireland as a whole, the people of the Six Counties and the people of the 26 Counties separately, for the nationalist population or the unionist population?

Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights enshrines self-determination as a fundamental, inalienable right. By virtue of this right peoples may freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, cultural and

social development. It is a violation of the Article if a state occupies and administers directly or indirectly a territory or part of a territory belonging to another people against their will. It is also a violation if a non-self governing territory or self-governing social entity is annexed by a state, or if there has been a partial or total disruption of a state's national unity or territorial integrity. The UN General Assembly has ruled that a people emerging from dependent status may choose to exercise their right to self-determination through:

- emergence as a sovereign independent state
- free association with an independent state
- integration with an independent state
- emergence into any other political status freely determined by a people

The term "a people", according to the UN, denotes:

- a) a social entity possessing a clear identity and its own characteristics.
- b) It implies a relationship with a territory, even if the people in question have been wrongfully expelled from it and replaced by another population.
- c) A people should not be confused with ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities who are protected against discrimination.

Northern Ireland clearly does not constitute a self-determination unit as opposed to the whole of the island of Ireland. The creation of the Northern Ireland entity constituted "*a partial or total disruption of the national unity and territorial integrity*" of the Irish Republic proclaimed in 1916 and confirmed in

the 1918 General Election.

Does the protestant community have a right to self-determination? I agree fully with Dr. Clare Palley, the former constitutional law advisor to the DUP, when she wrote:

"Once a state contains a large territorially based group, conscious of and wishing to maintain its culturally distinct identity, such a group is entitled in accordance with the law of self-determination, to collective rights, not necessarily to statehood or secession, but at least to maintain its identity and to some form of autonomy"

This is my understanding of the New Ireland Forum Report (1984) reference to *"political arrangements for a new and sovereign Ireland which would have to be freely negotiated and agreed to by the people of the North and by the people of the South."*

The Declaration talks a lot about consent. The consent of the unionists is required before Northern Ireland can come out of the UK, but the consent of the nationalist population is not required for their continued incorporation into the UK. Nevertheless I would like to draw your attention to an interesting and flexible interpretation of the concept from the same British government document I referred to earlier - The Future of Northern Ireland. This 1972 document discussed a range of future options for the North. There were five possibilities:

1. To assert that Northern Ireland is part of the "sovereign territory of the UK" and will remain so

come what may. The document rejected this position.

2. To admit the possibility of change but not to provide for it. This has been the British position since 1972.

3. To admit the possibility of change and also to provide specific machinery by which it could be brought about in an orderly way, **"subject to consent"**.

4. To legislate for change either gradual or rapid.

5. To establish an expanding and developing form of Joint Authority for the government of the North.

Under the third option the British were not only prepared to admit the possibility of constitutional change but they were also prepared to contemplate the provision of specific machinery to bring this about. The document stated that:

"It would be possible for instance to lay out a theoretical path towards closer integration and possible ultimate unity in Ireland, subject to the consent of the people of Northern Ireland as expressed by plebiscite before advancing from one stage to another."

What are the possibilities for real progress in the current situation? What is required to gain the consent of unionist leaders or a significant section of protestant opinion to transcend partitionist structures and to start creating the framework for a New Ireland? How can we develop the politics displayed in the Hume/Adams initiative into a

broadly based campaign for a secular national democracy?

I would suggest that the following proposals be explored as a basis for discussion and progress. I am not saying that all of them will succeed or even that I agree with all of them myself, but these are the issues that need to be discussed by everyone genuinely seeking an end to the nightmare of the past 25 years.

A Democratic Peace

Peace with justice is the ultimate goal, but the immediate need is for a democratic peace. This means the greatest possible de-militarisation on all sides. It means first a cessation of violence. It should include an externally monitored disarming of paramilitaries if necessary and withdrawal of British Troops to barracks pending total withdrawal.

Everyone must be guaranteed security and safety through a security system in which they have confidence. The RUC in its present form is unacceptable to nationalist communities. Equally, unionist communities could not be expected to accept an Irish police force or British/Irish force policing their communities. Communities must have a say in the policing and security arrangements in their districts. Nothing must be imposed. It is possible to have different arrangements in different areas through Community Police Authorities. Paramilitaries should not be involved, only professional, impartial police men and women who enjoy the confidence of the communities they police.

All those imprisoned as a result of the political

situation should be released, although exceptions may be necessary for certifiable psychopaths who are likely to be a danger to the community if released.

Community Reconciliation

Community Reconciliation is necessary to address the legacy of the past. This does not refer to the officially sponsored "two traditions" approach which is well meaning but ineffective. It means changing relations of privilege, discrimination, oppression and ascendancy. It also means confidence building measures to minimise the inheritance of bitterness. Almost everyone in the North has a family member, relation, neighbour, friend or workmate who has been murdered, maimed, jailed or harassed by one paramilitary group or another or by state forces over the past 25 years.

We cannot expect that bitterness to disappear with a political settlement. But people need to be assured that in a New Ireland there must be no retribution, no guilt, no settling of old scores, no "reverse" discrimination to compensate for discrimination against nationalists in the past.

The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation which is to be established by the Irish government can play an important role. The Forum should not be a closed shop for the chattering classes - politicians and civil servants. Like the National Economic and Social Forum it should include representatives of Trade Unions, business, unemployed, community groups, women's groups, farmers etc. It should be

charged with coming up with a programme of recommendations to heal community divisions and build confidence.

Living Standards

There must be assurances that new political arrangements will not lead to a fall in living standards. Social security entitlements must remain unchanged. In the long run I would like to see an integration of the Northern and Southern systems on the basis of the most favourable entitlements in each area being applied to all. But that would take a long time.

Integration of two different tax systems is even more complex. Even in a United Ireland it would be necessary to have parallel systems for quite some time. Indirect tax regimes (VAT etc.) could be brought closer together fairly quickly. Harmonisation must occur under European law in any case.

A lot of progress has already been made by this and the previous government in cross border economic co-operation. This needs to take place at grass roots level as well. Business people have led the way so far, in co-operation with trade unions, in setting up regional economic planning structures in the North-West (Derry-Donegal) and in the Newry-Dundalk area.

What is missing, according to business people, is more structured co-ordination between local authorities in border areas. New local economic cross-border structures are needed here. But they must not be imposed. Unionist dominated councils in border areas are very sensitive and fearful of any

such developments and nothing should be done without involving them in the process at a pace with which they and their electorates can cope.

Overall, in economic matters, the Irish government should say to the unionist people - we will not seek to impose anything which will make you worse off or cause any decline in your living standards. On the contrary, a democratic Ireland will improve everybody's living standards or it is not worth having.

It goes without saying that the British subvention would have to be guaranteed for an extended transitional period to avoid economic disruption. A special European and International Investment Fund would also be needed to rebuild the shattered economy of the North.

Political Structures

The New Ireland Forum Report suggested three options: A Unitary Irish state; Joint Authority or a Confederation. As a socialist republican in the tradition of the Republican Congress I favour the first option, but we have to be prepared to tease out the implications of all other options if we are to engage in serious dialogue with unionists.

For reasons I have already outlined, the Six County area is not capable of being a viable, democratic political entity and there is no good reason why such an artificial construct should be retained. But strong regional and local government structures are vitally important, in the Republic as well as in the North. Such elected authorities should

be established on the basis of natural community or geographic areas with significant powers to raise local finance and plan local/regional development in the areas of industrial development, environment, housing, health and education, tourism and local infrastructural needs.

Under these arrangements, areas which are at present heavily unionist, would have a much greater say over their own affairs than they have under existing arrangements as would people throughout Ireland where local politics and local democracy is so intensely important. Also the present unionist population would have far more political weight in a democratic Ireland than in the UK. They would represent almost 20% of the population compared to 1.5% of the UK population. The Six County population as a whole, which would have common economic interests and demands in a United Ireland would represent 31% of the population compared to 2.5% of the UK population.

Dual Citizenship

If sections of the Irish nation wish to cherish and give formal expression to their historic ancestral Scottish and English links then surely we can have a national democracy which is flexible enough to accommodate that - people can be citizens of an Irish Republic and regard themselves as subjects of a British monarch if they so choose....After all many thousands of northern nationalists hold both an Irish and a British passport. We can have one nationality, one state and dual citizenship. In fact the entire population of the North have, in law,

triple citizenship - they are Irish citizens, British citizens and citizens of the European Union.

Cultural and Linguistic Rights

There are different cultural traditions in Ireland. The people of Ballymun express themselves culturally in ways which have more in common with the people of the Shankill Road than with the people of Connemara. The right to express and practice one's preferred cultural and linguistic traditions must be guaranteed to all. This means equal respect and legal protection for the 12th July and the Easter parades.

It means full rights for all those who wish to use and speak the Irish language, which a great many protestants wish to do as Chris McGimpsey has shown. At the same time, we could not impose compulsory Irish in schools in the North or have the same rules relating to knowledge of Irish for public service appointments. Many of these rules are a farce in the way they are implemented in the South anyway.

It may be difficult to maintain compulsory Irish in schools in Donegal while allowing free choice in Derry. This is one of the many difficulties to be resolved

Another question arises as to the status of Irish as the first official language of the state. An agreed Ireland with new political structures would have to have a new constitution. In practice Irish is not the first official language of the state. Should our constitution not reflect reality rather than wishful thinking? Should we not give equal status to both

languages and actively encourage the development of a bilingual society with equal rights for all?

Health, Education and Women's Rights

In the Declaration, the Irish government undertakes to examine "elements of southern society not fully consistent with a modern pluralist society". We should be doing this anyway, not using the offer of liberal legislation as a bargaining chip in political negotiations with unionists. In practice we are making some progress. Homosexuality has been decriminalised. Divorce, hopefully, will be agreed by the southern electorate before the end of this year. Abortion is a much more difficult proposition and there is no straightforward catholic/protestant divide on this issue.

But we must guarantee that any freedoms, rights or facilities which the people of the North now enjoy under British legislation, will continue to be provided in the areas of health, education and women's rights. It would be very unsatisfactory to have a two tier social system in some areas but it may be unavoidable for a period.

Catholic control of education in the South is being rolled back painfully slowly. Ideally we should have a state school system free of denominational bias available to all. However, for different historical, religious and cultural reasons, North and South, large numbers of people want their children to be educated in Catholic schools, and smaller numbers in schools of Protestant or other denominations. Their rights must be respected. If the Irish taxpayer is willing to fund schools with a particular

denominational ethos, then so be it, but that ethos should be confined to religious teaching. Church bodies should not have any influence in the administration of publicly funded schools or in state educational policy generally.

G.A.A.

It is not just for politicians to adjust to the changing face of the Republic. Ernest Blythe, Finance Minister in the first Free State government and a northern protestant suggested that the GAA should not play games on a Sunday in Northern Ireland, should not fly the tricolour at matches there and should lift the ban on RUC and British military personnel. A knee-jerk nationalist reaction to this would be to cry "Free State Traitor" but he was actually trying to lessen unionist fears and alienation from the Irish nation.

The GAA has been one the prime targets of abuse from the Dublin 4 neo-unionist clique, two nationalists and revisionist propagandists who use the ban as a handy excuse to attack republicanism. This politically motivated abuse of the GAA has only served to stiffen their resolve to keep the ban. I understand their reluctance to admit members of the RUC and British Army into their ranks as they have suffered at the hands of these bodies - their grounds have been taken over and damaged, activities deliberately disrupted, their members have been harassed, attacked and in some cases murdered by security personnel.

GAA policy has nothing to do with sectarianism as some suggest. But they could make a useful

contribution to defusing the atmosphere of fear. Individual members of the RUC or British Army who enjoy Gaelic games should not be blamed for the activities of their employers or for allegiance to a foreign monarch. To exclude them from membership is, in the minds of unionist people, to exclude the whole unionist population from one of the most attractive aspects of Irish culture. It is to alienate them from the Irish nation. Such a policy is itself alien to the Republican tradition and the spirit of the Republican Congress.

Conclusion

The Republican Congress activists - Peadar O'Donnell, Nora Harkin, George Gilmore, Cora Hughes, Charlie Donnelly, Paddy Byrne and so on - did not preach Republican rhetoric or offer nothing more than honeyed words to the working class. They did not indulge in the politics of flag waving symbolism. They went out among the slums of Dublin and Belfast and fought for decent housing conditions and living standards. They united people in a practical struggle for social justice within the context of a secular, republican socialist vision.

As Nelson Mandela approached the whites and the Zulus in South Africa, we have to go to our unionist fellow countrymen and women and engage with them as to what kind of Ireland we want, even if many of them don't want to hear it. We have to give them guarantees about their rights, their religious and cultural beliefs, their living standards. We have to make clear to them that we are not interested in erasing a line on a map and pretending that

everything will sort itself out thereafter.

We must say to them that we are sick to the back teeth of tribal politics. We are still liberating ourselves from the remnants of a narrow, suffocating, catholic-dominated confessional state as they must liberate themselves from notions of a Protestant state for a Protestant people if they are to have any hope of engaging with reality in a world approaching the third millennium. We want peace, social progress and a secular state.

They may not respond in the way we would like. Some may want an independent "Ulster" once they realise, as many of them already have, that the British ruling elite has already withdrawn from Ireland psychologically and is seeking acceptable ways to do so politically. That does not matter. At least, once they engage with us, it means that they have started to move away from tribal politics. As the Shankill Road workers responded at Bodinstown to the Republican Congress in 1934, I believe that the most advanced sections of unionist opinion will respond.

The Republican Congress tried to sow the seeds of national unity through social progress on stony ground and in the dark days of the 1930's when fascism was sweeping Europe and Ireland was locked in a vice of clerical reaction in the south and the sectarian political slum that unionism had created in the north. The most promising political movement Ireland saw since the national independence movement of 1916-21 faded out as the Second World War approached and their finest leaders were decimated fighting fascism in Spain

and illness at home.

These are altogether more promising times. We have a British ruling class which wants to withdraw from Ireland but cannot as yet say so openly or find an acceptable mechanism for withdrawal. We have an Irish government which is serious about finding an agreed mechanism. No government or party is prepared to use force or coercion against the protestant people of Northern Ireland. For the first time in its history, the Republican Movement has stated that it wants to abandon the use of military means to effect its political objectives and it too is trying to find an acceptable mechanism for laying down the gun. When they find that mechanism, a major block will be removed from the road to a new, the first real Irish, democratic republic.

When that happens, it may be possible for the forces that formed the Republican Congress to co-operate again in pursuit of the kind of Ireland that James Connolly fought for: those forces were the most progressive elements of the Republican, Labour and Socialist movements. It may even be possible to look forward to the day when, once more, protestant workers from the Shankill Road march to Bodenstown side by side with socialists, republicans and trade unionists from all corners of Ireland. Downing Street seems an unlikely place to begin such a journey but it may yet prove to be so.

GRALTON LABOUR HISTORY COMMITTEE

The Gralton Labour History Committee was founded in 1985 with the purpose of organising a number of events to commemorate the life and work of Jim Gralton. The annual Jim Gralton Commemorative School organised by the Committee is now widely recognised as one of the major events in Ireland's political calendar.

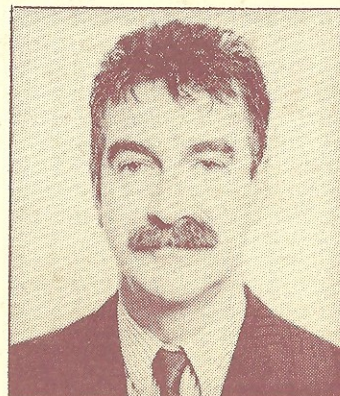
Gralton, a life long socialist and trade unionist, was born at Effernagh, near Gowel, Co. Leitrim, in 1886. Like many sons of small farmers he emigrated as a young man and while in the USA he became actively involved in the struggles of the time.

Returning to Leitrim in 1921 he immediately became active and it was during this period that the famous Pearse-Connolly Hall was erected on his parents land at Gowel. In June 1922 with his authority undermined by constant clerical condemnation, Free State troops came to arrest him. He escaped and returned to America where he played a major part in the formation of the powerful Transport Workers Union.

In 1932, following the death of his father, Gralton returned to Leitrim to run the family farm. The Pearse-Connolly Hall again became a centre not only for dancing and social enjoyment but also for social and political study. Collusion between the local gombeen men and the clergy helped to intensify a red scare campaign to fever pitch. On Christmas Eve 1932, the Hall was destroyed in an arson attack. In January 1933 the Fianna Fáil government secured a deportation order to have Gralton deported as an "undesireable alien". Gralton went on the run, not even being allowed to see his aged mother before being put on board ship.

The Leitrim radical was never allowed to return again. He spent the remaining years of his life in the American Labour Movement. He died in the USA in December 1945.

Alderman Declan Bree T.D. is the first ever Labour Deputy for Sligo-Leitrim. He is a full-time representative who has been immersed in politics for most of his life. He is already one of the most respected and best known of the new group of Labour deputies elected to Dáil Éireann in the last General Election, not only for his forthright views on a variety



of issues but for his sheer capacity for work on behalf of the people whom he represents. A member of both Sligo Corporation and Sligo County Council since 1974, he held the position of Chairman of the County Council in 1986/87. He is a member of the Sligo branch of SIPTU and of the General Council of the Labour Party

Price £1.00