

# **Dermot Nally Papers**

**UCDA P254/98**

'Even among Protestants . . . there was grudging acknowledgement that at some point Sinn Fein, or the political wing of the IRA, would have to be included'

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# A welcome antidote to the poison of despair

GARRET  
FITZGERALD

ON SATURDAY



THE Opsahl Report deserves to be taken very seriously indeed. It reflects and distils the views of those people in Northern Ireland, nationalist and unionist, who have resisted disillusionment and despair and who have something positive to contribute to the resolution of this problem.

The quality of the report is such, indeed, that it deserves from all who are concerned with this problem an open-minded response and a willingness to reconsider settled views in the light of its recommendations.

Encouragingly, on the basis of what it has heard from the 554 groups or individuals who made submissions to it, the commission reaches a reasoned conclusion that, having regard to the expressed stance of nationalist leaders in Northern Ireland and the Republic, the task of creating a government for Northern Ireland that could be acceptable to the unionist majority "should not be beyond the possible and the practicable".

The authors do not, however, seek to diminish the gravity of the Northern Ireland problem or its intractability. They recognise that because the conflict has appeared "manageable", there has been little pressure on politicians to find a settlement; the politicians "are not punished by their respective electorates for their failure to do so". There is a strong desire among the people of Northern Ireland for a settlement but, in the words of the report, this desire has not yet become a demand for change.

## Six issues dominate report

Yet the gravity of the underlying social and economic situation created by a quarter-of-a-century of violence can scarcely be exaggerated. For one thing, segregation of the population has increased at an alarming rate: the number of district council wards that are almost exclusively Catholic or Protestant has increased almost two-and-a-half times in the past 25 years to 40 per cent of the total — indeed the proportion is as high as 70 per cent in Belfast — and of Northern Ireland's population, only 7 per cent now live in areas with approximately equal numbers of the two religions. This bodes ill for the future social development of the area, even after a settlement is achieved.

It seems to me that six major issues dominate this report: how Sinn Fein can be brought into the political debate; the possibility of a power-sharing solution to the problem of government; the need for reforms in security; the question of a human rights code; and the problems of the negative perception of the Roman Catholic Church among unionists and of

defects in the educational system that need to be addressed. In this article, I can address only the first of these themes.

On this issue, the commission is unequivocal: "There was almost across-the-board agreement among presenters at the oral hearings that a settlement that excluded Sinn Fein would be neither lasting nor stable and that some way had to be found to bring Sinn Fein into the process. Even among Protestants, while there was no enthusiasm for any such move, there was grudging acknowledgement that at some point Sinn Fein, or the political wing of the IRA, would have to be included."

To this — to me at least — unwelcome conclusion, the report goes on, however, to add the following crucial qualification:

"The overwhelming opinion of those submissions which spoke of Sinn Fein was that its claim to be a political party should be tested by accepted democratic norms, and that, if it did aspire to function as a constitutional party, it should be given a helping hand over the hurdle of violence. . . . Almost all the presenters we heard from felt that, before Sinn Fein could earn a seat at the negotiating table, it would have to renounce the use of violence."

I have quoted at some length from the report on this issue because summaries of it may have given some people an impression at variance with what is made clear in the last sentence above.

WHAT the report describes as a "shift in policy emphasis" that is currently under discussion within Sinn Fein in fact involves a reiteration of the traditional requirement for a "British declaration of intent to withdraw within a specified time period". This is now visualised as a preliminary to a negotiation "after the withdrawal of British troops".

However, in the course of this proposed negotiation, "if unionists could not be persuaded of the benefits of joining a united Ireland, then other constitutional arrangements would have to be considered." In conjunction with Mr Gerry Adams's reference in his Dundalk Ard-Fheis speech last February to "Northern majority consent" to reunification, the latter part of this proposal would represent an advance on previous Sinn Fein positions. But the condition of a British declaration of intent to withdraw would,

if maintained, effectively vitiate this policy shift.

As the report itself says quite bluntly: "If Sinn Fein really wants to address itself to the question of obtaining the consent of a majority for its new Ireland, a renunciation of violence is a necessary first step. . . . The obstacle to Irish unity is not the British presence in Northern Ireland, but the absence of consent from a majority for a united Ireland. . . . If it insists on British withdrawal before consent is forthcoming, it is only reinforcing opposition to what it wants to achieve."

In any event, the relevant issue from a nationalist point of view is not a British declaration of intent to withdraw — which many nationalists, North and South, would see as dangerously destabilising and which, as the report itself comments, "would, in the short run at least, further reinforce Protestant opposition to Irish unification."

Instead, what many such nationalists would like to see would be a clear enunciation of the fact — which by this time should be starting to become evident to Sinn Fein — that Britain no longer has any strategic, economic or other interest in Northern Ireland.

Its retention of sovereignty there is today a reflection only of its duty to the unionist majority who wish to remain in the United Kingdom. And of its interest — which we in this State pre-eminently share — in inhibiting an escalation of violence that could threaten the security of the whole island of Ireland, and also, in some measure, of Britain itself.

At two points, the report contains proposals on contacts with Sinn Fein. The first is a recommendation that "informal channels of communication should be opened with Sinn Fein with a view to persuading the IRA first to move towards a de-escalation in the level of violence and eventually to a ceasefire that would lead to a drastic reduction in the number of security forces deployed in Northern Ireland and/or their return to barracks. . . . The party should be given help and encouragement to join the constitutional process."

And later: "The [British] government should open informal channels of communication with Sinn Fein with a view to testing the party's commitment to the constitutional process, without resort to or justification of violence."

These recommendations call for sev-

eral comments. First of all, I am convinced that the IRA campaign would have been abandoned many years ago but for the wrong message sent to that organisation by the repeated British contacts and discussions with it and/or Sinn Fein. These took place in 1971-72 and 1974-75, and were later followed by the disastrous approach to the IRA from the British side in July, 1981, that wrecked the discussions organised by the Hierarchy's Commission for Justice and Peace which were on the verge of settling the hunger strikes without conceding the IRA's demands.

However, while such discussions directly involving governments are highly dangerous, initiatives by competent people who have a command of the issues at stake and who may help to persuade the IRA to abandon its campaign of violence must surely be welcome.

Such contacts, if undertaken by people familiar with the realities of democratic constitutional politics and with the thinking of governments may be particularly helpful in dispelling illusions — and delusions — that can all too easily persist in this booby world of underground organisations, and which can contribute to irrational attitudes and actions. But I distinguish such useful contacts clearly from ones made by or on behalf of governments, which, as we know from bitter experience, can send absolutely the wrong messages.

There are some indications that the commission itself may recognise some of

## Violence must be abandoned

these dangers: it says that involvement of paramilitary organisations in talks is "best handled by non-governmental agencies." Nevertheless, I feel that there is not sufficient recognition in the report of the need for governments to keep their distance from such contacts, while being aware of what is going on.

The second comment I would make on the Opsahl Commission's proposals is on the use of the word "ceasefire" in connection with the involvement of Sinn Fein in talks — though elsewhere in the report, the words "renunciation of violence" are used.

The involvement of Sinn Fein in any constitutional talks must be preceded either by an abandonment of violence by the IRA or at any rate by an unequivocal repudiation of the IRA by Sinn Fein. No government, and no constitutional party, can be expected to, or should, participate in talks with any group which claims the right to restart violence if it does not get what it wants. That would be intolerable.

I shall return again in this column to other key issues in this valuable report.



# monium in the more of the d of rumour

Patrick Smyth and Michael Foley found idle talk was fraught with danger for Cambodians during the UN-sponsored election.



Smiling face of the god Avalokitesvara, one of 172 images of him in the city of Angkor Thom.  
—(Photograph: Michael Foley)

truth, their hospitality to  
much of unruly civilians. 19  
Irish, is generous to a

Japanese are uneasy about  
role here. At home a huge  
every rages with accusa-  
that the government has  
about conditions in Cambo-  
dian interest is massive and  
cameras fill our briefings.

Japan's first military en-  
ment abroad since the war  
their troops are ostensibly  
only as engineers. Will we  
escort for our deployment?

The one advantage in being  
sent to Siem Reap is the chance  
to see the temples of Angkor. The  
best known, Angkor Wat, is the  
world's largest religious building.  
Its place in Khmer identity is so  
important that UNTAC banned  
its use as a party symbol and for  
the Khmer Rouge the achieve-  
ment of Angkor was proof of the  
greatness of the Khmer people  
and legitimised its nationalism.  
The paradox was that as soon as  
Pol Pot achieved power the ar-  
chaeologists working to restore  
the temples were killed.

The temples were built between

**O**UR weeks of acclima-  
tisation have not pre-  
pared us for the hell that  
is the count. Instead of  
"assisting", we are the counters,  
accommodated in a floorless tent  
that traps the heat like a green-  
house. Chaos reigns as boxes and  
forms pile up and the sweat  
pumps from us in rivers. Three  
eight-hour shifts. In the morning,  
too hot to think; at night, plagued  
by insects.

To eat there are only MREs,  
Meals Ready to Eat, known in the  
Gulf as Meals Rejected by Ethio-  
pians.

No one, it came, once thought

AS President Yeltsin completed  
his first year in office the privi-  
leges and perks of those who have  
shown opposition, whether politi-  
cal or legal, to his policies contin-  
ued to fall like nine-pins. The  
latest victim is the chairman of  
the Constitutional Court, Mr Va-  
lery Zorkin, who last week lost his  
personal bodyguards. Now he has  
been stripped of his state dacha  
and official limousine with tele-  
phone in a move which is becom-  
ing all too familiar in Russian  
politics.

The former president, Mr  
Mikhail Gorbachev, got similar  
treatment and so too did vice-  
president Mr Alexander Rutskoy  
who, with no privileges left to  
lose, launched a further attack on  
Mr Yeltsin's team yesterday.

## RUSSIA

Seamus Martin,  
Moscow

renewing allegations of corrup-  
tion and saying that the "commu-  
nist mafia" had been replaced by  
a "democratic mafia".

Mr Rutskoy said he had no in-  
tention of resigning as vice-presi-  
dent and would continue to  
expose what he described as "top-  
ranking criminals in the democ-  
ratic mafia system". He added  
that if he gave up his position he  
would become an ordinary "man  
in the street and would have  
fewer opportunities to break the  
system".

## Conference to set new UN human rights agenda

BIG questions about the right of  
the United Nations to brush aside  
the barriers of national sover-  
eignty to protect basic human  
rights are among the difficult  
issues to be addressed at the  
World Conference on Human  
Rights, organised by the UN,  
which opens in Vienna on  
Monday.

Complaints from Islamic  
nations, and some African and  
Asian countries that political and  
economic arm-twisting is being  
used to force Western dogmas  
about human freedoms on their  
cultures will also raise sharp de-  
bate, when foreign ministers from  
all over the world gather for what  
is seen as the most important  
meeting of its kind yet.

On the defensive will be so-  
called hardliners against human  
rights "interference" such as  
China, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Cuba as  
well as Indonesia and Pakistan.  
They are particularly agitated by  
President Clinton's professed aim  
to make human rights the core of  
his foreign policy and to use trade  
pressure to force changes, particu-  
larly in China.

Ireland played a prominent  
part in preparations for the Vi-  
enna conference. President Rob-  
inson was chosen to be *rapporteur*  
for one of the important prepara-  
tory sessions at Strasbourg last  
January, in recognition of her dis-  
tinguished record on human rights

Key questions  
about human rights  
and the UN will be  
raised in Vienna  
next week, Colm  
Boland, Diplomatic  
Correspondent,  
writes.

lary of State, Mr Warren  
Christopher, follows in the after-  
noon. The procession of speakers  
will go on until June 25th.

So far the Vienna conference  
has failed to ignite the imagina-  
tion of the general public or the  
international media anything like  
the more colourful "Earth Sum-  
mit" which took place in Brazil  
just over a year ago. Hoping it  
would generate a similar spirit  
and stimulate public awareness,  
Mrs Robinson said: "Rio must  
come to Vienna".

While it is not quite Rio in the  
full global carnival sense of that  
event, something of tent village  
has developed in Vienna over the  
the last few days as thousands of  
human rights bodies, aid agencies  
and other non-governmental  
associations (NGOs) gathered