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KNOCKING AT THE DOOR

Sinn Fein is mounting a legal challenge to overturn the Howard Government's decision to ban its president, Gerry Adams, from visiting Australia. Is he a terrorist or a political leader genuinely in search of peace in Northern Ireland? **Ben Bohane** spoke to him in Belfast

WELCOME to Belfast City Airport, ladies and gentlemen, where the ground temperature is 4deg and the local time is somewhere in the 18th century," was the reported welcome for passengers on a recent British Airways flight.

The fairy lights are out, twinkling in tandem with the surveillance towers dotted around town and on the rolling hills surrounding this once industrial port city.

Shoppers mill around the Christmas pine in front of Belfast's imposing City Hall, with children rugged up against the bracing winds.

The rejection by British Prime Minister John Major of the second peace proposal put forward by Gerry Adams and the Social Democratic Labour Party's John Hume, as well as the return to hostilities, have cast a shadow over this Christmas.

"Last year was grand," says Michael, a bus driver shopping on his day off. "We had a half-million rally together for peace and with the ceasefire you could go anywhere."

"Now the troops are back on the street and everyone's creeping back to the fortress mentality of their communities."

Britain redeployed several thousand troops after the ceasefire was broken by London's Canary Wharf bombing earlier this year and maintained a heavy presence during the July-August marching season.

Now they remain on high alert for an anticipated "big strike" by the Irish Republican Army before the traditional Christmas ceasefire.

Foot patrols, armoured convoys, security cameras, hovering helicopters: It's hard not to feel you are a moving blip registering on a vast surveillance landscape somewhere.

The feeling is further enhanced wandering alone around Milltown Cemetery at one end of the Falls Road.

A patchwork of Celtic crosses and Victorian-era angels, it is home to the republican dead. Through the drizzle, a helicopter hung no more than 200m directly above me until I left.

Along the grey streets the ever-present steel shutters are a permanent reminder that shopkeepers and residents are always expecting the worst, that a state of peace can never be guaranteed in a city where the Troubles have been a part of society for generations.

It is a city living on the edge and is almost surreal - Christmas decorations and heavily armed patrols existing side by side, the tinny sound of Christmas carols drowned out by the ominous rumble of helicopters shuttling overhead, on the way from heavily guarded army compounds to the border bandit county and beyond.

It is a sign that even in this season of peace, Belfast knows that war is never far below the surface.

"There's been a change in plans," said the Sinn Fein representative inside the third-floor bunker of the abandoned flour mill which serves as Sinn Fein headquarters. "Gerry's down at the ox-Felons Club waitin' for you."

I climb into a black cab outside and cruise the 3km to Andersonstown, past a bus stop with "Free our POWs" emblazoned on a brick wall and the usual territorial graffiti.

Two steel security doors, barbed wire and a security camera guard the entrance but once inside the Felon's Club reveals a cosy interior.

To be a member here you must have served time in a British jail "for the cause".

Old men in flat caps sit in snugs, throwing back Guinness, watched over by oil portraits of past campaigners.

Etched on to stained glass windows with Celtic motifs are the names of the dozen hunger strikers who died in 1981 demanding political prisoner status.

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Upstairs Gerry Adams is delivering 20-second "grabs" to a gaggle of television crews who want his reaction to the latest rejection of his peace proposal.

He is taller than I expect and dressed casually in a white wool jumper.

"All (British Prime Minister) John Major is doing is postponing the inevitability of talks," he repeats. "Sinn Féin remains committed to the peace process."

The television crews return to the bar downstairs and Adams and I find a quiet corner.

Like Martin McGuinness, reportedly the IRA's commander-in-chief, Adams is not regarded as a drinker.

He starts talking about the Australian Government's recent decision to reject his application for an entry permit.

"This is the first time I applied to get to Australia and it was mostly at the request of my publisher," he says.

"I would like to have gone to Australia many times -- in fact, my parents tried to emigrate there in the 1950s (they were rejected because his father had served time for republican activities).

"Clearly it would have been better to get there before now, but with the peace process and all it was just so hectic it was impossible.

"I'm still hoping to get there, and in fact our legal people are looking to see if there is some legal redress."

A Queensland legal firm is mounting the challenge, using the Freedom of Information Act to obtain documents about the decision.

Adams says British pressure is behind the ban, combined with Australian Prime Minister John Howard's pro-monarchist sympathies.

When the British Broadcasting Corporation announced the ban, another news item on the same bulletin reported that British Trade Secretary Michael Heseltine and senior Ministry of Defence officials were in Australia finalising an arms deal including Harrier jump jets.

"I certainly think the decision was taken after a lot of lobbying by the British Government," he says.

"I mean, look how hysterical they got when I was able to go to the USA.

"It isn't about a power struggle, it's about the British trying to keep an idea under wraps, it's about trying to stop people from being informed or forming a rounded opinion.

"I would never have dreamt of coming to Australia on political business: in this case I was invited by my publisher to talk about a book.

"It is a disappointment but that is also a matter for the Australian people that their Government took a decision to ban me.

"It isn't about denying me my rights because I have no more

right to go to Australia than anyone else, but I presume that in Australia people have the right to information, they have the right to form their own opinion.

"There are no restrictions placed on any British or Unionist or other factions in this.

"So it is a disappointment at one level that the British can be so strident and can reach so far."

The book Adams is referring to is his autobiography, *Before The Dawn*.

It traces his childhood in West Belfast, through the civil rights movement of the 1960s campaigning for equal housing, employment and electoral representation, to the violence of the 1970s, hunger strikes, life on the run, prison and various peace initiatives.

It is a straightforward account of his personal struggle. It is also notable for what it doesn't say.

While it is widely believed Adams was Belfast commander of the IRA in 1972 and 1973, nowhere in the book does Adams acknowledge he has even been a member of the organisation.

"I have to confess the book came out of a very busy time in my life and hasn't been the main focus," he says.

"But it has been quite surprising to see the media focus on it."

The most controversial passage

in the book, picked up by the British press in particular, is where Adams describes in short-story form what goes through the mind of an IRA sniper as he prepares to kill a British officer leading a patrol in Belfast.

Adams insists the story is fictional and in no way reflects his own personal experience. He says he now regrets including the passage.

"I wrote that story at least 10 years ago and it was only included because my publisher asked me to project what is like to be an IRA volunteer."

LATER in the book he writes: "The physical-force tradition in Ireland is very strong and those who are part of it, especially on the republican side, have a huge responsibility to bring it to an end, to embrace other forms of struggle and seek to develop these in place of armed struggle if this is possible.

"No one should be dogmatic about armed struggle as a tactic.

"Nor should it be romanticised. I have lost many good friends, and their families' loss, like my own, is, I know, reflected also in the loss experienced by those who have suffered because of the armed actions of the IRA."

Does he think the British Government has ever made a sincere attempt at a peaceful solution?

"I think the British Government will always act in its own interests," he replies.

"Unfortunately there is a history of imperialism in Britain -- 70 or 80 years ago they controlled half

the globe and that is still a factor in their attitude."

He quotes former British prime minister Harold Wilson who, a week before leaving office, said that a united Ireland was the only long-term solution to the conflict.

"It is somewhat ironic that some of the limited attempts at peace have mostly come from the Conservative Party.

"It is also educational to note that no matter what their public position, there has been for a long time contact from the British Government, mostly initiated by them, with us.

"They have called us criminals, terrorists, subhuman and barbarians.

"Yet even under (then prime minister Margaret) Thatcher there was contact. I have a notional view that the British Government does not have a moral attitude towards Ireland. It has an expedient attitude towards Ireland.

"John Major was given an opportunity his predecessors never had but has failed because of his own political ambition, to move things forward.

"Paradoxically, it may have been the case that if Margaret Thatcher had been given an opportunity she may have grasped it."

Once again the main stumbling block to all-party talks is the issue of decommissioning.

Having lost his parliamentary majority last week, Major is seen to be even more dependent on the support of Ulster Unionists in the run-up to next year's elections.

Hardline Unionists such as Ian Paisley insist Sinn Féin should not be allowed a seat at talks until the IRA begins decommissioning its weapons.

To republicans, this is tantamount to surrender in a war they believe they are winning.

After loyalist attacks in the 1960s which saw them unarmed, republicans are unlikely to meet such a demand.

"The British Government, under pressure from the Unionists, keep moving the goalposts.

"Back in 1995 we were led to believe that once we had established a ceasefire for a minimum of three months, there would be a timetable set for inclusive negotiations.

"After nearly 18 months of the ceasefire, there was still no date fixed for talks.

"John Major has continued to throw obstacles on the path, from Unionist-inspired elections, to decommissioning, to rejection of not just our proposals but US recommendations.

"Having said that, Major's dependency on the Unionists is somewhat overstated.

"I don't think there was ever a time when the British Government could have fallen on the question of Ireland.

"I think the main factor in all this is one of his own statements

the British Prime Minister to preside over the break-up of the Union."

It is this point which resonates deeply in analysis of the conflict.

Here there are generally two schools of thought. One has Britain looking for a face-saving exit. The other is that Britain will remain engaged for fear of the domino effect, begging the question: which British prime minister is prepared to go down in history as the one who triggers devolution? Surely Scotland is next?

Adams: "Well, I think they'll have to cope with that anyway because of the dynamic of Scotland and Wales."

"But they have always dealt with Ireland in a different context."

"It's in their terminology when they say the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland."

"These are the sorts of things that feed Unionist paranoia and insecurity."

"Everyone knows when you come here that you're in a different country."

"The British administered this

as one island up to 70 years ago, so even the adjustment of a little gerrymandered statelet doesn't give it any sense of permanency.

"So I think the British can be moved, they are not a monolith."

There is another, more cynical view, that Britain uses Ireland as a laboratory in modern warfare.

In the same way Irish republican Michael Collins' guerrilla tactics of the 1920s were to inspire China's Mao Tse Tung, Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh and other 20th century revolutions, so too has the IRA's policy of industrial targeting begun to influence a new generation of terrorists.

It is not surprising that the British possess perhaps the most sophisticated anti-terrorist unit in the world.

The technology and training needed to combat the IRA is a highly valuable — and exportable — commodity.

In a post-Cold War security landscape, the conflict also justifies Britain's considerable military and intelligence establishments.

BUT what is it about the Irish psyche that provokes such resistance?

Adams: "It's difficult to pinpoint and I don't want to be accused of racism. But the fact is there is a colonial history in Ireland."

"It has an effect on Ireland and it has an effect on Britain."

"For better or worse, the Irish are a colonised people who have never been colonised in our heads."

"Some of that might be down to no more than a song. And the fact that we are an island race separated by the sea."

"But the Irish have also paid a very high price for the British connection."

"It is hard to overestimate the impact of the famine, for instance."

The Irish potato famine of the 1840s is thought to have killed a million Irish and forced 2 million to emigrate.

The irony is that by being colonised, the Irish diaspora established new colonies in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand with their own antipathies towards the British.

"There is a phenomenon attached to the Irish diaspora

which cannot be over-exaggerated and perhaps we are seeing it come full circle." Adams said.

"When the Australian Government said I was 'not of good character' it was exactly the same reason the British used when they sent Irishmen to Australia."

"Once upon a time you couldn't get there unless you were of bad character."

Adams has been influenced by two struggles which he believes have parallels with his own.

The first was the US black civil rights movement to end discrimination; the other the movement to end apartheid in South Africa.

It is not surprising then, when asked to nominate a statesman who has inspired him, Adams nominates Nelson Mandela.

"Having endured as much as he did and yet be so considerate in the process of reconciliation, is the true mark of leadership."

Reflecting on his own paradigm, Adams says: "For conflict to exist there must be injustice. If the conflict is to be tackled, then the causes of injustice must be tackled."

"There are only two ways to end conflict. One is when one side beats the other. The other is to have a negotiated settlement."

"For a negotiated settlement there must exist a certain dynamic and often that is fostered by having an outside party step in to establish a framework."

Adams is hoping that the US will continue to act as that "outside party".

"They can certainly give the whole movement towards peace a bit of a push."

"There is an emotional relationship that exists in America over Ireland (a recent census stated 43 million Americans claim Irish ancestry)."

"But when you look at conflicts that have been resolved, it is because at some point all the parties talked."

"Now they may have all kept their views, yet at some further point a common denominator was found."

"So far that hasn't happened in Northern Ireland."

I presume that in Australia people have the right to information, the right to form their own opinion