

Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey, recently in North America for a series of speaking engagements, was probably the most internationally renowned figure in the Northern Irish Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. A committed socialist, Devlin-McAliskey firmly believes that the only way to solve the problems in Northern Ireland is through the withdrawal of British troops and the reunification of Ireland. While in Toronto, Devlin-McAliskey spoke to Excalibur's Lorne Manly. This week, in part one of the interview, Devlin-McAliskey talks about her political experiences.

Q. What is your purpose in making this trip of speaking engagements through North America?

A. It is an effort to break through the silence and lack of information which exists in Ireland. It is an attempt to portray the reality of the situation from our point of view. Essentially, therefore, it is informative. There exists throughout Canada and the U.S.A., particularly since the hunger strikes (of 1980 and 1981), a growing number of groups which would fulfill that role in that they try to disseminate information, create a greater public awareness of Ireland—and they would invite speakers like myself to come. Essentially, it's never any more highflown or grand than that.

Q. What was it like growing up Catholic in predominantly Protestant North Ireland?

A. Well, in the area that I grew up in, in as much as it was a small town in the country, the degree of segregation was less marked than it's always been in the city. Therefore, I was not typical of many people in my generation in that I actually grew up knowing Protestant children as playmates and neighbours. There would be many people of my generation, indeed many young people of this generation, who, because of a whole series of factors, would have very little real social contact with people from the other community, be it Nationalist or Loyalist or the other way around, until they either meet in the workplace or meet during higher education.

For me growing up in that situation you are always aware of your place. To some extent it's like saying "what was it like being black in the southern United States before the civil rights movement?" You knew what your position in society was but certainly the adults around you accepted that position. It had been accepted for a long time and you conducted your daily affairs within those confines. It was only with the Civil Rights movement of the late 60's that the position began to be challenged. For me, particularly, I was more aware growing up of the differences between the wealthy and the poor because I was not only Catholic but from a working class family and my mother was a widow. There were six of us in the family and therefore, we were much more conscious of poverty than of political discrimination against Catholics. And because my father had died at an early age we were not particularly aware of the lack of job opportunities for Catholics as we didn't have a wage earner in the family.

Q. How did the Civil Rights movement of the late 60's get its start?

A. I think there are two factors which came into play. One was external to the people themselves. After World War II free education was introduced in Britain and because Northern Ireland was part of Britain, controlled by Britain, free education applied in the north of Ireland as well. It was strenuously resisted by the Northern Irish Government because they were aware they'd be educating Catholics. This factor is often underrepresented but nonetheless very significant because with the introduction of free education in 1947 you had the first wave of educated Catholics in the professions—lawyers, doctors, and teachers who went through the universities. (But) it was only with the second wave of educated Catholics, which was around the early '60s, the second wave of Catholic professionals, managerial, commercial people, that the philosophy of "the nearer you rise to the ceiling, the more conscious you become of the ceiling" (became more prevalent). Therefore, the demand really started there among that grouping of people, for equality of opportunity in the workplace, for the opportunity to progress, for promotion. It also coincided with the industrial boom in Britain which provided a great deal of employment and heightened the awareness of political discrimination in job opportunities because now when jobs were readily available they weren't readily available to Catholics at any level.

A major factor which imposed itself on that was the fact that it was the 60's. (Laughing) It was when we were young and beautiful.

ful. It was the 60's when there was a great deal more aggressive confidence among young people that they were going to change the world, certainly amongst the student population. A great influential factor was the black Civil Rights movement of America. I think all these factors impinged on creating the North Ireland Civil Rights movement which in fact existed from 1964 as a kind of lobbying organization, basically comprised of business people, professionals. They did a lot of good work documenting the case but in 1968, after four years of consistently using the normal channels to try to implement reform that the leaders of the Civil Rights Association, as it was called, opted for street protests, massive demonstrations, and unleashed the poor upon the nation. Lots of people joined the Civil Rights movement who right from the beginning had a different concept of reform and a different basic need from the leadership. Very rapidly the movement moved from reform for equality within the system to demands of expanding the system to make room for equality from the bottom up and that always drew into play the national question.

Q. You helped form the People's Democracy in 1968. What led you to form this movement and what were its aims?

A. People's Democracy was an experiment that has to be studied to be believed. I didn't so much help form the People's Democracy as it helped form me. The People's Democracy quite literally grew out of a demonstration. We had a student demonstration against police brutality. We marched from the university (Queen's University in Belfast) down into the centre of the city and we were stopped by the police. We all sat down in the time-honoured fashion in the middle of the road, there to sit until hell froze over. And hell froze over in about 25 minutes (laughs) when people got tired of the middle of the road. I think we probably felt very humiliated because for all our grand gestures and talks, the police just chased us back up the road to the university. And there was this mammoth meeting that went on from early evening to early morning in the course of which the People's Democracy was born.

Looking back on it, it was incredible but that was what the People's Democracy was—to gather in the University Debating Hall and discuss civil rights. Very rapidly we discovered anarchy is not a very effective means of proceeding so we elected a "faceless committee" and that's how I got elected...They (the people in the hall) elected what they thought would be the most harmless people who would do all the work, paint all the posters, and take all the rap for the illegal demonstrations—and I was one of the faceless committee.

The People's Democracy contested the (Northern Ireland)

Government elections and won 9 1/2% of the vote. It so shocked them...that we didn't know what to do. So the People's Democracy retreated back to the university, denouncing all bourgeois elections and one or two of us were left standing out among the masses and stayed there.

Q. So after that, is that when you moved on to running for the House of Commons in London?

A. That's right. Almost immediately. To be denounced temporarily by the People's Democracy for running in a bourgeois election and vote still, getting elected. By that time I was the youngest MP (at the age of 21) and into a different set of anarchistic principles.

Q. What made you decide to run for Parliament?

A. Again it was a combination of circumstances...In fact, my whole future was decided by a series of accidents. The sitting member for Parliament for Mid-Ulster died—he just upped and died—leaving a vacancy and the South Derry constituency (in which she ran in local elections) was part of that. I don't know if that confuses you but we had (until the British abolished the North Ireland Parliament in 1972 and instituted direct rule) a system of representation to a government in Northern Ireland which had 52 members while in London we returned 12 members. So a lot of our Northern Ireland constituencies came together to form the bigger Westminster area.

So I had been a candidate in part of the Westminster area and we had this convention. Everybody wanted to be a candidate for the by-election except me. I wanted to go back to the university. But at the end of this peculiar circus which vaguely compared to a democratic convention, I ended up being the candidate for the Mid-Ulster election because I was the youngest and because I wasn't a member of a political organization. Each of the political organizations seeking the candidature felt that I was less of a threat to them than someone from another organization and I seemed to be the piece of paper which everyone could write more easily. Therefore, I became the Unity or Coalition candidate for the election and because we had that measure of unity we had the slight edge on the Unionists. Therein started my problems—the child turned out to have a mind of her own.

Q. You've been called many things in your life ranging from the "Maid of Derry"—and "Saint Joan of the Bogside" all the way to "Fidel Castro in a mini-skirt" and an "Unwashed Joan of Arc." What do you see yourself as?

Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey on life and politics in Northern Ireland



NORTHERN IRELAND: The six counties that make up Northern Ireland are pictured here. The shaded areas denote that over 55 percent of the population is Catholic. Within those predominantly Catholic or Protestant areas, however, there are many towns and districts of opposite complexion.

A. It's difficult to say, although I'd like to see Fidel Castro in a mini-skirt. In fairness, I started out as did many people, as a student. If you like, you grew up aware of all those deficiencies but suddenly when they confronted you, once you make a decision you have to do something about it. It's not actually very rational or clear-cut or a politically motivated decision—you just get in there. You either learn to swim or you drown, to some extent. In learning to swim you develop your own political ideas. I started out essentially on that basis and I ended up with a very clear socialist perspective on Ireland and on the rest of the world. I (qualify) that immediately, particularly on the North American continent where people actually know very little about anything, to be quite frank, except that "ism's" are not generally good. They will immediately particularize: "What about Russia?" "What about Afghanistan?" There isn't a very clear understanding that socialism is a principle, a means of economic organization. It's not, in fact, a particular state model.

So it's in that context of economic principle that I say I'm a socialist. And basically I arrived at that position by applying my mind to the problems we have and how we might resolve them rather than any great intellectual depth which is where a lot of the left come from. They read the books and then apply the recipe. There are those of us who actually started out trying to solve the problems and ended up with a socialist perspective...I do honestly believe that if we are to provide economically for the future of the people in Ireland, to eradicate poverty, massive unemployment, and a very low standard of living, it is necessary to retain in Ireland most of the wealth that we produce. And the hard facts of life are that we can't retain it unless we own it. There is no way you can say "Please Mister Ford, can we have your profits?" and he'd say "Certainly, what a nice idea." The only way you can control the profits of wealth is to control the means of its production and essentially that is the essence of socialism. That's what I stand for. But we are a long way from there. I mean we're still into basic human rights. It's a more practical problem for today.

Q. You wrote in your autobiography, *The Price of My Soul*, "To gain that which is worth having, it may be necessary to lose everything else." What do you consider worth having and what are you willing to sacrifice for it?

A. For us what is worth having...is the right to self-determination. That is the first cornerstone because we can't move forward, we can't actually construct anything for the future until we have the right to make those decisions for ourselves. The bottom line is self-determination in Ireland, the withdrawal of Britain from Ireland's affairs. Because everything

hinges on that, you have to gamble everything for it. To a large extent it has to be an individual choice—people make what contribution they can—there's something everyone can do.

It's a peculiar situation because it's only from outside that someone else can evaluate what it is you're gaining and what you've lost. It's very difficult in the middle of it to balance the gains against the losses.

Q. In 1970, the Official IRA underwent a split in its ranks and the Provisional IRA came about. What do you think were the reasons for this split? Was it because a more militant outlook was gaining precedence?

A. There were a number of reasons... You had the official policy of the Republican movement up to the '70s having been very much colored by a series of events. During the war, during the '40s, a lot of Republicans were imprisoned and because of two coincidences of history, the leading members of the Republican movement were imprisoned with the members of the Communist Party. That may sound flippant but it was true. A lot of the ideas of the IRA at that time were learned from the members of the Communist Party. It wasn't a very clear understanding and they seem to have incorporated much more of the methods than the philosophy. (The leaders of the Republican Movement) believing that the struggle in Ireland could be followed along a stages theory. First we get social democracy and reform, then because he have that there will be a class alliance created between the Protestant and Catholic workers, and then we will be able to do away with partition.

It was clearly evident in the '70s that this wasn't going to work out that way. The demand of the Nationalist population had gone beyond civil reform to an instinctive, rather than political recognition that in order to get any meaningful reform they would have to basically take the State apart, because the State had been created to prevent it (the rejoining of N. Ireland to Ireland). And so the popular demand among the nationalists was to end partition. And the Republican movement found itself in the position of saying, "We aren't at that point yet." You had a position of, if you like, the masses running ahead of the leadership. In essence you had a small group splitting off from the movement who were right-wing social democrats and militarists with a number of leftists. What actually happened was although they were a very small part of the organization, the bulk of the organization withered and died because their policy was wrong. The people were right. If it looked on the ground it wasn't going to work that way, it wasn't going to work. So, the bulk of the working class nationalists in the North followed the Provisional movement and over the years it has meant the withering away of the Official section, until now where it no longer exists, and the development of the Provisionals into the movement of Sinn Fein. Now Sinn Fein is essentially a politically left-wing social democratic movement that is armed. That's very hard to con-



Principles are unalterable and many people confuse principles with what is to their immediate advantage, and that's not confined to Ireland itself, it's everywhere...If non-violence is to be a principle, then it has to be a cornerstone of your entire ethics.

ceive in a Canadian context. In an Irish concept it has been a lot more frequent in Ireland than a Left-Wing Social Democratic party that hasn't been armed. It is without doubt, for all their strengths & weakness, and for whatever agreement or criticism I might have of them, and I'm not a member of their organization, Sinn Fein constitutes the leadership with the greatest support among the Nationalist working class in the North and considerable sections in the South. It has now grown to a position where it has electoral representation in almost every elected department in Irish society.

Q. The next major chronological date is Bloody Sunday on January 20, 1972 where the British army fired on the unarmed demonstrators, killing 14 people. The next day in Parliament you slapped Home Secretary Reginald Maudling in the face and had to be restrained physically. What was going through your mind at that time?

A. What was going through my mind was perfectly clear. The House of Commons has a very clear set of procedure that has developed over time. And the period in question was Question Time. The rules of the House were very clear. In the event of a major situation like that, the Government spokesperson responsible makes a statement. It is replied to by an opposition spokesperson. Then, after they have spoken, the floor of the House belongs to any member of Parliament having a direct interest in the affair or being an eye witness to the event. I was the only member of the House of Commons in Derry on Bloody Sunday. From my point of view the Government spokesperson, Mr. Maudling, had stood on the floor of the House and lied. A subsequent inquiry proved not that the Minister had lied but that the Home Secretary had been misinformed.

In any event, what the Minister had said was not a true representation of what happened and I rose to speak as it was my right within the House. Not only was I not called to speak next but the discussion when on for 30 minutes and the Speaker got up and closed the discussion. So, in keeping with the parliamentary principle I got up and very peacefully and democratically asked the Speaker if he would not uphold the rules of the House and reopen the debate to allow me, as the only witness to the event, to inform Parliament of what I had seen. And the Speaker said, "The honourable lady member from Mid-Ulster has no rights except those given to her by the honourable Speaker." and the honourable lady said, "The honourable lady member has whatever rights at any time she has the power to exert." Whereupon I hit the Home Secretary.

And there was more uproar in the House of Commons and the British press over the fact that an MP had used violence against a

Minister than there was over the fact that the British army had used violence against 30,000 unarmed people in a peaceful demonstration.

Q. In 1974 you helped form the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), which was an offshoot of the Official Sinn Fein. Yet you weren't typical of the founding membership. You were a longtime independent socialist while nearly all the party's activists were former members of the Official IRA. Why did you join, what were its objectives, and why did you leave the next year?

A. It's what's known as learning the hard way. There were quite a number of us who were basically independent socialists who came to the national question from a different perspective to those who had their political education in the Republican movement. With the split in the Republican movement it certainly seemed in 1974 that the opportunity was there to build an organization which reflect both the national aspirations and also the economic and social demands of the poor. Ideally, that was what we were trying to do... Within six months of the formation of the organization it became quite clear that those of us who had come in from outside the Republican tradition had a baptism we will never forget.

The official Republican movement decided that one split was enough, and they set about ensuring there wouldn't be a second by physically and violently threatening members who had left. They mounted a vicious attack, not a political attack—political arguments where there are guns are very difficult. It had the effect of adding a new dimension to the IRSP which none of us had wanted. It reopened the debate as to whether, in Ireland, a political organization of necessity required armed support. There were many of us who, perhaps idealistically, argued that whatever the question of violence was we should never be in a position where violence was the (only) means of resolving the political dispute in the Nationalist community. And even though we were under armed attack we shouldn't retaliate in kind. That argument held until we had 85 people in hospital and seven people dead. Then we lost that argument...

(Even though the feud was resolved) the makeup of the IRSP became very confused and in a long political debate literally fell apart (leading the independent Left to leave the party as they felt it had become just like the Provisional IRA in that it paid almost exclusive attention to the National question and that the IRSP should not have an armed wing). The history of the party has been a tragedy; it is now virtually smashed. It never got to grips with filling that gap. The opportunity to build the kind of organization we wanted came and went and was lost. Most people, by that time, were moving into Sinn Fein (the political wing of the IRA), dramatically changing its political outlook... The organization, because it was small, was smashed by the security forces. Most of its remaining members are now in prison and it's no longer a political force. I've been an independent ever since and I've never yet mustered the courage to join organization.

Q. You have rejected the violence and terrorism of the IRA, claiming you have little interest in the murderous politics of Ireland calling mean-minded nationalism one of the deadlier diseases of the body politic. Yet, despite these criticisms, you have taken the IRA's side many times, including in the House of Commons. How do you reconcile these two seemingly contradictory statements?

A. Very simply, because the first thing you have to determine is whether non-violence is a principle or a tactic. That immediately creates a problem where people think we're back in the smoky corridors of discussions, that it is an academic question. It's not actually. Principles are unalterable and many people confuse principles with what is to their immediate advantage, and that's not confined to Ireland itself, it's everywhere...If non-violence is to be a principle, then it has to be a cornerstone of your entire ethics. But if someone breaks into this office and comes at us with a hatchet, we all feel entitled to break his leg. So it's in that context I say let's take non-violence out of the question of principle. There are occasions on which most of us would use violence and we justify it to ourselves—non-violence (in that situation) is a tactical question, not a question of principle.

On the other hand most of us are opposed to violence, we don't like it, we prefer not to use it. We are aware of the incredible damage violence does; not only in the immediate sense but of the horror of violence. Therefore, I don't talk in terms of justifying it, condemning it. It is the sad fact of human history that for a long time it has been endemic in our society. We have all restored to it and we all justify it by our own political attitudes. The violence in support of that which we believe is usually good and the violence which threatens what we believe is invariably bad. I would prefer to work towards the resolutions of problems by peaceful means. But there are times when it becomes inevitable, mostly because of the violence used against progress. If you move it out of the Irish context for a moment and look at South Africa where people in the mode of Martin Luther King or Bishop Tutu would argue and firmly believe in non-violence. But to countenance non-violence as an absolute principle in South Africa today is actually to condemn the majority of people in South Africa to oppression, because it presupposes a non-violent conscience on the part of the Botha regime. If the non-violent principle were to be accepted by both sides, they could resolve it. But in a situation where the oppressed are violently oppressed it's not a question of justification but basically a question whether the violence of the oppressed is more justifiable than that of the oppressor. While people are oppressed by violence, the oppressed have a right to the use of violence.

(In Ireland) Violence is the prime method of the State to control... Only the context can we deal with the question of violence within the community or the armed struggle of the IRA. Therefore, those who are most genuinely interested in ending the violence are much better occupied, rather than making empty calls of condemnation in the abstract on the question of violence, trying to solve the political problems which produce violence.

NEXT WEEK: The hunger strikes and the new Anglo-Irish accord.