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BERNADETTE DEVLIN

PITY anyone who attempts in Northern Ireland, to write something about Bernadette McAliskey, née Devlin!

As she herself emphasises, she was born in Cookstown of decent underprivileged Catholic parents. She displayed early her combative nature which so often goes with a stocky physique.

She was lucky enough to be among the earliest stream to have free secondary and third level education.

It was the British Labour Party which provided this great amenity for Catholics. Those with brains—and Bernadette was well provided with that commodity—could, for the first time, promote themselves even from the least affluent section of the community. I often wonder whether Bernadette, or indeed many of those other younger political figures who have so successfully forced Ulster Unionists away from the grudging obscurantism of earlier years, ever give credit to the British Labour Party for what has been made possible for them.

Bernadette secured her secondary education in St Patrick's Academy at Dungannon, then went on to read Celtic Studies at Queens's University, Belfast, later switching to Psychology which she studied for a time.

She became involved in various societies and in the beginning conformed to the picture of a country girl tasting what for her was the big city, and the big university. Needless to say she found her feet in the Debating Society. At this time her opinions were swinging between republicanism and socialism. Eventually she gravitated to the group of young militants who later became the People's Democracy.

At that time the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association

was in the second year of its not very thrusting activity. NICRA was not militant enough for Bernadette or her friends. They were moving along beside it, but not of it.

1968 and 1969 were certainly Devlin years. In October 1968, as an emissary for the People's Democracy, she confronted the Rev. Ian Paisley in his home, attempting to persuade him that they were both concerned with the same problem, namely the disadvantaged working-class people, both Protestant and Catholic. 'In his blinkered way he is quite bright but we got nowhere,' she said afterwards. Rev. Paisley agreed that there were injustices, but said to her, 'I would rather be British than fair.'

The operation of the Dungannon march and the nuances that led up to it were too subtle for her youthful comprehension, but what came later, the Derry march of 5 October, was the catalyst which matured her as it did many others of her generation.

She was horrified by all she saw, especially, as she says in her book *The Price of my Soul*, 'the evil delight the police showed as they beat the people down'. She herself escaped being attacked. Later she took an injured person to Altnagalvin Hospital where she got the impression from the staff, rightly or wrongly, that they thought 'the injured people got what they deserved'.

Her next outings were on the People's Decocracy marches. These were prevented from going through Shaftesbury Square on their way to the city centre. Then she was off with her fellow members to picket Mr William Craig's house to show displeasure at his having banned the march of 5 October. They received personal abuse from Mr Craig.

Worse was to follow, she joined the Burntollet march where she was savaged by the Paisleyite mob, one man attacking her with a piece of flat wood armoured with two nails. Later she was knocked down and beaten as she lay on the ground.

Then in February 1969, a spate of party politics. She contested the South Derry seat against Major Chichester-Clark, then the Minister of Agriculture, later to become Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. She lost by six thousand to his nine thousand odd votes. A very creditable performance.

Her real opportunity came when she was nominated and won the Mid-Ulster seat at Westminster. At that time she was

everyone's darling. We were delighted with her dynamism and her absence of posturing. We hoped that from then on she would consolidate her position, fusing together the disparate elements of minority life. Unfortunately this did not happen.

When Bernadette was nominated for the seat, apart from her relatives she could only call for help on her left-wing associates from Queen's University. These latter had little rapport with rural mid-Ulster. She possessed neither a political organisation nor money.

There was a concerned and socially conscious citizen of republican persuasion, in Maghera, Mrs Betty Noone. She came to Bernadette's assistance, gathering a group of practical people around her. Mrs Noone and her friends worked very hard for Bernadette. When she was elected she ignored these good friends. At the least estimate they surely could have contributed something. In her book she dismisses them with the relentless cruelty of youth.

Patricia made a judgment that she would not be able to influence Bernadette, and she did not try.

Introduced to the House by Paul Rose and Gerry Fitt, her maiden speech at Westminster was a huge success. Ignoring the 'convention', which had been so successfully ignored before her by Gerry Fitt, instead of saying a few conventional words, she lambasted all those who deserved it. The press lionised her as did an almost incredulous British public—at that time we were winning hands down.

Thereafter things did not go so well. Bernadette gathered around her, in her smart Belgravia flat, a 'coterie' who were of no use to her, or to those of us who helped to put her into Westminster. Rose and Fitt found her a difficult colleague. Furthermore her political agent had no time for them. A few women MPs who tried to be friendly were rebuffed. Relations depreciated further when Paul and Gerry tried to co-operate with her in drafting Amendments to the Ulster Defence Regiment Bill. She was determined to paddle her own canoe, and produced her own Amendments.

Paul Rose is Jewish and, understandably perhaps, was angry when she declared her support for El Fatah, an extremist pro-Palestine organisation.

She thought little of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster, a group which did more to provide our Campaign for Social

Justice with a platform in Britain than any other—at a time when Bernadette was still a schoolgirl. Indeed, relations between her and this large group of Westminster MPs were virtually non-existent.

Although the publicity she was enjoying was bringing in a great deal of money from television appearances, lectures and the like, she found the media attention hard to bear. Indeed she seems to have revealed the only faintheartedness in her makeup when dealing with the rapacious newsmen of the British popular press.

By August 1969, Derry, like Belfast, was going through one of the worst periods Northern Ireland had known. It was in a state of near anarchy. The police and the Bogside were in a fight-to-a-finish situation. Bernadette joined in and helped to place the first barricades in position, thereby beginning to set up the first no-go area in what was later to be called 'Free Derry'. The world was treated to television shots of her racing round the area in jeans and sweater urging the people to greater efforts through a loudhailer, organising the filling of petrol bombs, and screaming at the defenders to man the barricades. At times she wore welders' goggles to protect her against the CS gas being used against her. There was an eye-catching shot in the newspapers of Bernadette breaking a flagstone to use as ammunition.

She said afterwards that she did what she did because she felt that the police were out to get her. She was concerned also for the survival of the Bogside as a Catholic 'ghetto'.

This Derry episode had a further emotive outcome for her and her followers, still more for most of the Northern Ireland Catholics. Court proceedings were started against her. The result was that she was found guilty on three charges of incitement to riot and one of rioting. She was sentenced to six months gaol. She appealed; in vain. Her barrister, Sir Dingle Foot, QC, attempted to bring her case to the House of Lords. His main arguments centred on a group's right to self-defence, an MP's right to protect people she believed to be in danger, and the relevance of disallowed evidence about the police. The Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, Lord MacDermott, rejected the application. There was condemnation of her sentence from many quarters including Norman St John Stevas, the Tory

MP. The French newspapers, *L'Aurore* and *Figaro* also disapproved. But to emphasise her martyrdom, the inept law and order arbiters of the province, after first arranging that she should surrender herself to the police in Derry at an agreed time, stopped her car on a windswept country road and she was bundled away to commence her sentence.

Gaol, her opponents said hopefully, would teach Bernadette a lesson. They were wrong. She came out after four months, committed to a militant revolutionary socialism, as she confided to Mary Holland in an article in the London *Observer*. She was seeking a grass roots movement of the left, saying that she did not see herself as an Irish MP but as a Socialist MP. These, too, were the views she propounded in her book, *The Price of my Soul*. They shocked many Catholic conservatives who were, and still are, in the majority. Her book detailed a sort of Marxist manifesto, Bernadette style. She had little time for traditional Nationalism, the Catholic Church (as at present constituted), for the reigning Pope, for Cardinal Conway, even for the various Governments of the Republic of Ireland. This in spite of the fact that these Governments are democratically chosen by the total voting population. For example, Barry Desmond in the Irish Dáil, speaking in December 1972 at a debate on the Offences Against the State Bill, denounced Bernadette for a statement she made in Liberty Hall. She said, 'If the Bill is passed through the Dáil may the hand of the President who signs it wither as he signs it, and may every one of his dead comrades who fought and died for this country, appear before his dim eyes and curse his beating heart.' Great rhetoric, but damaging to what many held dear.

She frequently referred in the book to the problems of the oppressed Protestant working class. It is very doubtful indeed if there was more than a handful of these who saw things as she did. She objected to 'Catholic slum landlords marching virtuously beside the tenants they exploited, in civil rights gatherings'. She claimed, 'Only if it is an all-Ireland working class revolution are there enough of us to overthrow the powers that be,' and again, 'Basically I believe that the parliamentary system of democracy has broken down.' Again and again she praised Eamonn McCann and Michael Farrell,

the latter being the leader of the Young Socialist Alliance, members of which seemed to hold ideas far to the left even of Bernadette's.

A final quotation to demonstrate her philosophy, culled from the *Irish Times* of 22 January 1970:

It is up to Mike Farrell and Eamonn McCann to say 'That's what you're thinking and that's what we're thinking and this is what we've got to do about it.' I know we've got to have control of our own lives, control of our factories but somebody like Farrell or McCann knows how to spell out how it's done. They know the principle of private ownership which has got to be destroyed—they know how to get from the profit margin to workers' control.

In all this she revealed sentiments which relatively few shared.

Particularly stung by the book's content were the good nuns of St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon, who gave Bernadette her education and a lot more. They were so incensed as to issue a circular in which they said 'Bernadette Devlin's references to this school, in her book *The Price of my Soul*, have shocked all of us....Bernadette has hurt two of her best friends, who are lifelong friends to each other....With regard to corporal punishment this school could stand the strictest scrutiny.' The document was signed by three nuns and thirteen lay teachers, some men, some women.

In Paris in November 1970 she declared that she would advocate armed guerilla warfare against Northern Ireland to get better conditions for workers. Her aim was a workers' socialist republic. 'We are not interested in liberal democracy.' She was addressing a mass rally sponsored by 'Secours Rouge', and was accompanied by Seamus Costello of Sinn Féin, Eamonn McCann and Frank Gogarty.

A manifestation of her republican feeling was shown when she helped to found the Irish Republican Socialist Party, the IRSP. This eventually became the political wing of the ultra-extreme INLA. Bernadette has always denied that she had links with this latter body.

It was the same sort of strong gut feeling for the people of Northern Ireland, and for Derry in particular, when, in Westminster Parliament, she reacted in a way which shocked

the British, who regard their Parliament as a sacred institution. The House was discussing 'Bloody Sunday' in Derry. Mr Reginald Maudling, the Home Secretary, claimed that the troops had fired in self-defence. Bernadette, who was on the platform on that awful day, was on her feet immediately. She called Mr Maudling a 'lying hypocrite'. Thereupon she crossed the floor and boxed his ears. After living with a half century of mealy-mouthed Nationalism most Irish people forgave her.

America proved to be a very attractive setting for her. In the beginning she was a thoroughgoing success. In the early days citizens of the USA with an Irish background seized upon the same features that so delighted us when Bernadette first appeared on the scene.

In March 1971 she was scheduled to speak at Nevada State University in Las Vegas. She had a bigger audience than Jane Fonda, who had appeared the previous night. Fifteen minutes before she was due to speak, the doors were closed. Hundreds were locked out. More than three thousand had paid a dollar admission charge.

The older members of the audience were angry, and showed it, when she harangued them about the American way of life, the almighty dollar and the injustice of jailing Angela Davis, a black power militant.

She condemned injustices in Northern Ireland and the brutality of the police both there and in America. She condemned also the injustices perpetrated against the Viet Cong. She called John D. Rockefeller 'an exploiter of the American people'. She got laughs when she referred to the Catholic Church, expressing standard left-wing censures. Bernadette was paid two thousand dollars a lecture and she talked in thirty-eight universities in twenty-eight days. Of the money received she had to pay thirty per cent booking fees as well as other expenses, of course.

Mayor John V. Lindsay of New York presented Bernadette with the Golden Key of the City. She later turned it over to the Black Panther organisation—'As a gesture of solidarity with the black liberation and revolutionary socialist movement in America. To these common people to whom this city and this country belongs, I return what is rightfully theirs, this symbol of the freedom of New York.'

The United Ireland Committee issued a statement saying that this 'was a flagrant act of discourtesy which offends the vast majority of the Irish people both here and throughout the world'.

The American Irish Action Committee, which represented eighteen Irish organisations in the USA, had banned the National Association for Irish Justice, mainly because of its association with the Black Panther movement. When Bernadette was to visit the United States in November 1969, not one of the eighteen associations was notified about it. This was greatly resented. They said that the proposed million dollar target for Ulster riot relief would have been raised for her project but for the association with the National Association for Irish Justice.

When she returned from this fund-raising tour she announced that £40,000 had been collected. The *Sunday News*, however, reported that only £20,000 had materialised because hundreds of Irish Americans had cancelled donations. One of the fund's trustees, Mr P.K.O'Doherty, claimed that many Americans had been annoyed by Miss Devlin's anti-American speeches. Also she had snubbed Mayor Daley of Chicago. On the date of the *Sunday News* report, 3 May 1970, less than £10,000 had been distributed in the city of Belfast. The newspaper then went into further detail.

Some of this bad publicity had by now rubbed off in Bernadette's own constituency. At first meetings were few and far between, although great enthusiasm was shown for their MP. Later, quibbles began about how she had carried out her mandate. She was reminded that she had given a great deal of her time to Derry city. There were questions about her private life which she declined to answer.

By this time our Campaign for Social Justice had been disbanded, but a chapter about Bernadette Devlin would be incomplete without mentioning two further incidents in her tempestuous career.

There was a Westminster election in February 1974. The Mid-Ulster seat was won by the Unionist John Dunlop with 26,044 votes. Ivan Cooper, SDLP, received 19,372, Bernadette Devlin, Independent Socialist 16,672 votes. Thus, as I see it, because Bernadette received less than Ivan Cooper, she

can be considered to have split the Nationalist vote on this occasion.

Some time after this, an attempted assassination by shooting at the hands of Protestant paramilitaries left her and her husband for dead. They were discovered by the British Army and rushed to hospital. Both recovered slowly. Bernadette is a survivor.