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Contents

Acknowledgements.................................................................p.3

Contents..................................................................................p.4

Introduction........................................................................p.5

1. British Labour’s Irish Problem Prior to 1979.........................p.10

2. ‘The Left Wing Backlash’ Labour Policy 1979-83......................p.33

3. ‘Neil Kinnock and the Impact of Hillsborough’ Labour Policy 1983-87...p.86


6. Conclusion..........................................................................p.254

Appendix A: Contingency plans in the event of Irish re-unification.....p.272

Appendix B: Conference Votes 1979-97......................................p.274

Bibliography........................................................................p.275
Introduction

This study sets out to analyse the policies of the Labour Party and the attitude of the movement to the Northern Ireland problem. The main focus will be the Labour movement during the years of opposition between 1979 and 1997 with a brief overview of the years preceding the 1979 election. The policies, ideas and arguments on the question of Northern Ireland need to be analysed against the backdrop of the enormous changes which the Labour Party itself went through in its eighteen years of opposition. These included various policy changes as well as ideological and structural changes, beginning with a sharp move to the left in 1981, followed by a steady reform process initiated by Neil Kinnock and ultimately resulting in Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour Party’: a party almost unrecognisable compared to that led by James Callaghan. This thesis sets out to look at the broad Labour movement with all its various pressure groups. There are essentially three component parts of the Labour movement: firstly the Parliamentary Party whose priority is very often the Party’s electability, secondly the Constituency Parties who in the early and mid-eighties were primarily concerned with ideological and policy matters and, finally, the trade union movement which could be described as the conscience of the movement as its main concern was always the welfare of its members and of the working class in general, both employed and unemployed. Throughout this analysis of the Labour movement’s attitude to the Northern Irish conflict it is, of course, important to set each development against the backdrop of events taking place in Ireland and the policies pursued by the Tory government because much of the debate in the Labour Party was often influenced by the changes which took place within Ireland such as the steady increase in the electoral strength of nationalism.
in Northern Ireland, the changes in Anglo-Irish relations (for example, the Anglo-Irish Agreement) as well as the broad changes which took place in the both the British political scene and the wider international climate especially during the 1990s. However, the official policy of the Party as articulated by the front bench will constitute the bulk of this study but the role of the other component parts of the Labour movement each play an important part in the development of policy. For example the CLP’s were considerably more sympathetic to the aspirations of Irish nationalism whereas the trade union movement was less enthusiastic about a nationalist agenda and, in many cases, were markedly more sensitive to the concerns of Northern Ireland’s Protestants.

The research into Labour Party policy on Northern Ireland during the opposition years is limited to work by Dr. Paul Dixon and Dr. Paul Bew in addition to wider studies by Dr. Michael J. Cunningham and Drs. Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry which have included brief inclusions on the subject of Labour Party attitudes. Dr. Dixon’s work has often suggested that the Labour Party has continued to maintain a bipartisan relationship with the Conservative Party; this particular thesis will be challenged. His work has also criticised Labour for its inheritance of Liberal thinking which tends to show undue

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1 Up until the mid-eighties there were only two nationalist MPs returned to Westminster and during the seventies the combined nationalist vote was about 25%. After the 1997 general election there were five nationalist MPs elected (SDLP & Sinn Fein) with the combined nationalist vote totalling over 40%. Flackes, W.D. & Sydney Elliot Northern Ireland: a Political Directory 1968-88 (1989) & Guardian, 3 May 1997.


sympathy towards Irish nationalism and he also takes a critical view of Labour's preparedness, during the eighties, to cynically seek an understanding with Unionism in the event of a hung Parliament. This thesis sets out to reveal the complexity of the Labour movement's varying and ever-developing perception of, and relationship with, both Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism. Drs. O'Leary and McGarry have an analysis more favourable to the pro-unity position that the Labour Party held and Brendan O'Leary was himself an advisor to the shadow front bench Northern Ireland team during the early nineties whilst Labour's 'unity by consent' policy was still in place. It is also important to take seriously the work by Geoffrey Bell whose brief historical study of the Labour Party's position on the Northern Ireland question has helped to contribute to the widely held perception of Labour as being woefully troubled and confused by the Irish problem. His is a left-wing analysis which amounts to a damning indictment of the Labour Party for its handling of the Northern Ireland problem throughout the twentieth century. Although Bell is an Ulster Protestant he is supportive of the aspirations of Irish nationalism and criticises the Labour Party for failing the nationalist people of Northern Ireland. Bell completed his main work on the Labour Party and Northern Ireland shortly after the Party's historic decision to adopt a policy favouring Irish reunification. His work is not valued so much for its intellectual contribution but it is of historic importance as it articulates better than any other work the mood of the Labour left at the time, which was one of hostility to those such as Rees and Mason and of a desire to champion the Irish nationalist cause.

Although this thesis is set out into chapters which are based on the four parliaments from May 1979 to May 1997, this period of history has three distinct phases in the

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development of political debate in Britain on the question of Northern Ireland. The first is from 1979 until the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. This was the period when the left carried considerable influence and at times was able to set the agenda. It was the era of conflict in British politics (the miners’ strike and the inner city riots characterise the period) and Ireland was seen as another arena of conflict in which the left felt that it needed to take sides. The polemic of the period was rich with the language of class conflict: ‘imperialism’, ‘oppression’ and ‘liberation struggle’. This was aided by the politicisation of the Provisionals, the intransigence of the Thatcher government during the hunger strikes and developments such as the ‘shoot-to-kill’ saga. The second phase is from 1986 up until about 1990-91 when the ‘Brooke talks’ process got underway. This was a period of transition in which the left began to lose influence in the Labour movement. The Anglo-Irish Agreement initiated a gradual re-examination of the Irish conflict and Britain’s role in it. Although this period witnessed the left launch the ‘Time To Go’ initiative to try and breath new life into the withdrawal movement, this in fact amounted to the last stand by a pressure group rapidly losing influence and relevance in the Labour movement. The period from the early nineties, up to the 1997 general election, witnessed a sea-change in attitudes to the Irish problem and this was aided by the fact that the wider political climate became markedly less adversarial following Margaret Thatcher’s resignation, the ending of the cold war and the attempts at conflict resolution in South Africa and the middle east. This thesis will set out to analyse the Labour movement’s journey through these three phases arriving, as it did in 1997, at what has been described, by contemporary journalists, as a neutral position on the constitutional question having adopted a policy advocating Irish re-unification sixteen years earlier. The issues to be looked at are complicated and also have various historic, social and political dimensions each of which will be assessed through
the chronological framework set out above and will be set against the three aforementioned political areas of the international arena, Conservative government policy and the metamorphosis of the Labour movement itself over these eighteen years.
Chapter 1: British Labour's Irish Problem Prior to 1979

Since the earliest days of the British Labour movement there had always been a considerable element sympathetic to the aspirations of Irish nationalism. During the eighties and even nineties Labour Party literature often referred to their ‘historic’ commitment to a united Ireland⁸ and yet there also existed, within the British left, a large body of opinion which found no empathy whatsoever with Irish Catholic/Gaelic nationalism. For example, many on the British left condemned James Connolly for his involvement in the 1916 Irish Rising,⁹ the Labour Party supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 which established the partition of Ireland¹⁰ and in 1949 it was Attlee’s Labour government that passed the Ireland Act which ensured the permanence of partition with the commitment that “in no event will Northern Ireland or any part thereof cease to be part of His Majesty’s Dominions and of the United Kingdom without the consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland”.¹¹ The Unionists could not have asked for more and yet a consistent belief has existed throughout 20th century political history that the Tories are the friends of Unionism, while Labour are the friends of Irish nationalism. By the mid-1990s the pro-unionist Labour MP Kate Hoey was still complaining of the continuing existence of this notion and arguing that there was no reason for British socialists not to have good relations with the Ulster Unionists.¹²

The Attlee government has gained itself the image of an administration particularly unsympathetic to Irish nationalism with its speedy willingness to introduce the Ireland Act

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¹¹ As quoted in Farrell, M. Northern Ireland: the Orange State (1976) p.188.
in 1949 as a direct response to the Dublin government’s decision to declare the 26 counties of Ireland a Republic. However there did exist concern over the South’s neutrality in both the Second World War and the developing Cold War and with De Valera making a visit of condolence to the German Embassy at the news of Hitler’s death in 1945 relations between the two governments were not particularly warm. These factors ensured that any emotional attachment to the aspirations of Irish nationalism in the Labour Party were eclipsed, in large part, by the wider concerns of safeguarding the western alliance and being seen to act favourably toward the Northern Ireland government after its co-operation during the War. Whilst there did not exist any great interest in Irish affairs, not even amongst the great left-wing reformers of the time such as Shinwell, Cripps and Bevan, there did exist a small body of opinion within the Parliamentary Party which remained opposed to the continued partition of Ireland. A small group of about thirty back-bench Labour MPs came together to form the ‘Friends of Ireland’ who were not so much campaigners against the discrimination in Northern Ireland but were primarily concerned with Irish re-unification and with supporting the newly launched Anti-Partition League in Ireland. Although the Friends of Ireland were supported by what were mostly left-wing Labour MPs and also had the support of the two Communist MPs elected in 1945, the APL was a conservative organisation launched in Northern Ireland by the Nationalist Party; the party which had supported Franco in the Spanish Civil War, which remained under clerical influence and was resolutely hostile to Communism. However, the APL was launched following the Labour victory in May 1945 in the hope that their grievances would be responded to by the Party which had originally been opposed to the partition of Ireland in 1920. In spite of the Friends of Ireland supporting an amendment to try and defeat the

Ireland Act and the holding of various public meetings around Britain,\textsuperscript{14} the efforts of both the APL and Labour's back-bench pressure group were in vain. The Friends of Ireland did not have a Tony Benn or a Clare Short and with their leading figure being Geoffrey Bing, MP for Hornchurch and an Oxford educated Northern Irish lawyer,\textsuperscript{15} they lacked the dynamism and numbers to influence the government. Both the APL and the Friends of Ireland went into rapid decline during the 1950s with the Friends of Ireland disappearing soon after the defeat of the Labour government in 1951. This small and shortlived interest in promoting the Irish nationalist cause within the Labour movement was not based upon actively challenging the Unionist government or attacking Stormont on matters such as democratic rights or civil liberties for the Catholic minority in the way that later pressure groups were to do. The Friends of Ireland group was tinged with Irish nationalist, romanticism and was allied to an anti-partition party in Ireland which, with its traditionalism and conservatism, was not seen by the rest of the British Labour movement as a force for progressive change in Northern Ireland.

When the Labour Party was returned to office following the general election of 1964, after thirteen years of Tory rule, the Ulster Unionists had anticipated the worst. The Labour leader, Harold Wilson, was considered sympathetic towards Irish nationalism and, indeed, during his first years in office he arranged for the remains of Sir Roger Casement to be returned to the Republic of Ireland.\textsuperscript{16} Wilson certainly wanted to improve Anglo-Irish relations but his motives were probably more to do with improving trade between the two countries than anything else. As events unfolded it became self-evident that the Unionists had nothing to fear. James Callaghan has pointed out, with the benefit of hindsight, that the

\textsuperscript{14} Farrell, M. op cit. pp. 189 & 197.
early sixties were the years of opportunity for Northern Ireland;\textsuperscript{17} the IRA was moribund and the Unionists had, in Terence O'Neill, a leader who was prepared to make changes to break with the past and yet Labour chose not seize the opportunity. They would not put pressure on Stormont because, evidently, they were unable to foresee the disaster that lay ahead. Ireland hardly featured on the British Labour movement's agenda even though within Northern Ireland tension had started to develop once again and during the elections of 1964 Belfast witnessed its worst sectarian riots since the 1930s. The phenomenon of Paisleyism had begun to emerge and so too had the question of civil rights with the establishment in 1964 of the Campaign for Social Justice, but still British socialists were not interested. Ulster rivalries based on religion and national identity appeared to many on the British left as an outdated squabble compared to the momentous events taking place around the world. The 1960s saw Britain disengage from the last of her colonies in Africa and the left were satisfied that Britain's Imperial era had finally come to an end. Areas with willing populations such as the Falklands, Gibraltar, Hong Kong and Northern Ireland seemed to be of no interest: nobody on the left, from the Labour Party to the Trotskyites were able to see the problems which lay ahead in these areas.

During the 1960s the debate in the British Labour movement was of a very different nature to that which existed during the 1980s or 1990s. Issues such as minority rights, racism, gay rights, civil liberties, environmental and third world concerns hardly featured in left-wing debate prior to the 1970s. The matters which were of greatest importance were, for the Labour Party, its attempt to try and build on the Attlee government's achievements\textsuperscript{18} and for the wider left (especially the Communist Party) its support for nuclear disarmament, opposition to the Vietnam war and agitation within the growing shop

\textsuperscript{17} Callaghan, J. \textit{Time and Chance} (1987) p.270.
stewards’ movement. Terms which have now entered the political mainstream such as ‘loyalist veto’, ‘Catholic ghettos’, ‘sectarian divide’ and ‘Irish dimension’, for example, were simply not a part of the British left’s vocabulary. How Northern Ireland was being run seemed to be of as much concern to the average British socialist as matters such as the workings of local government on the Isle of Man or the Shetland Islands. Even Tony Benn (who was to become such a vociferous opponent of Unionism in the 1980s) stated, after a visit to Northern Ireland as a government minister in May 1968, that his meeting with Brian Faulkner, the Stormont minister for commerce, “gave me an idea of what an advantage it is to have a separate government, and I could see why the Scottish Nationalists are enthusiastic about the idea.”

When the first signs of an impending crisis in Northern Ireland appeared, they were met with a certain amount of bewilderment and a complete lack of understanding. Ignorance of the Irish problem within the Labour leadership appears breathtaking. Even within the Labour cabinet, as late as May 1969, ministers were suggesting intelligence gathering to find out more about the Ulster problem. Richard Crossman, in his Diaries, describes his inquiry in the cabinet about the RUC thus: “Of course I gather they are oppressive but we haven’t got any reliable picture of the degree of their oppression.” Seven months previously, television pictures had shown the RUC batonning unarmed civil rights demonstrators in Derry.

The outstanding exception within the Labour movement was a back bench pressure group, the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster, which was set up in 1965 by the Labour MP Paul Rose and sponsored by up to 100 MP’s including individuals such as Stan Orme, Michael Foot, David Owen, Eric Heffer, Roy Hattersley and Kevin McNamara. The

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21 Bell, G. op cit. p.103-4.
CDU was unique within the Labour movement in so far as that it was the only body which mirrored the civil rights movement in trying to highlight problems such as anti-Catholic discrimination, gerrymandering in local elections and police excesses in Northern Ireland. Although the CDU contained MPs who had been part of the Friends of Ireland group in the 1940s, in sharp contrast to this group the CDU was not interested in promoting the Irish nationalist cause either through the Nationalist Party or the Dublin government, or by arguing for re-unification; instead they focused solely on the question of civil rights abuses. It is also interesting to note that the CDU could not be described as left-wing, indeed Paul Rose was to ultimately leave the Labour Party to join the SDP in the 1980s; the SDP was itself was set up by fellow CDU member David Owen. There can be no excuse for the lack of understanding within the Labour leadership mentioned earlier, because the CDU continually lobbied the government about the Ulster situation. As early as the summer of 1967 the CDU presented to the Wilson government a report detailing the many undemocratic shortcomings on the part of the Stormont regime, following a visit to the province in the April. The report concluded by requesting a Royal Commission to look into the government of Northern Ireland, but Downing Street was not interested. When Rose suggested that they should at least appoint an ombudsman for Northern Ireland, he was told that it would not be possible for the British government to impose such a measure. Two years later Stormont had to introduce just such an ombudsman. During its last three years in office the Wilson government ran into more and more difficulties regardless of developments in Northern Ireland. The government began to lose direction, unemployment continued to rise (with an increase of 10% during 1967-70), back bench revolts became more and more frequent and the growth in trade union militancy led to

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Barbara Castle introducing the ill fated ‘In Place of Strife’ white paper on industrial relations which nearly split the movement.\textsuperscript{23} In addition to this Party membership had dropped by about 15\% from 1965 to 1970.\textsuperscript{24}

It does seem evident that with so many problems and with a leader who certainly could not be described as a conviction politician, the Labour government was determined to avoid the Ulster problem for as long as possible. What is also curious is that Wilson did not seem overly concerned by the fact that television pictures were being transmitted around the world showing a part of the United Kingdom in political turmoil with police attacking demonstrators holding placards demanding ‘one man one vote’. As a British prime minister who attached such significance to Britain’s standing abroad (especially in the US) one can perhaps only explain this by the fact that Wilson did not tend to think of Northern Ireland as an integral part of Britain.\textsuperscript{25} Wilson had the misconception that because there seemed to be such anger from the Unionist right, by the time the civil rights movement got off the ground, that O’Neill’s policies must surely be going in the right direction anyway. Discussions in Downing Street at the time seem to have evolved around the question of how to deal with O’Neill in terms of appeasing the demand for reforms by the civil rights movement but at the same time keeping him in office in the face of right-wing Unionist opposition; taking over control of the province, in the event the collapse of the Stormont government, was the very last thing that Downing Street wanted.\textsuperscript{26} The Labour leadership appeared to be lurching back and forth with the basic feeling that surely it must support the civil rights movement (to anyone described as a socialist, they were certainly making reasonable if not highly desirable demands) but then realising their

\textsuperscript{23} Jefferys, K. op cit. pp.71-76.
\textsuperscript{24} Thompson, W. The Long Death of British Labourism (1993) p.79.
\textsuperscript{26} Wilson, H. op cit. p.692.
responsibility as Her Majesty’s Government deciding that it would be best to stand by the Unionist government.\textsuperscript{27} Having ignored the CDU and the impending crisis for so long, Wilson finally set up a Northern Ireland Committee in the cabinet, not to give serious thought to Ulster’s internal political problems but, rather, to finally begin preparing for the worst. James Callaghan (who was initially kept off the committee) took ultimate responsibility for Northern Ireland as Home Secretary. When O’Neill finally resigned in April 1969 and was succeeded by the more right-wing Chichester-Clark the Labour leadership’s thinking appears to have changed somewhat. Although Chichester-Clark was even less favourable to the CDU, Wilson realised that his election meant that Ulster had reached an impasse out of which he could not see it coming in the immediate future. The idea of being seen to be supporting Ulster’s Tory Party was obviously quite unpalatable but there was no real alternative: Northern Ireland was virtually a one party state and Labour Party thinking had certainly not begun to conceive of such ideas as power sharing or any other form of consociational government to deal with what was essentially an inter ethnic conflict. Both Callaghan and Healey argued that Downing Street had to support “the Protestant Government. The Protestants are the majority and we can’t afford to alienate them.”\textsuperscript{28}

It was no great surprise when, on the 14th of August 1969, Wilson finally agreed to deploy British troops, first to Londonderry and later to Belfast. Although, today, some on the British left try to talk of Labour’s ‘shameful’ decision to send in the British army to prop up the Unionist regime, at the time hardly anybody in the Labour movement or the wider left actually condemned the decision. With people like Bernadette Devlin and Kevin McNamara calling for the British government to introduce direct rule and working class

\textsuperscript{27} Crossman, R. op cit. p.463 & p.478 also Callaghan, J. op cit.
\textsuperscript{28} Crossman, R. op cit. p.622.
women in the beleaguered Catholic ghettos happily welcoming the British soldiers, it is hardly surprising that in fact most on the left saw little harm in Wilson's decision. Despite the heightened profile of the civil rights movement during the late sixties the left had not developed a coherent analysis of the Ulster problem, even though a curious interest had developed. A lot of left-wing papers had started to include articles about Ireland but they often amounted to little more than brief histories of the Irish struggle and perhaps a few quotes from James Connolly (the one Irish republican for whom almost every British left group seems to have completely uncritical admiration). Even as late as July 1969 a march to Trafalgar Square in support of the civil rights movement could only attract an estimated 1,000 demonstrators and most of these were members of Irish groups such as the Connolly Association rather than Labour Party activists.\(^\text{29}\) When British troops were finally deployed some left-wing journals, such as *Tribune*, positively welcomed the decision and naively envisaged the troops being recalled after a short period of time once a political solution had been achieved.\(^\text{30}\) Most of the left concentrated its efforts on demanding a recall of Parliament in order to discuss the crisis. As for the newly reinvigorated Trotskyite left, which had grown in stature following the Soviet crushing of the 'Prague Spring' and had won many new disciples throughout the student protests of the sixties, it also showed a certain amount of confusion and naivety over the Ulster crisis. One of the immediate problems for those trying to develop a Marxist, class based analysis of the crisis, was that whilst they automatically felt a need to support the Catholic demands, the very people trying to crush the civil rights movement by force were the Protestant proletariat. It was the existence of the sectarian divide between the Protestant and Catholic working class which caused such problems for the Labour movement and continued to do so right

\(^{29}\) *Morning Star*, 14 July 1969.

through to the 1980s. Although many on the Trotskyite left wanted to portray events as simply a struggle against British imperialism, the fact there was also this sectarian conflict within the Irish working class meant that Militant, for example, argued that British troops ultimately served the interests of the ruling class and that they “cannot provide lasting protection to the Protestant-Catholic [sic] workers”. Instead they called for a “common Trade Union Defence force”. Supposedly, because the trade unions were the only non-sectarian group in Ireland, the Militants felt that they could look to them to unite both the Catholic and Protestant proletariat. A number of individuals on the Labour left, who were to become such vocal supporters of the ‘troops out’ cause, such as Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone also saw no reason to criticise Wilson’s decision to deploy British troops at the time. Tony Benn’s only concern was that Westminster might well get dragged into running the province; one can only assume that he still thought it better to leave responsibility for Northern Ireland’s governance to the Unionists.

When Labour went into opposition, following the election defeat of June 1970, the following four years of Conservative rule witnessed the most violent years in Northern Ireland’s history. The debate around the Irish question began to shift towards the issue of Irish reunification and the matter of Britain’s historically oppressive role in Ireland. Part of the reason for this was the emergence of the Provisional IRA, who began to openly engage the British army and were consequently able to present the problem as re-opening of the age old conflict between Irish nationalism and British imperialism. The Conservative government did not help this by clearly choosing to support the Unionists and adopt a repressive security policy to try and thwart the newly revived republican movement. The

32 Livingstone, K. If Voting Changed Anything They’d Abolish It (1987) p.27.
33 Benn, T. op cit. p.199.
consequence of this was that much of the left seemed to be simply responding to events as they unfolded and often used Ulster as another way of attacking the Tories in a way that certainly would not have been done had a Labour government been managing the crisis. The Labour Party itself witnessed a minor, brief re-emergence of pro-united Ireland sentiment as the party shifted to the left after the 1970 election defeat, but overall Ireland still remained very low on Labour's agenda. Despite the epic events taking place in Ulster, which repeatedly stole the headlines during the early seventies, it was only the far left that took a keen interest in the crisis: the Labour front bench position remained one of bipartisanship with the Tories. When, in August 1971, Stormont introduced internment, Callaghan continued to support the government even though the Tories' attitude was to simply leave things to the Unionists because they knew best. Callaghan's only complaint was that no political initiative had followed internment, yet Labour conferences had previously voted to oppose internment. With back bench unease growing over bipartisanship and individuals such as Paul Rose and Kevin McNamara leading the attack on front bench ambiguity, Wilson's latent sympathy with the idea of a United Ireland re-emerged following the violence that flared up after the introduction of internment. On November 25th 1971 Wilson announced to the House of Commons his '15 Point Plan' to achieve eventual Irish re-unification over a fifteen year period. The plan was an example of what many describe as a typically English socialist attitude towards Ireland because the proposals included the suggestion that the Republic "would seek... membership of the Commonwealth recognising the Queen as Head..." and even went on to ask for changes to the Republic's constitution in order to "give assurance that there would be no constitutional impediment to the creation of a National Health Service on the British model" and also that

34 Bell, G. op cit. pp. 112-15.
changes should be made to social security, family planning, and censorship laws.\textsuperscript{35} Bew and Patterson were to criticise what they described as the “superficial nature of the strategy”\textsuperscript{36} and there can be no doubt that although Wilson had made visits to Ireland (north and south) prior to the decision, the plan does appear somewhat naive and made the paternalistic assumption, so often adopted by those devising Labour Party policy right up to the 1990s, that a British Labour government could resolve the Irish problem ‘from above’. Even people such as Kevin McNamara might have been surprised at the announcement at the time, but did not in fact attach a great deal of credence or hope to an idea which he believed suited Wilson only whilst in opposition.\textsuperscript{37} It might be fair to say that Wilson simply found the idea of disentangling the British state from the Irish problem rather attractive at the time, but the Labour Party as a whole had still not come near to developing a realistic policy which set out to achieve a solution based on recognising and trying to accommodate the aspirations of both the traditions in Ireland.

The Labour Party had completely lost the initiative when, in March 1973, the Tories produced their white paper outlining the idea of a Council of Ireland and a new devolved government for Northern Ireland. Callaghan had been replaced by Merlyn Rees as Labour spokesperson on Irish affairs in November 1971 and after Heath introduced direct rule in March 1972 with William Whitelaw as the first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rees consequently became the shadow secretary and from this period right up to 1980 the question of a united Ireland was almost completely sidelined within the Labour movement. In 1972 and again in 1974 the miners had successfully struck against the Tory government’s wage constraints and so political debate within the Labour Party centred

\textsuperscript{35} Wilson, H. op cit. pp. 68-70.
\textsuperscript{36} Bew, P. & Patterson, H. \textit{The British State and the Ulster Crisis} (1985) p.40.
\textsuperscript{37} McNamara, K. Interview April 1995.
around the questions of incomes policy, state intervention to bolster Britain’s ailing economy and the issue of the government’s relationship with the ever growing trade union movement. After the second miners’ strike the Tories were defeated in the general election of February 1974 and the Labour government which took over was the most hapless and incompetent since the war and it seemed as if the Ulster crisis was simply the last of its priorities: they certainly could not afford the luxury of going on an idealistic crusade to solve the Irish question. Rees and the rest of the Party were happy to support the Tories’ white paper and the resultant Sunningdale agreement which finalised plans for a Council of Ireland and a power sharing executive comprising Nationalists and Unionists to govern Northern Ireland, which took office on January 1st 1974. Merlyn Rees had never been greatly enthusiastic about the Sunningdale agreement. He considered the Irish politicians to be of rather low calibre and considered the power sharing venture “a piece of British suburban illusion”. Rees, unlike Wilson, had very little sympathy with Irish nationalism. He has talked of how his father had served in Ireland with the British army after the Irish rising in 1916 and at the Somme with the Ulster division (an important part of Ulster folklore which has long given weight to the Protestant demand that Britain should be obliged to reciprocate their loyalty) but nevertheless considered Ireland particularly conservative, traditionalist and rather a strange place to understand.

Within less than three months of taking office the new Labour government, so conscious of the strength of working class militancy, were confronted with the Ulster Workers’ Council strike; launched to try to derail the Council of Ireland and the power sharing Executive. This strike, which was the most overtly political strike in 20th century British or Irish history, created a great deal of frustration and political confusion.

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throughout the Labour movement and especially amongst the far left groups. The strike only lasted for two weeks and although many argued that its strength lay in intimidation and the strong arm tactics of the Loyalist paramilitaries, the Unionists on the Executive considered that it had such support and was doing so much harm to Northern Ireland that they resigned thus bringing the power sharing experiment to an end and leaving the Labour Party with little idea as to what to do next. Merlyn Rees and Stan Orme (his assistant) were taken aback by the success of the strike and they began to talk of the emergence of a new form of 'Protestant nationalism' or 'Ulster nationalism' which had developed over the preceding years. Rees entered into his diary that "It had to be faced that the community were in favour of what the Ulster Workers Council were doing - Ulster Nationalism was growing". As has been outlined earlier Labour did not have the political clout or confidence to maintain such a liberal idea as power sharing in the face of such a crisis, whereas a Tory government would almost definitely have able to defeat the UWC strike, or would have perhaps carried the confidence of the Protestant population with them, thus avoiding the strike (although abolition of the Council of Ireland would have to have been part of the deal). The UWC strike also revealed the Labour Party's, and in particular Merlyn Rees' lack of authority in government, because they were not prepared to demand action on the part of the military establishment to defeat the strike. When John Hume prepared a plan to secure oil distribution throughout the province the army were reluctant to use force to ensure the implementation of the plan because they wanted to avoid a showdown with the Loyalist paramilitaries. In fact the British army were quite intransigent about being used in anyway to smash the strike and it has been asserted that

40 Times, 4 June 1974.
41 Sunday Times, 18 June 1978.
42 Rees op cit. p.85.
43 Ibid. p.127. also Bell, G. op cit., p.122.
many troops and RUC men were openly fraternising with Loyalist paramilitaries on the
picket lines. The Executive did not stand a chance; Rees was resigned to its defeat even
before the strike had begun - "as I told Harold Wilson soon after taking office, it would
collapse before long, which happened in May".

The UWC strike was a significant test for the British Labour movement and the
wider left. It raised many questions for the left such as Labour's commitment to the
working class even if they were striking for a cause with which almost the entire British left
did not agree, which community (Catholic or Protestant) did Labour empathise with more
and the whole question of Britain's relationship with Ireland (especially the issue of
financial subsidies to the north) and the idea there was in fact two Irelands or at least two
different nationalisms. Whilst Wilson and Orme had sympathies with Irish nationalism,
Merlyn Rees did not. Unlike Wilson, he considered the UWC a body made up of bona fide
"active trade unionists" and was annoyed with the Irish government for considering the
Provisional IRA to be as political as the UWC, Rees evidently only considered the latter to
be politically motivated. He was also irritated by Dublin's request that the British army be
used to defeat the strikers and his reaction gives an interesting insight into his attitude to
the whole Irish question: "I had long believed that Dublin did not fully comprehend the
situation in the North but this letter [asking Wilson to use the troops against the strikers]
took the breath away. What, I wondered would a Dublin government ever do with the
Protestant community in general and the working class in particular if its long-term aim of a
United Ireland was ever realised? Use the army to keep East Belfast down?" This then
leads to the question, why was Rees and his successor Mason, prepared to use the army to

47 Ibid. p.65.
48 Ibid. p.73.
keep West Belfast down? This in turn makes one consider to what extent did the Labour Party at this time, give serious thought to trying to accommodate and accept the nationalist tradition within Ulster, if they felt that Dublin did not respect the legitimate aspirations of the unionist tradition. The Labour Party, by the mid-1990s finally recognised the problem of trying to achieve what has become popularly known as ‘parity of esteem’ between the two traditions, instead of trying to come down in favour of just one tradition which the policy of ‘unity by consent’ did during the eighties. The issues of greatest irritation for Wilson seemed to be economic and financial, rather than political. As has been described earlier Wilson did not think of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the British state and the fact that this economic backwater was being subsidised by the British exchequer, made the behaviour of the UWC all the more infuriating. When the strike began he quickly cancelled a meeting which had been organised to plan a £9 million subsidy for the Belfast shipyards and after the strikers had won their victory he complained, in his television broadcast, that “People on this side of the water... have seen the taxes they have poured out almost without regard to cost - over £300 million a year this year with the cost of army operations on top of that going into Northern Ireland... Yet people who benefit from this now viciously defy Westminster... spend their lives sponging on Westminster and British democracy and then systematically assault democratic methods. Who do these people think they are?”

The problem was that they saw themselves as the same as the people ‘on this side of the water’; Wilson clearly did not. Jones and Keating have pointed to this dilemma in Labour Party thinking at this time and rightly pointed out that no Labour leader would have condemned British workers on strike in the same way: the problem for Labour was that “although Wilson regarded the ‘Ulster Worker’ strikers as outside the British political

49 Wilson, H. op cit. p.75 & p.7
community, he still presumed them to be subject to its sovereignty". The Conservative Party has also developed the same view of Ulster Protestants, but the problem for Labour was that it was all the more unsettling and confusing that Sunningdale was defeated by the Protestant working class when, for so long, many on the left had blamed Ulster’s sectarianism on the ‘Orange ascendancy’. The legacy of the UWC strike was a Labour Party bereft of ideas on Northern Ireland for the next six years.

The Ulster Workers’ Council strike also caused considerable problems for the far left in the movement, as it witnessed a rare and resounding victory for a section of the working class but not for what the left considered political progress. The Militant tendency criticised the UWC strike as being simply a ‘lock out’, but it was also critical of the Provisionals and Dublin. Militant has consistently been the far left group most sympathetic to the loyalist working class, so that after the strike it was scathing about Wilson’s vitriolic speech and also about those who had demanded that the army be used to crush the strike. Interestingly, it had begun to develop a position of opposition to the idea of arguing for reunification because of its sympathy for Protestants who feared the “theocratic” state in the south: “The capitalist Republic represents lower living standards, worse social services and pensions to them [in the North]”.

The strike also made them consider that a likely outcome would only be re-partition, with a Pakistan/India type conflict resulting in Catholics being forced out of Belfast and Protestants being forced out of border areas. To varying degrees the UWC strike forced a rethink amongst the entire British left; the idea that they should just give their support to the oppressed Catholic minority was evidently

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51 Militant, 31 May 1974.
52 Militant, 24 May 1974.
too simplistic and greater consideration had to be given to the problem of loyalist working class intransigence, rather than just blaming the ‘Orange ascendancy’.

Up until Labour lost power in 1979, Party policy focused purely on achieving an improvement in the area of security in Northern Ireland and little else. Rees introduced, in 1975, a new elected assembly to be known as the Northern Ireland Convention, but this served only to fill the political vacuum after Sunningdale and show to the outside world that Labour were trying to stand back and allow Ulster politicians sort out their own problems. In contrast to government policy in the 1980s and 1990s the view was that the roles of both Dublin and Westminster should be played down and an attempt be made to try and give the Northern Ireland parties centre stage. The Convention ultimately failed and was wound up in March 1976. Few people even wanted to discuss Ireland and there was only a small, silent minority, including people such as Tony Benn, Michael Meacher, Eric Heffer and Tam Dalyell, who saw British withdrawal as the solution. Part of the reason for this was that morale within the Labour Party was very low. The Callaghan government was drifting from crisis to crisis and, regardless of the constant wrangling over the Common Market and economic policy, the most perplexing question for the movement was that of the relationship between the trade unions and the Labour government. In the midst of all these problems Roy Mason, appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in September 1976, set out to try and simply thwart the Provisional IRA militarily, bring some semblance of normality to the province and maintain direct rule for the foreseeable future because he actually considered it the best form of government for Northern Ireland. Other than that nobody in the Party had the will to embark on any kind of new initiative to

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53 Cunningham, M.J. op cit. p.93.
55 Irish Times, 6 Nov. 1976.
find a political solution to the Irish problem. Mason's junior Minister at the NIO, Don Concannon, has argued that the instability in Northern Ireland was such that there was little possibility of developing a considered political initiative because they were "running the place by the seat of our pants." In addition Mason considered Ulster politicians to be rather incompetent and unreasonable, he therefore embarked upon his job with a great deal of enthusiasm believing (in a rather typically English way) that he could sort out the Irish regardless of any major political initiative. With the Conservative Party supporting him and the Labour leadership happy with the new direction in policy, Mason became rather intolerant of criticism especially from Irish nationalist quarters. The new policy initiated by Rees and enhanced by Mason has become known as the three pronged policy of Ulsterisation, normalisation and criminalisation. The essential aim of the policy was to end the war like appearance of Ulster by reducing the army's role and involving the RUC to a greater extent, and also by ending internment and convicting terrorist suspects through the newly introduced no-jury courts, so that the paramilitaries would be portrayed as ordinary criminals. Without realising it Mason was actually exacerbating the problem, even though the short term reductions in violence appeared impressive. The wider left was also unable to foresee the importance of the prison conflict which was to develop over the next four or five years. In fact the lack of interest in Irish affairs meant that when allegations began to be made that widespread torture was being used to extract confessions from terrorist suspects as part of the new policy of securing convictions through the courts, the left was slow to seize on the significance of this new development and it was left to Amnesty International to carry out an investigation which concluded that "maltreatment of suspected terrorists by the RUC has taken place with sufficient frequency to warrant the establishment

56 Concannon, D. Interview, 11 March 1998.
of a public enquiry to investigate it." Although some on the far left did take up the issue of torture, very little pressure was applied from the back benches apart from the odd criticism by Kevin McNamara, Paul Rose and Ian Mikardo, so that Mason managed get off quite easily on the issue of torture. As for the H-Block campaign initiated by republican prisoners in protest at the removal of Special Category Status, there was even less concern even amongst the hard left. By 1978 the situation had deteriorated to the extent that prisoners were smearing excrement on cell walls, as well as refusing to wear prison clothing in order to reiterate the point that they considered themselves political prisoners of war. As a consequence Mason was publicly criticised by Cardinal O’Fiaich over his prisons policy. Despite the fact that many in Ireland considered this both a political and a human rights issue, in Britain very few were interested. The only group to try to campaign on the prison issue was the Troops Out Movement (a leftist, British based pressure group which grew out of the Anti-Internment League). The Labour back benches were completely indifferent even though the H-Block campaign was to develop into a milestone event in Irish history which would actually help to alter Labour policy in the early 1980s.

The one decision that the Callaghan government took which was to confound utterly the idea of Labour’s ‘historic commitment to a united Ireland’, was the decision in 1977 to form a pact with the Ulster Unionists in order to safeguard Labour’s fragile majority in the House of Commons. Ironically it was the one time Campaign for Democracy in Ulster supporter, Michael Foot, who first approached the Unionists about a deal which would also lead to an increase in the number of Northern Ireland seats, which would inevitably result in simply a greater number of Unionist members. In addition to

58 Bell, G. op cit. p. 131.
60 Guardian, 2 Aug. 1978.
this Mason, despite his general disdain for Irish politicians, had already alienated the main Northern nationalist party: the Social, Democratic and Labour Party. The SDLP, as well as being Labour’s sister party, was the voice of moderate Irish nationalism in opposition to violent republicanism and almost every Northern Ireland minister has been aware of the importance of maintaining good relations with a party which held out the only hope of drawing Catholics away from the Provisionals. But not Mason; he had already angered the SDLP over the question of torture allegations, his failure to attempt a new political initiative and his apparent desire to achieve simply a military solution. The behaviour of the Labour government had helped to push the SDLP to the right, with the party trying to water down its socialist content and adopting a more traditional nationalist agenda. This shift to the right resulted in the expulsion of the left-winger Paddy Devlin in 1977.

Callaghan’s decision to broker a deal with their historic enemies: the Ulster Unionists, infuriated the SDLP. It seemed to be conclusively evident that Labour were bereft of both principles and ideals on the subject of Northern Ireland and were prepared to go to any lengths to secure power for itself at Westminster. Although some on the Labour back benches were outraged by the decision, opposition to the deal was relatively small. When the Redistribution of [Northern Ireland] Seats Bill was finally presented to the House in November 1978, only 38 Labour MP’s voted against the government. This event perhaps more than any other highlights the nature of the Labour Party on the Irish question during this period. The idea that Britain’s socialist party could do such a deal with people who were to the right of the Tories and actually increase their numbers in the House seems incredible (the increase has never been reversed), but Ireland was virtually an irrelevance in Labour politics: the main issue of relevance was maintaining power.

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63 Cunningham, M.J. op cit. p.259.
In ideological terms also, some elements in the Labour Party during the mid-1970s were embarking on a complete rethink in terms of analysing the Ulster conflict. Dick Barry, a Labour Party policy advisor on Northern Ireland, produced two research papers in 1976 and 1978 which represented what were essentially pro-unionist revisions of Irish history. Although the NEC rejected them, the documents were an indication of the extent to which the new ideas of the ‘two nation theory’ or ‘Protestant nationalism’ were competing with the notions of a Irish reunification and British withdrawal. The arguments were that Irish nationalism was socially reactionary and that Ulster unionism was the inevitable consequence of a community under threat from an alien, Catholic/Gaelic nationalism. The republican movement was described as being, at the beginning of the century, “concerned to promote the social power of the Roman Catholic Church”, whilst Stormont’s abuses and discriminatory tactics were explained as not being the intended policy of the Unionist Party but simply the only possible “response to Catholic nationalist attempts to disrupt democratic government in Northern Ireland”. In explaining the sectarian conflict, Barry went on to argue that loyalist violence was an inevitable response to the Provisional IRA threat and that groups such as the UVF and UDA ought to be described as ‘counter terrorist organisations’. Geoff Bell argued that “This re-write of history went on to reverse everything most socialists in Britain and elsewhere had ever thought about Ireland”. The contrast between the analyses which were appearing during the seventies and the arguments which were to appear during the early 1980s, in the Labour movement, could not be more stark. Labour activists were being sapped of the will to embark on any campaign to change party policy on Ireland, as the troublesome seventies

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66 Bell, G. op cit. p.126.
wore on; that is if any will existed at all. One of the arguments for the lack of ideas or new initiatives on Ireland, in the Labour Party during the 1970s was that party membership had been declining consistently throughout the decade and the type of young radical socialists that could have injected some vitality into the party, were more likely to be attracted into one of the ever growing Trotskyite groups. It is ironic, therefore that the one Trotskyite grouping which operated within the Labour Party was Militant (they also dominated the Labour Party Young Socialists) and of all the far left groups, their analysis of the Ulster conflict happened to be closest to the Dick Barry school of thought.

When Labour were finally defeated in the House of Commons on the vote of confidence that would precipitate the general election in 1979, two votes that they hoped that they could rely on, namely Gerry Fitt of the SDLP and Frank Maguire the independent Nationalist, were in fact to let them down. On both counts it was due to Labour’s behaviour towards Ireland: Fitt because of the deal with the Ulster Unionists and Maguire because of the prisons issue. Labour had unwittingly sown the seeds of further problems in Ireland, because of alienating moderate nationalist opinion, further disillusioning northern Catholics, because of the ruthless security policy and perhaps most significant of all, its failure to resolve the prisons crisis. The party had lost any idealism; “In effect, Labour in the 1970s had become ‘all but doctrineless’”. It had failed to show imagination in looking for a solution, such as trying to accommodate and work with nationalist Ireland, especially the Dublin government or trying to draw the Unionists into taking a more pragmatic stance. Yet the Tory administration which took over in 1979 was to at least try and develop precisely such policies.

67 Ibid. p.133.
Chapter 2: ‘The Left-wing Backlash’
Labour Policy 1979-83

Following the Conservative victory in the general election of May 1979, the Labour Party began a traumatic and ultimately divisive reassessment of its ideology, its direction and its very purpose in British politics. Since 1964, the party had only spent the period of 1970-74 out of office and yet the left bitterly complained that the years in office had been wasted with nothing to show except ever rising unemployment and an economy in crisis. Eric Shaw describes the left-wing assault on the Party’s leadership as an attack on the ‘revisionist social democracy’ which had been Labour’s ruling body of ideas up until the late 1970s. The showdown was basically between socialists and social democrats within the movement. Social democracy had been in the ascendant throughout the sixties and seventies, but with the dropping of Keynesian economics and the decision to ask for an International Monetary Fund loan, the Labour government was attacked by the left which inevitably argued that social democracy was bankrupt. Shaw also argues that because Britain was “now so entangled in the web of an open, highly interdependent world economy where vast power was wielded by the financial markets that a socialist or social democratic national economic strategy had ceased to be a viable option”. In addition to failing to fully appreciate this, the left also “had an exaggerated view of the amount of power that victory in the electoral process and the possession of a democratic mandate actually conferred upon a government in an internationally integrated market system.” It is only with the emergence of ‘New Labour’ under Tony Blair in the 1990s that such notions have been laid to rest and recognition of the significance of the global economy fully recognised. Ministers in the Callaghan government considered their actions to be

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70 Ibid. p.15.
necessary given the international economic climate following the oil price increases of the early seventies but, to the left, they were class traitors. All the ingredients were in place to induce the left in to an all out assault on the right-wing leadership after the 1979 election defeat. Groups such as the Institute for Workers Control, the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy and, later in 1980, the Rank and File Mobilising Committee gained considerable influence throughout the movement. In addition to this “several of the major unions no longer displayed instinctive loyalty to the leadership, and after 1979 the left had a spokesman, in Tony Benn, who was capable of securing broad support for policy changes.”

At the Labour Party conference in 1979, at Brighton, the leadership were virtually on trial and the right did not have either the confidence or popular support to resist the left-wing backlash. By 1981 Callaghan had been replaced by the left-wing Michael Foot as party leader, Tony Benn had only missed out on securing the deputy leadership by 1% of the conference vote, policies such as unilateral nuclear disarmament, withdrawal from the Common Market and extended public ownership had been adopted and finally the party had made the decision to return to its historic commitment to a united Ireland.

It would be wrong to assume that the 1981 conference decision to adopt the policy of achieving “the unification of Ireland by agreement and consent” was simply another part of Labour’s left-wing shift. The conflict which took place between socialists and social democrats after May 1979, it could be argued, was mirrored by a conflict on Irish policy between those of the Dick Barry ‘two nation’ school of thought and those who sought an end to bipartisanship with the Tories. However, for a long time, the left concentrated on achieving organisational changes, such as mandatory reselection of parliamentary candidates whilst Ireland remained virtually an irrelevance. Although Roy

Mason had a vote of no confidence passed against him by his Barnsley Constituency Labour Party in September 1979 and the left undoubtedly saw him as the type of figure that they would like to have deselected, the arguments against him, in fact, had little to do with his record as Northern Ireland Secretary of State, but instead were concerned with his outspoken support for membership of the Common Market. When, in August 1979, a march was organised by the Troops Out Movement and others, to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland, the event was sponsored by only thirteen Labour MPs and just four Constituency Labour Parties. Although most of those who organised this march considered Labour’s performance in Northern Ireland to have been appalling, throughout the Labour rank and file Irish policy came a long way down the long list of complaints levelled at the leadership after Mrs Thatcher had been elected.

At leadership level, there remained a commitment to bipartisanship throughout 1979 and 1980. Roy Mason remained Labour’s front bench spokesperson on Northern Ireland until mid-June when Callaghan replaced him with Brynmor John as the new shadow minister with Tom Pendry (who had served briefly under Roy Mason) as his assistant. This appointment was made some weeks after the shadow cabinet elections were held and John himself had not been elected but was picked from the back benches as a rather colourless replacement for Mason. Even the Tories attacked Labour for this decision, pointing out that they evidently did not consider Ulster an important enough issue to warrant a shadow cabinet member as spokesperson. When appointed, John was clearly uncertain about his new role; “He declined to say what his views on Northern Ireland were,

74 Guardian, 4 March 1980.
75 Committee for Withdrawal from Ireland, Ireland: Voices for Withdrawal (1979) p.63.
saying he must acquaint himself thoroughly first." The new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Humphrey Atkins, was given an easy ride by John and Pendry. In his very first contribution as the opposition spokesperson in July 1979 Brynmor John made clear that "First, there will be a broad maintenance of that support which the Opposition give to the Government, and which has hitherto existed, particularly in relation to security." Front bench speeches on Irish affairs were characterised by a bland and equivocal tone with Brynmor John often more concerned with cuts in public spending in Northern Ireland rather than with the constitutional question. At this stage opposition to bipartisanship only amounted to a few left-wing backbenchers who included Frank Dobson, Martin Flannery, Joan Maynard, Ian Mikardo, Jo Richardson, Jock Stallard, Denis Skinner and Clive Soley. In Tom Pendry’s first contribution he articulated current mainstream Labour thinking towards the Provisionals arguing that the government were struggling “not against a bona fide enemy or political movement with a clearly defined philosophy, prepared to win the hearts and minds of the people of Northern Ireland by democratic means. Instead, the Government are dealing with a small, dedicated group of fanatics”. The significance of this and Brynmor John’s statement on bipartisanship and security, mentioned earlier, lies not in the context of the debate in 1979 but in the sea change in Labour/left-wing thinking over the following two years. Attitudes to bipartisanship and security (or more specifically the Prevention of Terrorism Act) as well as attitudes towards the Provisionals and the validity of republican aspirations with the rise of Sinn Fein were to alter drastically leaving men such as John and Pendry to appear, with hindsight, as a rather uninspiring postscript to the Rees/Mason era.

78 Hansard Vol. 969 Col. 940 (2 July 1979).
79 Ibid. Vols 969-975. See votes on direct rule, EPA and other Northern Ireland debates.
When Ireland was finally debated at the Labour Party conference in October 1979, Brynmor John did not make a contribution to the debate. It was only at the Brighton conference that the leadership was forced to reconsider its determination to continue with the safe option of maintaining bipartisanship. Northern Ireland had not been discussed at conference since 1974 and although in 1979 only four constituencies sent in resolutions on the subject, the NEC were being pressured to call a debate but tried to argue that there was just not enough time. It was finally agreed by a show of hands that half an hour be allotted to the last day of conference to discuss Northern Ireland and this was only after a 400 signature petition had been submitted calling for a debate. The debate itself evolved around two resolutions; the first of which called for British withdrawal and the second called for an end to bipartisanship with the Tories. Although the ex-Northern Ireland minister Stan Orme spoke in opposition to British withdrawal, it was unusual to see the left-wing Michael Foot speak to oppose both resolutions and to actually defend the position of bipartisanship using the tactic of promising delegates that if they voted down both resolutions then the NEC would set in motion a Northern Ireland policy review. It would appear that after a week in which the leadership had been under such a severe attack from the Labour left, the NEC certainly were not going to allow the spectacle of conference voting to commit a future Labour government to withdraw British rule from Northern Ireland. Over the following years it became clear that a Labour conference would not be likely to actually vote in favour of troops out, but in 1979 the leadership feared that the left-wing backlash was likely to ensure just such an outcome. So the NEC’s Northern Ireland Study Group (which was to eventually advocate Irish re-unification in 1981) came

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83 Bell, G. op cit. p.138.
into being as a result of the leadership's fear that without such a concession the left might have otherwise created a serious problem in the troublesome area of Irish policy.

In November 1979 the government published its proposals for negotiations to achieve a settlement based on devolution. The plan was doomed to failure, not least because the Ulster Unionists refused to join the talks and because the SDLP later boycotted the assembly, but what was significant about the white paper was that it included for the first time the phrase 'Irish dimension'. It took some time for the Labour Party to fully realise the significance of this apparently innocuous term, but over the coming decade it was to become central to the debate on Northern Ireland and to both government policy and Labour Party thinking. It is perhaps unfair to criticise Brynmor John's lack of foresight at this moment in time - few could have predicted the course of events during the eighties - but his response to the proposals lacked imagination and indicated that the front bench was completely out of touch with rank and file opinion. On the subject of a return to Stormont he not only failed to rule it out but simply explained that "We in Parliament would need to ponder very hard the return of such a body as Stormont... elected on a simple majority vote, before we accepted it." If hard pondering was all that stood between the Labour Party and a return to Stormont, which a decade later even the Ulster Unionists had given up arguing for, then progress on Labour's front bench, in terms of imaginative and progressive thinking over the intervening seven years, appeared to have been minimal. Although elements in the wider movement may have started to become restive John and Pendry continued in the same vein, often only criticising the government for its economic policies in Northern Ireland. When, in July 1980, the government introduced its white paper: 'The Government of Northern Ireland: Proposals for Further Discussions' which set

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85 Hansard Vol. 974 Cols 1512-17 (29 Nov. 1979).
out a plan for devolution, Brynmor John responded by announcing that although the PLP preferred the option of power sharing the second proposed option of a majoritarian executive was not opposed. Instead he simply expressed reservations about a proposed council of the elected assembly not being powerful enough in relation to the executive and that there was not an assurance that there would be equality of appointment (between minority and majority parties) for the chair and deputy chair for the proposed departmental committees. But it is worth noting that back bench opposition to the government and to bipartisanship sometimes took the form of just the odd interjection by those such as Martin Flannery or Denis Canavan, but the key figure always contributing to debates on Northern Ireland was Kevin McNamara. The frustration at watching Brynmor John accepting the idea of a majoritarian administration for Northern Ireland, albeit with a few misgivings, was best articulated by Kevin McNamara. It was he who as always articulated the ideological opposition to the government’s proposals and on this occasion took the opportunity to set out clearly his opposition to devolution, independence or integration and to advocate unification with the Republic.

Left-wing agitation in the Labour movement on the question of Irish policy, however, remained negligible throughout 1979. Nevertheless a slow burgeoning of interest in changing Irish policy did begin to develop during late 1979 and 1980. Many of the individuals who were involved in trying to get a debate at the Brighton conference, eventually came together in February 1980 in what was to become known as the Labour Committee on Ireland and organised their first conference in late March, which was attended by representatives of forty four CLPs. This group was made up of mainly rank

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87 Ibid. Vols 969-989.
89 Tribune, (letter by Don Flynn, one of the founders) 1 Feb. 1980.
90 Ibid. 20 June 1980.
and file Labour activists, although three back bench MP's namely Joan Maynard, Ernie Roberts and Jock Stallard, were also active with the committee. They set out simply to try and achieve a change in Labour Party policy which would include an end to bipartisanship along with a commitment to attain Irish re-unification and began producing a journal entitled *Labour and Ireland* in the April. The LCI was to grow continually throughout most of the eighties, both in numbers and influence. In addition to the LCI there also existed the Labour Party Northern Ireland Parliamentary Group which was made up of twenty eight back bench Labour MPs as well as four Lords. Although this group had been dormant throughout most of the seventies, after the election of Jock Stallard as chair in October 1980 they began holding monthly meetings to stimulate debate on Irish policy and apply pressure on the front bench team to abandon bipartisanship with the Tories. The Campaign for Democracy in Ulster was still operating with Kevin McNamara as chairman and Lord Fenner Brockway as president but the campaign was wound down in the early eighties. Despite the existence of these groups, pressure on the leadership to change course on Irish policy was in fact minimal. Nevertheless one can safely assume that within the leadership the argument that as a socialist party Labour could not continue bipartisanship with their historic enemies in such an important policy area, must have carried some considerable weight especially now that they had the luxury of being in opposition. The decision by the NEC to set up the Northern Ireland Study Group did seem to satisfy the left-wing critics for a short period of time. Instead of attacking the leadership over bipartisanship and their record on Ireland in government, a lot of these people were prepared to wait and see what the Study Group would come up with and to concentrate

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91 *Irish Times*, 3 April 1980.
their efforts on trying to stimulate debate in the direction of considering Irish re-unification as the best solution to the Ulster problem.

Within left-wing debate, pro-Union sentiment still existed after 1979 and was fairly influential. The Campaign for Labour Representation in Northern Ireland (CLR) emerged in the late seventies with a number of ex-B&ICO members making up an organisation based in Belfast, which included people from both unionist and nationalist backgrounds. Their main demand was for the British Labour Party to organise and contest elections in Northern Ireland. For this reason they were to become the Labour Committee on Ireland's main ideological opponents throughout the eighties. The LCI and many on the Labour left dismissed the CLR as pro-Unionist because they did not envisage an all-Ireland solution but sought to establish the British (rather than the Irish) Labour Party within the six counties. Despite this opposition the CLR became a very persistent lobby group; they worked hard at lobbying MPs and got their message across in the letters pages of *Tribune* and *Labour Weekly* to a far greater extent than did the LCI.93 One of their supporters was the MP Frank Allaun, who presented to the NEC Study Group a paper arguing for extension of the Labour Party to Northern Ireland.94 Dick Barry also continued to exert considerable influence as a key advocate of the 'two nation' theory, in the face of growing interest in the idea of Irish re-unification. As the party's research officer on Irish policy, he was a non-NEC member of the Northern Ireland Study Group and as a member of the Campaign for Labour Representation, was able to carry the argument for Ulster integration into British party politics right into Labour's new think tank. Although many on the left, most notably Kevin McNamara, vilified Barry as a pro-Unionist95 because he believed in Ulster

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93 See *Labour Weekly* and *Tribune* from May 1979 until the early 1980s.
95 McNamara, K. Interview April 1995.
integration with Britain and argued for it in the Study Group, Barry himself has argued that his views were based on two main factors: first, he was recognising Protestant dislike for the ‘theocratic state’ in the South and secondly he believed integration with Britain was the best way to guard against a return to Stormont, integration therefore being an anti-Unionist position because the Ulster Unionists were an essentially parochial party who did not want integration with Britain.\(^{96}\) Despite this there can be little doubt that Barry was certainly unsympathetic to Irish nationalism and so what is curious, is the fact that he did in fact sign up to the final NEC statement in 1981, which advocated Irish re-unification.

Although Tony Benn had sat in the Cabinet when British troops were deployed to Northern Ireland in August 1969 and continued in government and opposition throughout the seventies to remain completely silent on the subject of Northern Ireland, he was to become the most important advocate of British withdrawal during the early eighties. During the struggle within the Labour movement, between socialists and social democrats, Tony Benn became the undisputed leader of the Labour left and along with championing many other causes, he chose to join the slowly emerging movement demanding British withdrawal. According to his diaries, Benn had been quietly sympathetic to the idea of a united Ireland for some time,\(^{97}\) but only in early 1980 did he decide to go public with his beliefs. On the 18 March 1980 he addressed a meeting at Westminster Central Hall, on the future of socialism entitled the ‘Debate of the Decade’, during which he was heckled by anti-H Block demonstrators and so responded by stating his opposition to the continued partition of Ireland.\(^{98}\) To suggest that Benn decided to ally himself with the troops out cause simply because in opposition he could seize the opportunity to do so, ignores the fact

\(^{96}\) Barry, D. Interview March 1996.  
that he had remained silent when in opposition during the early seventies. A more credible explanation might be that unlike 1970, 1980 witnessed a showdown between left and right for the soul of the Labour movement and so Benn had to embrace all issues of importance to the left, in order to present a comprehensive set of ideas upon which to build a new radically socialist Labour Party. As early as February 1980 the *Irish Times* was aware of what Benn was up to on the NEC and stated that the Labour leadership deduced that he was “trying to play up what may prove to be a popular left-wing cause.”

There can be no doubt that Tony Benn’s decision to go public with his views in early 1980 was a major coup for those seeking an end to bipartisanship and the troops out lobby in general, because Benn’s many rank and file supporters would have undoubtedly been influenced by his statements and because he was the most high ranking politician to advocate British withdrawal to date.

The NEC Study Group on Northern Ireland was finally set up in March 1980 and was comprised of four MPs: Eric Heffer, Joan Maynard, Joan Lester and Jo Richardson; four trade unionists: Alex Kitson (chairperson of the group), Alan Hadden, Doug Hoyle and Neville Hough as well as Tony Saunois (a Militant supporter) representing the Young Socialists. The MPs were broadly anti-partition whilst the trade unionists were much more cautious about the border question and Tony Saunois, as a Militant, was more sympathetic to the ‘two nation’ theory. In addition to the NEC members and four research officers, the group had eight co-opted MPs, four from the shadow cabinet: Merlyn Rees, Roy Mason, Stan Orme and Brynmor John; and four from the PLP: Don Concannon, Jock Stallard, Martin Flannery and Stan Thorne. Although Geoff Bell states that

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100 Labour Weekly, 11 April 1980.
“membership of the study group was evenly balanced between pro- and anti-partitionists”\(^\text{102}\) in actual fact there were far more anti-nationalist minded people on the group with only the four NEC MPs and three of the back bench MPs holding a clearly anti-partition line. It was also incorrect for Bell to talk of Dick Barry ousting David Lowe (the International Research Assistant) from the group in order to create a majority in favour of partition.\(^\text{103}\) The reality was that, first of all David Lowe was not ousted, but in actual fact remained with the group right through to the completion of the 1981 policy statement.\(^\text{104}\) Secondly, the very notion of an individual being ousted to change the political complexion of the group is ludicrous in the light of the fact that at many of the meetings less than half of the group often attended\(^\text{105}\) and if all the anti-partition members had wanted to, they could have usually formed a majority by simply making certain that they all attended. At the first NEC meeting convened to set up the Study Group there was immediate pressure from the left in the shape of Labour’s Home Policy Committee, which was chaired by Tony Benn. Benn wanted the Group to begin work on the basis of trying to draw up a policy designed to achieve Irish re-unification. Although the NEC voted down the suggestion, it was evident that there was going to be continual pressure on the study group to drop bipartisanship and support a united Ireland. This immediate pressure also served to show up the group’s divisions, because while Eric Heffer and Joan Maynard were sympathetic to Benn’s suggestion, it was the trade unionists who were most opposed to the idea with Alex Kitson arguing on behalf of the T&GWU that to adopt a pro-nationalist agenda would only serve to divide theirs and other trade unions’ Northern Ireland membership\(^\text{106}\) (this was an argument that trade unionists were to use consistently throughout the eighties). The group

\(^{102}\) Bell, G. op cit. p.141.

\(^{103}\) Ibid. p.141.

\(^{104}\) NEC Study Group on Northern Ireland, minutes: 30 June 1981.

\(^{105}\) Ibid. minutes: 15 April 1980 to 30 June 1981.

also had to take into consideration the fact that, in Brynmor John, the Labour Party had a spokesperson who was every bit as committed to bipartisanship and opposed to reunification as any of his predecessors.107

The Northern Ireland Study Group began its work against the backdrop of a party beginning to take an interest in the Irish question and an enthusiasm for the sentiments of Irish nationalism. Along with Tony Benn's new found enthusiasm and the emergence of the LCI, by the spring of 1980 it could be seen that a new mood was emerging: the Party's official paper noted that "there is a growing feeling among constituency party members and back bench MPs that a return to a united Ireland is the only long term option."108 In the March the Greater London Labour Party adopted a composite motion demanding that the Parliamentary Labour Party commit itself to a policy of withdrawal from Northern Ireland109 and at the Labour Party's special conference, set up by the leadership at the end of May, calls for a united Ireland were receiving rapturous applause.110 In a Commons debate on the Emergency Provisions (Northern Ireland) Act, Martin Flannery took the opportunity to point to the new climate emerging in the Party: "It is not the climate that has emerged from the two Front Bench speeches. It is a climate that is developing throughout the Labour movement in which the bipartisan policy has been severely questioned."111 It is also evident that the Tories were growing concerned with these developments by the summer of 1980; they produced a policy document which warned that they were going to lose the support of the Labour Party in Parliament because of the back bench pressure to end bipartisanship.112 In the June the growing crisis in the Northern Ireland prisons was

107 Ibid. 16 June 1980.
110 Ibid. 8 June 1980.
111 Hansard, Vol. 969 Col. 446 (22 July 1980).
112 Irish Times 15 August 1980.
finally forced onto the Labour leadership's agenda. Previously there had only been the odd protest about the prisons crisis with Clive Soley calling for reforms to be made in the Maze prison and Tam Dalyell asking the Secretary of State to consider political status for some of those convicted in the Diplock courts. But it was the Home Policy Committee, chaired by Tony Benn, which forced the issue by presenting to the NEC a resolution calling for the abolition of the Diplock courts and "interrogation centres", the right for prisoners to wear their own clothes, the right to receive visits, the right to reading, writing and education facilities, the right to trade union rates of pay and to trade union membership, as well as stating that "we are opposed to the repression and torture in the prisons of Northern Ireland". Two weeks later the NEC voted to adopt the resolution in full and, although the motion stopped short of arguing for political status for paramilitary prisoners, was consequently denounced in the strongest terms by both Margaret Thatcher and James Callaghan, as well as by Merlyn Rees and Roy Mason. The National H Block/Armagh Committee, which had been set up by Sinn Fein and others, was beginning to gather momentum and many in both Ireland and Britain were prepared to lend support to the campaign on humanitarian grounds; especially as the prisoners did now appear to be suffering in appalling conditions. Benn and his supporters were no doubt aware of this and were therefore determined to get the issue on to the Labour Party's agenda even though it was an issue which appeared at the time to be potentially divisive. Despite the undoubted existence of pro-nationalist sentiment in the Labour movement, there did existed no sympathy for Irish republicans who were prepared to use violence for political ends. It was

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114 NEC Home Policy Committee, minutes: 9 June 1980.
115 Ibid. minutes: 27 June 1980.
for this reason that few were to support the demand for political status, but the suffering of
the prisoners did prick the conscience of a movement that held civil and human rights dear.

As the mood of the Labour Party began to shift towards favouring Irish reunification, so an even more stark divide became evident between those sympathetic to a pro-unionist attitude to the Ulster question and those who were now arguing that a united Ireland was the obviously natural socialist demand. The former group started to become more vocal as they saw the direction that the Party seemed to be moving in and were arguing that forcing the North into union with the theocratic Republic was a backward step, with Irish nationalism in general being portrayed as downright reactionary. This was the era of confrontational politics and maximalist demands and it very often appeared that the two sides simply saw the other’s arguments as spurious and fictitious: the united Irelanders seemed to have no appreciation of Protestant fears about the Catholic dominated state in the South, while the pro-partitionists seemed to be oblivious to the plight of Northern nationalists. This can be partly explained by the fact that at this stage republican support had not yet been revealed in electoral terms and so republican arguments were easily dismissed as actually having very little support. During this period Tribune’s regular columnist on Irish affairs was John de Courcey Ireland who continually denounced nationalism, criticised the pope as “the reactionary prelate”, and condemned the united Irelanders in the Labour movement for trying “to force those million Ulster Protestants to climb onto the obscurantist religio-bandwagon”\textsuperscript{116}. The failure to appreciate the ‘other side’s’ arguments within the debate in the Labour movement, almost mirrored the kind of zero-sum politics and intolerant polemic that took place in Northern Ireland. One of the key protagonists, the CLR, were certainly growing anxious at the new trend in the

\textsuperscript{116}Tribune 7 Sept. 1979.
movement. When the Study Group's first discussion document was printed in *Labour Weekly* in early 1981 to gauge the membership's opinion, in the same edition Ben Cosin (of the CLR) had an article printed showing a change in tactics to cope with the new mood. The CLR were arguing that, rather than hinder any progress towards re-unification, the Labour Party's presence in Ulster would be conducive to that process: "We should not put nationalist slogans before socialist policies; and it is imperialist arrogance to assume that an act of British policy can unify Ireland... most crucially, however, Ireland can be united only through co-operation between the Catholic and the Protestant sections of the working class in Northern Ireland; and only our party can do that". No doubt the CLR was hopeful that Dick Barry's influence in the working party would ensure that the NEC agreed to extend Labour Party organisation to Northern Ireland and reports did begin to appear throughout the year indicating that just such an outcome was in fact likely.

The Study Group, although sensitive to the growing mood in the party, was nevertheless mostly made up of people broadly unsympathetic to Irish nationalism. It was agreed at the very first meeting of the group, that during any visits to Ireland members were not to meet with Provisional Sinn Fein unless the meeting took place south of the border. In any event no meeting ever took place with either the Provisionals, the Irish Republican Socialist Party or the Irish Independence Party despite three visits to Ireland by members of the Study Group. After two visits to Northern Ireland, in 1980, to consult with political organisations, the Group had met eleven labour and trade union groups, three unionist parties, two leftist groups: the CLR and the Workers Party/Republican Clubs, one nationalist party: the SDLP, the security forces, the Peace People and the Civil Rights

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119 NEC Study Group on Northern Ireland, minutes: 15 April 1980.
120 Ibid. minutes: 15 April 1980 to 30 June 1981.
Association. In light of the fact that only a tiny minority of the people that the group met
could be described as nationalist, one can safely assume that re-unification was not looking
like such a viable option at this stage and indeed Labour Weekly was to report that “in its
visits to both the North and the Republic, the working party has come under strong
pressure from the trade unions and the Northern Ireland Labour Party to avoid a united
Ireland position”. In addition to this all the labour and trade union groups that were met,
with the exception of the IT&GWU, were also opposed to the granting of political status
for paramilitary prisoners, as were all the political parties. Throughout 1980, despite the
change of mood within the rank and file and the pressure of Labour’s Parliamentary Group
on Northern Ireland, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that the Study Group
would decide in favour of a united Ireland. In fact considering the political complexion of
the Group and the fact that early 1981 saw the departure of the left-wingers Joan Lester
and Eric Heffer from the Study Group in order to concentrate on other Party work it
appeared very probable that any new policy would not include a commitment to re-
unification.

The Labour Party’s annual conference in October 1980 witnessed the composite
motions calling for British withdrawal and an end to bipartisanship easily defeated and
Brynmor John made a lengthy speech explaining his opposition to a united Ireland and his
commitment to maintaining bipartisanship. Despite the resignation of James Callaghan
shortly after the October conference and the success of the left’s candidate Michael Foot in
defeating the favourite, Denis Healey, to become Labour Party leader, this apparent left-
wing shift did not result in any change in the party’s position on Ireland. In his shadow

cabinet re-shuffle Foot replaced Brynmor John with Don Concannon. Concannon was a long standing advocate of bipartisanship and had served under Roy Mason at the NIO from 1976 to 1979, but nevertheless he was a livelier and more confrontational figure than Brynmor John in the House of Commons. Despite being disliked by the left he was privately in favour of the idea of Irish unity, but having served in Palestine with the British army he was greatly sympathetic to the security forces in Northern Ireland and bitterly opposed the Provisional IRA. Concannon readily admits to a personal hatred of the Provisionals and has argued that he believed in upholding the Westminster tradition of responding to argument and persuasion but not responding to duress; consequently he was determined not to respond to republican demands on either political matters or the prisons issue. On a personal level he was well liked in Northern Ireland constitutional political circles, often being on first name terms with many of Northern Ireland’s political figures.

In January 1981 the Study Group finally published its discussion document, ‘Northern Ireland: the Next Steps’. The problem which is immediately apparent with this document and with the whole basis for the group’s deliberations on the constitutional question, is that they had confined themselves to the ‘straight jacket’ of considering basically just four constitutional arrangements. Ever since the very first meeting of the Study Group in April 1980 the ‘Programme of Work’ document, which was put before the meeting, ensured that the Group continued to examine its four suggestions, which were 1) a devolved government, power sharing or otherwise, 2) integration with Great Britain, 3) some form of independence for the province and 4) re-unification with the south. The one change with the ‘Next Steps’ document was the inclusion of the idea of joint sovereignty, or as it was
called at the time “shared responsibility” for Northern Ireland between Britain and the Republic. The problem with preparing a ‘shopping list’ of solutions such as this was that when the discussion document was published in Labour Weekly and circulated amongst the constituencies and the trade unions to gauge opinion throughout the movement, the recipients of such a document were restricted to choosing one of the five options as a replacement for direct rule. With the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 and finally the ‘Good Friday Agreement’ of 1998, the debate on Northern Ireland has steadily matured to the point where it is almost universally accepted that the idea of choosing one simplistic constitutional arrangement has had to be rejected in favour of realising that a negotiated settlement must be sought, which involves all parties and which may well involve a combination of various constitutional and governmental arrangements. The first draft of the ‘Next Steps’ paper was drawn up about six months before its publication and yet hardly any alterations were made to it apart from the inclusion of the joint sovereignty proposal. What is curious is that despite monthly meetings, little was done to revise and to expand upon these basic options and the independence idea was kept even though it was such an impracticable and economically unrealisable plan.

One of the immediate consequences of the Study Group’s discussion document was a swift and angry response from the anti-partitionists. As well as complaints in Labour Weekly’s letters pages over the alleged pro-unionist nature of the document, there came a vociferous attack from Kevin McNamara. Initially these attacks seemed to be rather excessive because the ‘Next Steps’ appeared a modest paper which basically set out five areas for members to consider: 1) the economy, 2) a Bill of Rights, 3) the constitutional question, 4) security and 5) organising the Labour Party in the North. What seems to have

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aggravated McNamara was the language of the document and probably the knowledge that it had been drafted by Dick Barry. For example, on the economy it was suggested that a gas pipeline be built from Britain to the North rather than from the Republic and, crucially, the question of re-unification was concluded with the idea that to achieve unity “The party would have to make it clear it does not believe the decision should be left to the Northern Ireland people alone; and that it would seek Parliamentary approval for the expulsion of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom.”

The term ‘expulsion from the UK’ is very much a Unionist phrase used to dismiss calls for British withdrawal as undemocratic and authoritarian. Within Ulster politics people are very sensitive to the language that people use; for example, Unionists are very quick to dismiss anything that either government suggests which uses republican language such as ‘demilitarisation’ or ‘six counties’, so the left in Britain had learned how to recognise someone of the ‘two nation’ school of thought or of the ‘socialism before nationalism’ persuasion. McNamara dismissed the whole document as a ‘Unionist paper’ and attacked the fact that it had included the integration suggestion which was “a recipe for continuing death and tragedy in Northern Ireland, a further corruption of our civil liberties, a threat to public security in Great Britain, a drain on the treasuries of the UK and the Republic of Ireland and a continuous embarrassment to whatever British Government we may have in the councils of the world.”

He went on to complain that little effort was made to look at all-Ireland arrangements and, interestingly, he advocated that Labour should improve relations with Dublin as a major part of its future policy. This, of course, was the direction that both Labour and the Tories went in throughout the eighties. Dick Barry was well aware of the distrust that many people had in him and wrote later on that “I got the feeling that Kevin McNamara was unhappy about my

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122 Ibid.
position as Party Officer on Northern Ireland affairs... He also believed me to be a unionist, even an Orangeman, hence his reference to an Orange tract [to describe the 'Next Steps']. I had became used to this kind of abuse by now.” It is probably fair to say that McNamara was reflecting the feelings of the PLP back bench Northern Ireland Group, because their anticipation that the Study Group would move towards favouring a reunification position had been put in doubt due the tone of this the first paper to be published by the group after nearly a years work.

What McNamara and the Northern Ireland Parliamentary Group were, of course, unaware of, was the immense impact that the H Block hunger strikes were to have on political opinion. The fears that the anti-partitionists had during the early months of 1981, with the publication of the 'Next Steps' and the departure of Joan Lester and Eric Heffer from the Study Group, were to be reversed as the political climate began to change not just in Ireland, but throughout Britain as well. Margaret Thatcher was the first Prime Minister to depart from the post-war consensus and was intent on confronting organised labour, thus precipitating the emergence of a much more raw and confrontational form of class politics. It was in this volatile and turbulent political environment that the left began to enjoy a brief but dramatic revival. The establishment of the Social Democratic Party as a right-wing break away group from the Labour Party appeared to many on the left to indicate that Labour could return to its socialist principles without the hindrance of the right-wing/social democrat elements, thus finalising the victory of the socialists over the social democrats in the battle for the soul of the Party. A political realignment was taking place and the Labour left sought to ensure that the Party would take up the role of standing for a clear socialist agenda and to represent the working class in much the same way as was

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done at the beginning of the century. The inner city riots in Brixton, Toxteth, Handsworth and Moss Side during 1981 helped to generate an element of panic amongst conservative forces but a certain degree of interest amongst the far left, many of whom believed that they were witnessing the break up of the post-war capitalist order. The inner city riots brought the issues of racism, inner city decay and the question of an emerging, lawless ‘under-class’ onto the political agenda. The political order in Britain in 1981 could be said to have been in a state of flux, the far left almost succeeded in taking complete control of the Labour Party with Tony Benn failing to secure the deputy leadership by just one per cent of the vote at the October conference (but never the less secured the votes of many of the major unions, most notably the T&GWU)\textsuperscript{135} and an optimistic left were to see positive implications in almost every crisis; the Irish hunger strikes were to prove no exception. To many on the left the situation in the H Blocks simply helped to add to the sense of crisis in the country and combined with the inner city disturbances they were seen as yet another welcome thorn in the side of the Thatcher government.

There can be no doubt that the hunger strikes had an immense impact on attitudes toward the Northern Ireland problem, not least on left-wing attitudes to republicanism and therefore republican aims; but the impact should not be exaggerated, it must be looked at in the context of a Labour movement whose attitude had begun to change more than a year earlier. Within Parliament the official Labour Party line was to fully back the government’s position on the prisons crisis and Concannon asked the Secretary of State from the outset not to bother making statements on the hunger strikes.\textsuperscript{136} For this reason the issues involved were never properly debated throughout the hunger strikes and, as if to make a point, the PLP took the unprecedented step (two weeks into Sands’ fast) of allotting its

own debating time in the Commons to discuss not the political crisis or the growing unrest throughout the province but the Northern Ireland economy. The Militant faction within the Labour movement also underestimated the impact of the hunger strikes and in fact was optimistically predicting the demise of sectarian politics at the time that Sands was beginning his fast. Shortly before Sands’ by-election victory in Fermanagh/South Tyrone Militant argued that “the Provisionals or the H-Blocks campaign through which they are working are completely incapable of mobilising mass support and of exerting mass pressure on the authorities to force concessions.” Even after his election they were clinging to the idea that there was a ‘new mood’ of non-sectarianism in the province but after Sands death they finally conceded that massive support and sympathy for the hunger strikers had indeed developed. The problem with a group such as Militant was that its analysis was based solely on social or class issues and they refused to recognise the importance that the two communities in Northern Ireland attached to their national identities. As a Trotskyite grouping it was opposed to nationalism but because of this they failed to recognise the importance attached to national identity by the working classes within Ireland. Therefore, whilst dismissing the Provos activities as ‘individual terrorism’ (Leninist terminology), they persistently argued that the solution lay in uniting the Protestant and Catholic working classes around a Labour/trade union campaign to seek improvements in areas such as housing, health and jobs. This attitude was not just confined to Militant; many in the Labour movement were repulsed by sectarian politics and wanted to believe that the northern Irish working class were being duped by their political leaders. But just as the UWC strike had brought home the reality of Protestant working class support for unionism

139 Ibid. 24 April & 8 May 1981.
so the hunger strikes, and the subsequent electoral successes for Sinn Fein, were to awaken many in the Labour movement to the reality of Catholic working class support for the Provisionals. It was not just the enhancing of the sentimental support for Irish nationalism and for the ideal of a united Ireland following the death of each hunger striker, but the show of popular support for Bobby Sands through the ballot box in the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election which in actual fact had the greatest impact on attitudes. Although on polling day Don Concannon had warned that “a vote for Mr Sands is a vote of approval for the La Mon massacre, the murder of Lord Mountbatten at Warrenpoint [sic] and all the other senseless murders” the fact that so many voters had ignored such pleas and given Sands such a sizeable endorsement led to a major rethink throughout the Labour movement. In fact the historic impact on Labour thinking is probably best summed up by the Labour Weekly editorial which followed the by-election, but was written before Sands' death: “Northern Ireland is at long last seen as a political question, by both politicians and the public.” This curious statement (which begs the question, what is considered a political question if not the Northern Ireland problem?) is an indication of how the by-election altered Labour’s decade old view of the Provisionals as a small group of terrorists in much the same mould as the Red Army Faction in Germany or the Red Brigades in Italy or as Tom Pendry described them two years earlier: ‘not a bona fide political movement’ but ‘a small, dedicated group of fanatics’. For so long the lack of empathy with the Provisionals was due to the fact that unlike the Labour movement they did not present themselves to the electorate in order to gain a mandate, they therefore did not sit on local councils, they did not work within the community, they did not work with the trade unions in the workplace and they insisted on using violence not just against the security forces but

against elected political opponents. The hunger strikes by contrast, were an example of non-violent passive resistance which even led Dick Barry to reflect, after his visit to the dying Sands, for what political cause would he starve himself to death? Clive Soley - a future front bench spokesperson - has argued that the two key effects of the hunger strike were firstly “it undermined the argument of those who were saying that these were just a bunch of psychopathic killers” and secondly the government’s political direction and attitude had to change from that of just crisis management “because the international impact of it was so powerful.” Indeed he has argued that only with the appointment of James Prior in September 1981 was crisis management for the first time dropped and a more thoughtful political position adopted. In addition to this, the fact that the majority of the people in a border constituency were prepared to elect a dying IRA man and later elect a republican candidate, Owen Carron (due to the law being amended to prevent prisoners standing for election) with an even larger vote, led many in the Labour movement, and most importantly those on the Study Group, to reconsider their view that there existed only a sentimental attachment to republicanism in Ireland. They began to consider that having believed for so long that a united Ireland was impossible because of Protestant opposition, that perhaps it was unrealistic to try and maintain the Union in the face of a combination of continuing violent opposition, impressive electoral opposition and a dramatic display of passive resistance which was creating adverse publicity for Britain throughout the international community.

The first group to be set up within the Labour movement in support of prison reform in Northern Ireland, as a result of the H Block campaign, was ‘Charter 80’ which

142 Barry, D. Interview, March 1996.
143 Soley, C. Interview Dec. 1996.
144 NEC Study Group on Northern Ireland, minutes: 1 & 30 June 1981.
was launched in September 1980 and had the support of Labour MPs Jock Stallard, Eric Heffer and Tony Benn. Then in April 1981, after Bobby Sands had begun his hunger strike, about twenty Labour MPs launched a ‘Don’t Let Irish Prisoners Die’ campaign which included Denis Skinner, Ernie Roberts, Bob Parry and Denis Canavan, as well as Lord Gifford and Peter Hain. In March Foot replaced Tom Pendry with Clive Soley as the Party’s assistant spokesperson on Northern Ireland in a move which appeared to indicate that the official Labour line was to become more flexible on the H-blocks issue, but in actual fact bipartisanship was to be maintained throughout the hunger strikes. Concannon had specifically requested that Soley be given the post in the full knowledge that he was one of the new generation who sought a break from the bipartisanship of the past and wanted a re-unification policy adopted. Soley has since explained that Concannon wanted a realistic united Ireland policy but did not know how to get there and so it was to be the Hammersmith MP’s job to do exactly that. Clive Soley, whilst being deeply committed to Irish unity, was also an ex-probation officer and was determinedly opposed to political status not least because he believed that to do otherwise would be irresponsible because it would open the floodgates for all sorts of convicts to claim that their crimes had been politically motivated. When Sands finally died on 5 May, Michael Foot’s response was to lend his support to the uncompromising position that Margaret Thatcher had taken throughout the hunger strike. Foot and Concannon issued a joint statement shortly after Sands’ death declaring that “His death was his own decision. It was unnecessary because parliament will never grant the demands of the protesters...” In the House of Commons, although Michael Foot received applause for his support for the government, both front

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147 Soley, C. Interview Dec. 1996.
benches were attacked by the back bench Labour MP Patrick Duffy (hardly a left-winger) who said “Is the Prime Minister aware that one of the difficulties in Ireland is that there has always been too much ‘me too-ism’ in the House on this subject? Is she aware of the widespread impression overseas - notably on the part of the New York Times, until recently a stout ally of this country’s policy on Northern Ireland - that the death of Mr. Sands whom you, Mr. Speaker, have already described this afternoon as a fellow Member of Parliament will be due to the right hon. Lady’s intransigence.” Kevin McNamara had wanted to deliver a much more condemnatory speech, but by leaving it to Patrick Duffy he believed that the anger felt even by moderate opinion on the back benches was articulated quite adequately.150

The political atmosphere grew very tense after Sands’ death; the Labour Party headquarters at Walworth Road was occupied by anti-H Block demonstrators for a number of hours151 and Don Concannon was condemned for visiting Sands shortly before his death to explain Labour’s opposition to his demands: John Hume described it as “a cheap and offensive publicity stunt”152 and Jock Stallard denounced it as “insensitive”.153 However, Concannon has consistently refused to divulge exactly what was said during the visit except to say that he would concede that Sands was not simply a thug “he was different” and that he did at least present him with a rather more philosophical argument than the type of rhetoric that he had grown used to from republicans.154 Tony Benn, who was now calling for the deployment of UN troops (a statement which drew criticism from Ken

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149 Hansard Vol. 4 Col. 17 (5 May 1981).
150 McNamara, K. Interview, April 1995. He had wanted to deliver a speech based on the O’Donovan Rossa graveside oration by Patrick Pearce in 1915: ‘The fools, the fools, the fools. They have left us our Fenian dead and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree will never be at peace.’
151 Times, 2 May 1981.
152 Ibid.
Livingstone) and had previously led demands for Bobby Sands to be entitled to take his Commons seat, had consequently incurred the wrath of the leadership, with Michael Foot asking Benn not to make any further public comments on the Northern Ireland situation.

In addition to this the Labour leadership was coming in for criticism from the Irish community, especially the Irish members of the Party. Steve Bundred wrote to Foot to complain that the recent GLC elections (in which he had won Islington North) had highlighted “the damage which is being done to our party’s standing within the Irish community by the attitude which you and Don Concannon have displayed on the Northern Ireland problem. When the ballot boxes were opened they showed a far higher percentage of spoilt papers than is normal and the majority of these were votes for Bobby Sands or for the H Blocks prisoners in general.”

There were undoubtedly growing divisions throughout the Labour Party in the midst of the hunger strike crisis. The back bench PLP Northern Ireland Group were growing increasingly angry with Concannon and Foot. By mid-May Labour Weekly had reported that “The rift between the front bench leadership and MPs who want a shift away from a bipartisan policy widened this week... A motion blaming the governments intransigence for the death of Bobby Sands last week was signed by 29 Labour MPs.”

At a lengthy Parliamentary Labour Party meeting on Northern Ireland, held the following week and attended by forty MPs, Foot was heavily criticised by all eighteen speakers for maintaining the policy of bipartisanship. In the House of Commons Martin Flannery enthusiastically stated that “recent events in Northern Ireland have created a new situation and that many people hope that the love-in on Northern

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155 Irish Post, 20 June 1981.
157 Irish Post, 23 May 1981.
Ireland between the two Front Benches will gradually be broken”.\(^{160}\) Despite left-wing disquiet, *Tribune* remained unsympathetic and having argued that political status could not be granted, not least because it would have to apply to the UDA and UVF also, argued after Sands’ death that “The IRA does not want that [a political solution] - it wants more martyrs.”\(^{161}\) The NEC, which was far to the left of the shadow cabinet, was also uncomfortable with the situation and the NEC Study Group, despite Concannon’s previous support for the government’s handling of the crisis, agreed a resolution which stated that “the NEC also condemns the Tory Government’s stand on prison conditions and facilities” and “We are opposed to all forms of repression and torture in the prisons of Northern Ireland.”\(^{162}\) The hunger strikes represented an extremely vexing situation for the Labour leaders in similar fashion to the way that the miners strike was to do so three years later. They were well aware of the fact that they were witnessing developments of historic proportions and, as a Party still coming to terms with the recriminations from the left which followed the fall of the Callaghan government, they were very conscious of rank and file disquiet. For this reason Concannon’s decision not even to call for statements from the government in the Commons on the prisons crisis was probably a mistake in so far as that it conveyed to the rank and file an insensitive leadership working hand in glove with the Tories while international opinion was beginning to move against the government in a way in which Concannon had not probably foreseen back at the beginning of March 1981.

Despite the groundswell of opinion amongst the left and amongst the rank and file in general, in favour of moving away from bipartisanship in the wake of Sands’ death, the leadership was not prepared to do a U-turn in the middle of the crisis. The Northern

\(^{161}\) *Tribune*, 1 & 8 May 1981.
\(^{162}\) NEC Study Group on Northern Ireland, resolution, RD: 864/May 1981.
Ireland Study Group on the other hand was beginning to think differently, in actual fact the impact that the hunger strikes had on the Group was such that most members on it appear to have made quite an astonishing ideological U-turn. Don Concannon, for example, had been arguing in the Study Group, only in the February, that a re-unification policy could not be adopted because it would actually set back the prospect of unity by forty years.\textsuperscript{163} By the summer the majority of the Study Group agreed that Party membership should not be extended to Ulster because "support for Labour Party organisation in Northern Ireland would be contrary to the principle of a united Ireland, to which the majority of the Study Group are committed" and stated that in the long term "we are moving towards a removal of the British presence."\textsuperscript{164} Merlyn Rees also began to publicly question the continuation of British rule in Ireland.\textsuperscript{165} In spite of his initial 'forty years' theory, Don Concannon argued much later that the Study Group wanted to achieve "peace and reconciliation between the communities in Ireland. After a great deal of thought and consultation we came to the conclusion that this desire can only be fulfilled when the border is removed."\textsuperscript{166} However on the opposition front bench he continued to take a rather more circumspect line. In response to Tony Benn's call for the deployment of UN troops and to the call by Militant and by the left-wing Labour MP Ron Brown for Northern Ireland to have "a people's militia based on the trade union movement"\textsuperscript{167} Concannon told Parliament "I cannot believe that by replacing the Army with a United Nations force or a workers' militia, or by unilaterally pulling out of Northern Ireland, we shall promote peace or stability in the province. The deep seated differences between the communities there would never be resolved by taking an india-rubber to the map of Ireland and trying to remove or erase the

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid. minutes, 25 Feb. 1981.  
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid. minutes, 1 June 1981.  
\textsuperscript{165} Times, 18 May 1981.  
\textsuperscript{166} Fortnight, March/April 1982.  
\textsuperscript{167} Hansard, Vol. 16 Col. 1169 (18 June 1981).  

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border. At the end of the day the physical border is not the real issue. It is the border in the hearts and minds of the people of Northern Ireland to which we must address ourselves. There is little scope for the map maker in such a delicate conflict of national identity.”

This was said in the light of continuing rumour over the likely united Ireland policy soon to be adopted by the Party and so Concannon perhaps chose a rather non-committal line. But clearly the atmosphere of the time was concentrating minds to the extent that Don Concannon also made the interesting suggestion (in the light of Labour's joint sovereignty ideas eleven years later) that the 1949 Government of Ireland Act should be amended: "Perhaps a formal recognition of the aspirations for dual nationality of the people of Northern Ireland would be no bad thing.”

The trade union movement, having carefully avoided the Irish question for so long, witnessed the beginning of a slow but steady change in attitudes. The position of the TUC, since the seventies, had been to only support a Bill of Rights and to support non-sectarian campaigns such as the 'Better Life For All' trade union campaign in Northern Ireland. The only union to hold a clearly political position on Ireland was the Bakers' Union, the BFAWU, which since the late seventies had supported a united Ireland. Despite the media image that developed during the mid to late eighties of a trade union movement exerting unhelpful pressure on a Labour Party attempting to moderate and modernise its image, the trade unions actually played an important role in preventing Labour from adopting a radical, 'troops out' policy. With the Labour movement being dominated by the big industrial unions such as the T&GWU, the AEEU and the GMBATU, their votes always had a moderating influence on the question of Irish policy. One important reason

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169 Ibid. Col. 1035.
for this was that these unions (along with many others such as UCATT, EEPTU, NUPE, ASTMS, UCW, COHSE, FBU and USDAW) had members in Northern Ireland and were therefore sensitive about the loyalist/nationalist divide within the region. Not only were they concerned about alienating their Protestant members in the event of a pro-unity policy being adopted but there was also very real concern with some unions about the safety of their members in general. For example, the Union of Communication Workers which organised workers in the Post Offices of Northern Ireland had, by the 1990s, fourteen of its members killed over a twenty five year period.171 The Confederation of Health Service Employees had problems with their members being threatened or compromised within hospitals where suspected terrorists were being treated. The Fire Brigades’ Union also felt that it was in an extremely difficult position as its members were often threatened in riot situations and traumatised as a consequence of dealing with the aftermath of a bomb explosion or fire bombing in which human lives were lost. Many members had to take considerable time off as a result of stress-related sickness.172 For these reasons and because of unions such as the AEEU having a large loyalist membership especially in the Belfast shipyards, few in the trade union movement were as willing as many in the Labour Party were to adopt a pro-unity position.

The beginnings of change began when, in early June 1981 the England and Wales Trades Councils’ conference voted in favour of Irish re-unification despite a determined attempt by Len Murray, the TUC general secretary, to prevent such an outcome. Union attempts at promoting the Irish nationalist cause had not previously been tolerated; Tameside Trades Council had been disaffiliated from the TUC in 1980 after launching a

171 Ibid.
172 Firefighter (Journal of the FBU) Vol. 23 No. 5 June 1995.
‘Support the Irish People: Bring the War to Britain’ campaign.\textsuperscript{173} A year later the hunger strikes aroused far greater and more sympathetic interest in the Irish question. The Coventry Trades Council came out in support of the hunger strikers in May 1981 and in early June there was a well attended trade union conference on the H Blocks and the Irish question held in East London.\textsuperscript{174} At the England and Wales annual Trades Councils conference Len Murray argued that if the conference adopted the Greater London Association of Trades Councils motion on Irish unity, such a decision would “imperil the lives of our colleagues in Belfast” and that “The Northern Ireland Committee [of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions] would be split from top to bottom if it were to identify with the political objective of the motion, They have told us they would not do it.”\textsuperscript{175} Despite this the conference passed the motion unanimously and thus began a debate within the trade union movement which broke the long standing silence on the Irish question. The far reaching motion stated “Conference regards partition as the root cause of the continuing violence and bloodshed in Northern Ireland and regards a united Ireland as the only lasting solution to the conflict” and went on to call for British withdrawal, scrapping of the Diplock courts, scrapping of the PTA and the Emergency Provisions Act as well as the disbanding of the UDR and RUC.\textsuperscript{176} Gradually small pressure groups emerged in various trade unions to push for a unity policy and later in the eighties a number of unions without members in Northern Ireland, such as the NUR, NALGO and NUPE, began to support Irish re-unification. The first such pressure group was the Associated Staffs for a United Ireland which was set up in the white collar union, the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs. At the ASTMS 1981 annual conference held shortly before Bobby

\textsuperscript{173} Tribune, 18 April 1980.
\textsuperscript{174} Irish Post, 30 May 1981.
\textsuperscript{175} Times, 6 June 1981.
\textsuperscript{176} Irish Post, 20 June 1981.
Sands’ death, an ad hoc meeting was held on the hunger strikes as a result of there having been no debate on Ireland and was attended by more than eighty delegates. Later in the year a further meeting was held to establish the ASUI and they claimed to have had about 200 active supporters within the union. This group continued to campaign within the union right up to the nineties, regularly producing their own journal, Unity, and enjoying relative success in keeping Northern Ireland on the agenda in the ASTMS as well as in the MSF which was established after a merger with TASS in 1988. Despite these important changes within the trade union movement it would be wrong to perceive this as being on a par with the growing trend in the Labour Party. Significant though they were, the changes in the unions were minimal and there did not exist in the movement figures comparable with Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone or even Kevin McNamara who provided a focus for campaigners for Irish unity. Indeed within certain unions such as the AEEU and the GMBATU there still remained virtually no debate on the national question, nor did that change for the duration of the eighties and nineties.

James Callaghan, who had had considerable involvement in Irish affairs dating back to the beginning of the troubles when he was Home Secretary, also began a major rethink on British involvement in Ireland after Sands’ death. For the first time people’s minds were really being concentrated by the hunger strikes and statesmen such as Callaghan who had been in a position to have an impact had never developed ideas that could be described as imaginative let alone radical. But in early July Callaghan delivered a speech to the House of Commons in which he declared that “I believe that our well intentioned but paternalistic attitude has undermined the sense of responsibility that the people of Northern Ireland should feel for their own destinies. We see examples of that every time a proposal is put

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177 ASUI pamphlet by Hugh MacGrillen, 1986.
forward. The proposition that I wish to put is that Britain, from now on, should make it clear that she intends increasingly to regard the people of Northern Ireland as responsible for proposing and taking the initiatives to solve the problems of how they are to live with one another.” He was reflecting the frustration felt by someone who had sat as the head of the government charged with trying to take care of the Northern Irish problem and it could be argued that he was coming to the natural and obvious conclusion from one in his position. He concluded that “My case today is that Britain should at once begin the process of formulating a policy based on that principle... with the ultimate aim of giving the people of Northern Ireland complete responsibility for their own affairs.” He envisaged that “a new Northern Ireland would emerge as a broadly independent State.” It is also important to consider that such a bold plan would, of course, appear so much easier from the opposition benches and Callaghan almost certainly would not have tried to go ahead with such an idea were he still in office. As has been said before if a Labour government were to try and implement such a plan they would be accused of treachery by an alliance of the right-wing of the Conservative Party, the right-wing press, and other elements within the British establishment; only a Tory government could achieve such an enormous constitutional change and so the suggestion was probably designed to be food for thought for the Conservative Party. In spite of Callaghan arriving at his conclusions as a result of watching an impasse develop in Northern Ireland over many years; as the eighties wore on, both government and Labour Party policy often tended towards a solution ‘from above’ with a desire to involve a further outside government, namely Dublin, in the shape of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the Labour Party’s ‘joint authority’ plans of 1992.

178 *Hansard*, Vol. 7 Col. 1049.
Labour's Study Group had included independence as one of its options and dismissed it early on. Independence for Northern Ireland was consequently never seriously considered by either the Conservative or Labour Party over the next sixteen years. However many of those given responsibility for reformulating policy on Ireland had not experienced the years of frustration that Callaghan had and those who were sympathetic to Irish nationalism envisaged an independent Ulster as the worst scenario because it appeared to mean a return to Stormont but without the option of Westminster stepping back in if the Unionists once again felt they had carte blanche to do as they wanted with the Catholic community. One of the factors which no doubt had a very great impact on the Study Group was the result of the rank and file consultations which took place following the publication of the 'Next Steps'. The final report on the responses to the consultative document showed that over fifty per cent of the submissions from Britain favoured the concept of a united Ireland. There were ninety responses from CLPs and Labour Party branches, as well as eleven from various organisations in Northern Ireland and the report concluded that “Overall, the only clear cut patterns which emerge from the evidence favour the concept of a united Ireland, oppose the organisation of the Labour Party in Northern Ireland and call for the withdrawal of troops.” It would appear correct for Dick Barry (who drafted this final report) to argue that although the Labour Party was probably going to adopt some form of re-unification policy anyway, the hunger strikes made the outcome inevitable. First of all the policy of bipartisanship simply had to go; Britain's socialist party could no longer be seen to be supporting a government that was coming under criticism from throughout the world, from sources as diverse as American Democrats, Lech

180 Barry, D. Interview, March 1996.
Walensa and, of course, the Irish government. Once it was accepted that a policy distinct from the Tories had to be adopted the choices available were limited and so a commitment to achieving re-unification in the long term had to be agreed because of the current political climate as well as the restive left-wing mood within the Labour Party at the time.

The final statement presented to the 1981 conference by the NEC Study Group was agreed overwhelmingly (although by no means unanimously). The constitutional options finally offered were much the same as in the 'Next Steps' except that joint sovereignty had been discarded in favour of the unusual idea of a confederation of the British Isles. This was rejected because the Group “concluded that it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve.” Independence was not a realistic option economically, devolution (which the Tories favoured anyway) would mean a return to Stormont and so short term direct rule was to be replaced by power sharing, which was to be the block upon which consent for a united Ireland was to be built. The decision to finally adopt a policy favouring a united Ireland was a major policy shift, after more than ten years of the 'troubles', six of which were presided over by a Labour government. It can be argued that it was achieved as a consequence of essentially three main factors. 1) The left-wing shift in the Labour Party, along with the departure of centrists/social democrats into the SDP. 2) A desire to break with the past because the Rees/Mason era appeared to be wasted years in which Labour had continued with the same attitude to Ireland as the Tories, just as the 1974-79 terms in office, as a whole, were considered wasted years. 3) The H Block hunger strikes and more importantly Bobby Sands’ election victory. Not surprisingly, the new 'unity by consent' policy was not without its critics. Some on the left were very dismissive such as the back bench MP Chris Mullin who argued that “the document is in practice a

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fudge from end to end.” Soley conceded that the policy was indeed “a compromise which most of us could just about live with” but it was to be developed into quite a coherent long term strategy. Militant were broadly supportive of the statement; they were enthusiastic because the language of the document was in line with their views on uniting the Catholic and Protestant working class and doing so on the basis of socialist policies. They supported ‘unity by consent’ because they argued that otherwise “Capitalist unity forced on the Protestants would precipitate a civil war, the expulsion of the Catholics from the north and the likely repartition of the country.” (This is precisely what Kevin McNamara was to argue years later as shadow spokesperson on Northern Ireland.)

The CLR were unhappy with the new policy and David Morrison argued that wanting to see a power shared government as a step towards re-unification meant that “the NEC wants to build on the success of the unattainable to achieve the impossible.” Although the CLR were disappointed with the commitment to re-unification, Dick Barry did manage to have a commitment to a new party of labour for Northern Ireland included in the final statement. At the beginning of June “It was agreed by a clear majority, that the Study Group recommends a) the Labour Party should not organise in Northern Ireland, b) the Labour Party should not support the setting up of a conference to discuss the establishment of a mass party of labour.” But in August Barry managed to get his way and had included at the end of the final NEC statement the words “We therefore believe that interested trade unions in Northern Ireland should support a Conference of trade unions, trade councils, shop stewards committees and other Labour movement organisations in Northern Ireland to discuss whether it is possible to form such a Labour
This ambiguous and non-committal statement was clearly left open to interpretation. When questioned by Enoch Powell in the House of Commons the following year about Labour putting up candidates in elections in Northern Ireland, Don Concannon was unequivocal in declaring that the Labour Party would not be following such a course of action. Part of Concannon’s personal reasoning for his opposition to the idea was that he believed that it would split the Northern Ireland trade union movement.

Nevertheless in respect of the 1981 statement the NEC did set up a Liaison Committee to work with Northern Ireland trade unionists in trying to set up a ‘conference of Labour’. The committee was set up in July 1982 but made no progress because of cancellations by various unions whenever a meeting was proposed or because of elections or other more important concerns. There was clearly a lack of enthusiasm for the project on the part of all sides involved. Frank Allaun, a leading supporter of the idea of setting up the Labour Party in Northern Ireland, resigned from the NEC in September 1983 and this effectively spelt the end of the venture. The following year the Liaison Committee reported that it would not attempt to pursue the idea of setting up a ‘conference of Labour’ as a result of the poor response from the Northern Irish trade unions.

During the next eighteen months, in the run up to the 1983 general election, the debate within the Labour Party on Northern Ireland shifted into new, more selective areas. Debate within the left on the Irish question tended to evolve around three main areas: 1) The constitutional question, which had been resolved for many within the Labour Party with the adoption of ‘unity by consent’ (although the demand for the removal of Unionist

189 Hansard, Vol. 22 Col. 862 (28 April 1982).
190 Concannon, D. Interview, March 1998.
consent - or loyalist veto - gradually emerged on the left). 2) Questions of repression, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act, strip searching, the use of plastic bullets and the military’s use of lethal force. 3) The question of what the left’s response should be to the people who often bore the brunt of this repression, namely the Provisionals, and to what extent they should be viewed as a liberation movement. The rise of Sinn Fein as an electoral force during the early eighties, opened up new arguments for the Labour left and gave them a party with whom they could develop a solidarity, having despaired with the SDLP for so long as supposedly the only progressive party. With ‘unity by consent’ established as Party policy and Clive Soley articulating the new position on the front bench, groups such as the LCI began to focus on civil liberties issues such as plastic bullets and the PTA. As early as March 1981 the home affairs group of the PLP had voted unanimously to oppose the PTA\textsuperscript{93} and the NEC Study Group also decided to declare in its final statement that “We cannot accept that such legislation should continue in existence and we would, therefore, repeal this [Prevention of Terrorism] Act.”\textsuperscript{94} The 18 March 1981 was the first occasion that the Labour Party abstained on the PTA in the Commons. For years prior to 1981 there had always been a small number of about 20-30 left-wing Labour MPs who would vote against the PTA Continuance Order and when the Party chose to abstain for the first time, there were still 37 back benchers who voted against the renewal of the Act. Then in 1982 the numbers voting against the PTA, increased to the considerable figure of 52 Labour MPs.\textsuperscript{95} In addition to such an impressive rebellion against the whips, Clive Soley, the Party’s assistant spokesperson on Northern Ireland resigned from the front bench in protest at the decision to simply abstain rather than oppose the Act. This was a

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Labour Weekly}, 13 March 1981.
\textsuperscript{95} Cunningham, M.J. op cit. Appendix C: p.263.
major coup for the LCI and others, because Soley only returned to his front bench post two months later after having been reassured by the leadership that the PLP would, in future vote against the PTA in future. Soley’s importance was further highlighted by the fact that Don Concannon had held out, refusing to accept anyone else as a replacement and demanding that something had to be done to ensure that Soley returned as his assistant. Then on 7 March 1983 the PLP did, for the first time, vote against the PTA.

Clive Soley had a reputation as a civil and human rights campaigner and he also came to articulate and develop the ‘unity by consent’ policy with far greater imagination than any other figure. It can be argued with some conviction that Clive Soley contributed more in terms of intelligent analysis and novel, though pragmatic, ideas than any other front bench spokesperson including Peter Archer and Kevin McNamara. Soley represented the ‘unity by consent’ school of thought in sharp contrast to the ‘troops out’ school of thought, on the Labour left, whose leading lights were to be people such as Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone. Unlike Benn and Livingstone, Soley was not sympathetic to the Irish republican cause but, instead, pursued unity believing it to be in the best interests of both Ireland and Britain. His was a typically English socialism and his view was that Britain could resolve the problem for the Irish by gradually uniting North and South with ideas such as “creating an interdependence in such things as energy supplies, transport, social security benefits... Physical cross-border links in the form of pipelines, power cables and the like.” Along with ensuring that “the Irish Government is willing to make major constitutional changes” and “the British and Irish Governments harmonise pensions, social security payments, financial aid to industry and other related legislation,” he also argued

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196 Irish Post, 22 May 1982.
197 Soley, C. Interview Dec. 1996.
198 Cunningham, M.J. op cit.
that “the Catholic Church must be pressed to examine this doctrine [that children in mixed marriages be brought up Catholic] to see if it could be enforced less rigorously.” Unlike people such as Kevin McNamara and Clare Short, Soley did not originate from an Irish background and consequently was quicker to criticise Catholic influence in the Republic. He was also therefore able to avoid the criticism, that McNamara was to attract, that he simply had an emotional and sentimental attachment to the idea of a united Ireland. Soley argued, with conviction, throughout the eighties that gradual re-unification was simply the best solution to the Irish question. The problem with this view was that Labour was then left open to the accusation throughout the eighties that it sought unity as a grandiose plan devised by a paternal government at Westminster which it believed was delivering self-determination even though the Protestants may argue that such a plan would in fact be denying them self-determination. For example Soley argued that “The political power to resolve the problem lies not in Belfast, nor in Dublin, but in London.” Part of the reason for this attitude was a sense of anger at Unionist intransigence: he told the NEC Study Group that “we should say to the Unionist parties that their failure to compromise, combined with the failure of the border since it was established makes it essential that we now consider an all-Ireland solution.”

He has explained since that as with Cyprus and Sri Lanka, if the crucial nearby power with whom a community (feeling threatened and under siege) were looking to for support takes an ambivalent view then this will in fact exacerbate the problem creating further insecurity. For this reason he took the view that, instead of continuing with the previous policy of crisis management, London had to take the lead and make it clear to the Unionists that they could not set the agenda. Soley was also careful

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200 Ibid.
201 Soley, C. Interview Dec. 1996.
not to use the republican rhetoric favoured by Livingstone and others, such as talking of 'Irish national liberation' and an end to 'British Imperialism' because he saw them as outdated slogans. For this reason he was able to gain the attention of moderates within the Party along with his consistent condemnations of republican violence, his impeccable record on the question of civil liberties and not least his moderate and likeable manner.

Whilst Soley and others were projecting the moderate and more acceptable face of pro-reunification sentiment, there began in the early eighties, a more outspoken and controversial support for the aims and aspirations of Irish republicanism, among certain sections of the Labour left. As the newly elected leader of the GLC, Ken Livingstone was able to use his prominent position to argue the case for British withdrawal and to explain his republican sympathies. During the hunger strikes he described the IRA prisoners as ‘freedom fighters’ and demanded immediate British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.202 Then during the following months he initiated a new phenomenon within the Labour Party: he began to foster a solidarity with the Provisionals which coincided with, and was aided by, the rise of Sinn Fein as an electoral force. It would be wrong to explain this phenomenon as simply the consequence of Sinn Fein’s electoral rise, because the emergence of pro-Sinn Fein solidarity was developing anyway and was part of the process of the development of a new (mainly London based) Labour left, which had begun to champion many marginal political causes such as ethnic minority rights and gay and lesbian rights. Ken Livingstone, who was to become the leading figure in this new Labour left, was similar to Soley only in so far as that he also had no Irish origins, he was also young and had a moderate, likeable manner. But Livingstone continually courted controversy because he chose a confrontational style, most notably on the subject of IRA violence.

which he consistently explained as being the responsibility of the British government because of their policies and tactics in Northern Ireland. Much of the Labour left were very uncomfortable with Livingstone’s behaviour. Tribune severely criticised him in late 1981, arguing that he was abusing his position as GLC leader and creating unnecessary problems for the Labour movement: “When they [rank and file Party workers] ring doorbells to recruit members and ask people to vote Labour, they are, of course, happy to answer queries on Labour record in London. Many of them are less happy to find themselves talking about the IRA…”203 There still existed, in the Labour Party, the desire to avoid debate on the Irish question especially if it appeared to damage the Party in terms of electoral support and especially when the views expressed by Livingstone had very little support throughout the movement anyway. The two styles of Soley and Livingstone essentially set the scene for the 1980s: the divide on Ireland was no longer between pro- and anti-partitionists, it was between the ‘unity by consent’ school of thought and the pro-Sinn Fein/troops out school of thought.

Throughout 1982 the pro-Sinn Fein people began to gain ground throughout the Labour Party and were aided by Sinn Fein’s successes in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in the October. They continued to apply pressure on civil rights matters, such as the PTA, and the persistent lobbying to have the Party adopt a policy of banning the use of plastic bullets also gathered momentum as a straightforward human rights issue. In May a group of more than twenty MPs, including Gerry Fitt, Denis Skinner, Jo Richardson and Ian Mikardo, signed an early-day-motion in the Commons calling for an end to the use of plastic bullets.204 Denis Canavan pressed the Secretary of State in the Commons over the use of plastic bullets later that month but Concannon’s only reservation was that the baton

204 Irish Post, 22 May 1982.
rounds were being used beyond the strict rules that should apply to them.\textsuperscript{205} Then at the annual Labour conference in the October a composite motion was passed, despite NEC opposition, which called for "our parliamentary spokespersons on Northern Ireland to campaign for the withdrawal of plastic bullets from the Royal Ulster Constabulary and army in Northern Ireland."\textsuperscript{206} Don Concannon spoke during the debate to argue against the motion and stated that it would be a very difficult policy for him to carry out, because it would be difficult for him to replace plastic bullets with something else.\textsuperscript{207} It began to look as if the more gains that the left made, the greater the problem of an unwilling leadership became. The left continued to pursue issues relating to Ireland in a way never before seen in the Labour Party. In February 1983 the GLC proposed giving the Troops Out Movement £50,000 to carry out research into the workings of the PTA. The GLC finally backed down on the decision after intense pressure which included the personal intervention of Michael Foot who argued that "The Troops Out Movement is committed to policies which could cause immense suffering in Northern Ireland - policies which the Labour Party conference has rejected by large majorities."\textsuperscript{208} These unprecedented developments also added to the wider image problem for the Labour Party during the early eighties as a party fraught with an internal struggle between left and right, because the left had almost created a situation in which only a commitment to British withdrawal was considered the left-wing position on the Irish question.

It was helpful for the Labour Party, but by no means simply coincidental, that in conjunction with the change in Party policy the Tories also began a subtle and slow shift in policy beginning with the appointment of James Prior in September 1981. The Tories of

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\item[205] \textit{Hansard}, Vol. 24 Col. 1042 (27 May 1982).
\item[208] \textit{Guardian}, 23 Feb. 1983.
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course were not immune to the impact of recent developments (as well as the changes in international opinion) which had been partly responsible for the change in Labour Party thinking. Indeed Clive Soley has stated that Prior’s appointment was the beginning of a new departure for the Conservative Party and it might even be suggested that the changes in the Labour Party might well have concentrated Tory minds. Michael J. Cunningham has argued that one of the reasons that James Prior decided to make a new attempt at achieving devolution was that this was the sort of measure the government would have to introduce if they were to try and maintain Labour Party support. When Prior first introduced his proposals for devolution for Northern Ireland to Parliament in April 1982, Concannon chose the unusual response of arguing that the time was not right for such a development because “Where economic and social conditions are so depressed, and where one in five of the workers in Northern Ireland is on the dole, it is unlikely that there will be a wide or enthusiastic response to constitutional changes.” The fact that Northern Ireland’s economy was in trouble was a particularly spurious argument. First of all, if the changes (which Labour broadly supported) were to bring political stability it could only be helpful for the economy and secondly his statement that the government were putting the cart before the horse by proposing these reforms flew in the face of the often repeated Labour argument that a political solution must be the priority. Indeed Clive Soley was to contradict the economic argument when offering his own analysis in the Commons. When the White Paper came before the House for its second reading two weeks later Concannon had decided to drop this argument and, in spite of the SDLP’s opposition, was altogether quite supportive of the government. Concannon set out Labour’s response to

the plan at length and for the first time stated that Labour was now committed to 'unity by consent'; although Martin Flannery was quick to criticise him for his reticence on the subject. He stated that while Labour supported the spirit of the Paper the main criticism was that Labour would include minority party representation at every level of executive power when devolution came whilst the government’s Paper did not make such provision clear. Criticism was also made of the fact that the chairman of the Assembly (who would have considerable power) would be elected by its members, almost certainly ensuring that he would be a Unionist. Concannon also argued that there should be a parliamentary tier to the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council on which the Assembly members could sit and that there ought to have been much greater emphasis on the Irish dimension.212 Clive Soley’s contributions indicate that there was clearly a very marked difference between the two front bench spokesmen. Soley’s analysis of the economic situation was very different; he argued that current Tory economic policies in Northern Ireland meant that “that economy will continue to collapse. I would also suggest... that the more that happens the greater will be the impetus towards a united Ireland. That is a good thing which I wish to encourage.” In direct contrast to Concannon he stated that violence was not the main reason for the lack of investment, implying that partition was, and that the economy should be looked at on an all-Ireland basis which would happen anyway with the government’s free market policies because market forces dictate that investment and trade will move in away which ignores national frontiers thus making the Northern Ireland border increasingly irrelevant.213 A further difference between Concannon and Soley was that the latter argued that the biggest disappointment was the lack of emphasis on the Irish dimension. In fact it would appear that while Concannon concentrated on policy and legislative detail, Soley had

213 Ibid. Vol. 22 Col. 928 (28 April 1982).
the job of dealing with the wider political and historical issues and of attacking the other parties’ policies such as the Tories, the Unionists and, most interestingly, the SDP.\(^{214}\) There was in fact very little Labour input during the debates on the Bill but this was because they did not want to help the Unionist and right-wing Tory filibuster. Concannon explained that “there is nothing in the Bill that will prevent Labour’s policy from being furthered... That is why the Bill has the Opposition’s tacit support.” However they did try two amendments; the first was to try and increase the 70% margin for the assembly to move towards devolved government because they feared the Unionists might achieve this without needing minority support. The second was to try and strengthen parliamentary control over any move towards devolution. Both amendments failed although they were given assurances by Prior on the latter request.\(^{215}\) Clive Soley later moved a further amendment seeking to have included in the Bill provision for a committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly designed to improve and foster relations between the North and Dublin. He openly conceded that the amendment was designed to further his aim of achieving Irish re-unification by consent. Soley’s performances in the House were inciting the Unionists but bringing admiration from the Labour benches: even Roy Mason was amongst the MP’s who voted for Soley’s amendment even though it was, of course defeated.\(^{216}\) The Bill was eventually passed on the third reading. A handful of right-wing Tories and the Unionists voted against (as did Denis Skinner) but the PLP opted for abstention.

The Assembly elections held in October 1982 saw Provisional Sinn Fein contest elections (albeit on an abstentionist ticket) for the first time since the outbreak of the ‘troubles’. Sinn Fein won 10% of the vote\(^ {217}\) and although the impact was not as great as

\(^{214}\) Ibid. Vol. 23 Cols 542-3 (10 May 1982).
\(^{215}\) Ibid. Vol. 26 Col. 172 (22 June 1982).
\(^{216}\) Ibid. Vol. 26 Cols 756-760 (29 June 1982).
Sands’ by-election victory in 1981, the emergence of the Provisionals as an electoral force throughout the six counties, without the emotional assistance of the hunger strikes, added greater weight and credibility to the new Labour left’s argument that republicans needed to be negotiated with and not merely condemned out of hand. The GLC reacted almost immediately; 26 GLC councillors signed an invitation for Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison, two of the newly elected Sinn Fein members, to visit London on 14 December. The Labour leadership’s response was not condemnatory but instead rather pragmatic. Perhaps because of Sinn Fein’s newly established electoral mandate, Michael Foot simply wrote to Livingstone asking him to explain Labour’s policy to Sinn Fein and their opposition to violence. Although Don Concannon was critical, and so too was Jock Stallard, Clive Soley stated that he would be prepared to meet the Sinn Fein delegates if they were to visit Westminster. Don Concannon was rather dismissive of Sinn Fein electoral success and misread the political situation arguing that “the success of Sinn Fein candidates in the recent Assembly elections was as much a vote against unemployment and the lack of any meaningful political progress as a vote for Sinn Fein.” This was another example of the desire that exists in the Labour Party to blame support for extreme nationalism on class or economic factors rather than recognising the strength of feeling over the question of nationalism and national identity. There is also no evidence to suggest that the Sinn Fein vote has risen notably during periods of economic depression or that it has dropped during periods of what Concannon describes as ‘meaningful political progress’; in fact throughout the period of the peace process in the 1990s the Sinn Fein vote has actually held up very well as they have become identified, within the nationalist

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219 Ibid.
community, as a party genuinely seeking a peaceful resolution. The change in left-wing
attitudes over Sinn Fein is probably best shown by the U-turn displayed by Tribune. The
Labour left’s weekly paper gave over its front page to a ‘Message to the British People’ by
Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison, and its editorial supported the GLC’s decision to invite
Sinn Fein to London.\(^{221}\) Shortly before the Sinn Fein members were due to visit London
the INLA’s Ballykelly pub bombing gave the government the opportunity to place an
exclusion order on Adams and Morrison which was supported by Michael Foot as well as
Jock Stallard because the favourable mood had changed dramatically after the bombing
(even though the INLA and not the PIRA were responsible).\(^{222}\) As so often happened with
the Northern Ireland debate, an outrage such as this immediately silenced many on the left
and stiffened the resolve of those such as Concannon who responded by publicly calling for
a withdrawal of the invitation to Sinn Fein.\(^{223}\) The consequence of the government’s ban
on Sinn Fein visiting London was that Livingstone (who of course was rarely if ever
silenced by such an event) accepted an invitation by Sinn Fein to visit Belfast. Livingstone
did visit Belfast in late February 1983 but was condemned by Foot for doing so.\(^{224}\)
Livingstone responded by pointing out that the NEC Study Group had met every political
force in Ireland except the Provisionals and argued that “The ignorance of the changes
within Sinn Fein explains the angry reaction of the leadership to my visit.”\(^{225}\) (Since the
late seventies Sinn Fein had begun moving toward the left.) The GLC councillors were
determined to go ahead with fostering good relations and dialogue with Sinn Fein, to the
extent that they virtually became their sister party in Ireland.

\(^{221}\) Tribune, 17 Dec. 1982.
\(^{223}\) Hansard, Vol. 33 Col. 722 (7 Dec. 1982).
\(^{224}\) Guardian, 1 March 1983.
\(^{225}\) Times, 5 March 1983.
Despite the condemnations and the arguments that took place within the Party, the left were undoubtedly gaining ground and throwing up questions about Labour’s attitude to the Irish question, many of which had never before even been an issue. If the decision in 1981 to adopt a re-unification policy was a milestone in terms of Labour policy on Ireland, the behaviour of the left over the next few years also led to historic changes in the attitude of the rank and file in the movement. The first occasion that Tony Benn spoke on the subject of Northern Ireland indicated the optimism and determination that the far left had on the issue; he urged dialogue with Sinn Fein arguing that a denial of their right to negotiate would lead to further violence filling the political vacuum and he rubbished ‘unity by consent’ as a reinforcement of the loyalist veto declaring on behalf of the left that “We are beginning to erode that veto which is nothing more than a ticket that commands British troops to defend the old partition.” Changes took place in terms of how republicans were perceived and it became popular among many Labour councils to invite over Sinn Fein councillors. In addition to this it had almost become accepted that favouring a united Ireland was the respectable position for a member of the Labour Party to have. After her election to Parliament in the Peckham by-election in December 1982, Harriet Harman wrote to the Irish Post to give her thanks to Irish voters and to tell them “You can rest assured of my support for a united Ireland and for the abolition of the Prevention of Terrorism Act in this country.” Despite this and despite the fact in Michael Foot they had the most left-wing leader since the War, there was an uneasiness and concern about the behaviour of the far left in pursuing issues on Ireland despite their vilification in the newspapers, especially the tabloids.

The Labour Party went into the 1983 general election with what was probably its most radical manifesto to date. However, the manifesto statement on Northern Ireland, omitted the commitment to end the use of plastic bullets and the constitutional issue was carefully worded; the commitment to ‘unity by consent’ was explicit, but so too was the reassurance to the Unionists that “We respect and support, however, the right of the Northern Ireland people to remain within the UK”. By early 1983 the enthusiasm and optimism which had existed in the Labour Party had already changed because the Tories looked to be heading for a second election victory and so the leadership became less and less tolerant of the far left’s behaviour. Moves had already been made to try and thwart the growth of Militant and people such as Don Concannon and the leadership in general were uncomfortable with left-wing demands for Labour to adopt a more radical stand on certain issues such as opposing repressive measures in Northern Ireland and favouring dialogue with Sinn Fein. Ken Livingstone and others appeared to be unconcerned about the damage to the Labour leadership that their behaviour on the Irish question was causing. This was a unique and ongoing problem for the Labour Party across all areas of policy as the general election approached. Austin Mitchell was to argue after the election, that with the Labour left it seemed that “To lead was to betray. Leadership itself was an anti-social act, an indictable offence. Leaders would sell out - unless they were stopped.” This does ignore the fact that that a great deal of passion excited in relation to many issues and Ireland was no exception. In fact the more it appeared that the leadership were only concerned about votes the more determined the left seemed to become in trying to force issues that they considered to be a question of human rights.

As the Labour Party entered the 1983 general election, it appeared to many that Labour’s new found commitment to a united Ireland was just one of many new left-wing policies adopted by the Party along with nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the Common Market. But, as we shall see ‘unity by consent’ was to outlast most of these other leftist policies in the coming years partly because of the continuing desire of the rank and file not to return to bipartisanship and, to an even greater extent because political developments in Northern Ireland and historic changes in Anglo-Irish relations meant that Labour were to adjust and develop their existing policy in response to these developments.

Following Labour’s 1983 general election defeat a realisation developed that the Labour Party would remain a marginal, minority party representing only the poorer sections of the working class in Scotland and the north of England, on the council estates and those employed in the public sector, unless drastic changes were made in terms of the Party’s electoral appeal. After the 1979 election defeat, the blame was laid at the door of a right-wing leadership and so with the left easily winning the arguments between 1979 and 1983 and securing radical policy changes, with ‘unity by consent’ amongst them, the consequence of the 1983 defeat (Labour’s worst since 1900) was that the left were to be accused of helping to create the image of a divided party and of a rather extreme and irresponsible party which was now viewed by the electorate as less capable of governing than it was in 1979. The election of Neil Kinnock as Labour leader following Michael Foot’s resignation was the first display of the party’s yearning for unity. Kinnock was the soft left’s candidate, but he was determined to lead the party away from what he has described as “impossibilism” and “sloganised dogma” and his dislike for Bennite socialism was summed up in 1983 by Benn’s apparent satisfaction that “28 per cent of the British people have voted for a truly Socialist programme”. Many on the left who voted for Kinnock were unaware of the extent to which he intended reforming the Party. Kinnock chose to embark upon a long term strategy of marginalising the most awkward left-wing individuals and discarding the most electorally unattractive policies. After proposals for one member one vote were defeated in 1984 Kinnock decided that “The experience of that defeat of OMOV [one member one vote], however, strongly confirmed my belief that

change of all kinds would have to be pursued by very thorough and calculated means: it was clear that it would be essential to compile majorities for reforms in the Constitution or the amendments to policy before even putting them for decision, whether to the NEC and its committees or to the National Conference.\textsuperscript{232} Although social democracy was seen to have been defeated in the Party during 1979-83, by the mid 1980s “Kinnock had built up a strong power base on the centre-left” and “Within three years, he had managed to jettison Bennite-style British socialism and replaced it with a variation on European social democracy.”\textsuperscript{233} Kinnock’s plans also included changing the way NEC/PLP study groups and policy committees operated, because he believed that they often produced what he has described as “inchoate wish lists”\textsuperscript{234}. With this in mind, it would have been safe to assume that Labour’s commitment to Irish re-unification would be targeted for either removal or reform in order not to appear so partisan in favour of Irish nationalism in the light of the embarrassing new relationship between sections of the Labour left and Sinn Fein, and because the policy was of little importance in terms of appeal to the British electorate. For a number of reasons the ‘unity by consent’ policy was to remain intact despite being seen as a product of the 1981 left-wing backlash and the policies of opposition to the PTA and the use of plastic bullets were to become consolidated.

Neil Kinnock had no interest whatsoever in Northern Irish politics and during the leadership contest David McKittrick concluded that “Mr Kinnock has apparently nothing to say about the North; he has turned down requests from the Irish Times and RTE for interviews on the subject. Mr Roy Mason last week told me: ‘I have never discussed Northern Ireland with Neil Kinnock. I don’t know what his views are on any aspects of the

\textsuperscript{232}Ibid. p.538.
\textsuperscript{234}Kinnock, N. op cit. p.538.
By the end of the decade Clare Short, who was always given a difficult time by the Labour leader on Irish affairs, was still prepared to say of Neil Kinnock that he “is not particularly informed about Northern Ireland nor are his instincts very good.”

It has been argued that, during this period, there were two wings of opinion in the Labour Party on the subject of regional policy; one of which favoured the radical liberal ideas of devolution and one of which favoured centralised government to achieve a coherent planned socialist economy.

Neil Kinnock had always tended to favour the latter argument and despite being Welsh remained sceptical about devolution for Wales and it was not until 1990 that a Cardiff Assembly was finally agreed as Party policy. Part of the logic of this scepticism was also based upon a suspicion of nationalism in general and there is also very little to indicate that he was either interested in or sympathetic towards Irish nationalism. In contrast to Kinnock’s reticence, Roy Hattersley (the centre-right’s candidate) did agree to an interview with McKittrick and in it he chose to use language which could almost be described as republican: he stated “I do believe the ultimate objective has to be union and I do believe the Six Counties have to be returned to Ireland.”

In addition to declaring his “very low opinion of Mr. Haughey” he stated that he did have a very high opinion of Garret Fitzgerald and of John Hume. This is not an untypical view on the part of Labour politicians; favouring the leader of the Republic’s most right-wing party over and above that of Fianna Fail is indicative of the lack of empathy with the latter’s attempts to present itself as the ‘Republican Party’ whilst being led by a millionaire whose integrity had, to say the least, become rather questionable.

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238 Labour Party, Looking to the Future (1990)
239 Irish Times, 8 July 1983.
went on to develop the argument that EEC membership has changed the economic disparity between North and South so that Unionists can no longer argue that re-unification would leave them in a depressed economic backwater. Indeed the Southern dimension to this argument has in fact gained added weight with the Republic’s remarkable economic success during the nineties. He also took up the civil liberties issue thus: “Now I think we have got to say to the Northerners - ‘If you are incorporated into Ireland, you mustn’t fear that you Protestants are going to be forced to live under laws as incorporated in the Catholic Constitution.’” 240 This is all the more fascinating in the light of the fact that Hattersley has claimed that he had longed to become Secretary of State for Northern Ireland during the 1970s.241 The style and language of the interview did seem rather unusual for the man considered the champion of the moderate centre-right, but then the interview was for an Irish readership and he may have stood to at least win over a few votes from those who despaired with Kinnock’s and Meacher’s (the other left candidate) silence on the question of Ireland. The use of the European argument was also a curious development in terms of Labour thinking on the Irish question because even John Hume was not to develop this argument until much later in the eighties. It is also a fact indicative of Labour’s indifference on the Irish question that there had never been any high profile right-wing opposition to the ‘unity by consent’ policy; certainly not in the way that there was to the policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament in the shape of individuals such as Peter Shore and Denis Healey. Whereas in the 1990s people such as Kate Hoey and Nick Raynsford offered the opposing argument to re-unification, in the eighties no such opposition existed and so it appeared very often that many in the Labour leadership, including those of the centre-right such as Roy Hattersley, gave support to ‘unity by

240 Ibid.
consent’ without any apparent conviction, so that one was left with the distinct impression that re-unification was certainly not a view arrived at as a consequence of lengthy internal discussion among the leadership.

Like most British socialists, both Kinnock and Hattersley had a deep abhorrence of violence and of those such as the Provisionals who believed in the use of force for political ends. Hattersley stated, after the 1983 general election, that “the vote for Provisional Sinn Fein was almost the most depressing thing to happen in the election.” Nevertheless, the links between sections of the Labour left and Sinn Fein were to gain an increase in democratic legitimacy following Gerry Adams election as MP for West Belfast. Jeremy Corbyn responded almost immediately by inviting a Sinn Fein delegation, which included Gerry Adams and Joe Austin, to visit London in July 1983 and amongst those that Sinn Fein met were the newly elected Labour MPs Clare Short and Tony Banks as well as Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone. There clearly existed, at this stage, a sharp divide between the pro-united Irelanders on the basis of those who saw the rise of Sinn Fein as a positive development and those who did not. Amongst the latter was the Party’s Northern Ireland Parliamentary Group (for whom Martin Flannery had become chair) which decided against meeting with the Sinn Fein delegation. Don Concannon, with his deep animosity towards the Provisionals, persistently opposed the new relationship with Sinn Fein; he urged members of the Labour Party not to meet with Sinn Fein, not to allow them into the Houses of Parliament and described Gerry Adams as a “godfather of terrorism.” At a public meeting held at Finsbury Town Hall, Gerry Adams was joined on the platform by the Labour MP Chris Smith who was persistently heckled until he was finally forced to sit

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242 Irish Times, 8 July 1983.
244 Irish Times, 19 July 1983.
down because he took the opportunity to denounce the use of violence for political ends.\textsuperscript{246} Despite the controversy and divisiveness of these events, the left saw them as important for stimulating debate as well as for raising the profile of Sinn Fein in the Labour movement over and above the SDLP which it considered a moribund middle class party. As for who was using who? It would seem that the Labour links were just another part of the Provisionals' overall strategy to achieve British withdrawal; for them “it at last seemed possible to build or to encourage a broad-based withdrawal movement in Britain... Gerry Adams promised reporters, after his triumphant October 1983 Labour Party conference visit, that both he and other leading Provisionals would be back in Britain regularly to build up their support in the expatriate community and on the left.”\textsuperscript{247} Despite Sinn Fein appearances at Labour Party conferences becoming a regular occurrence the Party leadership was deeply embarrassed, especially following events such as the IRA bombing of Harrods in December 1983 which left five civilians dead. The disquiet over the violence as well as the lack of empathy with Sinn Fein’s culture of militant nationalism was summed up by Neil Kinnock thus: “I must say that I am utterly opposed to any such relationship with Provisional Sinn Fein and that there is nothing in the traditions or the policy of the Labour Party that justifies such relations.”\textsuperscript{248} This statement was made at the height of the miner’s strike in Britain when picket line violence was at its worst; but this protracted industrial dispute was a matter which also led to a great deal of soul searching and bitter internal tension within both the rank and file and the leadership of the Labour movement. It should also be noted that although Peter Archer (Party spokesperson on Northern Ireland from 1983-87) never met with Sinn Fein leaders,\textsuperscript{249} Clive Soley on a number of occasions did.

\textsuperscript{246} \textit{Irish Times}, 28 July 1983.  
\textsuperscript{248} \textit{Times}, 2 June 1984.  
\textsuperscript{249} Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996.
However Soley had very little sympathy with Sinn Fein and held the meetings only to put his views across and to try and make sense of the Provisionals aims and tactics which he has described as counter productive and unrealistic. For example, while Soley sought to achieve harmonisation between north and south he argued with Sinn Fein that their activities were serving only to alienate the population of the Republic from the North. He also questioned them as to what they would do in the event of a British withdrawal and concluded that first of all the Sinn Fein leader, Gerry Adams, was simply bogged down in theory and secondly they had no realistic idea about how to deal with an aggrieved Protestant community thus reinforcing Soley’s belief that only a peaceful and consensual process of unification and British withdrawal would be feasible.230

At the Labour Party’s 1983 conference the now commonplace composite resolutions appeared, calling for British withdrawal, and on this occasion one (which called for an end to the loyalist veto) was moved by Tony Benn, much to the annoyance of his fellow NEC members. The NEC had urged that the resolutions be remitted but Benn took the unprecedented step of defying the will of the Committee, despite being a member, and moving one composite as a representative of Kensington CLP.251 On the subject of Ireland the left still appeared to be in the ascendant at the conference. With the rise of Sinn Fein and the ever growing influence of the Labour Committee on Ireland, the troops out lobby were optimistic and although Tony Benn’s resolution was heavily defeated by 5,142,000 votes to 356,000 they at least had the satisfaction of witnessing Don Concannon being slow handclapped towards the end of his contribution until the chair finally switched the microphone off for over running his time.252 Debate on Ireland was undoubtedly

250 Soley, C. Interview, Dec. 1996.
beginning to reach into more and more areas of the Labour movement, to an extent greater even than in 1981. In addition to the LCI, there emerged in late 1983 the 'Ireland: Peace Through Democracy' campaign which was a Parliamentary grouping (including Plaid Cymru as well as Labour MP’s) committed to achieving British withdrawal and one of whose main sponsors was Tony Benn.253 There also emerged the pro-unity but anti-Republican ‘Labour Campaign for Peace and Progress in Ireland’, which unlike the ‘Peace Through Democracy’ group did remain in existence for a number of years as a persistent pressure group within the Labour movement.254 The campaign was sponsored by the Labour MP Sean Hughes and by Tom Pendry the ex-shadow spokesperson on Northern Ireland well known for his hostility towards the Provisionals. The group remained of only limited influence maintaining a position of sympathy for the Workers’ Party and eventually established a set of moderate proposals including devolution, integrated education, demilitarisation and a Bill of Rights.255 It is also important to note that fringe meetings on Ireland at the Party’s annual conference were also becoming more numerous and popularly attended during this period as the Northern Ireland conflict became one of the left’s more exciting pet subjects along with anti-racism campaigns and the issue of nuclear disarmament.

In November 1983 Don Concannon lost his place in the shadow cabinet, following the annual PLP vote, and was consequently replaced by Peter Archer as Kinnock’s choice for spokesperson on Northern Ireland. There had been no speculation that Archer would get the job and he was initially viewed with suspicion by the left because he came from the centre-right. He was a practising Methodist and he did have an impressive record as a legal

255 LCPPI, Northern Ireland: Background to the Current Situation (1986).
rights campaigner in addition to having previously been the chair of the British section of Amnesty International. Archer’s immediate response when questioned on his views on Ireland was to declare that economic issues such as improving trade and combating unemployment were more important than the constitutional question. Clive Soley immediately approached Archer to ensure that he was in agreement with his ideas on harmonisation and re-unification. Peter Archer has admitted that he was perfectly happy with Soley’s ideas but was in fact limited in his understanding of the issues involved and consequently “to a great extent I was dependent on Clive.” To begin with many of the debates on Northern Ireland, in the House of Commons, were left to Clive Soley to lead for the opposition. In spite of Archer’s lack of experience on the subject, the next year was in fact to witness the Labour Party, at front bench level, develop some of its most original and radical policies on Northern Ireland thus far. Clive Soley remained the assistant spokesperson for the next year and came to be dubbed by David McKittrick, writing in the *Irish Times*, as ‘The Father of Unity by Consent’. Soley made it his job to put the meat on the bones of the ‘unity by consent’ policy. In spite of the critics, such as the LCI, who said the policy was a contradiction and a reinforcement of the Unionist veto Soley set out to try and make the policy appear a practicable and realisable goal. The Archer-Soley combination worked well because unlike people such as Mason and Concannon they did not irritate the left but always showed a willingness to listen, to discuss and to show flexibility and originality especially when dealing with matters of legal and human rights. Years later Clare Short was to describe Clive Soley as “the best Shadow Minister Labour has ever had on Northern Ireland.” In addition to this the journalist, Kevin Toolis, has

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256 *Irish Times*, 1 Nov. 1983.
257 Ibid. 2 Nov. 1983.
claimed that “many of his [Clive Soley’s] ideas on joint economic initiatives have been taken up by the Northern Ireland Office”\textsuperscript{260} and Soley himself has complained that he probably has not received the credit he deserves for many of the ideas he developed and the influence they had in government circles.\textsuperscript{261} Dublin was also happy with the Labour Party’s front bench team and as we look through the contributions that Soley and Archer made to the debate, it might also be argued that they were much more in tune in terms of anticipating the direction of Anglo-Irish relations than they might have been given credit for, especially in the light of the Hillsborough agreement signed in November 1985.

As for legal reforms, as part of Labour’s all-Ireland harmonisation plans, the first suggestion was that of an all-Ireland court proposed by Clive Soley in early 1982.\textsuperscript{262} Then in late 1983 Clive Soley proposed the establishment of an all-Ireland police force\textsuperscript{263} and, as with many of his ideas, he did not set out a detailed plan of how this would be achieved or what the end result would exactly be, but floated the idea by envisaging “an all-Ireland police force recruited and trained on both sides of the border and used where appropriate. I’m not suggesting it would be used on the Shankill on the first day, but on the other hand, you might want to use it in Armagh.”\textsuperscript{264} In the months ahead Soley was to develop his ideas for the merging of the Irish judicial systems and the setting up of all-Ireland law courts.\textsuperscript{265} As an example of the aforementioned influence that Soley had even amongst his opponents, the right-wing Tory MP for Epping, Sir John Biggs-Davidson (who was to express such anger at Soley’s suggestion that the Tories were beginning to favour Irish unity), was to take up Soley’s idea and propose that the Garda should be used in certain

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\textsuperscript{260} \textit{Fortnight}, 18 March 1985.
\textsuperscript{261} Soley, C. Interview Dec. 1996.
\textsuperscript{262} \textit{Hansard}, Vol. 22 Col. 927 (28 April 1982).
\textsuperscript{263} \textit{Times}, 30 Nov. 1983.
\textsuperscript{265} \textit{Irish Times}, 3 June 1984.
\end{flushleft}
areas within Northern Ireland. Although Soley always seemed to be one step ahead of Archer with many ideas, Peter Archer usually sanctioned the suggestions albeit in a much more moderate style: on the police, Archer simply argued that the process should at least be initiated by closer RUC/Garda co-operation and when, in late 1983, it was disclosed that Labour were looking into the idea of joint sovereignty he complained that the matter had been “a little over dramatised”. Throughout 1984 Clive Soley concentrated on developing ideas upon which re-unification was to be achieved. David McKittrick stated that “Mr. Soley, John Hume once said with enthusiasm, had all on his own worked out a plan to unite Ireland. His plan might have a few holes in it but it was indeed a plan, such as no other politician has ever come up with... One of the unusual things about Mr Soley has been that he arrived at his ideas through his own thought processes: it wasn’t the question of the Irish embassy in London or the SDLP talking him round to their point of view.” Unlike most others who have held positions in Labour’s front bench Northern Ireland team, Soley appeared to argue his case with genuine conviction. Through Soley and right up to the early nineties, Labour’s case has been that Britain should not simply wait until the nationalist vote reaches 51% but that the British government should work, in conjunction with Dublin, to bring the Ulster Protestant community into co-operation with nationalist Ireland so that re-unification can be achieved peacefully and with sufficient Protestant acquiescence. On the argument about the loyalist veto Soley said that “there is no way that we can force them in [to a united Ireland] without a degree of consent. A degree of consent. I’m not saying that I want Ian Paisley and Enoch Powell to come out and say we are in favour of a united Ireland, we’ll never get that.” Winning such consent was to then

267 Ibid. 2 Dec. 1983.
268 Ibid. 10 Nov. 1984.
be achieved through “initiatives such as an all-Ireland Economic Development Council, links on Tourism, Trade and Education.” To this he added the idea that there should be joint citizenship for those who wished to retain their British passports and in addition “We would probably have some sort of Anglo-Irish Council which could look after the human rights aspect.”269 Many on the left were still not convinced and Clare Short for example was to argue that the whole ‘unity by consent’ strategy “was obviously a fudge, given that consent isn’t there, but still the aspiration of re-unification became part of policy. Clive Soley then interpreted it to mean Labour working to build all sorts of united institutions between North and South... till you reach the point where you have actually re-unified the country without anyone noticing.”270 The unity by ‘stealth’ accusation was often raised by the LCI in addition to which it would also be fair to say that no great consideration was given to Unionist opposition to such a surreptitious plan or the likely resistance and disruption they would employ in the event of a Labour government embarking on such a project.

In the same fashion as Peter Archer, Neil Kinnock began by wanting to concentrate only on economic issues and the problem of unemployment in Northern Ireland271 but also came to argue publicly for many of the ideas that Soley was developing, although Kinnock became much more disposed to the idea of some form of joint authority with Dublin as a prerequisite to re-unification.272 The New Ireland Forum report, which was finally made public on 2 May 1984, united the Labour leadership and elevated the Party’s Irish policy to greater political acceptability because the three options that the Irish parties advocated in the report, namely a unitary state, a federal/confederal state and joint authority, were

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precisely the lines along which Soley and Archer had been thinking. In fact Soley himself had sent a contribution on behalf of the British Labour Party to the Forum. The New Ireland Forum report is of immense historic and political importance, not least because it ushered in a sea change in British party political thinking on the Irish question which led in turn to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985, but also because it was to create such a divergence of opinion between the two main British parties that it in fact set them on course for an eventual return to bipartisanship. As early as December 1983 Clive Soley had argued that the government were beginning a fundamental shift: “I sense a growing change in the Conservative Party... What I suspect - or what I think - is that current Tory policy is inevitably leaning towards a united Ireland.”

What was even more significant was the Tory front bench’s failure to refute Soley’s claim and, indeed, Sir John Biggs-Davison took issue with the Secretary of State for not opposing what the Tory-right considered an unthinkable suggestion. Peter Archer, prompted by the report to take up a more resolutely anti-partition line, declared that “No one would suggest that the people of Ireland benefit from having two incomplete economies, two fuel, transport and agricultural policies, two systems of law enforcement” and arguing that “It is impossible to recognise the Irish dimension without severing the British link.” However in the House Commons debate two months later he cautioned pro-unity enthusiasts that “The shotgun wedding of 1 million people with 3 million people without their consent would simply not be workable.” Neil Kinnock was positively enthusiastic about the New Ireland Forum and was foremost amongst those calling for a debate on the Forum report in the House of Commons. As early as November 1983 Kinnock met with Garret Fitzgerald and Dick

Spring and after discussing the Forum he made it clear that he wanted the final report fully debated in the Commons. When the opportunity finally arose, the Commons debate gave the Labour Party the chance to articulate their commitment to re-unification in the more favourable political atmosphere engendered by a conservative Irish government presenting a report which begged a considerable change in the British government’s direction and which had behind it a sympathetic international community, not least the United States. In the debate Peter Archer proposed that an ‘all-Ireland chamber’ be established, through which the Dublin and Westminster governments could maintain ongoing dialogue and Clive Soley took the opportunity to set out clearly and concisely the five main proposals which he had developed over the preceding year: 1) joint citizenship 2) a British-Irish Parliamentary council 3) an all-Ireland economic development committee 4) an all-Ireland police force and 5) an all-Ireland judicial system. In the face of criticism that the Republic’s welfare benefits were below the standard of those in the North, Soley was to later add to his list of demands the proposal that the social security systems of North and South be gradually harmonised. The Commons debate also highlighted some of the divisions in Labour’s pro-unity camp. Joan Maynard made clear her differences with those such as Martin Flannery who took a cautious view of achieving Irish unity and she articulated the arguments of the ‘troops out’ lobby, calling on the government to set a date for the withdrawal of the British army. Flannery made clear that he believed that such a policy would risk a bloodbath and that such a risk was not worth taking. He went on to throw a novel argument at the Tories by supposing that “If a powerful, imperialist Ireland had been the order of the day many years ago and had subjugated and taken over a weak

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277 Irish Times, 9 Nov. 1983.
278 Ibid. 3 July 1984.
England and Scotland and, ultimately due to the force of circumstances, had carved out
Lancashire and attached it to Ireland, we should certainly not be sitting quiet. We should
be struggling for a united England, just as the Irish are now struggling for united Ireland
and we should respect them for it."280 At a joint press conference with Dick Spring in the
June, Neil Kinnock expressed his support for Irish unity with the greatest enthusiasm
shown to date. (This was quite a development in itself, considering the fact that Michael
Foot never publicly endorsed ‘unity by consent’). “What Kinnock said this week was,
almost exactly, what Soley has been saying for the last few years.” He set out the exact
same proposals that Soley had already outlined in the Commons, so that as was pointed out
at the time “the Kinnock endorsement of the Soley approach now means that Labour has a
definite policy shared by the party conference and by the party leader. Its been a long time
since that was the case.”281 Considering that Kinnock took on the Labour leadership
vowing to ditch the Party’s attachment to what he described as ‘impossiblism’, one might
be justified in speculating that without the New Ireland Forum and the change in
Conservative policy in trying to accommodate Dublin in seeking a solution, such a unified
commitment to the ‘unity by consent’ policy would never have been achieved; after all,
there is little in the world of politics which appears quite as ‘impossible’ as the winning of
Ulster Protestant support for the idea of a unitary Irish state. However, when Kinnock was
pressed on a timetable for a Labour government attaining a united Ireland he stated that
such a goal would not be achieved for “many, many decades.”282

During the mid-eighties a number of civil and legal rights issues emerged, around
which the left began to focus. Along with the issue of banning of plastic bullets, which was

agreed as Party policy in 1982, there emerged three other contentious matters: the strip searching of women prisoners in Armagh prison, the introduction of 'supergrass' trials and the question of the 'Diplock' non-jury courts (which were brought under greater public scrutiny following the acquittal of three RUC Officers connected with a series of 'shoot to kill' allegations in June 1984). First of all strip searching became a focal point for women's groups within the Labour movement; it was the first specifically female issue to emerge from the Irish conflict. The practice had been introduced in 1982 following the disappearance of a set of warders keys in Armagh prison and consequently become a major campaigning issue for Sinn Fein. To begin with the Labour leadership were indifferent about the issue and Don Concannon had told James Prior in early 1983 “I do not suggest for a moment that he should give up the powers of strip searching in Armagh women's prison, but is it necessary to continue planned searches of that kind, as I am afraid that it is providing a cause which the IRA, Sinn Fein and others are looking?” In May 1984 the annual Labour Women’s conference voted in favour of a resolution condemning strip searching; they also voted to oppose the Diplock courts and ‘supergrass’ trials. MPs Harriet Harman and Clare Short visited Armagh prison to look into the practice in early 1984. Jo Richardson, as the Party’s front bench spokesperson on women's affairs, also visited the prison in November 1984 and concluded that strip searching “is being carried out as a way of harassing and humiliating Republican women prisoners. I can’t understand why else the Government would allow itself to have all this criticism heaped on its head with so little in return.” The campaign was given further legitimacy within the Labour movement with the NIC/ICTU decision in 1985 to pass a motion condemning strip

searching and calling for the abolition of the practice.\textsuperscript{286} In Peter Archer the Labour Party had a spokesperson who needed little persuasion by the left to take up such an issue; his human rights background meant that Archer was personally shocked at the practice and was certainly enthusiastic in his opposition to it.\textsuperscript{287} Within weeks of gaining his front bench position he said of strip searching that “I believe that it does more harm than good... If we are to believe what we hear the way they are conducted is a major mistake... It seems that it is provocative to a degree which outweighs any possible security use.”\textsuperscript{288} Two years later Archer was still pursuing the issue by holding a private meeting with the junior minister for Northern Ireland, Nicholas Scott, to persuade him to scrap the practice, not least because he believed that it was damaging Britain’s international reputation.\textsuperscript{289} The left were able to motivate and draw sections of the movement into taking an interest in the Irish question through an emotive human rights issue such as the strip searching of women prisoners and throughout these years there were constant visits by women’s groups, black groups, Labour councillors and various left-wing delegations to Northern Ireland; most of which were hosted by Sinn Fein.\textsuperscript{290} The contentious legal matters of the Diplock courts and the ‘supergrass’ trials were vigorously pursued by groups such as the LCI but the Party’s front bench line was always one of just cautious criticism.

The PLP was already firmly committed to opposition to the PTA and many of the new Labour MPs were especially enthusiastic about opposing the draconian legal measures and could do so without the accusation of having supported the introduction of the Act a decade earlier. When in early 1984 the Home Secretary, David Waddington, accused the

\textsuperscript{286} NIC/ICTU letter to Jo Richardson, 4 June 1985, ref: A3/1/tc/mnt. (Kevin McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)
\textsuperscript{287} Collins, M. (Editor of \textit{Labour and Ireland} at the time.) Interview Nov. 1995.
\textsuperscript{288} \textit{Labour and Ireland}, Vol. 2 No. 2 (Jan-Feb 1984)
\textsuperscript{289} \textit{Labour Weekly}, 14 Feb 1986.
Labour Party of a sudden change of mind on the PTA, Clare Short and Harriet Harman leapt to the defence of the PLP. Harman stated “Will the Minister accept that it is not a sudden change of mind? What was sudden was the passing of the prevention of terrorism laws, and since then we have been able to reflect on their effect. It is in the light of that experience that many people who agreed with the laws when they were first put on the statute book have genuinely changed their minds.” Harman and Short were typical of the new, energetic, ambitious left-wingers who had recently arrived in the House and they pursued such issues with particular vigour. (Harman had previously been a legal officer with the National Council for Civil Liberties.) At the time, many speculated that an incoming Labour government faced with a serious terrorist threat would be unlikely to fulfil the commitment to repeal such legislation. Difficult though it is to speculate what a Labour government in the mid-eighties might or might not have done, ‘New’ Labour in the mid-nineties had decided that in order to achieve acceptance by the British public as a responsible party fit for government it needed to drop its opposition to the PTA; included on Labour’s front bench by this time were Clare Short and Harriet Harman. However, whilst criticism of their silence in a PTA supporting shadow cabinet might be justified, one of the first measures taken by the Blair government in 1997 was the dropping of the use of exclusion orders. As for the Emergency Provisions Act, Labour voted against its renewal for the first time in July 1984, although as Archer explained in the Commons, the Party did not seek repeal of the EPA but were disappointed with the government’s decision not to act on the advice of the Baker report which had, in April, recommended a comprehensive set of reforms to the Act. At the annual conference in October 1984 a composite motion which called for the abolition of the Diplock courts, for an end to ‘supergrass’ trials and for

an end to strip searching was narrowly passed by 3,000,000 votes to 2,624,000 despite NEC demands that the resolution be remitted.\textsuperscript{293} Although this decision was reversed at the following years conference and the decision was never accepted by the leadership as official policy, it did seem to give Archer the freedom to criticise the government more so than previously. Archer had always made public his criticisms of strip searching but by late 1985 he was unequivocal in his attacks on the Northern Ireland legal system: “The ‘supergrass’ system is almost universally abhorred in Northern Ireland. In combination with the absence of juries it greatly increases the possibility of unsafe convictions... As part of our programme to restore confidence and return normality to Northern Ireland the next Labour Government will end the system which allows convictions on the basis of uncorroborated accomplice evidence in the non jury courts of Northern Ireland.”\textsuperscript{294}

After the 1984 conference the shadow cabinet elections produced a right-wing shift which saw Eric Heffer lose his place and Kinnock chose to move Clive Soley to home affairs and appointed Stuart Bell as Archer’s new assistant. Bell (also a barrister) was a centre-right MP and secretary of the right-wing Manifesto Group of Labour MPs who had never previously been associated with Northern Ireland. Although some on the left saw this as a deliberate right-wing shift on the part of the leadership, Clive Soley had actually requested that he be moved. In addition to this, it did appear initially that Bell was likely to embark upon a slightly different course; he told the BBC “I will be placing more emphasis on tact and diplomacy, not that he [Soley] did not, but I think that I would personally prefer a softer approach to the problem.”\textsuperscript{295} Early in 1985 a further development helped to convince many that Kinnock was engineering a shift away from ‘unity by consent’. A joint

\textsuperscript{293} Times, 6 Oct. 1984.
\textsuperscript{295} Irish Times, 8 Nov. 1985.
PLP/NEC committee had been set up after conference to look again into Labour’s Northern Ireland policy; the committee was chaired by the pro-nationalist MP Joan Maynard but in a vote of no confidence she was defeated by four votes to three and was consequently replaced by the moderate trade unionist Alex Kitson. Many, such as Kevin Toolis of the *Irish Times* and Chris Ryder of the *Times* were arguing that Labour were embarking on a new strategy of opposing any increase in Dublin’s role and toning down the commitment to re-unification. This was not the case: first of all, rather than reducing Dublin’s role Neil Kinnock, inspired by the NIF, was becoming evermore disposed to the idea of joint authority. During a visit to Londonderry in December 1984 he said that he could not envisage an internal settlement but he did favour “joint authority especially in the economic areas- on employment policy, efforts to stimulate employment; trade policy.” In an RTE interview he stated that he did not foresee an immediate executive role for Dublin but explained that “In a process of gradualism we are talking of a problem centuries old in existence and over a decade in intensity. There cannot be an executive role but there may be some kind of an advisory one. I believe in growing oaks; this may be an acorn.” When asked directly on joint authority he said “joint activity precedes joint authority”. It is here that we can see the beginning of the divergence of opinion between the two main British parties mentioned earlier and one can only speculate as to what extent Kinnock was aware of the deal that was being hammered out between London and Dublin, but there is no doubt that both the substance and rhetoric emanating from the Labour front bench during this period indicated that they were anticipating the new role that would be given to Dublin. Despite Thatcher’s hard-line rhetoric it was known that the new Secretary of

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State, Douglas Hurd favoured further Dublin involvement and throughout 1985 speculation continued to increase that such a deal was imminent. Tony Benn argued, at the 1984 annual conference, that London and Dublin were “trying to do some sort of deal that would safeguard the face of the British Government but would begin to nudge the North into a new relationship.” The Labour front bench team were well aware of the direction in which the government were moving in. Peter Archer has stated that government ministers were keen to try and involve the Labour Party in what was going on and undoubtedly sought a return to bipartisanship; but Archer’s response was to try and keep his distance because although a divergence of opinion might have been developing around recognition of the Irish dimension, Labour wanted to be seen to be maintaining a distinctive position.

Regardless of developments on Labour’s front bench and the evident beginning of the Party’s right-wing drift, amongst the rank and file the troops out/united Ireland sentiment continued to dominate what was a very different debate. The ongoing polemic, which was led by mainly Ken Livingstone and Tony Benn, was concerned not with how best to achieve re-unification or reconciliation but, being essentially based on an anti-imperialist analysis, evolved around the idea of British withdrawal as well as the related questions of dealing with the ‘blood bath’ scenario, the suggestion that UN troops could replace British troops and the notion that the whole issue was cold war related, assuming that the British government’s overriding concern was the Republic’s refusal to enter NATO. Throughout 1984 Tony Benn was consistently arguing that “We should understand that the occupation of Ireland is primarily a defence issue - it is like a curious

300 Cunningham, M. J. op cit. p176.
cul-de-sac frontier of NATO." Later in the year he told *Marxism Today* that “we have a long running war in Ireland where the real motive is not to protect the Protestant minority, but to maintain a NATO presence on that island. Because since the Republic is a neutral country any re-unification of Ireland under the Irish constitution would mean that Ireland was no longer a member of NATO.” Fanciful and speculative these accusations might have appeared, (they were not given much notice by the Labour leadership) Benn was no doubt convinced by certain soundings from the Tory back benches. In October 1984 Michael Mates, the Tory chair of the Inter-Party Committee on Irish Affairs, told a meeting in the Republic that Britain giving up control of Northern Ireland would be difficult “but if enough wanted it we might give way.” In addition and most significantly he argued that only Irish insistence on retaining neutrality would prevent it: “There you would have a stumbling-block twice the size of any other.” The theory was given greater validity when in 1985 the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed and Enoch Powell immediately stated his belief that the accord was the result of a deal with the USA to achieve an expansion of NATO bases in the Republic. Benn was to be joined by the Daily Mirror’s Joe Haines who as a one time adviser to Harold Wilson carried considerable weight in also arguing that the NATO issue “was an obstacle to withdrawal.” Ken Livingstone on the other hand was relatively dismissive of this issue pointing out that “Now that NATO has got its listening post on Mount Gabriel, the military arguments for Britain remaining in the North are gone - Ireland is now effectively part of NATO.” It was partly for this reason that he believed the Tories were prepared to sign the Anglo-Irish Agreement now that Northern Ireland was no longer of such strategic importance with the Republic, as he argued, having

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become a full member of the western alliance in all but name. If anything these contrasting arguments were more than the usual left-wing splits but rather an indication of the left’s inability to deal with the changes developing in British party political attitudes to Ireland (North and South). On the question of deploying UN troops Tony Benn was completely on his own arguing that “If you are to deal with the problem, you have to have something to say about the risk that a blood bath might happen... In a way the UN function would be to cover a withdrawal and pave the way for something else.” He believed that the idea would generate debate but in fact the overwhelming majority of the left were hostile to the idea and over the years Benn gradually abandoned it.

During the mid-eighties a number of trade unions started to break the tradition of silence on the Irish question and initiated a change in attitudes towards the ideas and aspirations of Irish nationalism. The most important development was the decision by the National Union of Railwaymen to adopt a resolution at their annual general meeting in 1985 which stated that the union supported “the principle of the reunification of Ireland and urges discussion with the government of the Irish Republic... it being understood that while every effort should be taken to secure reconciliation and consent, the Unionists of Northern Ireland cannot be allowed a permanent veto on constitutional change.” In Jimmy Knapp they had a leader who was sympathetic to Irish nationalist aspirations, but as a Scot he was also sensitive to the problem of sectarianism having encountered sectarian tension in the west of Scotland. The NUR also did not have the problem of a Northern Ireland membership and so could adopt such a position without fear of a backlash from loyalist railwaymen in the province. It was argued by some on the Labour left that the Northern

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311 Ibid. Vol. 2 No. 10 (Jan-March 1986).
Ireland trade union branches carried out a 'loyalist veto' of their own, preventing debate on what they decided was not a trade union issue. As was explained in the last chapter some unions had legitimate reasons for avoiding the issue. However, although the accusation that many unions were dominated by loyalists was rather an exaggeration, the GMB was put in the embarrassing position in 1983 of being found guilty by the Fair Employment Agency of discriminating against Catholics in the Harland and Wolff shipyard. Although the GMB had an arrangement with the employer whereby new recruits should be taken from amongst the union's unemployed membership, they were in fact allowing them to employ new non-union workers ahead of unemployed Catholic members of the Union. The GMB were consequently fined.312 Following the example set by the Associated Staffs for a United Ireland, another new pressure group was established in December 1984, this time in NALGO. Martin Sachs was the organiser of the NALGO Campaign for a United Ireland which was ultimately rather more successful than the ASUI. With NALGO their main opponents in the union were the Conservative group, but of greater significance was the fact that they did not have a Northern Ireland membership to hinder their campaign.313 The ASTMS, by contrast, was organised in both Northern Ireland and the Republic and so the Irish question was considered a particularly contentious and potentially divisive issue. The ASUI pressure group inside the ASTMS were not making the progress that they had hoped for and were arguing that at the organising committee for the 1985 annual conference the Northern Ireland region delegate tried to prevent having Ireland on the agenda and argued that if a troops out resolution was debated and passed by conference then "the security of full time officials could not be guaranteed."314 The nearest the ASUI came to achieving its

312 Ibid. Vol. 2 No. 3 (March-April 1984).
313 Ibid. Vol. 2 No. 6 (Feb-March 1985).
objective of winning the ASTMS over to a policy favouring Irish unity was at the union’s annual conference in May 1986. There were determined attempts to keep Ireland off the conference agenda with delegates arguing that resolutions on Ireland were contrary to rule 32 (which prevented the union signing up to single issue campaigns) and amendments calling for troops out were indeed ruled out of order. The motion which was finally passed stated that the conference “notes the Labour Party’s commitment to the reunification of Ireland, but because of the continuing suffering of trade unionists of all denominations in the North of Ireland, Conference instructs the NEC to: Encourage Divisions and branches to obtain information about the situation in Ireland” to “Promote open discussions on Irish issues” and also to “Organise day and weekend courses”.

It must be said that part of the reason for these minor successes by the pro-Irish unity lobby in the trade union movement was the fact that no such attempt had previously been made to change the unions’ policies on Ireland and so the first attempt was always likely to yield a few results; but ushering in a sea change was not what was taking place.

At the 1986 Labour Party annual conference the National Union of Mineworkers became the first union to vote in favour of the composite motion in favour of British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. This historic decision and the developments mentioned earlier in the movement were partly the result of three or four years of work by various pressure groups, most notably the Labour Committee on Ireland, who deliberately focused on the trade unions in the knowledge that their votes were vital if they were to change Labour Party policy on Ireland through the annual conferences. During the miners’ strike of 1984-5 the union established contact with various support groups in Ireland and

\[315\] Ibid. Vol. 2 No. 12 (July-Sept 1986).
had the support of Sinn Fein who helped collect funds for the striking miners. Along with the Labour Committee on Ireland offering free membership to striking miners, there were also low level contacts being established by Sinn Fein and the Troops Out Movement with rank and file miners, miners’ wives and their supporters. For example, Birmingham Trades Council sent a delegation to Northern Ireland which included striking miners and part of the visit included observing a ‘supergrass’ trial. Such activities prompted Don Concannon (who was sponsored by the NUM) to condemn these developments arguing that “the only things they can teach miners is how to make bombs and kill policemen. Many of them are nothing more than terrorists and they can do nothing to advance the cause of the striking miners.”

The politicisation that developed as a result of the miners’ strike was evident in the new found relationships which were established with elements such as black groups and gay and lesbian groups. Along with these developments which would have been unlikely during the sixties and seventies, the new found interest in the Irish question on the part of the NUM was also created partly as a result of pressure groups, such as the LCI, looking to build on the empathy between the miners, who met such fierce state opposition during their year long strike, and the beleaguered northern Irish nationalist community. With the LCI deliberately trying to get matters such as RUC excesses, use of plastic bullets, the PTA and strip searching on the agenda, they were able present the Irish problem to the unions as a matter of state repression versus popular resistance. By 1987 Martin Collins of the LCI was explaining that “Because these issues all now have a very big majority in the unions people are much more open about discussing other aspects of the problem. We’ve managed to win a certain legitimacy for Ireland to be

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318 Labour and Ireland, Vol. 2 No. 6 (Feb-March 1984).
319 Ibid. Vol. 2 No. 5 (Autumn 1984)
discussed; if you want to talk about Ireland it doesn’t mean you’re a terrorist.” 320 They saw the civil liberties issues as a way of securing a foot hold in the movement in order to try and place British withdrawal and Irish unity on the trade union agenda. However, despite understandable optimism the successes that they witnessed with the NUM and NUR were not to prove to be the launch pad for a major change throughout the rest of the trade union movement which would translate into votes at the Labour Party conference. Even with the presence of groups such as the Associated Staffs for a United Ireland (who, despite persistent pressure, never achieved what was achieved in the NUM and NUR) over the coming years only minor changes took place in terms of trade union policy on Ireland. If Neil Kinnock’s election as leader in 1983 signalled a steady shift towards the centre ground and an attempt to appeal to moderate opinion in the wider electorate, then these changes in the trade unions in the aftermath of the miners’ strike must have appeared potentially problematic for future Labour Party conferences. But, as has been said, rather than this being the beginning of a sea change in the unions, these minor changes were only as far as the LCI could really push the movement. The turbulent political environment which existed also provided a favourable atmosphere for the campaigners to promote radical ideas such as Irish unity which they felt would sit comfortably with the commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament, the demand for sanctions against South Africa and opposition to US interference in central America; policies which most trade unions already supported. The inner city riots of 1981 and other events have already been mentioned in the last chapter as contributory factors in the changes in Labour attitudes to the Irish question. By the mid-1980s a heady political atmosphere still existed under the Thatcher government, with further inner city riots taking place in 1985 and following the bitter year

320 Fortnight, op cit.
long miners’ strike the wider Labour and trade union movement appeared, in many ways, to be almost traumatised by the emotional strain of the strike and its historic importance. With this in mind, it can be understood why a number of unions, especially the NUM, were prepared look at adopting a more radical position on Northern Ireland in order to at least be seen to be taking a progressive and radically different line on Ireland as compared to the Thatcher government. But in the years ahead it would continue to be mainly the Constituency Labour Parties that were to vote for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland at the annual conferences.

A number of other issues were forced into the debate amongst the Labour left as a consequence of various new developments in Ireland. The first of which was the matter of the referendums in the Republic which included the vote in 1983 in favour of an anti-abortion amendment to the constitution and the 1986 vote to oppose the introduction of divorce. Many, including some on the far left especially in certain Trotskyite groups, pointed to these decisions as justification for Protestant opposition to Dublin involvement in the North and to any notion of Irish re-unification. For example, after the 1986 vote against divorce some on the left such as Anne Dawson, writing in Labour Weekly, concluded “The Irish people have effectively voted for partition. They have said their specific fears and confusion over the introduction of divorce are more important than the religious freedom of a minority on the island... Unionists can now legitimately ask why should they allow the republic’s government to have any say in their affairs.”

Ken Livingstone had always tried to counter such arguments by stating “That misreads the situation. If you talk to Protestants in Northern Ireland, they share all those values [opposition to abortion and to homosexuality] of the Catholics in Southern Ireland.” On the

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wider question of Britain’s role in safeguarding Protestant rights he said “why should we as British people intervene in the politics of the Irish people... I think that reflects the systematic racism of the British Establishment, reflected among many people in this country towards the Irish.” To a certain extent he was trying to play down Protestant fears about the Republic in much the same way as Sinn Fein were doing, but his attitude to Britain’s relationship with Ireland was in stark contrast to that of the Soley school of thought which believed in the idea that Britain could play a progressive role in Ireland’s future.

Another development which highlighted the contrast in the two schools of thought was the consistent findings of opinion polls revealing that there was a majority in Britain which favoured British government withdrawal from Northern Ireland. A Daily Express/Mori opinion poll in May 1984 revealed that 53% of those questioned favoured British withdrawal from Northern Ireland and a LWT/Mori opinion poll in August 1984 showed that were a referendum to be held on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland 53% of those questioned in Britain would vote in favour of ending the province’s inclusion in the United Kingdom. The LCI drew attention to these findings as often as possible, as did the likes of Benn and Livingstone, the latter complaining that newspapers who were always “predicting the demise of the Labour Party never find themselves able to give the same degree of coverage to the findings of the same opinion poll organisations which find year after year that two-thirds of people in Britain would vote in a referendum to get out of Ireland tomorrow.” Clearly a powerful argument had emerged to counter those who pointed to the majority in Northern Ireland who favoured the Union: it was now evident.

that a majority on the other side of the water did not seem to favour the continuation of the Union and some took up the argument with much the same feeling as Wilson a decade earlier, which was that the people of Great Britain and their taxes were of greater importance than the one million Protestants of Ulster. Indeed when Concannon was pressed by Enoch Powell, during the heady days of summer 1981, on whether Labour sought to remove the Protestant people’s guarantee that Ulster remain a part of the UK he said “I believe that when I referred to the guarantee, I said that there were 50 million guarantors [in Britain] also looking for progress in Northern Ireland.”325 As the eighties wore on it appeared that a unique situation was developing in British political history. Whilst a majority in Northern Ireland clearly favoured continuance of the Union, such a clear majority did not now appear to exist in Britain. This had not been the case at the beginning of the ‘troubles’ when only a very small minority favoured British withdrawal, but since the collapse of the power-sharing Executive in 1974 a majority has developed which favours an end to British government involvement perhaps as an expression of despair precisely because of the failure of initiatives such as Sunningdale.326 Whenever colonies of the British Empire were relinquished in the past it was only as a result of demands for decolonisation by the subject peoples and by the international community, especially the US. The British people have always wanted to resist giving up a colony as was seen with the Falklands War of 1982 which commanded overwhelming public support and the question of Scottish independence which provokes very different language in British Party politics especially amongst the Tories who, whilst talking of only maintaining Ulster within the Union if a majority wants it, dismiss Scottish devolution unequivocally.

because they fear it will precipitate the beginning of the break up of the UK just as they did with the Irish Home Rule Bills at the turn of the century. For some on the left this was an important development, although for many it was just the result of anti-Irish racism on the part of the English people and not the expression of concern for the future of Ireland. Or as Clive Soley did in fact argue "the British people do not really recognise them as British. The British see them as Irish." However, neither Soley nor Archer or anyone else on Labour's front bench ever took up the issue as reason enough to work towards disengagement from Northern Ireland simply on that basis, but remained committed to the notion that Britain was duty bound to work to find a solution and simply could not extricate itself from the situation until London and Dublin had managed to bring Protestant Ulster into an all-Ireland arrangement.

Over many years Labour leaders have, time and again, pointed to the importance of the will of the British people as pre-eminent over those of Northern Ireland; these include Harold Wilson after Sunningdale, James Callaghan during the hunger strikes, when he called for Ulster independence, and then during the eighties some in the Labour Party began to point to a similar sentiment beginning to emerge in the Conservative Party. Clive Soley had already made reference to it and in the run up to the Anglo-Irish Agreement Peter Archer, after less than two years in his job, made the following observation in a debate on direct rule: "It is not the case that the British Government want to run the affairs of Northern Ireland. Those who insist that the Government are clinging to Northern Ireland as a miser clings to his gold are simply wrong. It is not an example of a colonial power reluctant to let go. Indeed the reverse is true; the British Government do not want to rule Northern Ireland... There is no electoral advantage for the Government. Frankly they do

not care about it. Archer presented this as an attack on the government and gave the
impression to the Unionists that he believed Labour would be more sympathetic by
suggesting that Northern Ireland debates should not just be slotted in at the end of a day’s
parliamentary proceedings. It was not the case that Labour was any different, but
nevertheless a new (although short lived) understanding emerged between the Labour Party
and the Unionists which resulted in an opposition debate being given over to the Unionists
to move a motion on the impending Dublin/London agreement. Meanwhile Martin
Flannery, as chair of Labour’s Parliamentary committee on Northern Ireland, articulated
left-wing/back bench sentiment best when, in a change of tactics, he also took up the issue
of public opinion, arguing that “It is time the British people began to intervene or it is clear
that no hope is emanating from the Northern Ireland Unionist parties... If a referendum
were held, we would have to come out of Northern Ireland straight away. At least 70 per
cent. of the British people would say that it was time that we came out. The British people
were ready to intervene, but time has gone, and a sense of helplessness pervades us.” It
would be accurate to say that this sentiment does in fact run very deep and the
intransigence of the Unionists, as Callaghan argued in 1981, only helped to reinforce the
resentment engendered by the assumption that Britain should continue to safeguard their
interests indefinitely.

In spite of the short-lived understanding between Labour and the Unionists at
Westminster, throughout most of 1985 there appeared to be little to indicate that Labour
were to start their predicted opposition to any further Dublin involvement and to start
watering down their commitment to Irish unity; in actual fact the front bench team seemed
to be articulating the Party’s policy with as much vigour as during the Clive Soley era. The

328 Ibid. Vol. 82 Col. 978 (26 June 1985).
329 Ibid. Col. 1012.
question of the UDR which had never previously been raised by the Labour front bench, was taken up by Peter Archer at a public meeting in the February at which he said "the Government should seriously consider phasing out the Ulster Defence Regiment, which has clearly lost the trust of the nationalist community with the result that its efficiency can only be limited." It is worth noting that despite this, four months later two Scottish backbench Labour MPs, Harry Ewing and Ian Campbell, joined with Ian Paisley and others in signing an early day motion congratulating the UDR on its fifteen years in existence and for its "selfless devotion to duty." If nothing else, this at least indicated the continuing presence of a quiet pro-Unionist minority. Stuart Bell continually spoke of achieving unity through Dublin often in unusually idealistic terms; in July he told a meeting in Manchester "It is in the national interest that we have a united Ireland... The dream of Irish unity has lasted too long for it not to be made a reality. The dream however must come true in our lifetime, not from here to eternity." His repeated calls for greater Dublin involvement seem to indicate that Labour were rightly anticipating that the forthcoming Westminster-Dublin deal would take matters in precisely that direction. He told *Labour Weekly* that "A future Labour government will create Irish unity through Dublin. To this end it will begin with the setting up of joint committees with senior civil servants to develop the political, economic and social harmonisation programmes that will be necessary to re-unite the two parts of Ireland in peace and prosperity." It is also significant that at this juncture Clive Soley, whilst at the shadow Home Office, drew up contingency plans for what a Labour government should do to deal with unionist/Protestant opposition in the event of the election of a Labour government committed to Irish re-unification. Included in the

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332 Bell, S. Speech to Manchester City Labour Party, 6 July 1985.
proposals for dealing with strikes, boycotts and paramilitary violence were the options of using the security forces against the loyalists and in the event of Parliament going ahead with an Act of Irish Unity he proposed tackling loyalist violence with Irish troops backed up by the British army.\textsuperscript{334} Such plans were not endorsed by the leadership but the ideas suggested in the document do present us with an insight into the thinking of those who might be considered moderate united Irelanders but nevertheless were not unaware of the possible violent upheaval such pro-nationalist policies may well engender. Stuart Bell also argued consistently for “A parliamentary tier” to be “added to the Anglo-Irish intergovernmental council which meets at ministerial level.”\textsuperscript{335} In conjunction with the Tory MP, Peter Temple Morris, and others Bell did indeed help to set up the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body.\textsuperscript{336} Such contributions from Bell even led some in the LCI to show a guarded enthusiasm for his early performance\textsuperscript{337} and the \textit{Tribune} journalist Phil Kelly concluded that “Labour MPs who have been closely involved in Northern Ireland policy agreed that while Mr Bell’s contribution was delphic in parts, it represented a clear shift by the front bench towards backing for a united Ireland.”\textsuperscript{338} Even the \textit{Times} expressed its dismay that the right-wing Stuart Bell had stuck to such a pro-nationalist agenda, agreeing in September 1986 to share a conference fringe meeting platform with Sinn Fein’s Tommy Carroll despite the Labour leadership’s disquiet.\textsuperscript{339} Bell has explained that such decisions were arrived at in order “to keep of the platform others who were more friendly and who might give a false indication of Labour’s position”.\textsuperscript{340} The idealism which characterised Labour’s contributions throughout 1985 was eventually to come to an end;
the run up to the signing of the Hillsborough Agreement and a brief period immediately afterwards were to be the high point in Labour’s enthusiastic commitment to the notion of Irish re-unification during this particular Parliament.

Labour’s response to the government’s signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985 was one of unequivocal support. In some cases, so exuberant was the optimism of certain elements in the Party it appears, in retrospect, rather naive. Tribune declared that “It will take the Unionists a long time to accept it, but the Anglo-Irish agreement signed on Sunday means that a united Ireland is inevitable... Irish unity is being planned over a timespan of decades” and they thanked Thatcher for initiating “the demise of Unionism as a political force.”341 Neil Kinnock pursued the argument that Labour had held the right position throughout, stating that “My party was the only party in Britain which gave the Forum the interest it deserved” and went on to lavish praise on Margaret Thatcher: “I do not underestimate her effort. I say without any taunt that it has involved a significant and welcome adjustment in her position over the last six years.”342 Stuart Bell declared that “The Hillsborough agreements shall provide a framework for a future Labour government to advance towards its own policy goal - that of a united Ireland.” He also argued that Article 1 of the Agreement, which provided for change in the status of Northern Ireland if majority consent was expressed, meant that “This kills at a stroke all talk of a Unionist veto.”343 It is evident that Hillsborough created a great deal of confusion throughout the left with the LCI and the Bennite left arguing in direct contradiction to Bell that the agreement reinforced the loyalist veto. Confusion was aided by the delight at witnessing such intense Unionist opposition which was countered by the reality that this

was an agreement between the most right-wing government in post-war British history and a moderate/conservative Irish government. Some on the left took their lead from Sinn Fein and deduced that the deal was the brainchild of the SDLP designed to marginalise republicanism and bolster constitutional nationalism. Ken Livingstone’s immediate response was to argue that “the main reason behind the Agreement is an attempt to undermine electoral support for Sinn Fein.”

Although a few MPs abstained in the vote on the accord in the House of Commons, such as Clare Short, Kevin McNamara, Denis Canavan and Martin Flannery (who began the Parliamentary debate committed to opposing the accord), there were only fourteen Labour MPs who voted against; among them were the two Militants: Dave Nellist and Terry Fields, as well as the usual pro-republicans such as Tony Benn, Joan Maynard, Denis Skinner, Jeremy Corbyn and Ernie Roberts, but also Tam Dalyell. The Militants took a rather sceptical view but not for the same reasons as the pro-Sinn Fein left. First of all they took a cynical view of the two governments’ decision arguing that the British ruling class were in fact looking for a way to get out of Ireland and took the broadly accurate view that the southern Irish parties had very little desire for a united Ireland because they would not want the responsibility of trying to incorporate the one million Ulster Protestants. However, as usual they were primarily concerned with the implications for the Irish working classes and Dave Nellist declared, in an article in Militant, that “This agreement is a purely cosmetic exercise which is doomed to failure” arguing, in addition, that it offered nothing to the Catholic working class in addition to heightening the fears and anxieties of the Protestant working class. He then goes on to argue for “a rational, sane, socialist united Ireland - freely and voluntarily

federated to a socialist Britain".\textsuperscript{347} This, more than anything argued by the non-Marxist/pro-Sinn Fein left, is an attempt at setting out an idealistic goal which bears little relation to the complex problem of an ethno-national conflict and also ignores the will of the majority of nationalist Ireland which has never shown any enthusiasm for the idea of a return to a formal link with Britain - federal or otherwise. Martin Flannery, of Labour's back bench Northern Ireland committee and a moderate pro-nationalist, also decided to take a similarly sceptical line arguing that "The agreement strengthens the border. It makes the policy of a united Ireland more difficult because it gives the border a spurious legitimacy and almost entrenches it in international law." He went on to make the novel demand for a United Kingdom wide referendum on the future of Northern Ireland.\textsuperscript{348} Tam Dalyell pursued the line that a solution from above would always fail; "As long as the British Army is there - I am not criticising the forces - this problem will go on and on. I would pull them out... if left to themselves, the Irish would sort something out, a reasonable, viable solution."\textsuperscript{349} Dalyell presented the argument that the English are historically, simply incapable of ruling Ireland and in contrast to Soley and later McNamara who believed in a British Labour government finding a solution, he was articulating a recurring theme on the left, namely that Britain should stand back from the situation, not because hers is an immoral imperialist presence but because the solution will be found much sooner if the two traditions find themselves in a position where they will have to come to an agreement precisely because the vacuum left by a British withdrawal will present them with a challenge that they cannot ignore not least for the sake of the future of their own country. This was what Neil Kinnock was to describe as the 'politics of Pontius Pilate' but then even Peter Archer was to concede, a year later, that "One of the few propositions which

\textsuperscript{347} Ibid. 6 Dec. 1985.
\textsuperscript{348} Hansard, Vol. 87 Col. 904 (26 Nov. 1985).
commands universal acceptance in Ireland is that the English cannot govern.”350 In anticipation of the Hillsborough agreement, Peter Archer had already tried to pre-empt those on the left who were predicting a London/Dublin ‘sell out’ and declared that Labour must support any such deal because “We can’t be seen to be more Irish than the Irish.”351 In the Commons debate he presented an interesting and idealistic analysis of the concept of the nation state and the problem of territorial claims over Northern Ireland. Archer was pro-European Union and has described himself as a world federalist; it is also important to note that he harboured considerable sympathy for the Workers’ Party whose analysis he believed represented common sense, the like of which did not emanate from any of the other Irish parties.352 In his Commons contribution he claimed that “the 19th century concept of sovereignty is outmoded.” “I suspect that the assumption that every square foot of the earth’s surface must lie within the exclusive jurisdiction of one nation state and that no other Government must presume to intervene may not prove to be appropriate to the way in which the human race wishes to order its affairs in the 21st century.”353 This could be interpreted as an allusion towards the idea of joint sovereignty; this may or may not be the case but it at least represented a refreshing attempt at breaking out from the traditional arguments and dogmas.

The LCI specifically dismissed Archer’s jibe about being more Irish than the Irish (as well as the Tribune editorial) and argued that the accord “recognises in a formal and binding agreement, the subordination of the Irish government to the interests of the British establishment... Margaret Thatcher has enlisted the Dublin government to help maintain the partition of Ireland upon which both their interests depend.” As for Labour’s response in

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349 Ibid. Vol. 87 Col. 940.
352 Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996.
Parliament they declared that “If the Labour leadership were seen to grasp the nettle of the Irish question by breaking with bipartisanship and arguing for unity; it has been spun disastrously off course by the Anglo-Irish Accord.”^354 This statement might at first appear typically over dramatic but in actual fact it would be accurate to say that Hillsborough did draw Labour away from its clear partisan position through supporting the accord, but it was the government which had begun to spin off its pro-Unionist course thereby shifting the centre ground on the Irish debate. Nevertheless people such as the LCI, Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone were in a very small minority in immediately expressing their opposition, even Clare Short initially gave a cautious welcome to the agreement: “My own view is that the treaty is of historic importance. Unionism has been exposed in all its intransigence and unreasonableness.”^355 One of the problems with the Unionist reaction was that after five years of Labour rethinking its position due to the hunger strikes, the electoral rise of Sinn Fein and the New Ireland Forum, the 1974 UWC strike and the strength of Unionism as a popular political force had almost been forgotten in their quest to adopt a more nationalist agenda. Some on the left, as the Tribune editorial displayed, took the view that the Unionist response indicated that the initiative must have been a progressive development. However, the problem for those in the Party with a serious eye on power was how could a Labour government resist an ongoing Unionist campaign bearing in mind the humiliation of 1974? Neil Kinnock was reminded of the strength of loyalist feeling when he was met with anti-Hillsborough protests at the Harland and Wolff shipyard during a visit to Belfast three weeks after the agreement was signed.\(^356^\) Although the official Labour position was that Hillsborough was a positive step forward, the initial

^354 Labour and Ireland, No. 10.
euphoria finally gave way to a realisation that it had also once again exposed the depth of polarisation between the two traditions and was an indication of just how far Labour could realistically expect to take their ideals in the face of determined loyalist resistance should Labour be returned to government.

In the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement there was a marked increase in violence in Northern Ireland from all sides; something which Clare Short had accurately predicted. The consequence was that British party politics went through a phase of despair and despondency. The Labour Party especially began to lose the idealism and enthusiasm of the previous years and with the approach of a general election began to adopt a more flexible approach towards the Ulster Unionists. The reaction of Protestant Ulster certainly impressed and worried a great number of people within the Labour movement. Many on the left displayed considerable irritation and frustration at the show of strength exhibited by the Unionists; Clare Short responded to Ian Paisley’s setting up of the semi-paramilitary ‘Ulster Resistance’ by calling on the government to shun the DUP for its incitement to violence in the same manner that it did with Sinn Fein. She even complained that, in addition, the DUP drew parliamentary salaries whilst Sinn Fein did not and so was doubly penalised. The Labour front bench grew more suspicious of the government’s real intentions especially when, a fortnight after the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed, the Secretary of State Tom King announced in Brussels that it indicated that “the Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland... has in fact accepted that for all practical purposes and into perpetuity, there will never be a united Ireland.” Although Peter Archer immediately called for a statement in the House of Commons from King, the damage had

358 Belfast Telegraph, 28 Nov. 1986.
already been done and of course the opponents of Hillsborough on the left appeared to have been vindicated. In the Commons Tony Benn accused the government of trying to present the agreement in a favourable light to Dublin and to Washington in order to win their support, whereas King’s admission revealed that the agenda was still partitionist.\(^3\) Archer was disappointed in the outcome of the Accord and has conceded that different people and different parties had very different ideas about what it was supposed to achieve. His own hope had always been that somehow the two governments would work to bring people together on the ground in Northern Ireland on the ‘bread and butter’ issues of jobs, housing and health, thus pushing the constitutional question to the periphery of political debate.\(^3\) There had long been a sizeable, perhaps majority, element in the Labour movement that disliked seeing working class people so pre-occupied with the ‘national question’ and yearned to instead see them unite in struggling for social and economic improvements which would enhance their everyday lives. Nevertheless it was fanciful to say the least to believe that Hillsborough would do anything to change that, because for the Protestant community the agreement evidently pushed them further back into their ‘laager’. If the Anglo-Irish Agreement was not necessarily going to take government policy in the direction that Labour had hoped, then as the months went by it became evident that the shadow front bench was certainly not going to do as Bell had at first claimed: “keeping a vigilant eye on the reluctant Tories across the eye of the house of commons” and to “chivvy the government towards implementation”.\(^\) With the Labour Party annual conference in September 1985 throwing out the composite resolution calling for an end to the use of plastic bullets, an end to strip searching and scrapping of the PTA after the NEC had called

\(^3\) Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996.
for remittal it did seem to appear that, along with the slow but steady right-wing shift taking place throughout the Party, the enthusiasm for tackling the Irish question was also gradually starting to wane.

It was during 1986 that speculation became rife that Kinnock’s determination to make the Party electable and ensure that a Labour government would be formed at some point in the coming months, that Labour’s position on Ireland was to be compromised. In July 1984 the Party had set up a joint NEC/PLP working party to revise Northern Ireland policy in preparation for the next general election and its political complexion and composition was rather more pro-Irish nationalist than the 1981 Study Group. Its membership included the front bench spokespersons and eight NEC members in addition to MPs Kevin McNamara, Derek Fatchett, Pat Duffy, Martin Flannery, Clare Short, Clive Soley and Lord Jock Stallard all of whom were supportive of the idea of Irish re-unification. However, in March 1986 the Guardian reported that the joint working party was in fact proposing to “side step” the commitment to re-unification. In reply Peter Archer wrote to the paper to refute the claim and stated that Party commitment to re-unification was as strong as ever but that the working party had a limited staff and so the final statement was not to be as comprehensive as hoped. In fact the working party had held few meetings since the previous summer and, if anything, the problem was that Ireland was simply slipping down the Party’s list of priorities. Archer stated that the NEC wanted to abandon the policy review altogether in order to concentrate on what they saw as more important issues, but pressure from the front bench team persuaded them otherwise. The discussions in the working party evolved around the question of how to develop the current

364 PLP/NEC Joint Policy Committee, PD (1) 436/April 1986.
366 Ibid. 26 March 1986.
367 Labour and Ireland, No. 11 (1986).
policy and give a clearer definition of ‘consent’. For example the questions were raised; should there be a referendum of Northern Ireland or of all Ireland? Or, if not by referendum how was consent to be given. It was through these discussions that the left suggested that the policy statement should read Irish unity by a ‘significant’ degree of consent. Clare Short and Kevin McNamara were in favour of the change as was Peter Archer, but he has explained that along with the fact that Neil Kinnock and Stuart Bell were uncomfortable about the proposal the two factors which made the change unlikely were, first of all, Alex Kitson’s chairmanship of the working party, because he was vehemently opposed to any watering down of the principle of consent, and secondly the fact that most people did not want a fuss made over Northern Ireland policy so close to a general election.368

Despite Archer’s persistent denials of any change in the Party’s attitude towards Unionism, it did seem apparent that Stuart Bell was being given (or was deciding to take) responsibility for sending out conciliatory signals to the Unionists. In July 1986 Bell delivered a speech in Cardiff in which he advocated the introduction of a parliamentary grand committee on Northern Ireland (a long standing Unionist demand) and a standing committee to discuss legislation for the province. He also stated that “Labour would be studying ways to give some form of devolution to Northern Ireland, but not along Stormont lines” and that they “would be looking at structures of local government to see how best people of Northern Ireland could involve themselves in their own affairs.”369 (Extended local government was also a long standing Unionist demand.) The LCI were furious with what they believed was Bell’s unilateral decision “promising the Unionists a

368 Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996.
369 Bell, S. ‘Labour Will Not Tear Up Anglo-Irish Agreement’ Labour Party press release PR/175/86. (Documentation supplied by Paul Dixon.)
squalid deal to renegotiate the Anglo-Irish Accord in return for parliamentary votes.”

In reply to a letter of complaint from the Irish historian, Liz Curtis, Peter Archer was at pains to make clear that Bell’s speech did not “seek to reflect the Party’s Northern Ireland policy as a whole.” In spite of the fact that a select committee for Northern Ireland had never previously been Party policy and McNamara was to oppose precisely just such a proposal by the government in 1994, both Archer and Bell have consistently denied that the floating of the idea in 1986 was a sop to the Unionists but was simply suggested as sensible addition to parliamentary procedure. In fact the Unionists had raised the issue in the past and no one on the Labour benches had said anything on the subject. When Enoch Powell (a lone Unionist MP in the House while the others abstained over the Hillsborough accord) called for a select committee just a couple of months before the Cardiff speech Stuart Bell had simply replied that the other Unionist MPs should return to the House of Commons to discuss the matter. It has also been argued that there was a justified democratic argument for the introduction of a select committee: “With the demise of the [Northern Ireland] Assembly in 1986, however, the opportunity to scrutinise the six local departments reverted back to the subject Select Committees in London, each of which could include Northern Ireland within the range of a particular enquiry if its members so chose. This, however, was an offer most committees managed to refuse: in effect, the democratic deficit reopened and the scrutiny of Northern Ireland matters was again sidelined at Westminster.”

The left’s fears were raised further when on the morning of 18 November 1986 Neil Kinnock, along with Bell and Archer, held a meeting at Westminster with Ian Paisley and James Molyneaux. No details of the meeting were disclosed at the time although speculation was

370 Labour and Ireland, No. 16 (1987).
371 Archer, P. Letter to Liz Curtis, 8 Aug. 1986. (Kevin McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)
rife that a deal had been done. Stuart Bell was clearly looking to establish a new understanding with the Unionists; according to a paper prepared by Stuart Bell for the meeting, an offer was to be made to the Unionists that in the event of Labour forming a government included in the Queen’s speech would be proposals for a Northern Ireland select committee, a standing committee to scrutinise Orders in Council and commitment to enhance the role of local government in the province. Bell also spotted an advantage in the latter point stating that the beauty of the local government proposals was “that they need not be discussed within the purview of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and therefore impinge upon the susceptibilities of the Unionist community...” The paper also gives a revealing insight into private advances made by the Labour front bench to the Unionists. For example they had already, according to Bell, given the Unionists reassurances on reforms to the workings of the Secretariat at Maryfield, they had also agreed that there ought to be “a measure of devolution for Northern Ireland” and “Molyneaux had been offered forms of local government to be worked out” for which he was to conduct his own research.374 This document is the only evidence to support the allegation that Labour sought a deal with the Unionists375 and both Archer and Bell have consistently claimed that “No deal was sought and no deal was offered.”376 All that can fairly be concluded is that Kinnock wanted to size up the Unionists and ascertain what common ground existed between them and Labour. However Bell’s paper does stand as a fascinating insight into the lengths that the Labour Party was prepared to consider going to in order to come to an arrangement with the Unionists.

374 Bell, S. Paper for N. Kinnock; ‘Visit of Jim Molyneaux and Ian Paisley 18 November 1986’ 12/11/86. (Documentation supplied by Paul Dixon.)
375 This is alleged in Dixon, P. ‘The Usual English Doubletalk’: The British Political Parties and the Ulster Unionists 1974-94, Irish Political Studies Vol. 9 (1994)
376 Archer, P. & Bell, S. op cit.
No commitment had been made to the Unionists to revoke or to revise the Anglo-Irish Agreement, but then by the autumn of 1986 enthusiasm for the accord had started to wane in the Party regardless of Unionist opposition. During the debate on the dissolution of the Northern Ireland Assembly there was once again an element of despair in the mood on the Labour benches. Merlyn Rees had on one occasion, previously, asked the Secretary of State how the government would respond if it became clear that a majority of people in Northern Ireland favoured independence\(^{377}\) (it was an option that neither the government nor the opposition wished to entertain). Nevertheless it is interesting to note the line of thought of someone who has had such considerable involvement in Northern Ireland: in the dissolution debate he displayed his frustration at British attempts at finding a solution stating that integration was now a “pipe dream” but that devolution was now also a “pipe dream”.\(^{378}\) The confusion and despair was highlighted by Peter Archer’s contribution when he stated, in contrast to Rees, that “If there is to be peace it cannot be imposed by people from London or Dublin.”\(^{379}\) With the Unionists abstaining from Parliament (except for Enoch Powell) Clare Short did not hold back in articulating her anti-Unionist hostility. She said that “Their behaviour, their intransigence, their unreasonableness, their unwillingness to work with the [Hillsborough] agreement, have pushed the British people around that historical corner into a determination to withdraw from Northern Ireland.” The frustration was reminiscent of 1974 or 1981 and Clare Short felt that this was a turning point, declaring “I want to put on record clearly my reading of the current situation; I believe that history will vindicate this reading. The absolute unreasonableness of the Northern Ireland Unionism, shown clearly over the Anglo-Irish agreement, means that from now the


\(^{379}\) Ibid. Col. 1223 (19 June 1986).
determination of Britain to withdraw from Northern Ireland will grow." Although Stuart Bell did state that he tended to be in agreement with this, one may argue that there was an element of wishful thinking in Clare Short's remarks and history has not entirely vindicated this reading as the British public continued to maintain what was basically a consistent disinterest. Short may also have been thinking of her future plans with the Time To Go initiative (to be looked at in the next chapter) and this statement was perhaps more her hope rather than prediction. The periodical re-emergence of the idea of Ulster independence always produced curious contributions from individuals in the Labour Party. Following Rees' statement, Stuart Bell took issue with the idea thus: "A majority for such a state would not be found within the six counties [at this point one would assume he would declare the majority in favour of the Union, but no] because two of those counties, Tyrone and Fermanagh, are already Republican in their majority. The forbearance of those in the north who consider themselves part of the Republic would be overstrained by the creation of an independent Protestant state." It should be born in mind that Bell was a relative novice on Irish politics and this statement is quite incredible in that its glaring mistake is that those majorities in Fermanagh and Tyrone have been opposed to the existence of the Northern state ever since its inception. This goes to the very core of the problem and Bell seems to ignore the fact that nationalist opposition exists whether the state is administered from Westminster, from a Unionist controlled Stormont or a Unionist controlled independent government. The one argument that could have been used is that independence would cut away the Republican argument that it is the British imperialist presence which is the cause of the problem. The problem with Bell's position is that, once again, there seems to exist this feeling that a British Labour government could resolve the

380 Ibid. Col. 1252.
381 Ibid. Col. 1258.
problem for the Irish rather than allowing self-determination to take precedent. This is perhaps why Rees, in sharp contrast to Bell’s novice status, has come to the conclusion Britain is perhaps spent in trying to find a resolution.

At the Labour Party’s annual conference in the September it was alleged in the *Irish Times* that along with Archer’s speech showing a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the accord being used to achieve unity, Neil Kinnock had stated his disapproval of Bell’s continued reference to Hillsborough as the key to achieving Irish re-unification.\(^{382}\) In a speech to the Cambridge Union shortly afterwards, Peter Archer stated, with a view to the Unionist audience, that “It does not follow that every discussion needs to be within the framework of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Nor, indeed, is the text itself carved in stone.” He went on to explain that at present the Unionists will not negotiate until the Agreement is repealed and the government and the SDLP will only negotiate in the context of the Agreement: “In the event, no-one talks to anyone else.”\(^{383}\) Although the *Irish Times* reported that his only reference to unity was a suggestion that there could perhaps be an all-Ireland energy policy implying that the speech was intended to represent a move away from Irish unity in an attempt to appear more favourable to the Unionists;\(^{384}\) the fact is that he simply qualified how unity could be achieved. He did say also that there should be for all of Ireland “a single transport policy, a single investment policy and a co-ordinated agricultural policy” and, in a statement typical of his view of the problem, made clear that “the transition from the unhappy present to the ideal future could best be realised in an Ireland which has achieved some form of unity, but not unity imposed by imperialism from either the east or the south.”\(^{385}\) In early December Stuart Bell then reiterated his advocacy of a

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\(^{382}\) Irish Times, 3 Oct. 1986.  
\(^{385}\) Archer, P. op cit.
parliamentary select committee on Northern Ireland in a speech to the House of Commons. Meanwhile in Dublin, Peter Archer declared that a future Labour government would be prepared to delete article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Although this was said in response to Haughey’s statement that a Fianna Fail government would be unhappy with the first article of the agreement, it nevertheless seemed to indicate an ongoing attempt by the front bench team to send out ambiguous sounding signals to in order to indicate their flexibility to the Unionists. Then, in late March 1987, Stuart Bell took matters alot further when he delivered a speech at Workington in which he pointed to the fact that there would be a review of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1988 but made clear that he believed the Agreement enhanced the Unionists’ constitutional position as it “excludes any likelihood of a united Ireland down the wrong end of a barrel of a gun, it excludes victory for terrorist nationalism, as it excludes the creation of a Cuban-style state friendly to Communism and hostile to Great Britain. It equally excludes the creation of a new Republic with a Catholic constitution which infringes upon the rights of a Protestant community in the North.” In addition to offering improvements to local government in Northern Ireland, he even went as far as to suggest that “we would fully expect the Unionists to support Labour on a Queen’s Speech if there were to be a hung parliament.” The Times was the only British paper to report the speech and consequently the leadership covered the whole issue in a shroud of confusion. Kinnock blamed the whole affair on media distortion and indeed Stuart Bell still maintains that he said little of any great significance but the Times simply “wanted to make some kind of

388 Bell, S. Letter to Peter Archer, including the text of the Workington speech, 31 March 1987. (Kevin McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)
sensational announcement on its front page by a journalist on the make."\textsuperscript{390} However the \textit{Belfast Telegraph} also reported Bell's speech which was clearly directed at the Unionists:

"We say to them that they should clearly let us have specifically what their objections are and what it is they specifically want to see on the Agreement... We are making an offer they should find attractive and should not be able to refuse."\textsuperscript{391} Although Peter Archer has said that he was never fully aware of what Bell was up to and has made the admission that "I used to wonder if there was something going on that I didn't know about."\textsuperscript{392} Nevertheless he then appeared on television to refute the idea that Labour were preparing to do a deal with the Unionists altogether and later said that "I still haven't actually sorted out what Stuart said he was going to say in his hand out, as against what he did say, as against what he said afterwards he had said, and what everybody thought he had meant. It's all a bit of a jumble."\textsuperscript{393} It certainly had become a bit of a jumble, which suited the Labour leadership: the Unionists were getting the message from Bell that a deal was in the offing, but Kinnock and Archer were continuing to make clear to everyone else that policy had not changed and no deals were to be done. Clare Short was very much concerned with what Bell had been saying as was John Hume who said in response to Stuart Bell's speech that he had already been given assurances by Neil Kinnock on Labour's commitment to the Anglo-Irish Agreement.\textsuperscript{394} But it must also be accepted that any Labour opposition is bound to keep an open mind to the possibilities of a hung parliament in the event of a general election but more importantly the situation at this particular time was one of real disappointment in the outcome of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Peter Archer pointed out, in what was reported as a 'Unionist friendly speech', the undeniable fact that "With the Agreement already twelve

\textsuperscript{390} Bell, S. Letter of reply, Nov. 1996.
\textsuperscript{391} \textit{Belfast Telegraph}, 31 March 1987.
\textsuperscript{392} Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996.
\textsuperscript{393} \textit{Fortnight}, May 1987.
\textsuperscript{394} \textit{Irish News}, 31 March 1987.

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months old, little has emerged to win the approval of the Nationalist community, or to foster the hope that grievances can be redressed by constitutional politics. Nor has anything emerged to win over Unionists from their bitter opposition.395

Meanwhile the joint NEC/PLP working party on Northern Ireland had also run into difficulties by the end of 1986. The working party did have a paper ready for the 1986 conference but was held back by the NEC allegedly because there were already too many other reports on the conference agenda396 and the report was consequently not made available to rank and file members. Perhaps because of this, speculation grew that there was something either politically embarrassing in the report or that it was at odds with the drift towards a more conciliatory attitude towards the Unionists. A well publicised and highly damaging leak appeared in the *Times* in February 1987 alleging that the latter case was in fact correct. The article by Philip Webster alleged that the leadership, along with Stuart Bell and Peter Archer, were trying to block a proposal introduced by Clare Short and Kevin McNamara to have the unionist veto removed so that the final NEC/PLP working party document, entitled ‘New Rights, New Prosperity and New Hope for Northern Ireland’, would have a commitment to Irish re-unification without requiring the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland.397 Shortly afterwards Clare Short’s response indicated that the revelations were broadly correct: she described the article as “a distorted and malicious, but very well informed story” and admitted that the document did include the revised phrase “a significant degree of consent”398 rather than majority consent. Due to the accuracy of the leak it was strongly suspected that Stuart Bell was responsible399 and Peter Archer has himself since stated his belief that Stuart Bell very probably was

396 *Tribune*, 20 Feb. 1987. (Article by Clare Short)
responsible for the leak.\textsuperscript{403} One reason for this was that Bell was very much a Kinnock loyalist and the Labour leader was determinedly opposed to any changing of the ‘unity by consent’ policy; it is therefore probably fair to conclude that Bell was doing everything he could to make matters easy for his leader and avoid any embarrassment for him. Neil Kinnock made clear that he did not want any changes made to the policy; he said that “The elastic proposition of significant evidence of consent is something that can only mislead without informing.”\textsuperscript{401} In a radio interview Clare Short explained her interpretation of the requirement of unity by a ‘significant degree’ of consent as meaning a vague display of support for re-unification by “A lot of people in Britain and a lot of people in the whole country of Ireland.”\textsuperscript{402} Clare Short exhibited a great deal of suspicion about the tactics of the leadership stating that after the leak “Suddenly, it was announced that the draft could not propose any change of policy without the agreement of conference. Some of us felt we had been conned.”\textsuperscript{403} Indeed the committee had prepared a draft document which was in fact written by Peter Archer\textsuperscript{404} and stated that a future Labour government “will work hard for a significant degree of consent because we realise that without it we would be bequeathing to the people of Ireland a continuing legacy of bitterness, of violence and of anarchy.”\textsuperscript{405} Most people on the committee appear to have been happy with this especially those such as McNamara, Clare Short and Clive Soley.\textsuperscript{406} However, the working party’s remit, as laid down by the NEC Home Policy Committee a year earlier was “To prepare a

\textsuperscript{400} Archer, P. Interview Dec. 1996.
\textsuperscript{401} Independent, 6 Feb. 1987.
\textsuperscript{402} Transcript of BBC Radio 4 interview with Clare Short by John Humphrys, 4 Feb. 1987. (Kevin McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)
\textsuperscript{403} Tribune, 20 Feb. 1987.
\textsuperscript{404} McNamara, K. Letter to Neil Kinnock, 10 Feb. 1987. (Kevin McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)
\textsuperscript{406} Clive Soley’s submission to the committee, ‘A United Ireland - How do we get there?’ also had a revised version of Unity by ‘a significant degree’ of consent.
draft statement... but to avoid seeking to change the basic policy of the Party on unification. The NEC consequently pointed to this as reason for not allowing any radical changes so that the final document did not include the wording “significant degree of consent” and even the sentence “we respect and understand the wishes of people in Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom” (which was included in the revised draft at the end of February as a watering down of the loyalist veto) was replaced in the final document with the original wording “we respect and support the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland...” This proved to mark the high point of the left’s campaign to have what it saw as the unionist veto removed from Labour Party policy; it was their last chance before a general election and the way they had been defeated caused great resentment. Clare Short described the situation thus: “The Times leak caused enormous trouble. I understand that the crucial words that would shift our policy forward are to be deleted from the document. This would mean that, without any discussion or debate, The Times leaker has got what he wants. The second question raised is why one leak in The Times is enough to make it unthinkable that our policy should be changed.”

The controversy over the new policy document only helped to convince those who believed the Labour leadership were deliberately trying to smooth the way for a deal with the Unionists in the event of a hung parliament. The Times continued to keep up the pressure and just two months before the general election devoted its editorial to an outright attack on Peter Archer who they claimed had managed a fudge on policy in order to “keep lines open to the Unionist MPs” but went on to argue that Labour had a hidden agenda which was that when in government “re-unification will proceed as discreetly as

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possible.”\textsuperscript{410} In actual fact Peter Archer said at about the same time that “If there were a plot going on about Labour’s policy on Northern Ireland and I wasn’t a party to it I would have something fairly strong to say to everybody.”\textsuperscript{411} Kevin McNamara was at pains to point out to Neil Kinnock that he and Clare Short had “not combined about anything”, there was no plot and that he had never discussed matters or made plans with Clare Short prior to attending meetings of the NEC/PLP joint committee.\textsuperscript{412} The reality was that the main concern in the run up to the general election was that it would be best to ensure that Northern Ireland did not become a major issue and on the advice of Peter Mandelson the election campaign was not to include any policy statements or otherwise on the Ulster question.\textsuperscript{413} Archer was certainly more sympathetic to Irish nationalism than Stuart Bell and the latter was much more interested in ensuring that matters went the way Neil Kinnock wanted. Nevertheless he has insisted that although it was considered important that the principle of consent remained integral to Party policy “it should not be inferred from this that Neil Kinnock was paving the way for a deal with the Unionists. He never contemplated any such action.”\textsuperscript{414} This is almost certainly accurate: Neil Kinnock knew what he could and could not do with his Party and having seen the minor revolts over the PTA and the bad light that the 1979 deal to increase Northern Ireland MPs was now seen in, he knew only to well that too large a percentage of his back benchers would resist a deal with the Unionists in the event of a hung parliament. In any event the Party went into the 1987 general election with a manifesto which had a policy commitment on Northern Ireland which was of very little difference to that of 1983. On the constitutional issue the policy of

\textsuperscript{410} Times, 10 April 1987.
\textsuperscript{411} Fortnight, May 1987.
\textsuperscript{412} McNamara, K. Letter to Neil Kinnock, 10 Feb. 1987. (Kevin McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)
\textsuperscript{413} Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996.
\textsuperscript{414} Bell, S. Letter of reply, Nov. 1996.
‘unity by consent’ remained intact but on legal issues there were some curious omissions. Although there was a clear commitment to abolish strip searching there was no mention of the PTA, the Diplock courts, the supergrass trials or the matter of employment discrimination.415 These omissions were a disappointment for the left because over the previous year or two it appeared that important gains had been made. In December 1986 Peter Archer had come out firmly in favour of introducing the idea of having three judges sitting in the Diplock courts416 and yet the final manifesto made no mention whatsoever of the Northern Ireland legal system. Finally the latest issue to be brought to the fore as a result of pressure from the left, and the LCI in particular, was that of employment discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland. The McBride Principles were produced in 1984 as a set of guidelines to tackle discrimination and won considerable support among major businesses in the US. The McBride campaign made discrimination a mainstream political issue which Bell and Archer were more than happy to take up during 1986417 but again no mention was made of this issue in the Party’s election manifesto. As at the beginning of Neil Kinnock’s leadership Ireland was still, by the time of the 1987 general election, simply not a political issue of any great consequence. One can speculate that Labour were simply continuing to respond to events and developments in Ireland so that just as in 1981 re-unification might never have become policy without the hunger strikes, so in the mid-eighties it might be accurate to suppose that without the New Ireland Forum report and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement Neil Kinnock may very well have decided that ‘unity by consent’ would have to be jettisoned. But, the Hillsborough Agreement provided Labour with the opportunity to continue to advocate ‘unity by

415 Labour Party, 1983 Election Manifesto, Freedom and Fairness for all Britain’s People.
417 Labour and Ireland, No. 13 (1986).
consent as a policy which could be interpreted as now being enshrined in this internationally recognised and almost universally supported treaty.
Chapter 4: ‘Enniskillen and the Decline of the Left’ Labour Party Policy 1987-92

After the 1987 general election defeat the Labour Party did not enter into recriminations and blame laying, as with the defeats of 1979 and 1983, but instead the leadership re-doubled its determination to continue with the process of trying to bring the Party back to the centre ground. Although victory had not been expected, Kinnock had hoped to have gained more in terms of making in-roads into the Tory south and so it was believed that the changes in policy and image during the preceding four years had evidently not gone far enough. Over the next seven years dramatic changes were to take place throughout the British party political system: Thatcherism was to come to an end but the British left both inside and outside the Labour Party was to become marginalised to the extent that for the first time in post war Britain they had almost become an irrelevance. It is in this context and the context of major global political changes that the maturing of the debate on the Irish question in the Labour movement (and not least in Ireland itself) needs to be analysed. The outbreak of hostilities in Yugoslavia, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of apartheid in South Africa and the beginnings of a peace process between the Israelis and the PLO all contributed to a slow and subtle change in the way that the Irish problem was understood and dealt with both in Britain and in Ireland. The Balkan crisis and conflicts in former Soviet states assisted in changing the perception of the Irish problem from one of nationalism versus imperialism to one of an ethno-national conflict, albeit with a native/settler dimension.418 Many of the contentious issues which the left had always championed, began to fade from mainstream political debate, for example nuclear disarmament, resisting the Tory trade union laws, demanding sanctions against South

Africa, gay rights, racism and the question of black sections in the Labour Party. Needless to say, international developments removed many of these questions but Thatcher’s resignation in November 1990 also brought to an end the sharp left/right divide which had characterised British political debate for the previous decade. For this reason a return to bipartisanship appeared increasingly imminent and, but for the fact that Labour had the most unashamedly nationalist Northern Ireland spokesperson in its history, it would not be unfair to speculate that Labour’s distinctive pro-unity policy would have been jettisoned prior to the 1992 general election.

Despite the direction in which Neil Kinnock undoubtedly wanted to take the party, his choice for the post of shadow Northern Ireland Secretary was not one of his favoured ‘soft left’ individuals but the long standing pro-united Ireland stalwart, Kevin McNamara. The appointment certainly raised a few eyebrows; the *Times* stated that “The decision came as a surprise, as the post was supposed to go to Mr Clive Soley, one of the stars of Labour’s middle ranks.”\(^{419}\) *Fortnight* editor, Robin Wilson, claimed that McNamara was in actual fact Kinnock’s third choice, but did not make clear who was supposed to have been the first or second choice.\(^{420}\) Either way, it would appear that Kinnock would have been happy to keep Archer in the job, but after he failed to win election to the shadow cabinet the post was left vacant while the rest of the shadow appointments were made. Then on 14 July, after a day’s deliberations, Kinnock finally chose McNamara.\(^{421}\) In actual fact the appointment was probably less a political decision and more an indication of the low priority Northern Ireland was in Kinnock’s mind as well as being a job that few in the shadow cabinet wanted. During the furore which followed the Enniskillen bombing four

\(^{419}\) *Times*, 15 July 1987.
months later Neil Kinnock wrote a letter to BBC reporter John Cole to refute his allegation that Kevin McNamara was appointed precisely because he favoured a united Ireland. Kinnock argued that McNamara was not a united Ireland zealot and the reasoning behind his appointment was that he had extensive knowledge and experience in the field of Irish politics and Northern Ireland in particular.\(^{422}\) Kevin McNamara's explanation for Kinnock's decision was that he wanted someone who would help improve the Labour Party's relations with the Irish community in Britain, the Irish government and the SDLP. Secondly, whilst installing someone who was well qualified to work with the representatives of constitutional nationalism, his task was also to try and end any association between the Labour Party and Sinn Fein.\(^{423}\) This was a task which McNamara stuck to throughout his years as Labour's spokesperson. In addition to Archer's departure, Stuart Bell gave up the job of assistant spokesperson because, as he explained, he needed to devote more time to constituency matters; most notably the Cleveland child abuse scandal.\(^{424}\) The appointment of a successor for the post of assistant spokesperson was left until some months later. In Northern Ireland itself the development was anything but unimportant and McNamara was quick to argue that the fact that he himself was a Roman Catholic was of no consequence. Meanwhile Frank Millar, secretary of the Ulster Unionist Party, nevertheless described the move as "unhelpful" and added wryly that it "certainly lays to rest the theory that the Labour Party was going to give us total integration."\(^{425}\) Despite McNamara's desire to reassure Unionists that his political and religious background mattered little, he told *Labour and Ireland* "I hope that the Irish community will see the significance of Neil Kinnock's appointment. For the first time, a Labour leader

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\(^{422}\) Kinnock, N. letter to John Cole, 19 Nov. 1987. (Kevin McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)

\(^{423}\) McNamara, K. Speech to St. Mary's University College, Twickenham, 14 May 1998.

\(^{424}\) *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 July 1987.

\(^{425}\) Ibid.
has got a Northern Ireland spokesperson... who has spent most of his career trying to change party policy to one of active support for a united Ireland. I am the first person of an Irish nationalist background to be a senior spokesperson on any subject."426 Although the fact was that, in all probability, the appointment had nothing to do with Kinnock’s political convictions the left desperately wanted to believe otherwise: Clare Short declared “we got the appointment of Kevin McNamara which is symbolically significant. Kevin has never, throughout his time as an MP, compromised on his republicanism.” Being well aware of the party’s right-wing direction, she then said optimistically “The willingness of the Party leadership in the shape it’s now in to appoint Kevin, seems to me to be a symbol that we’re gaining ground.”427

A few months later the Labour Party suddenly embarked upon an unprecedented and embarrassingly public debate on its attitude to the violence and political conflict in Northern Ireland. Earlier in the decade the Labour Party’s, and in particular the Labour left’s, fickleness on the Irish question was highlighted by the swift conversion to the idea of a united Ireland as a consequence of the emotion precipitated by the hunger strikes and then by the softening of the front bench’s pro-nationalist rhetoric as a result of the resolute popular Unionist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In November 1987 an event in Northern Ireland made a similarly powerful impression on left-wing thinking: the IRA’s Enniskillen bombing which killed eleven people, led to an hysteria which almost completely reversed all the achievements Sinn Fein had made in courting the Labour left over the previous four or five years and virtually silenced the pro-republican lobby within the Party, with the notable exception of the newly elected MP for Brent East, Ken Livingstone. The Party was almost completely unanimous in its condemnation of the IRA and Sinn Fein with

426 Labour and Ireland, No.18 (Oct-Dec 1987).
427 Ibid. No. 20 (March-May 1988).
the revulsion being extended to almost all sections of the movement including Militant who
described the IRA’s action as a deliberate provocation to the Protestant working class
designed to precipitate civil war.\footnote{Militant, 13 Nov. 1987.} The bitter wrangling and personal abuse which took
place in the weeks after the bombing were entirely the result of Livingstone’s determination
to pursue his arguments in the face of equally determined political and public hostility. The
\textit{Sunday Times} and the \textit{Times} led the campaign against Livingstone with the latter describing
an LBC radio interview in which he stated that he would be re-doubling his efforts to forge
links with Sinn Fein and argued that “I don’t think anybody seriously thinks they [the IRA]
won’t get their own way. As with all other colonial situations we have been involved in
eventually Britain will go.”\footnote{\textit{Times}, 17 Nov. 1987.} Although Ken Livingstone continually argued that his
comments had been taken out of context and that he had in fact condemned the bombing,\footnote{See \textit{Tribune}, Dec. 1987 and \textit{Labour and Ireland}, No. 19 (Jan-Feb 1988).} in the highly charged atmosphere which existed the newspaper reports were taken at face
value and he came in for attack from numerous quarters including elements on the left both
inside and outside the Party. The relative consensus that had existed within the Labour
movement since 1981, namely support for Irish nationalism and a desire to see a united
Ireland, appeared to be beginning to break down.

The bitter arguing went on for weeks and gave what still stands as one of the best
insights into the deep divisions which existed within the British left on the Irish question in
terms of their attitude to political violence and their interpretation of the politics and history
of Northern Ireland. Neil Kinnock led what were often personal attacks on Livingstone.
Immediately after the Enniskillen bombing (but before Livingstone’s radio interview)
Kinnock, for the first time, unequivocally condemned those in the Labour Party who were
maintaining links with Sinn Fein and called upon Hackney Council Labour Group to withdraw an invitation they had made to Sinn Fein’s Alex Maskey. Kinnock had always maintained a deep disliking for the Provisionals but this was a definite shift in his position. Ten months earlier a row had blown up after a Labour Party NEC delegation, which included Peter Archer and Stuart Bell, met with a group of Sinn Fein councillors in Northern Ireland. Tom King was amongst those who criticised the Labour Party but Neil Kinnock came to their defence arguing that “as part of a general series of meetings from all parties in Northern Ireland, as long as they are duly elected, it is appropriate for us to meet with all parties.” Nevertheless, after Livingstone’s comments the Labour leadership rounded on the maverick MP with Roy Hattersley condemning Livingstone and claiming that his comments had cost Labour a Wandsworth council by-election which would have secured Labour control of the borough. It should also be noted that this followed a shadow cabinet/NEC meeting on 20 November which discussed a report presenting evidence that the ‘loony left’ image had cost Labour literally millions of votes at the general election. The *Irish Times* quoted a source ‘close to the Labour leadership’ saying that “Mr. Livingstone’s concern for Ireland has been more about the London Labour Party than about peace in Ireland.” What this refers to is the belief that existed in the Labour mainstream that in London there existed something of a party within the Party and the people who gained positions of power and influence within it did so by championing and promoting the most controversial political issues whether they be gay rights, black sections or indeed support for the Irish republican cause. A *Times* editorial chose to belittle

432 Alex Maskey was amongst the Sinn Fein representatives with whom the NEC had made prior arrangements to meet. 'List of Representatives Meeting Labour Party NEC Delegation to Northern Ireland, 15-16 Jan. 1987', PDI: 914: Jan 87.
434 Ibid. 23 Nov. 1987.
Livingstone's motives even further by suggesting that within this section of the Party there is a “need to shock the bourgeoisie” and “Anyone who can outrage the majority of the electorate, particularly the middle classes, and become a hated figure in the ‘Tory media’, is alright with them.”

At a Parliamentary Labour Party meeting on 18 November, Ireland was the main issue up for discussion and Neil Kinnock took the opportunity to argue that those who equate the British presence in Northern Ireland with “colonialism show a fundamental, permafrost ignorance about the nature of Northern Ireland.” He described the IRA as “a few hundred armed gangsters.” It should be remembered that as always Kinnock was very media conscious and the tabloid depiction of the Provisionals as a criminal/Mafia style organisation controlled by ‘godfathers’ was a popular misconception of the time. Livingstone remained defiant and after the Labour Chief Whip, Derek Foster warned him about toning down his public statements he replied to the suggestion that he was likely to have the Labour Whip withdrawn “You don’t remove the whip from someone who came fourth in the national executive committee elections.” The leadership was furious and at an NEC meeting on 25 November Kinnock rounded on Livingstone and with equal arrogance told him “You have a right to speak and you have a right to be wrong. And you exercise both rights extensively. I believe you have suggested that someone who comes fourth in the NEC elections cannot be disciplined. This is rather an elitist view for someone who considers himself a democrat.” With Kinnock, this type of arrogant speech was often used when dealing with the left and feeling confident after defeating Militant infiltration he no doubt felt Livingstone was little more than a nuisance to be dealt with.

equal contempt. In addition, Kevin McNamara was making the point that it was time for the Party to start actively promoting the SDLP (in line with Kinnock’s strategy) as a way of opposing Sinn Fein. This was a suggestion which found a large and sympathetic audience in the Party especially in the mood of the time. McNamara also expressed his frustration at the fact that the whole affair had distracted attention from the recently published report by the Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights on reforms to deal with employment discrimination in Northern Ireland. This was a crucially important issue as far as McNamara was concerned and the kind of matter on which he felt the Party should be campaigning, not least because it was a subject of great difficulty and international embarrassment for the Thatcher government. When the NEC finally voted on a resolution which condemned the Enniskillen bombing, condemned Sinn Fein and reiterated support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement, only Ken Livingstone, Denis Skinner and Linda Douglas of the Young Socialists voted against. In spite of this and the reaction of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee (to be looked at further on) the Campaign Group of far-left Labour MPs, in a show of defiance, voted to adopt a clear policy favouring Irish re-unification and British withdrawal, just days after the NEC meeting. At the following week’s Parliamentary Labour Party meeting on Northern Ireland Ken Livingstone was criticised by a wide spectrum of opinion including Martin Flannery, Clare Short and Merlyn Rees who said “I didn’t come fourth in the National Executive Elections but I will speak my mind. I will say that the basic tenet of the Labour Party is the ballot box and will always be” and complained that “Politicians are great ones at allowing others to die for their own daft causes.” Ken Livingstone responded by taking up the argument about British public

attitudes and pointed to the various opinion polls which since 1971 have indicated that the
majority of people in Britain favour withdrawal from Northern Ireland. However, although this was an accurate and awkward fact for the leadership with the last poll in the Daily Express showing a 61% majority supporting troops out, the timing was unwise for Livingstone because after the Enniskillen bombing a Marplan opinion poll revealed, for the first time, only a minority of 40% were now in favour of withdrawal.

Despite the damaging high profile media coverage the leadership were at least encouraged by developments within the left pressure group, the Labour Co-ordinating Committee. The LCC was a broad group on the left which was not so closely associated with the Bennite hard left, as was Labour Left Liaison, but increasingly moved towards the Kinnockite soft left. In January 1986 Peter Hain drew up a policy statement which was endorsed by the Committee and which stated “There will be a commitment to British withdrawal from Ireland within the lifetime of the next Labour Government, the dissolution of the Union and its replacement by a freely negotiated structure for the whole of Ireland in which the rights of each section of the community will be guaranteed.” On 15 November 1987 the LCC held a conference which voted by 70 votes to 54 in favour of ditching its policy of British withdrawal in favour of ‘unity by consent’ and Livingstone was unceremoniously voted off the executive after bitter personal attacks on both Peter Hain and Ken Livingstone for their statements on Ireland. For example executive member Sean Rodgers, Chairman of the Labour Campaign for Peace and Progress in Ireland and closely associated with the Workers’ Party, denounced Livingstone as having blood on his hands at the meeting. The Labour left was entering a phase of relative crisis in the aftermath of

the general election and despite a ‘Left Unity’ statement by Tribune which had the support
of both the Labour Co-ordinating Committee and Labour Left Liaison\(^{449}\) a struggle was
developing within the various left groups to decide whether they would throw their lot in
with the ‘Kinnockite’ soft left or retain their distinct campaigning identity. A Guardian
editorial seemed to suggest that over the last five years there had been a silent majority
opposed to the pro-republican direction of the Party and argued that “the left Labour
activists... have equivocated on Ireland too long and have therefore allowed the
Livingstones and the Corbyns to hijack policy in favour of Sinn Fein” and went on to call
on the rest of the Labour left to follow the “encouraging” example of the LCC.\(^{450}\)
Although, for a long time, two distinct pro-united Ireland groups had existed namely the
McNamara or Clive Soley ‘unity by consent’ school of thought and the pro-Sinn Fein
elements (with only Clare Short managing to bridge the gap between the two), the crisis
within the left was exacerbated by Enniskillen with the consequence that the pro-Sinn Fein
elements were forced into a position of isolation from which they have never recovered and
the great majority of the Party chose to revert to what was almost the pre-1981 attitude of
sympathy for the idea of Irish unity but no sympathy for republicanism with its use of
violence. The change in attitudes was aided by the fact that the leaders of the Republic’s
three main left-wing parties, namely the Irish Labour Party, the Workers’ Party and the
Democratic Socialist Party, sent a joint letter to the British Labour leadership calling for all
links between the Labour Party and Sinn Fein to be broken off.\(^{451}\) Certainly Enniskillen had
helped to revive the impression among the Labour left that the Provisionals were an out of
touch Baader-Meinhoff type of organisation who were behaving in a way that appeared

\(^{449}\) Ibid.
wholly inappropriate in the light of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the recognition given to
the Irish dimension through improved relations with Dublin. Shortly after Enniskillen,
Jonathan Moore wrote in *Fortnight* that (as has already been argued) Labour left support
for Sinn Fein was a very new development anyway and was partly prompted by the
Provisionals shift towards socialism and its new found interest in electoral politics, but by
now “The real problem that Livingstone and the Labour Committee on Ireland face is that,
having tied their colours - and those of the withdrawal movement - so firmly to the Sinn
Fein mast, the efficacy of their arguments is greatly affected by events such as Enniskillen.
Rather than being associated with any set of principles, sections of the Labour left have
wedded themselves to Provisional republicanism. Tactically, this may prove to be the
critical mistake on the part of those advocating British withdrawal from Ireland.” 452 So the
consensus that had existed had changed; ‘unity by consent’ was not yet under threat but
support for the Provisionals continued to exist only amongst a very small minority, whilst
following McNamara’s lead many in the Party, indeed the majority, saw the SDLP and
Dublin as Labour’s natural allies on the question of Northern Ireland; indeed McNamara
himself never once met with Sinn Fein at any time in his role as shadow spokesperson.
Instead of McNamara’s appointment ushering in a new shift of emphasis towards a more
clearly nationalist agenda, within six months the Party had shifted in the opposite direction
and despite the optimism of the LCI and others the shift was much more deep rooted and
set to last a lot longer than anybody anticipated. The days when career minded soft left
MPs such as Harriet Harman thought it wise to proclaim their belief in a united Ireland
were certainly over.

As the furore over Enniskillen died down Kevin McNamara continued to try and get the employment discrimination issue at the top of the political agenda. Although Archer and Bell had first taken up the matter in 1986 after the launch of the ‘McBride Principles’, McNamara brought new vigour and enthusiasm to the debate and relished the fact that this was the kind of campaign around which he thought he could unite the entire Labour movement. He described the matter of religious discrimination in employment as “the last of the great issues still unresolved since the civil rights marches of 1969.” In 1994, after Kevin McNamara lost his shadow post, Frank Miller of the *Irish Times* (one time Ulster Unionist Party secretary and not known for praising McNamara) said of him that he would be best remembered for his campaign against employment discrimination on “which many people in the North believe his tenacity outstripped that of the SDLP and the Irish government of the day.” Debate on the left and on Ireland in particular had been rather muted and despondent in the months immediately following the general election, but the one issue that the LCI also tried hard to pursue was the question of religious discrimination within Northern Ireland. The government were responding to the McBride campaign and the pressures from the US and the Irish Republic so that in October 1988 the Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights published its report on employment discrimination, commissioned by the government, which was highly critical of the Fair Employment Agency and its failure to achieve affirmative action to redress the ongoing problem. On 28 November the LCI organised a conference on the subject which attracted 300 delegates and heard contributions from Kevin McNamara, Ken Livingstone, Clare Short and Sean McBride himself. In line with the SDLP, McNamara stopped short of actually

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455 *Labour and Ireland*, No. 19 (Jan-Feb 1988).
supporting the 'McBride Principles' but nevertheless enjoyed the difficulties that the government was having and pressed the Secretary of State in October 1987 to declare what the cost was to public funds of British government campaigning and lobbying in the USA to oppose the 'McBride Principles'. The reasons for not supporting the McBride campaign were different for McNamara and the SDLP. The SDLP were fearful that having such restrictive demands placed on employers might in fact deter inward investment whereas McNamara was privately very sympathetic to the McBride principles but would not publicly support them for fear of alienating the Unionists and once again draw the accusation that he was an IRA 'fellow traveller' because Sinn Fein had thrown their full weight behind the McBride campaign. In response to the SACHR report, the Secretary of State announced that a white paper was to be published on fair employment which was to appear in May 1988. In December 1987 McNamara called on the government to bring forward the proposed white paper and set a target of reducing the Catholic/Protestant unemployment ratio of two and a half to one to one and a half to one within five years. Despite this the leadership, including McNamara, did not go as far as the LCI and others wanted and at Labour's 1987 annual conference a resolution demanding a policy designed to reverse employment discrimination on religious grounds was defeated by 2,435,000 votes to 3,337,000, with the T&GWU vote going against the motion at the request of its Northern Ireland region.

Whilst McNamara would not go as far as publicly calling for the McBride Principles form the basis of any change in the law, he was clearly enthused by the McBride campaign which brought such pressure to bear on the government and maintained discrimination in

459 Labour and Ireland, No.19 (Jan-Feb 1988).
the mainstream political debate. Labour felt they might be able to force concessions from the government with, for example, the call for employment discrimination claims in Northern Ireland to be heard by the industrial tribunals. This was unsuccessful but was essentially designed to keep up the pressure on the Tories whilst they were preparing the White Paper. At the 1988 conference the 1987 decision was overturned with an anti-discrimination resolution being overwhelmingly carried despite NEC opposition (this was aided by the fact that it was exactly twenty years since the first major civil rights march). Throughout 1988 McNamara continued to try and harry the government as they took the Fair Employment (NI) Bill through its parliamentary stages. When the Bill was debated in the Commons in July 1988 he pursued the argument that the government needed to act in the interests of the Northern Ireland economy, now that eight American States had adopted the Principles and he took advantage of the precedent that Short Brothers had set having made a specific commitment to improve employment opportunities for Catholics in order to reassure a concerned US army. He told the government that this was because it had the choice of losing a $60 million aircraft order or agree to anti-discriminatory measures which ought already to be legally required. There was a stark difference in the manner in which McNamara pursued the government on this issue as compared to the manner in which Labour’s policy of ‘unity by consent’ was being articulated; in actual fact the Irish unity policy was now hardly ever mentioned by the front bench team in the House of Commons and if it was it was often done so very briefly and almost apologetically. In fact the left-wing MP Diane Abbott said at a meeting in south Wales that she could just about remember the names of Labour’s Northern Ireland front bench team because their

performance had been “so unmemorable”.\textsuperscript{463} There was a feeling on the left that Labour should have taken a tougher line towards the government during the passage of the Bill. Although the PLP voted against the Bill on the second reading, this was because they were unhappy at the fact that there was a lack of detail as regards the various codes and regulations.\textsuperscript{464} During the committee stages that followed, Labour made a number of amendments to strengthen affirmative action programmes and to make improvements in the setting of targets and timetables; finally the Labour Party voted for the Bill on the third reading in May 1989.\textsuperscript{465} However the Labour Party ultimately felt tricked by the government; they had been told that the Lords would make further amendments in line with Labour’s concerns but no such amendments were ever made.\textsuperscript{466}

The left were fortunate to be given the opportunity for one last lease of life due to the fact that 1988 was the twentieth anniversary of the first civil rights marches and 1989 marked twenty years since British troops were deployed in Northern Ireland. The Labour Committee on Ireland planned a year of activity with the aim of bringing the question of British withdrawal into mainstream party political debate and keeping it there. The Time To Go charter was launched by Clare Short at a press conference held at Westminster at the end of June 1988.\textsuperscript{467} They were able to present a slick looking campaign complete with a consumer friendly logo and boasted the support of A.J.P. Taylor as well as personalities such as Emma Thompson, Robbie Coltrane, Alexei Sayle and Pete Townshend. When Clare Short stated that “The ingredients for a political settlement are beginning to surface,” pointing to the Sinn Fein/SDLP talks which had been taking place for some months and the

\textsuperscript{464} \textit{Hansard}, Vol. 146 (Jan. 1989).
\textsuperscript{465} Ibid. Vol. 153 (May 1989).
\textsuperscript{466} McNamara, K. Interview, Nov. 1997.
\textsuperscript{467} \textit{Guardian}, 1 July 1988.
more pragmatic language of people such as Jim Molyneaux and Ken Maginnis, the LCI were actually unaware as to what extent the shift in the Northern Ireland political debate towards the search for a political settlement, leading ultimately to the ceasefires, would actually undermine the withdrawal movement and the pro-republican elements within the Labour Party. Yes, the ingredients for a political settlement were beginning to emerge but no, the Labour movement was not going to rally to the ‘troops out’ cry as if it was going to be the catalyst in the search for a solution. In fact it was precisely because the Sinn Fein/SDLP talks and the later talks organised by Peter Brooke did hold out a fragile and slim prospect of finding a solution that the limited interest that Time To Go did engender was not sustained or built upon: many in the Labour movement were not now prepared to jeopardise the prospect of peace which the talks held out by supporting an idea which purported to be in the interests of peace but which many felt was the remnant of an outdated form of slogan politics. Although Clare Short argued that the initiative was designed to stimulate intelligent debate and to end the situation in which those “who advocate withdrawal are instantly accused of being covert supporters of the IRA,” in the wake of Enniskillen it was unlikely that that situation was going to change. The Labour Campaign for Peace and Progress in Ireland opposed Time To Go because they said that the only political organisation in Ireland which supported the campaign was what they called the ‘quasi-fascist’ Provisionals. It is also a fact that although they were arguing that Time To Go was designed to help mature the debate, Clare Short was essentially espousing the traditional nationalist position, displaying a rather naive optimism and a condescending attitude towards Unionists. During a Radio 4 interview, prior to the general election, she argued that the goal of a united Ireland was realisable if you could “keep

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469 Irish Times, 1 July 1988.
enough sensible Unionists behaving sensibly.\textsuperscript{471} In a \textit{Tribune} interview she stated that she believed Irish unity could be achieved by winning simply “the maximum possible consent” and that “When you talk to Unionists, they all know that it’s going to happen one day. When they believe a British Government’s really going to do it, vast numbers of them will want to negotiate their place in that future.” “There is a danger of a Loyalist backlash… but if they know the Government means it, it will fizzle out.”\textsuperscript{472} The idea that the major stumbling block to a united Ireland - one million unionists’ opposition - would not ultimately present a problem, is precisely the kind of argument which made Time To Go appear somewhat limited in terms of its appeal and its contribution to the debate.

Time To Go deliberately planned to target the trade union movement, just as the LCI had tried to do, knowing that if the big push to change Labour Party policy in 1989 was to be successful the trade union vote would have to swing behind the Time To Go initiative. Since the NUR adopted a policy favouring British withdrawal in 1985 very little movement had taken place in the trade unions on the Irish question. The only significant shifts in the LCI’s favour was first of all the decision by NALGO, four months before the Enniskillen bombing, to support Irish reunification at its annual conference. This was the consequence of over two years of pressure by the NALGO Campaign for a United Ireland. The adopted resolution stated “This conference recognises that the only just and lasting solution to the problems in Ireland lies in a united and independent Ireland established by peaceful means. This conference believes that the people of Ireland must be allowed to determine their own future.”\textsuperscript{473} NALGO was the largest public sector union but without a

\textsuperscript{470} \textit{Irish Post}, 30 July 1988.
\textsuperscript{471} Transcript of BBC Radio 4 interview with Clare Short by John Humphrys, 4 Feb. 1987. (Kevin McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)
\textsuperscript{472} \textit{Tribune}, 2 Dec. 1988.
Northern Ireland membership was able to have this slightly ambiguous statement passed with little fuss or controversy. There was no commitment to British withdrawal but the wording suggested that the British presence represented a denial of Irish self-determination. The policy adopted also listed various demands such as abolition of the Diplock courts as well as ending the use of plastic bullets, strip searching and the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism and Emergency Provisions Acts. This policy did in fact remain intact right up until NALGO was absorbed into the large Unison public sector union established in 1994.

Secondly, the small media union the Association of Cinematography and Television Technicians voted in favour of British withdrawal from Northern Ireland at its annual meeting in April 1988.\textsuperscript{474} Six months later the NUR overturned its commitment to British withdrawal from Northern Ireland which had been adopted at the 1985 annual conference. This decision was evidence that the troops out lobby was not on the brink of a sea change in the movement but in fact was only ever going to achieve limited success in convincing the trade unions that they ought to go one step further than the official Labour Party policy of ‘unity by consent’, which was essentially what the NUR adopted in 1988 as opposed to its previous troops out position. In the run up to the 1988 conference Jimmy Knapp, the NUR leader, had begun to express his doubts about the troop withdrawal policy. At the union’s 1987 annual conference he was much more vociferous in his opposition to the idea of British withdrawal arguing that such a move would mean the union turning its back on a political solution and handing victory to the armed struggle. He supported the amendment which opposed immediate withdrawal and which pointed to “the chaos and bloodshed which followed the hasty withdrawals from India and the Belgian Congo.” Yet even this amendment was defeated and the troops out motion was passed. This prompted Jimmy

\textsuperscript{474} Troops Out, Vol. No. 8 (June 1988).
Knapp to draw upon his background in the west of Scotland and argue that a precipitate British withdrawal would result in a violent conflict with thousands of Protestants leaving Scotland to go and fight in Ulster.\textsuperscript{475} In 1988 Jimmy Knapp finally got the policy he wanted. One can speculate as to what extent this was a personal victory for him or whether or not the change was the result of the general upheaval and rethink which took place throughout the left following the Enniskillen bombing. The motion adopted at the 1988 NUR conference stated its support for the principle of Irish unity but stated “We understand however, that the complex situation in the North of Ireland is unlikely to be peacefully resolved by short-term proposals for the withdrawal of the British presence... We therefore endorse the policy of the Labour Party of support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement... and the achievement of Irish unification by consent.”\textsuperscript{476} This was a setback for Time To Go coming, as it did, at the same time as its launch; but over the next two years the initiative was to eventually gain the support of a number of trade unions including the NUR.

In the short term and in terms providing a focus for the many disparate left groups, which involved extensive debate and activism, Time To Go was relatively successful. Various Time To Go or Year of Action committees were set up around the country involving people from both inside and outside the Labour Party and although a great deal of energy was spent in organising public meetings (which usually included that peculiar phenomena of the British left in the eighties namely ‘workshops’) and demonstrations, trying to apply pressure to achieve a change in Labour Party policy was almost forgotten. Meanwhile the activities of some of the ‘troops out’ die-hards in the Party began to appear more and more desperate and in the case of Tony Benn’s Northern Ireland (Termination of

\textsuperscript{475} \textit{Irish Post}, 18 July 1987.
\textsuperscript{476} \textit{Labour and Ireland}, Vol. 2 No. 22 (Oct-Nov. 1988).
British Jurisdiction) Bill the thinking appeared simply wishful, setting as it did 1 January 1990 for British withdrawal. The bill had the support of the Campaign group of Labour MPs and was sponsored by the usual ten or so MPs including Ken Livingstone, Jeremy Corbyn and Denis Skinner but it was slammed by Kevin McNamara as “stupid and looney.”

Then, again ignoring the criticism that he had previously attracted from the left, Tony Benn wrote to the secretary-general of the United Nations urging UN intervention in Northern Ireland early in August 1988. An increasingly hostile division developed between McNamara and the small ‘troops out’ rump; for example when Ken Livingstone accused Sir Patrick Mayhew (as Attorney-General) of being an accomplice to murder, after his announcement that the RUC officers involved in the Stalker/Shoot-to-kill affair were not to be prosecuted, Livingstone’s consequent expulsion from the House of Commons was opposed by just nineteen back benchers whereas McNamara happily expressed his satisfaction at the decision.

The Time To Go initiative was just the sort of campaign to which McNamara would have previously lent his support but the final Charter had the support of just nineteen Labour MPs which did include a couple of surprises such as Dale Campbell-Savours and Joan Ruddock, but many of those who signed the 1979 declaration of commitment to British withdrawal such as McNamara, Martin Flannery, Ernie Roberts and Jock Stallard as well as Frank Dobson, Clive Soley and Jo Richardson thought better of the idea on this occasion. The two Militant Labour MPs, Terry Fields and Dave Nellist, also refused to support Time To Go. The Militant view, as always, was based on their class analysis and although they did support eventual troop withdrawal, they believed in trying to build a movement in Ireland which would cut across the sectarian divide and

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477 Troops Out, Vol.11 No.7 (May 1988).
would ultimately lead to Catholic and Protestant uniting to demand British withdrawal. This was in actual fact rather similar to the 1981 Labour Party NEC statement on Northern Ireland which also used the language of class politics. But by 1988, whilst the Time To Go initiative might have appeared rather simplistic, the Militant class analysis was looking rather naive as the wider debate was beginning to recognise the importance of trying to accommodate and deal with the two competing national identities rather than supposing that economic or class factors were the key to the problem.

In addition to Jim Marshall, Mo Mowlam was added to the Labour Party’s front bench team in the summer of 1988 and was given responsibility for welfare and women's issues in Northern Ireland. In September the shadow team launched what the Guardian described as “Labour’s most detailed policy on Ireland yet.” The ‘Towards a United Ireland’ document was essentially a more detailed and updated version of the 1981 NEC statement although on this occasion there was no mention of setting up a Party of Labour in Northern Ireland. Detailed it may well have been, but it was essentially the same ‘unity by consent’ policy drawn up seven years earlier. Although Kevin McNamara had wanted to see the requirement of unionist consent watered down in the 1987 document, the 1988 policy statement made clearer than ever that “The constitutional step of unification will be taken only with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.”

Despite being such a detailed document, that detail was essentially concerned with harmonisation and other steps designed to bring about unity, no attempt was made at considering other options or at proposing structures through which political progress and dialogue could be

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482 Labour and Ireland, No. 21 (Jun-Sept. 1988).
485 Ibid. p.8.
developed between the two traditions north and south. Such was McNamara's belief in re-
unification that he argued against British withdrawal precisely because "there would be no
guarantee that the outcome would be a united Ireland," the concern was that "Whilst
unification must involve withdrawal, precipitate withdrawal might preclude unification."486

At the launch of the document it was evident that the Labour leader was essentially in
agreement with McNamara in believing that Britain was obliged to take responsibility for
finding a solution to the Irish problem. Kinnock stated that "Too many people look at
Northern Ireland and turn away, saying the problems are intractable. That is the politics of
despair. Others say Britain should wash its hands of Northern Ireland. That is the politics
of Pontius Pilate."487 McNamara later described those calling for British withdrawal as
"neo-imperialists" and argued that the consequence of troop withdrawal would be
repartition, a new sectarian state in the north east of Ulster and Belfast would become a
Beirut.488 Ironically this is precisely what his opponents in the CLR had been arguing for
years. The supposition by the troops out elements in the Labour Party that British
withdrawal quite simply meant Irish unity was challenged by the CLR who believed that the
result of British withdrawal "would not be a united Ireland but an independent Protestant
dominated state in the North."489 Considering that the UDA, through its New Ulster
Political Research Group, developed a policy in the early eighties which proposed an
independent Ulster state490 clearly the very real prospect of such an outcome could no
longer be ignored, not least by Kevin McNamara who no doubt considered that such an
outcome would be a disaster for the nationalist community. McNamara's position seemed
to be that what might naturally develop as an agreed arrangement between the two

486 Ibid. p.2.
489 CLR Beyond Our Ken (1983)
traditions north and south, once Britain had left, might not be the outcome that he considered best for the Irish people. His position was that having created the problem, Britain had a moral obligation to resolve the situation. It is this position which clearly sets McNamara apart from those such as Wilson, Callaghan and others in the Labour movement who have felt a frustration with the Unionists that has led them to conclude that Britain simply cannot resolve the problem for them. Such was McNamara’s hostility to Unionism that he would not contemplate ideas such as Ulster independence (which Callaghan once proposed) precisely because although it would fulfil one republican demand, namely British withdrawal, it risked re-establishing Unionist hegemony in a new Ulster state.

The ‘Towards a United Ireland’ document was evidence that there had been no major developments in Labour policy; the limited ‘shopping list’ of options that appeared in the 1981 NEC report had been reduced to just one. The option of devolution before moving to re-unification as contained in the 1981 statement was still included but there was very little detail and the idea appeared to be proposed with reservations about its success to the extent that the document almost seemed to threaten that “In the event of a failure by political parties in Northern Ireland to agree a basis for internal devolution, a Labour government will reserve the right to review means for strengthening the institutional and representative provisions of the [Anglo-Irish] Agreement with a view to providing for alternative structures of government... The authority of the Secretary of State and Northern Ireland Ministers, and their control of decision-making, will be enhanced.”491 It is well worth noting that shortly after the ‘Towards a United Ireland’ document appeared the newly merged Labour ‘87 group (which was made up of the old NILP, the United Labour Party, the Labour Party of Northern Ireland and included elements from a nationalist

background such as Paddy Devlin) published its plans for devolution for Northern Ireland. Robin Wilson (Fortnight editor) pointed to the contradiction in Labour front bench thinking and the limited development of the now seven year old policy: "The fundamental problem is that the paper marries two conflicting viewpoints. On the one hand it endorses the classical civil rights stance. [Labour's programme of internal reforms] Yet two pages later it supports the republican alternative - based precisely on the 'irreformability' claim: 'We recognise that the National Question, and hence the Border, is central to the 'Troubles' and that only the resolution of the question can bring peace.' Bew and Dixon also take issue with this apparent contradiction describing it as "an attempt by Labour to combine the 'reformist' and 'republican' positions on Northern Ireland" so that "Labour's policy can be interpreted to mean all things to all people. The party spokesperson can emphasise Labour's republicanism or reformism depending on the disposition of audience being addressed." This, in fact, is precisely what did happen; Neil Kinnock made various statements emphasising different policy ideas as seemed appropriate. Relations with some Unionists did improve over the next few months: Ken Maginnis said at a fringe meeting organised by the Labour Campaign for Peace and Progress in Northern Ireland at the 1988 annual conference that devolution could be achieved on the basis of some type of power sharing. Then when Neil Kinnock visited Enniskillen later in the year he only met with Unionists including Ken Maginnis.

The principle of self-determination also did not appear to be an important factor in the thinking behind the document - indeed the word did not appear at all - and the idea of

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Northern self rule (what Protestants consider their right to self-determination) did certainly not appear to be an option even in the context of an all-Ireland arrangement. The thrust of the document was aimed at securing a united Ireland as an end in itself to be achieved under the paternal guidance of the British government. In a *Fortnight* editorial Robin Wilson also argued that "Labour should realise that 'working for consent' for Irish unity can not be done by 'harmonisation' of structures, over the heads of actual unionists and nationalists, in the way its policy suggests: by enhancing insecurity this approach would be self-defeating... Nor are democratic institutions for Northern Ireland a barrier to unity: as Brendan O'Leary of the LSE has remarked, if unionists and nationalists can't share power in Northern Ireland - and recent developments in the councils are an encouraging pointer that they can - then they won't be able to share it in Ireland as a whole."497 The statement stressed that "The Labour Party does not seek to achieve unification by stealth"498 and went on to explain at length the plans that the Party had to harmonise north and south in terms of the economy, social security, education, the legal system and security arguing that whilst the Tories have been accused of a policy of surreptitious economic disengagement Labour were making their plans clear for all to see. Gone was Clive Soley's idea of an all-Ireland police force but much was made of the new dimension of the Single European Act and the argument that closer European integration will also help bring the two parts of Ireland together in economic and social terms anyway. The Dublin government was enthusiastic about the document as were all the other southern parties but Sinn Fein were critical as were the DUP with Peter Robinson accusing Kevin McNamara of being intent upon simply trying to erode the 'Britishness' of Northern Ireland.499 Nevertheless it did

497 *Fortnight*, July/August 1989.
appear that the document had reconfirmed the Labour Party as the party committed to Irish nationalist goals and as Dublin’s ally so that the idea of Labour returning to the position it held in the 1970s appeared (albeit superficially) more remote than ever.

During the late eighties security and the question of combating terrorism came very much to the fore again, most notably following the Gibraltar shootings, the Ballygawly coach bombing and a steady rise in both republican violence and loyalist assassinations generally. As always Labour found the question of security a difficult and problematic matter; they had to try and strike a balance between being seen to oppose violence and also upholding civil liberties. First of all the Gibraltar shootings prompted sixty Labour MPs to sign an early day motion (considerably more than the dozen or so that would normally make a stand on such issues) which denounced the event as “tantamount to capital punishment without trial.”

Then, following a dramatic increase in republican violence during the summer of 1988, demands for the re-introduction of internment were met with unanimous opposition from the Labour benches with Roy Hattersley as Home Affairs spokesperson unequivocally opposing such a move not least because of the adverse international reaction which would follow, most especially in the United States.

The government did respond with a number of measures including the Elected Authorities (NI) Bill and the Criminal Evidence (NI) Order. Although the PLP found little of contention with either bill they did oppose the anti-violence oath in the former and the ending of the right to silence in the latter. The Labour Party was united in its opposition to the Criminal Evidence (NI) Order because of the removal of the right to silence and consequently voted against the government. With the Elected Authorities (NI) Bill the second reading saw

500 Troops Out, Vol. 11 No.7 (May 1988).
Kevin McNamara and Tony Benn make speeches criticising the anti-violence oath as just an attempt to be seen to be doing something and futile because Sinn Fein would make the oath but still support the IRA anyway, but the PLP finally abstained on the Bill after failing to have the anti-violence oath amended because they were at least happy with the measures which extended the franchise in district council elections. When Douglas Hurd announced on October 19 that restrictions were to be placed on the IBA and BBC when broadcasting statements by Sinn Fein and other spokespersons for terrorism again the PLP was united in its opposition to the government. In the House of Commons Roy Hattersley denounced the ban as ill conceived and draconian whilst Clare Short, who contributed a great deal to the debate pointing out that Tory contributions had consistently talked only of republican violence and argued that the decision was clearly political and the inclusion of the UDA in the ban was most probably an after thought designed to make the ban appear even handed. Then, ironically, the one Parliamentary measure the government introduced which created a split in Labour's ranks was the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Bill which had its second reading in December 1988. The PTA was the one repressive law which Labour had stood firm in opposing since 1983 and just a month prior to the new Bill's second reading the European Court of Human Rights had ruled that the Act's power to detain suspects for seven days was in contravention of Europe's human rights convention. For this reason it is all the more a curious landmark in the PLP's attitude towards repressive legislation in Northern Ireland that Kinnock and Hattersley decided on abstention in the vote on the bill because it included new measures to tackle paramilitary funding and racketeering. The decision to abstain led to two shadow spokespersons resigning their posts, namely Clare Short (employment) and Andrew

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Bennett (higher education). Despite what Clare Short described in her resignation letter as Neil Kinnock's "constant threats and denunciations" a revolt took place which culminated in 43 Labour MPs defying the whips and voting against the Bill. The shadow Northern Ireland team abstained as did the long standing opponent of the PTA Clive Soley. The leadership argued that they could oppose, and therefore maybe amend, the more draconian measures such as exclusion orders and seven day detentions in the committee stage, so that after these tactics had in fact failed the PLP did in fact vote against the government after the third reading in January. The initial split may perhaps have been more significant as an example of Kinnock's desire to stamp his authority on the PLP than a sea change in the Party's attitude to the PTA. Nevertheless the fact that so many refused to stand with Clare Short and the others on what they saw as a matter of principle, regardless of the leadership's Parliamentary tactics, was a pointer towards a future softening of Labour's stand on these coercive measures.

Throughout 1989 the LCI, the Troops Out Movement and the pro-united Ireland elements in the Labour movement generally were hoping for a greater response to the twentieth anniversary of British troop deployment than they did in fact get. In addition the year also witnessed the left within the Labour Party forced into its most marginalised position since the beginning of the decade. Tony Benn and others tried to revive the left's fortunes through the setting up of the Socialist Movement which was designed to bring together various leftist elements from both inside and outside the Labour Party by way of a series of Socialist Conferences held throughout the year. There can be no question about the fact that from the first Time To Go conference in November 1988 through to the Time

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To Go Show in June 1989 the left did mobilise its forces well during the year. A great deal of debate and discussion was generated through the various local Year of Action or Time To Go committees which sprang up around the country\(^{508}\) (the choice of name depended upon whether or not the local elements wished to be associated with the national Time To Go organisers). About thirty Time To Go committees had been established by the time of the August march and carnival in London’s Finsbury Park\(^{509}\). In addition, various concerts, meetings and public debates took place around the country and a fifteen minute film by Ken Loach explaining the Time To Go argument was shown on BBC 2. An unquestionable momentum and enthusiasm did gather pace throughout the movement so that by the end of the year Richard Vize of the LCI could proclaim triumphantly that “In one year Time To Go! has captured the imagination of a new generation of campaigners and has significantly broadened support for British withdrawal from Ireland. By its approach of combining an argument for the principle of disengagement with an open ended commitment to discuss ‘how?’ Time To Go! has enabled more hesitant supporters to become actively involved and greatly increased the movement’s accessibility.”\(^{510}\) The reality was in fact very different and in a refreshinghonest self-examination Geoff Bell writing in the Troops Out Movement’s monthly bulletin in September 1989 stated that of the two objectives set out at the beginning of the year, namely the broadening of the withdrawal movement and the bringing together of the disparate groups including the LCI, TOM and the Irish in Britain Representation Group, neither was ultimately achieved: “There are different explanations for these failures, but surely any sober assessment of the last twelve months must agree there is a deep sense of a lost opportunity.”\(^{511}\) One problem was that internal stresses and

\(^{508}\) *Labour and Ireland*, Nos. 22-26.
\(^{509}\) Ibid, No. 25 (1989).
\(^{510}\) Ibid. No. 26.
strains were created within the well established organisations as they tried to co-operate with each other whilst slowly realising that the gains that were being made were in fact rather shallow with various elements joining the band wagon only up until the August before returning to their favoured issues and campaigns. Many had wanted to see, and believed they could achieve, a movement as large and influential as CND or the Anti-Apartheid Movement. The problem was for the LCI was that they were divided over whether to focus on such a strategy or focus on their founding aim of trying to achieve a change in Labour Party policy as an internal pressure group; they tried to straddle the two horses at once so that ultimately neither objective was achieved. By the end of the year most in the LCI had decided that they should return to simply focusing on the Labour Party. In 1988 the LCI had been happy to boast that the annual Bloody Sunday march held in London in January was the largest in a decade with an estimated 5,000 marchers in attendance by the end of 1989 the LCI decided to pull out of the Committee for British Withdrawal which organised the annual march each year in conjunction with TOM and refused to support what it said had become “merely a republican parade.” The decision was ratified at the LCI annual general meeting and although in later years they did return to supporting the annual march (they could ill afford not to especially during the Bloody Sunday anniversary year of 1992), all hope of building a new unified movement following the Year of Action had gone.

Within the trade unions the impact of the Time To Go initiative was also relatively disappointing. A number of unions did decide to sponsor Time To Go but they were the same unions that had already been sympathetic to Irish unity and the achievements made in terms of making in-roads and winning over new converts in the trade union movement were

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512 Labour and Ireland, No. 20 (March-May 1988).
negligible. At the 1988 Labour Party annual conference the composite resolution calling for British withdrawal was supported by the National Communications Union and the small media union the ACTT.\textsuperscript{514} This had only a minimal impact on the overall conference vote and what was of greater importance to Time To Go at this time was for trade unions to come forward and fully endorse the initiative with affiliation. The first unions to do so were NALGO and the long standing supporters of British withdrawal, the BFAWU (Bakers Union) who both affiliated to Time To Go in April 1989.\textsuperscript{515} Time To Go campaigners held fringe meetings at most of the trade union’s conferences during 1989 and 1990 in an attempt to win support and secure sponsorship for the initiative. The national executive council of the National Union of Public Employees had resisted previous attempts to win the union over to a position of favouring Irish unity and supporting Time To Go but in May 1990 the union’s annual conference in Blackpool voted in favour of a motion which advocated withdrawal of British troops and a commitment to support the Time To Go initiative. The motion also recognised the problem of employment discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland, but this had been expected because, although the union had members in both parts of Ireland, their Northern Ireland region secretary was Inez McCormack, a nationalist and one of the four founding signatories of the McBride Principles. The conference decision created a great deal of controversy for the union and the NUPE offices in Belfast became the target of loyalist bomb threats. As a result the union executive agreed to put out a statement which played down the conference decision and stated “We are not in favour of troops out tomorrow and the Executive Council accepts that the intent of the resolution is to engage in a serious debate and is also concerned about the attempt to limit that debate to simplistic slogans rather than a political

\textsuperscript{514} Labour and Ireland, No. 23 (Jan. 1989).
\textsuperscript{515} Ibid. No. 25 (July-Aug. 1989).
Following this the NUR also took the decision to sponsor Time To Go. A year later ASLEF, the other rail union who had for years resisted any radical Irish policy being adopted, took the same decision and also declared its support for the withdrawal of British troops. However this was as far as the Time To Go trade union campaign was going to go and despite the enormous importance attached to winning over the big industrial unions, in this they were singularly unsuccessful.

It is very difficult to get a precise and clear picture of what was happening in the trade union movement on the Irish question. There were no definite trends or patterns except that the industrial unions were not willing to support the ideas of Irish unity or withdrawal of British troops whereas some public sector unions were and the rail unions without having members in Ireland were also. Nevertheless the explanation for this is not that British industrial workers were more sympathetic to loyalism and the public sector and rail workers were more sympathetic to nationalism. The reasons for the varying positions were more often than not the result of the small core of executive members and national leaders being in some cases supportive of taking a radical line, or that a determined pressure group were able to achieve success because of an indifferent leadership. For example the leadership of the BFAWU and the ACTT happened to be sympathetic towards Irish nationalism and Neil Milligan the ASLEF leader was arguing for a policy of support for Irish unity long before the union took up such a position in June 1991. The importance of trade union sensitivity over their Northern Ireland membership cannot be overstated. Clare Short considered it the equivalent of the wider unionist veto on the constitutional question, arguing that “We’ve got this real malfunction in the trade unions

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516 Britain and Ireland Human Rights Centre, op cit.
517 Ibid.
518 Milligan was an individual supporter of Time To Go; Irish Post, 29 July 1989. So too was Peter Heathfield, the general secretary of the NUM, who was one of the initial sponsors of the Time To Go charter; Labour and Ireland, No. 22 (Oct-Nov. 1988).
because a lot of them allow a veto to their Northern Ireland branches, and because of
discrimination in employment, they tend to be Unionist dominated.) 519 The Transport and
General Workers Union was one union that Time To Go put a lot of work into and placed
a lot of hope because of all the big industrial unions it was considered the most left-wing
and carried the largest block vote at the Labour Party conference with over a million
members. At the T&GWU biennial conference held at Brighton in July 1989 a highly
acrimonious debate resulted in a motion in support for Time To Go being defeated after an
impassioned plea from John Freeman, the secretary of the union’s Northern Ireland region,
to reject Time To Go and support the neutral position of the NIC/ICTU. 520 John Freeman
was no Unionist and had always opposed the idea of organising the Labour Party in
Northern Ireland but he was sensitive to the sectarianism in the province and was no doubt
aware of the unease which would exist among unionist minded members in Northern
Ireland.

The reality was that regardless of what was done to build on the Time To Go
campaign the left were facing an uphill struggle within the Labour movement anyway and
the intense activity which surrounded the campaign belied the fact that interest in the troops
out cause was very much in decline. During the week of the Time To Go anniversary
march and carnival Merlyn Rees made a call for the scrapping of the Anglo-Irish
Agreement, in addition to which James Callaghan later added that any future agreement
must “come from within Northern Ireland.” 521 This was not 1981 and the call for
recognition of nationalist grievances had been made persistently over the previous eight
years but was now losing its impact and failing to interest a leadership which felt it was

finally beginning to turn the corner in terms of political respectability and therefore electability. At the 1989 Labour Party annual conference the Time To Go campaigners were placing a lot of hope upon the outcome of the vote on the British withdrawal composite, but the signs were not good when the NEC elections resulted in Ken Livingstone’s removal from the constituencies section.\footnote{Guardian, 3 Oct. 1989.} During the debate Kevin McNamara dismissed the supporters of ‘troops out’ and of Sinn Fein as ignoring the will of the majority north and south and he felt confident enough to argue that “Those who believe that violence is an acceptable policy response and those who flirt with the paramilitaries have no place in this party... I believe that the NEC constituency results demonstrate this point.”\footnote{Ibid. 6 Oct. 1989.} The appearance of McNamara apparently displaying such satisfaction at Livingstone’s defeat led to a noisy and hostile response with McNamara being slow hand-clapped and heckled. Nevertheless, the outcome of the vote was another disappointment for Time To Go with 600,000 voting in favour of the British withdrawal composite and 5,308,000 against.\footnote{Irish Times, 7 Oct. 1989.}

The failure of Time To Go does seem to mark the turning point in Labour Party and left-wing attitudes in general to the Irish question. Unlike 1985, when the Labour leadership were continually making pronouncements on Ireland in the midst of the optimism which surrounded the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the years that led up to the 1992 general election witnessed conspicuous silence on the part of Neil Kinnock and the rest of the shadow cabinet. It would appear that the Labour leader’s input into Party activity on the Northern Ireland issue was to amount to an annual trip to the province for a couple of days each December which usually amounted to a few meetings with local political figures

\footnote{Guardian, 3 Oct. 1989.}
\footnote{Ibid. 6 Oct. 1989.}
\footnote{Irish Times, 7 Oct. 1989.}
and security chiefs and a brief, safe and carefully worded statement which usually said more about security and the fight against terrorism than anything else. In a visit to Enniskillen in December 1988 Kinnock and McNamara met with the Unionist MP Ken Maginnis and a number of Unionist councillors, but met with no nationalists of any shade.\(^{525}\) In 1989 the Labour leader met with John Hume in Derry and on this occasion he made an unusually specific statement on constitutional policy declaring that "of all the options, devolution offered the best opportunity and I'd like to see it coming together with the appropriate democratic powers to local councils across Northern Ireland, because it is one of the ways of demonstrating that democracy is alive and well."\(^{526}\) Regardless of the fact that this newfound emphasis on devolution was contrary to the spirit if not the letter of current policy, what is of concern is the erratic nature of Kinnock's contributions to the Irish debate. Contemporary observers attached little significance to such statements but in the light of Kinnock's 1985 pronouncements on joint authority it seems that the Labour leader viewed 'unity by consent' as a distant and vague aspiration rather than a policy to be pursued once taking office so that he could advocate whatever he deemed suitable at any given moment and on this occasion it was to be devolution. Even Kevin McNamara has admitted that Kinnock displayed an element of naivety on this occasion forgetting the historic significance of local government in Northern Ireland as the one layer of government in which the worst cases of anti-Catholic discrimination had taken place.\(^{527}\) Kinnock's December 1990 trip to the province included a visit to the Parachute Regiment at the Palace Barracks, Hollywood and following meetings with heads of the security forces, including the commanding officer of the British army in the province, he stated his support for the Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, in his attempts to achieve all-party talks and he praised the government in general

\(^{525}\) Ibid. 20 Dec. 1988.
\(^{526}\) Ibid. 22 Dec. 1989.
for “sustaining a very positive and practical role” in developing Anglo-Irish relations. In December 1991, during his now regular visit to Northern Ireland, the Labour leader along with Kevin McNamara again issued a statement which contained very little of any significance except to say that (in spite of a campaign to make 'Ireland: an Election Issue' launched by TOM and others in April 1991) “it would be very foolish to make Northern Ireland a political issue in a general election.” This in itself, despite appearing insignificant, spoke volumes about Labour attitudes to the Irish problem and underlined the ongoing tendency towards bipartisanship not least because there appeared little point in trying to find new ground upon which to fight the Tories especially not the contentious ground of Northern Irish policy. Despite the official Party policy and Kevin McNamara’s presence as shadow spokesperson, for all intents and purposes Neil Kinnock seemed to be carrying out a policy of bipartisanship, saying little apart from condemnations of violence and expressing hope for the talks process. More worrying for the left was the fact that its steady decline in the Labour Party was becoming an ever more rapid decline with policies such as unilateral disarmament being abandoned in 1989 with surprisingly little resistance from the left. The situation reached an all time low when in October 1990, for the first time since 1979, the Labour Party conference did not debate the constitutional question of Northern Ireland because there were simply not enough resolutions on the subject. In addition to this, evidence from an opinion poll carried out in 1990 amongst members of the Labour Party and voters in general, revealed that 52% of general voters questioned said that they favoured the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland (a consistent trend) whilst 63% of the members of the Labour Party questioned also favoured

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527 McNamara, K. Interview, Nov. 1997.
withdrawal. However in 1984 opinion polls revealed that almost 60% of general voters questioned favoured British troop withdrawal and 70% of Labour voters said that they favoured withdrawal. The drop in support for British withdrawal among general voters and the fact that Labour members support for withdrawal was so much lower than among Labour voters just six years earlier was also an indictment of the Time To Go initiative which had clearly failed to generate the momentum it believed that it could to alter Party policy in favour of a clear commitment to withdraw from Northern Ireland.

Since 1988 the Party had been working on a major policy review which had immediately aroused the suspicions of the left because it appeared imminent that Kinnock was going to water down many existing policies in a way that would be difficult to prevent unless conference was prepared to throw out the entire review in October 1989. An early draft of the policy review, which appeared in October 1988, contained nothing on Ireland but the final report, ‘Meet the Challenge Make the Change’, which was published in the summer of 1989, contained a fairly detailed restatement of existing Northern Ireland policy. A commitment was included to strengthen legislation designed to tackle religious discrimination in employment and the pledges on ending strip searching, banning plastic bullets, repealing the PTA, amending the EPA and reforming the Diplock Courts by providing three judges rather than one, were all restated. Various attempts were made by the left to amend the Northern Ireland statement; Tony Benn had proposed deleting the whole section and inserting “Labour will terminate British jurisdiction over Northern Ireland within the lifetime of a full parliament to allow the Irish people to determine their own future” but this was defeated by 21 votes to 5 with Benn, Livingstone, Skinner, Hanna

Sell and Sam McCluskie voting in favour. Clare Short later suggested that the commitment that “any change in the status of Northern Ireland could only come about by the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland” should be deleted. This was also defeated, on this occasion by 18 votes to 8, with Short, Benn, Skinner, Sell, McCluskie, David Blunkett, Colm O’Kane of COHSE and Ted O’Brien of SOGAT voting in favour of the deletion.\textsuperscript{534} The report also contained the commitment to introduce a devolved power sharing government and details of the proposed harmonisation of the two Irish states (contradictory though this might of course seem), but the shortened final document, ‘Looking to the Future’ which appeared in the summer of 1990, was reduced to just twenty lines and had neither of these two commitments.\textsuperscript{555} The 1992 general election manifesto had an even briefer statement on Northern Ireland and again, at a joint PLP/NEC meeting on the drafting of the manifesto in the March, Tony Benn moved that the statement be replaced with a declaration of intent to end British jurisdiction;\textsuperscript{556} once again he was heavily defeated. Ten years earlier Benn’s arguments had carried a certain moral weight as he was the leading critic of the discredited Callaghan government, but after thirteen years of Tory rule, two election defeats in which the electorate had recoiled from what appeared to be a party lacking in responsibility and a changing political climate in terms of the Northern Ireland debate, the ‘troops out’ argument appeared rather out of date and out of tune with the atmosphere engendered by the Brooke talks which began in April 1991.

Labour Party thinking on trying to achieve a resolution to the Northern Ireland conflict evolved around policy ideas and rarely, if ever, proposed the idea of trying to achieve a negotiated settlement based upon fostering all party talks. When Peter Brooke

\textsuperscript{534}Labour and Ireland, No.25 (August 1989).
\textsuperscript{536}Benn, T. \textit{End of an Era} (1992) p.56.
made his speech after 100 days as the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in November 1989, he proposed that he would like to eventually see all party talks which would include Sinn Fein and, most controversially of all argued that the British could not secure a military defeat of the IRA. Although many on the Labour benches (for example Martin Flannery, chair of the Northern Ireland Committee) were enthusiastic about the statement, Kevin McNamara appeared to be wrong footed and his immediate reaction was to denounce Brooke. He said that his comments were “ill timed” and “conveyed the wrong message”; they could only “assist the ‘one last push’ mentality of the paramilitaries.” He explained to Tribune that “At a time when Provisional Sinn Fein’s political standing is lower than it has ever been, and on the anniversary of the Enniskillen bombing, to come along and give a degree of respectability, and the oxygen of publicity, to them is quite amazing.”

However there was consistency in McNamara’s response; he had always held a deeply hostile attitude towards the Provisionals and saw the advancement of Irish nationalism as being achieved through Dublin, the SDLP and the Labour Party, but did not see a role for Sinn Fein and, unlike some of his less nationalistic predecessors, maintained a commitment not to meet or even have secret contacts with Sinn Fein. On certain occasions his criticisms of the Provisionals could have come from the mouths of the DUP. For example he has said that “their objective is a military dictatorship throughout Ireland” and because they are organised mainly within the six counties “In that sense, a former Irish Attorney General, John Kelly, was correct when he once described the IRA as a ‘British terrorist organisation’.” For this reason it was not altogether unsurprising that he reacted as he did, whereas Clare Short argued that “All he (Peter Brooke) said was the

537 Tribune, 10 Nov. 1989.
538 McNamara, K. Speech to St. Mary’s University College, Twickenham, 14 May 1998.
539 McNamara, K. Speech to Bradford University Labour Students, 3 Nov. 1989.
truth, but if the Government will use its influence to invite those who support Sinn Fein to declare a ceasefire and come to the negotiating table, it will create the space for real efforts to end the conflict in Northern Ireland.”

But as McNamara was always well aware of the Unionists’ suspicions of him he was determined to ensure that at least they could never describe him as what they term an ‘IRA fellow traveller’ and so this opportunity to attack the government on what could be construed as their going soft on Sinn Fein was not to be missed. McNamara has freely admitted that whilst he clearly has nationalist sympathies and is from an Irish Catholic background he therefore deliberately kept his distance from Sinn Fein for two tactical reasons: first off all he did not want to add to Unionists reasons for distrusting him (of which there were enough already) and, secondly, because he wanted to be seen to be pursuing a united Ireland and opposing the Prevention of Terrorism Act because he considered it to be the right thing to do and not because he was being persuaded by or influenced by Irish republicans.542

With the rising importance of the question of the future of the European Union in the political debate, John Hume’s long standing argument that closer integration would help to reduce the significance of the Northern Ireland border began to be taken more seriously. In 1989 Kevin McNamara seemed to be in agreement with Hume, predicting that “as a result of the single market, the border will become less and less relevant and the benefits and necessity of co-operation between the two parts of the island will become more apparent. As a result of this process, Unionist objections to a united Ireland would have less and less force.” In mid-1990 Kevin McNamara appeared to have adopted a more cautious line on the theory arguing that “The assumption that the single European market

541 Tribune, 10 Nov. 1989
after 1992 will eventually bring about a united Ireland is not merely mistaken; its passivity is also dangerous.” 544 This apparently innocuous statement actually presents an insight into McNamara’s thinking for two reasons. First of all it begs the question, if McNamara considers such an attitude to be ‘dangerously passive’, just how ‘pro-active’ would he have been in pursuing unity? And secondly, if taking a passive or less pro-active attitude to trying to make the border irrelevant can be described as ‘dangerous’, then this begs the question who does it endanger and why? The answer is that his thinking appears to have been continually geared towards achieving unity as the pre-eminent objective and so, despite viewing the Single European Act as a chance to advance this objective, he was perhaps simply warning of the danger of missing such an opportunity. Certainly his intention was to be determinedly pro-active with his economic harmonisation plans, arguing more and more as time went on that partition was not so much wrong because it denied self-determination (the republican argument) but that it is illogical in terms of economic planning. For example in late 1991 he complained that it was ludicrous for Ireland to have an economic development agency covering 1 and a half million people in the North competing with another covering 3 and a half million people in the South on an island on the periphery of Europe. 545 This was unquestionably a logical argument and McNamara appears fully committed to all-Ireland economic planning even though he recognised that “Unionists will not stop being Unionists simply because of 1992.” 546 This goes to the core of the Irish unity policy because if after a Labour government had done all it can to harmonise the two regions of Ireland - in terms of the economy, policing, the legal system and even social security - and the political divisions still remain, then constitutional reunification will remain an elusive goal. McNamara did say on one occasion that “The

romantic vision of a united Ireland is exhausted."547 This was perhaps recognition of the reality that ‘Unionists will not stop being Unionists’ but nevertheless he never fully explained what his vision of a united Ireland was or how the two national identities could practically be accommodated in a unitary Irish state. At the same meeting at which McNamara made this statement, his political advisor to be, namely Brendan O’Leary made clear that “European economic integration is not a necessary condition of Irish unity” pointing out that “Divergent economies can be politically integrated, as is happening in Germany, and integrated economies can diverge politically”. “There is, in other words, no compelling logical reason to suppose that the economic integration of the two political units on the island of Ireland through the institutions of the European Community has definite implications for the national conflicts within and between those two units.”548

There is, of course, a well established internationalist tradition in the Labour movement which opposes nationalism and national boundaries and it is this tradition which came to the fore as the Labour Party shifted from its opposition to the European Community to an almost positive enthusiasm for the European idea. Amongst them was the one time Labour Party spokesperson on Northern Ireland, Peter Archer, who has described himself as a ‘world federalist’ and argued that, in spite of developments such as the break up of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, this was not a trend which he favoured. He opposed this rising nationalism in Europe and argued that it made administrative sense for larger states to be established, which was why he even opposed any rapid moves towards Scottish devolution.549 The argument that the improved global transport and communications networks mean that larger administrative areas are required makes perfect

548 Tribune, 3 August 1990.
549 Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996.
sense and this is part of the logic behind the European Union; but the political problem of nationalism remains and continues to present problems in Spain, Belgium and throughout Eastern Europe. McNamara himself argued that it was the existence of militant Irish nationalism and the ongoing campaign by the Provisional IRA which heightened the significance of the border creating a "semi-militarised frontier". The conclusion that he made on the Single European Act was once again a rather paternalistic argument that "without a governmental commitment to extend and enhance cross-border co-operation, there is no argument that it will take place. In crude terms, an argument is sometimes made that 1992 means the two parts of Ireland must swim together or sink together." "It is precisely because one cannot rely on the instinct of self-preservation that an active role is demanded from both governments."550 This theory has in fact proved to be wrong: the Republic’s economy has grown remarkably throughout the mid-nineties. The significance of the statement is, once again, its rather condescending tone and the presumption that a British Labour government would have to pursue such a task because the Northern Ireland parties could not be relied upon to see the sense in such a policy. It is also important to consider that if one argues, as McNamara did, that ‘Unionist objections to a united Ireland would have less and less force’ following economic convergence after 1992, if one looks at the Basque region of Spain which enjoys a healthy economic relationship with the rest of the country, with Bilbao in particular maintaining impressive prosperity, with no borders or frontiers to hinder trade, yet the Basque nationalist demand for separation has not been dampened and continues to exist as a formidable political force regardless of economic arrangements.

550 McNamra, K. op cit.
The changing political climate, aided by Peter Brooke with his more pragmatic approach, had a detrimental effect on the left-wing pressure groups. With the exception of the 1992 Bloody Sunday twentieth anniversary march, street demonstrations went into rapid decline and the LCI began declining both in numbers and influence with the last edition of ‘Labour and Ireland’ appearing in May 1990. In the 1988 NEC elections the first three members elected by the CLPs, namely David Blunkett, Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone, all favoured Irish re-unification, but by 1991 only Blunkett remained and he was hardly forceful in his advocacy of Irish unity. However, in addition to this a number of further developments took place which signalled a worrying new trend in the Labour movement for the LCI and others. In February 1991 Harry Barnes, who had become vice chair of Labour’s back bench committee on Northern Ireland, helped to organise and was established as chair of the British branch of New Consensus. At the initial launch of the British branch he stated that “This is the first attempt to bring together people from all political persuasions to set up a broad-based and individual member organisation that will challenge simplistic slogans such as Time To Go! and promote an alternative that can help bring peace to Northern Ireland.” The fact that such an individual - so critical of Time To Go - could become vice chair of the Party’s back bench committee, was indicative of the extent of the changes taking place within the Labour Party. He also came to represent the Peace Train organisation in Britain and hosted a Peace Train delegation to Westminster in July 1991 which met with a number of sympathetic Labour MPs which included Kevin McNamara. Harry Barnes had maintained a keen interest in Irish affairs and had consistently opposed the PTA, but he was one of a small new generation of people in the

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553 Irish Post, 1 Dec. 1990.
Labour Party who were somewhat sympathetic to left-wing opponents of Irish republicanism and was himself associated with the Workers’ Party. He represented an anti-nationalist left situated somewhere between the Militant Tendency and the Worker’s Party and took it upon himself to call for devolution and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland in the House of Commons. He was a leading left-wing opponent of the imperialist analysis of the problem and he discerned “that some on the left on the ‘mainland’ are abandoning this time-warped analysis, eschewing romanticised republicanism and paramilitarism in favour of a class analysis.” But his pro-partitionist view meant that this British version of the Workers’ Party’s analysis was unlikely to gain much sympathy because his argument that “In a nutshell what is needed is an internal settlement” ignored one of the key developments of the past decade, namely recognition of the Irish dimension. In response to left-wing sympathies with the nationalist community Barnes claimed that “Protestant workers have often played a progressive role in the past and there is no reason why they should not do so again” and so was to frequently argue during the debates on the government’s Fair Employment Bill, that Protestants also suffered discrimination in certain areas. Paradoxically he was then to join up with three left-wing Labour MPs to vote against the renewal of direct rule, because of his belief in devolution, in defiance of the official PLP position. In addition to this, Barnes maintained left-wing respect by, for example, tabling a motion along with Jeremy Corbyn in early 1992 calling for a review of the Widgery Tribunal which had exonerated the Parachute regiment after Bloody Sunday twenty years earlier. New Consensus and the Peace Train organisation were resented by Sinn Fein because they were presented as a non-unionist/non-political peace movement but received

555 *Fortnight*, April 1990 (Article by Harry Barnes).
considerable funding from the Northern Ireland Office. The fact that they received such sympathy from Labour MPs was equally worrying for the LCI which was at this stage struggling for survival let alone hoping to achieve such a high profile and well publicised meeting at the House of Commons.

A further development which indicated the changing attitude amongst many in the Labour movement was the increased profile of the Campaign for Labour Representation. The CLR had of course been very vocal in the early eighties and had the support of a couple of key figures such as Dick Barry and Frank Allaun who became the Honorary President of the CLR, but only in 1990 did they finally reach centre stage with a composite resolution agreed for the October Party conference. Considering that there had been too few resolutions to present a troops out composite, the CLR saw this as a major coup. Prior to this the best that had been achieved in terms of publicity was the contesting of the Fulham by-election in 1986 by the self-styled South Belfast Labour Party. Boyd Black stood as the Democratic Rights for Northern Ireland candidate against the official Labour candidate Nick Raynsford (who curiously enough was, in later years, to become an outspoken advocate of the CLR’s case) but received a dismal vote. The case for organising the Labour Party in the North was then given a boost by the fact that in 1989 the North Down Conservative Association finally received official recognition by the Tory Party; a sharp contrast to Walworth Road’s attitude towards the SBLP and the other Labour organisations in Northern Ireland. Neither the two Militant MPs or Harry Barnes supported the CLR but by the late eighties the organisation had an important supporter in the shape of the Vauxhall MP Kate Hoey. Kate Hoey was an Antrim born Protestant who had been involved with the ‘troops out’ supporting International Marxist Group whilst a student and was a leading activist in the Anti-Internment League, but went on to join the
Labour Party. She initially supported the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland, and went on to become a resolute opponent of the Labour Party’s Irish unity policy, maintaining a firmly unionist position on the Northern Ireland question.\textsuperscript{559} If it was argued that McNamara’s Catholicism made him a liability in trying to present Labour’s policy to the Unionists, then Kate Hoey was not the best choice for an organisation which claimed that it was not integrationist but in fact sought a Labour Party for Northern Ireland to combat and bridge the religious divide. Larry Whitty, the Party’s general secretary said in early 1990 that they were considering allowing people who apply from Northern Ireland to become members of the Labour Party, but that the strongest objection to this came from the SDLP and the Irish Labour Party.\textsuperscript{560} Labour’s headquarters at Walworth Road immediately responded by denying this, but Kate Hoey was able to claim that Larry Whitty (in a letter to one of her colleagues) had confirmed that, indeed, the situation was under review.\textsuperscript{561} In addition to this, the fact that the Tories showed such sympathy towards their Ulster integrationists gave the CLR a powerful new argument for the Labour Party to challenge the Tories in the province rather than let them take the integrationist initiative. During conference week Roger Stott, an assistant front bench spokesperson on Northern Ireland, also began to waver on the subject, replying to the question of extending Party membership to the province he said, in a radio interview “There clearly is a groundswell of opinion in Northern Ireland that we should do so. There are many people in the trade union movement... who believe that the Labour Party ought to organise in Northern Ireland and some of the arguments are very persuasive. Namely that if we become the next government, which we will, and we are governing Northern Ireland, then the people of Northern Ireland should

\textsuperscript{560} Ibid. 16 May 1990.
\textsuperscript{561} Belfast Telegraph, 16 May 1990.
have the opportunity to either vote for us or not vote for us.”562 (Roger Stott was to be part of the front bench team which three years later wrote a highly contentious document vehemently criticising the CLR’s aims; to be looked in the next chapter).

In the end the 1990 annual conference voted overwhelmingly to oppose the motion calling for the British Labour Party to be organised in Northern Ireland563 and Kate Hoey responded by immediately announcing that the campaign to extend Labour Party membership to the province would continue. Ted O’Brien of SOGAT (an unashamed nationalist) spoke for the NEC in opposition to the composite resolution stating that “We sent a team of people to Northern Ireland to talk to the trade unions and other parties there and there was no support whatever for the Labour Party to be set up in Northern Ireland because it would be seen as linking them forever - I wish we talked about the six counties rather than Northern Ireland - with Westminster.”564 He was heckled from the floor during his speech and although the CLR campaigners were well known for their vocal and disruptive reputation, Party managers, it seems, were simply not willing to travel over to Belfast and start to embroil themselves in Ulster politics. It is worth noting that most fringe meetings at which Kevin McNamara was present were invariably disrupted by CLR heckling and its members were usually seen outside the Party’s annual conference waving 10 pound notes at delegates demanding that they should be entitled to membership of the Labour Party. The CLR’s members have been variously described as “an unpleasant bunch”565 to quote Frank Millar of the Irish Times or at least “sharply polemical”566 to quote the more polite Jonathan Moore. Whilst Kate Hoey argued, after the conference decision, that “We were told there was no support among trade unionists. I know there is.

I have been approached by a lot of delegates and trade union members..." McNamara himself dismissed the whole idea as a "straight integrationist move" and said "The trade unions are against it because that would bring the constitutional issue onto the shop floor, with all the divisions that would create, and which they have sought to remove over the past years."

At the 1991 Party conference another CLR resolution was again defeated with Eddie Hague arguing on behalf of the NEC that extending Party organisation to Northern Ireland would result in Labour becoming identified with the Unionist community. Whilst attempting to analyse the Labour movement and its attitude to these issues one must accept that a majority among the Party’s membership had very little interest in Ireland and very little enthusiasm for Northern Irish politics. With this in mind one can understand that the CLR was always going to find sympathy among those who were agnostic on the Irish question when presented with the suggestion that the Party they are so committed to, be organised in Ulster. The fact that the CLR were not particularly successful must therefore be, to a large extent, a consequence of the fact that an alliance developed between the pro-nationalists in the Party such as Short and McNamara and those in the leadership (many of whom were also agnostic on Ireland) who believed that organising in Northern Ireland would prove a costly and disastrous experiment which would serve no worthwhile purpose other than to distract the Party from achieving its primary aim of winning enough votes in Britain in order to ensure the return of a Labour government. One can speculate that it was for this reason that the NEC asked a pro-nationalist such as Ted O’Brien to speak in the debate on the CLR composite motion,

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whereas in a debate on British withdrawal such an individual would almost certainly not be asked to speak.

In July 1990 Nelson Mandela, during a visit to Dublin, suggested that the British government ought to be able to begin negotiations with the IRA at some point. Bishop Desmond Tutu argued much the same during a visit to Ireland a year later and so the consequence was that these statements were used by many on the left to demand that both the government and the Labour Party adopt a more flexible attitude towards the question of talks with Sinn Fein. Peter Brooke’s initiative for all party talks had undoubtedly helped to create a new positive climate and the debate on Northern Ireland certainly began to change and begin moving away from the tribalism and sloganism of the past. Despite this Kevin McNamara continued to project an inflexible position; refusing to move on his opposition to Sinn Fein’s inclusion in talks and also developing an apparently changed view on the Anglo-Irish relationship which drew criticism from the LCI. In a speech shortly before the Brooke talks got under way, he lavished praise on the Secretary of State and arguing that “Increasingly the complexities of the relationship between Britain and Ireland and the reasons for the intractability of the Northern question have come to light. It is no longer enough to blame Britain, nationalist Ireland has accepted its own responsibilities for the present state of affairs.”

McNamara’s position was also attracting criticism from the LCI mainly because the Labour Party appeared impotent and unable to influence developments in a way which furthered the ‘unity by consent’ policy. However McNamara must be credited with the fact that he was recognising and responding to the changes in Southern nationalism. He was well aware of the new found pragmatism and flexibility within constitutional Irish nationalism with, for example, their willingness to debate the

existence of articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution. However he criticised Sinn Fein who he said had “remained immune” from this “major re-evaluation of nationalist thinking”.571 Because the Labour front bench so vehemently opposed Sinn Fein’s inclusion there was virtually no difference between their’s and the government’s position on the talks so that bipartisanship was effectively once again in operation in the House of Commons. Kevin McNamara explained that his opposition to Sinn Fein’s inclusion in talks was based on two factors. First of all they refused to renounce violence and secondly “The simplistic analysis of the republican movement according to which the conflict in Northern Ireland arises from the British manipulation of the unionist community purely in order to serve British interests, reveals that they do not understand the problem. If you cannot understand the problem you cannot be part of the solution.”572 This was an unprecedented position for a leading politician to take and is evidence of McNamara’s unbridled contempt for a party which nevertheless represented more than a third of Northern Ireland’s nationalist community. However, a month later, after the Brooke talks had finally got underway, he welcomed the involvement of the Dublin government because he argued that Southern nationalism was a dimension in the conflict and so had to be included in the talks; the logic being that “It is vital that those who are part of the problem are involve in the solution.”573 This apparent contradiction was the result of the new climate created by the Brooke talks which caught people such as McNamara somewhere between trying to think in terms of a solution from above and trying to consider the possibilities involved in talks among the parties ‘on the ground’. The Labour Party, for the last decade, had concentrated on devising a policy for Northern Ireland rather than thinking in terms of creating the conditions for talks and

571 McNamara, K. Speech to Sir John Deane’s School Northwhich, Cheshire, 26 April 1991.
572 Ibid.
facilitating those talks with a view to looking for common ground between the parties on which to build a settlement on the basis of self-determination. Even as Brooke was working to achieve a talks process throughout 1991, the Labour Party front bench team were considering a plan to introduce joint sovereignty for Northern Ireland.574

The Brooke initiative was not achieving the breakthrough that had been hoped for by the end of 1991 and calls from the left for Sinn Fein to be included became a source of great irritation for Kevin McNamara. When Bernie Grant called for the government to include Sinn Fein in the talks his comments received widespread publicity and he argued that they had the support of a great number of people in the Labour Party. McNamara reiterated his long standing position of opposition to any negotiations with any party supporting violence to which Grant replied that really he was “not on top of the situation.”575 As the 1992 general election approached speculation developed that, as the opinion polls were indicating that the election of a Labour government was imminent, Kevin McNamara would be removed rather than be given the Northern Ireland Office job. No such problem arose with Don Concannon in 1983 or with Peter Archer in 1987 but it was reported that gossip was rife even at the 1991 annual Labour conference that McNamara would be removed in the event of a Labour victory.576 Regardless of what may have been said by leading Labour figures, the speculation grew partly out of the fact that it simply appeared unlikely, in the wake of Peter Brooke’s carefully built talks process, that a Labour government would be prepared to jeopardise what may be the beginnings of real progress towards a political settlement by keeping someone in the post who was so obviously disliked and distrusted by the Unionists. McNamara was well aware of this and

so, in spite of his association with Irish nationalism and the SDLP, he continued to make
sure he kept his distance from Sinn Fein never once meeting with them and replying, when
asked if as Secretary of State he would talk to Sinn Fein, “No. No democratic socialist can
have any truck with people whose argument is not through the ballot box and persuasion
but is through the bomb and the bullet. We have made that very, very clear and Neil
Kinnock has made that very, very clear.”

This did little to reassure Unionists especially in the light of his stated desire to bring the very existence of the Northern Ireland Office to an end. After a year in his shadow post McNamara told Ella Shanahan of the Irish Times
that he wished to be the last ever Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Then in November 1990 he said that “I have to make a confession, I am the only shadow secretary
of state in Westminster who wants to exchange shadow office for the real thing with the express intention of ensuring that the office is eventually abolished. I would consider it a
major success, if I, or which ever of my colleagues is appointed to the office of Secretary of State, could one day inform the Cabinet that the post is no longer necessary.”

In addition to this, there was also the continuing ambiguity over what exactly ‘unity by consent’ meant.

In 1987, when first appointed spokesperson, McNamara said, in a letter to the Independent,
“Labour’s policy is one of unification by consent - as everyone who is interested knows - I
am trying to ‘coax’ that consent from people of both traditions in Northern Ireland.”

As the argument developed over the coming years as to whether a British government should be a ‘persuader’ for a united Ireland, the word coax appears a lot stronger than persuade so ensuring another reason for Unionist hostility to the prospect of a Labour victory.

Explaining what a Labour government would do for Northern Ireland, McNamara said

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shortly before the election “We cannot impose unity, but we can set in motion the policies which will ensure that unity is freely accepted.”\textsuperscript{581} What sort of policies could alter the unionist community’s present position were still not exactly clear; after four years as Party spokesperson all that had been done was the reiteration of Clive Soley’s harmonisation plans. As for achieving a situation in which ‘unity is freely accepted’ Bew and Dixon suggested that the opposite would have been a more likely eventuality: “Faced by a British-Irish-SDLP consensus, with the prospect of both chairs of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental conference being in favour of Irish unity, the unionists are likely to feel that their backs are against the wall. Their siege mentality will be reinforced and the prospects for power-sharing correspondingly reduced. In such a climate of increased tension, the ability of Labour to implement a comprehensive reform strategy, even if it has the will, may well be undermined.”\textsuperscript{582} Such statements by McNamara did of course create great anxiety amongst Unionists although they did find a degree of reassurance in the Labour leader. Neil Kinnock told journalists at a meeting at the Irish Embassy that a Labour government would not use the talks process to pursue Irish reunification - “That isn’t the objective. The first objective is to achieve the political, economic and civil security that will enable people to take new perspectives.”\textsuperscript{583} John Taylor, who said of McNamara “He’s seen as an Irish republican... His presence will greatly damage the prospects of the talks,”\textsuperscript{584} asked him directly in the House of Commons about Neil Kinnock’s statement, challenging him to declare that he also did not view the talks process as a means to achieving reunification. McNamara replied “We believe that the long term future of Northern Ireland lies in unity with the rest of the island.” McNamara could not shift from

\textsuperscript{581} \textit{Tribune}, 4 Oct. 1991.
\textsuperscript{584} \textit{Times}, 7 April 1992.
his time honoured position but it should be made clear that the tone and mood of this Northern Ireland debate was by no means confrontational but rather it was a display of consensus and bipartisanship (in fact Seamus Mallon complained that in seeking to achieve harmony the debate was downright bland).585

Neil Kinnock simply did not want Ireland to become a party political issue in the run up to an election; indeed Paul Dixon has argued that it is evident that bipartisanship has re-emerged whenever an election has approached precisely because the electoral benefit to the Labour Party in taking a partisan stand on Northern Ireland is almost non existent.586 The difference between McNamara and Kinnock was becoming increasingly clear and both Ian Paisley and Jim Molyneaux stated publicly that following a Labour victory they would be seeking negotiations directly with the Labour leader rather than with McNamara.587 Times journalist Edward Gorman stated that, having spoken to certain Unionists, “In a hung parliament his head would be at the top of their list in a deal with Labour.” James Molyneaux explained that “It’s not just because of a distrust of Mr. McNamara’s policies. There are certain other reasons which it wouldn’t be fair to state publicly. Just put it under the heading of trust and confidence.”588 Speculation about Kevin McNamara’s future continued right up to the election. Ralph Atkins in Fortnight had already thrown up the idea that he would be replaced by either Frank Dobson, Michael Meacher or Martin O’Neill.589 Frank Dobson had a history of sympathy for the Irish nationalist cause but both he and Michael Meacher had taken very little interest in Ulster politics in recent years. Since the election it has still been rumoured that Martin O’Neill would indeed have been

586 Dixon, P. ‘Britain, Bipartisanship and Northern Ireland’ in *Contemporary Record* Vol.9 No.1.
given the Northern Ireland job. It is difficult to speculate what might or might not have happened if Labour had been called on to form a government. If there had been a hung parliament of course Kinnock would have seen the sense in appointing a Secretary of State who would have made matters easier for him in terms of ensuring Unionist support for a Labour administration. Although many have pointed to the fact that Kinnock and McNamara were indeed close personal friends, it was also a fact that McNamara was not an elected member of the shadow cabinet and so could not argue that he was entitled to a cabinet post. In addition to this, just what Molyneaux’s ‘certain other reasons’ were one can only guess, but what is, of course, known now is that for a long period before the election Kevin McNamara and his advisors were working on a plan to introduce an Anglo-Irish joint authority to take over the administration of Northern Ireland. The details of the plan were not leaked until after the election and so the issues involved and the implications of the plan will be looked at in the next chapter. Suffice to say that in the context of the debate on the 1992 election the Unionists’ fears were more than well founded and puzzling though the differing signals about devolution from Kinnock and eventual unity from McNamara may have been, the very fact that there was also a team working on a completely new idea for joint authority makes a clear and conclusive analysis of Labour thinking during this period extremely difficult. The one conclusion that can be made is that as ever, the Labour Party was and still is a broad church with various factions pulling in different directions. By 1992 McNamara was evidently wanting to take the Anglo-Irish Agreement to what he saw as its inevitable conclusion, namely joint authority, but his position was looking increasingly out of step with the leadership. Tony Benn and

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others were still committed to troops out, Kate Hoey and Harry Barnes had different agendas altogether; but with the hard left in drastic decline, the Kinnockite soft-left and centre-right were in the ascendant and were to remain so throughout the coming years ensuring that Labour was, in spite of McNamara’s plans, firmly on the road back to bipartisanship.
The post-1992 general election period witnessed dramatic changes in both the Northern Irish political debate and British party politics. In the immediate aftermath of the Tories' fourth consecutive victory the outlook appeared bleak for Labour which by September 1992 had seen Party membership drop to an all time low of 261,000.\textsuperscript{592} The Party continued to move to the right and with the left becoming increasingly marginalised Militant finally decided, in March 1993, to end its policy of entryism, leave the Labour Party and field its own candidates in elections.\textsuperscript{593} The right-ward drift became ever more evident in the debate on the Irish question. Ten years earlier the LCI was campaigning to strengthen Labour's commitment to a united Ireland as well as seeking to have the loyalist veto removed from the policy. In 1992, with the LCI in steady decline, the pro-nationalists in the Party were simply hoping to achieve the minimum objective of retaining the 'unity by consent' policy intact and ensuring that Kevin McNamara kept his position as spokesperson on Northern Ireland. In many instances their energies were being distracted by having to deal with the growing demand for the Labour Party to be organised in Northern Ireland. The right-wing drift was enhancing the confidence of those such as Kate Hoey to persist with a demand which was hardly even heard ten years previously. Following Neil Kinnock's resignation the Party elected John Smith as leader: a man who had similarly never made Ireland a high priority. Individuals who had once deemed it wise to speak out on Irish affairs and declare their pro-nationalist sympathies such as Harriet Harman, David Blunkett, Frank Dobson and even Clare Short became conspicuously reticent on the Irish question. If ten years earlier it was considered popular within the Labour movement to

\textsuperscript{592} Guardian, 4 Sept. 1992.
\textsuperscript{593} Ibid. 26 March 1993.
take a pro-nationalist line on Ireland, those who had serious front bench ambitions (which the aforementioned four certainly did) now believed that such an attitude could seriously harm their plans for future government posts. Whilst the British party political scene generally shifted into the centre-right ground, the debate on Northern Ireland was continually maturing both inside and outside of Northern Ireland and a new word was to enter the debate, namely 'peace'. The reason for this, as is so often the case with Ireland, was that international developments were changing peoples' attitudes to the problem. The progress that was made in the Middle East and in South Africa led to a change in thinking with the feeling developing that if such achievements could be made there, then they could be made in Northern Ireland. The problem for the left was that in this new climate and in the new-found international desire to seek common ground upon which to agree a lasting 'settlement' (another new word to enter the debate) the old slogans of 'united Ireland' and 'troops out' appeared more and more simplistic and out of date.

The most prominent pro-nationalist grouping in the Labour movement during this period was to be the Labour Party Irish Society. There had been unofficial Irish Sections in the Party for years, with Clare Short as President, but the LPIS was a well organised grouping with a moderate image which eventually won official recognition by the Labour Party. The LPIS, whose membership overlapped considerably with the LCI, said shortly after the 1992 election “It is fair to say that an attitude of indifference and even hostility towards Irish activists has changed into a constructive dialogue between activists and the party leadership.”\textsuperscript{594} This rather optimistic statement was said at a time when Labour was actually without a leader, but John Smith had told the LPIS just days before his election as leader that Labour “would conduct a fundamental reappraisal of the means by which we

\textsuperscript{594} Irish Post, 18 July 1992.
can achieve this objective [unity by consent]." In spite of this, and the high profile and respectable image the LPIS managed to maintain, they were not ultimately able to prevent the right-wing drift affecting Labour’s position on Northern Ireland. At almost the exact same time that the LPIS won its official recognition, Kate Hoey and Nick Raynsford launched Democracy Now! (the name was taken from the East German opposition group) as a Parliamentary based pressure group designed to win the Labour leadership over to the idea of having the Labour Party contest elections in Northern Ireland. It is also worth noting that Democracy Now also, on certain occasions, used a gaelicised version of their name: Daonlhas Anois. Hoey claimed that she had the support of 40 MPs and asked at the launch of the new group “Should we not be seeking a mandate from the people of Northern Ireland if we are going to be governing them?” Kevin McNamara responded by arguing that “It is a mirage believing that if UK parties organised in Northern Ireland the problems would disappear.” The SDLP took exception to Hoey’s complaint that there was no progressive socialist party in Northern Ireland for people to join. SDLP chairman, Mark Durkan, stated that the party was socialist and was “an affiliated bonafide member of the Socialist International and the Confederation of Socialist Parties in the EC.” (A point which Kevin McNamara also frequently made.) Kate Hoey and Nick Raynsford, another Labour MP who became prominent in Democracy Now (he was converted to the cause after the Fulham by-election when Boyd Black as a ‘Democratic Rights for Northern Ireland’ candidate had stood against him), immediately responded to the election of John Smith as Party leader by writing to him to urge a change in policy and to allow Labour Party candidates to contest elections in Northern Ireland. This set the tone for the next

595 Ibid.
few years; the LPIS and Democracy Now opposed each other in the same way that the CLR and LCI had done during the eighties. The difference was that whilst the LPIS presented a more moderate and leadership friendly image, Democracy Now sought to achieve the exact same objective (thus breaking with the marginal image of the CLR) but was far more successful precisely because it was based within the PLP.

One of the consequences of the new, high profile, Democracy Now campaign was that it added to the speculation about Kevin McNamara’s position as the Party’s Northern Ireland spokesperson. The fact that there had already been so much speculation about his position in the run up to the general election made him all the more susceptible to a whispering campaign by those whose confidence had been enhanced by the emergence of Democracy Now. In late July 1992 both the LCI and the LPIS publicly welcomed McNamara’s reappointment to the shadow cabinet by John Smith as Northern Ireland spokesperson. Bill O’Brien replaced Jim Marshall in the front bench team, joining up with Roger Stott as McNamara’s assistants. Then at Labour’s annual conference a composite resolution was moved by the LPIS which re-committed the Party to ‘unity by consent’. Speaking on behalf of the LPIS, Siobhan Crozier took the opportunity to attack Democracy Now, arguing that “On principle, we oppose the notion of a British Labour and Unionist Party.” Having coined this phrase they used it to great effect in trying to convince the rank and file that any move towards Labour organising in Northern Ireland would advance the cause of unionism and not socialism. The composite motion went on to argue for a review of “all aspects of the relationships between Britain and Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and between Nationalists and Unionists in Northern Ireland” and to “examine new institutional and constitutional approaches and

relationships." But, too few resolutions calling for Labour to be organised in the North were submitted for the subject to be debated.\footnote{Irish Post, 10 Oct. 1992.} It would have appeared that Democracy Now’s initial impact was in fact negligible with their supporters and the CLR’s supporters making only their usual vocal impact at a few conference fringe meetings.

Kevin McNamara’s position appeared secure under John Smith. Although he was not popular with people such as Kate Hoey and Nick Raynsford he maintained good relations with New Consensus because he was determined to be seen to be opposed to republican violence. When the Secretary of State announced a ban on the UDA McNamara gave the decision his full support.\footnote{Labour Party News Release, 10 Aug. 1992 [329(Lab)A].} He continued to support the demand for a Bill of Rights and for the government to tackle even further the problem of employment discrimination. In June 1992 McNamara took the opportunity to continue to put pressure on the government on this question despite the passing of the 1989 Fair Employment (NI) Act. During a debate on direct rule he took issue with the government’s record on the subject but was accused by John Taylor of being concerned only with discrimination against Catholics, in reply to which McNamara claimed that he was equally concerned about discrimination against Protestants.\footnote{Hansard, Vol. 209, Cols 1060-61(18 June 1992).} In November he supported the NIO announcement that they were to introduce a system of goals and timetables to boost Catholic employment in the Northern Ireland civil service and in the same month the LCI successfully lobbied a conference of Labour MEPs to support Neil Blaney’s (Donegal MEP) resolution on employment discrimination in Northern Ireland. The Labour MEP, Christine Crawley, led the campaign to get Blaney’s resolution passed which called for the European Commission to investigate discrimination and to set up a special EC committee to tackle the problem in

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\footnote{Irish Post, 10 Oct. 1992.}
\footnote{Labour Party News Release, 10 Aug. 1992 [329(Lab)A].}
\footnote{Hansard, Vol. 209, Cols 1060-61(18 June 1992).}
Northern Ireland.\textsuperscript{604} On the constitutional question, rather than moderating his views in the light of the speculation about his front bench position, McNamara was at pains to tell a meeting of Socialist MEPs at a meeting in Londonderry that Labour was not trying to move towards a return to bipartisanship with the Tories but was committed as ever to the policy of unification with consent. He went on to say that Labour differed greatly from the Tories in so far as that they were more concerned with civil liberties and with the accountability of the RUC, especially on the question of the use of lethal force, and argued - significantly - that if the talks between the Northern Ireland parties were not proving fruitful then the British government should develop better co-operation with Dublin in order to fill the political vacuum.\textsuperscript{605} This came shortly after the \textit{Irish News} had attacked the Labour leader after a visit to Belfast and accused the Party of maintaining bipartisanship, claiming that “There is a cosy understanding between the two major parties in Britain that it is essential that the Northern Ireland problem is somehow ‘above politics’.” John Smith had reiterated the government’s position on all party talks, stating that Sinn Fein could not be included without a clear renunciation of violence. However he also took up the argument, sometimes used by Neil Kinnock and others in the Labour Party, that the most important issue in Northern Ireland was its economic problems, unemployment and “the lack of social opportunity”. He pledged a future Labour to restore the Province’s manufacturing sector.\textsuperscript{606} John Smith was particularly agnostic on the Irish question and although the \textit{Irish News}’ criticisms of him might have some validity they certainly could not be applied to McNamara. The ‘economic solution’ argument was favoured by those who believed the materialist analysis that unemployment was the main reason for paramilitary recruitment

\textsuperscript{604} \textit{Irish Post}, 14 Nov. 1992.  \\
\textsuperscript{605} \textit{Guardian}, 15 Jan. 1993.  \\
rather than political motivation. Kevin McNamara was not so enthusiastic about the argument (although he did of course argue for economic improvements in line with general Labour Party policy) and his political advisor Brendan O'Leary has stated that he "regularly criticised the merits of economic explanations of the conflict advanced within the Labour Party, and criticised naive economic prescriptions for its resolution, a position not regularly taken by advisers to social democratic parties." It would be fair to say that John Smith was displaying an element of naivety on the subject. However his position was not untypical for a British socialist and Peter Archer also favoured this argument as did Harry Barnes; both of whom were sympathetic to the Workers' Party. This position was indeed consistent with certain liberal and Marxist analyses of various ethno-national conflicts which tend to play down the significance of national identity and explain the violence as the consequence of economic deprivation; "Thus the relative lack of class and ethnic conflict in Western industrial societies is sometimes ascribed to prosperity and the ability of Western regimes to provide increasing economic benefits to their citizens."

The situation throughout the Labour movement on the Northern Irish question during this period could be said to be, once again, in a state of flux. Part of the reason for this was the emergence of Democracy Now but this was itself the result of other developments. The fact that Kate Hoey embarked on this course, having been an MP for years without ever entering the debate on Northern Ireland either in the House of Commons or elsewhere, is an indication that it was the new political climate which gave


The Militants also took a similar view; see *Militant* 1981-91.

McGarry, J. & O'Leary, B. *Explaining Northern Ireland* (1995) p. 266. Also pp. 265-307 'Mammon and Utility: Liberal Economic Reasoning' in which such analyses are opposed as being an inadequate explanation for ethno-national conflict

This is freely admitted by Hoey in 'New Labour New Union'; an article written for the *Ulster Review*, Issue 19, Spring 1996.
Hoey and others the confidence to come out and take up such a position. Another reason for this may well be the warm reception that New Consensus received from the Labour Party but then even this development was symptomatic of the deep rooted decline in the left and the previously high profile elements within it, for example the pro-Sinn Fein figures such as Ken Livingstone and Tony Benn, who had been in trouble since Enniskillen, and the ‘troops out’ lobby including the LCI and Time To Go. Democracy Now held a conference in October 1992 at which it was announced that a petition of 800 signatures calling for Northern Ireland citizens to be allowed to join the Labour Party, was signed by 29 MPs including Peter Shore, Bryan Gould, Austin Mitchell, Kim Howells and Keith Vaz as well as the general secretary of the NUT, Doug McAvoy. This ever increasing high profile of Democracy Now led to bitter rivalry within the ‘Ulster Labour’ camp with the CLR accusing Hoey and the others of pursuing a unionist agenda, whilst asserting that the CLR supported the LPIS and the ‘unity by consent’ policy. The South Belfast Labour Party also rushed to distance itself from Democracy Now and to declare its anti-unionist credentials. What was clearly frustrating for the CLR was that they had decided to embark on a strategy of adopting a Labour left position of supporting Irish unity in order to shake off its anti-nationalist image and win the support of the British Labour movement to its cause. In fact Boyd Black had left the CLR precisely because of the group’s decision to support the Irish unity policy. To begin with in 1981 when the ‘unity by consent’ policy was first adopted, the CLR immediately denounced it as an unattainable nationalist slogan. The CLR then spent years in the political wilderness having been denounced as pursuing a hidden unionist agenda only to now find themselves supporting Irish unity and being marginalised by a grouping which they themselves were denouncing as trying “to

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612 Ibid. 21 Nov. 1992. (Letters from CLR secretary, David Morrison and SBCLP secretary, Joe Keenan).
create just another sectarian Unionist Party.”614 However Democracy Now were completely dismissive of the CLR and in early 1993 were given a boost by the fact that in a postal ballot the AEEU (Northern Ireland region) voted by 3,587 to 2,823 to have the Labour Party contest elections in the region. Kevin McNamara’s response was to argue that because there was only a 28% turnout this meant that only 16% of the union in the region voted in favour despite the AEEU having an overwhelming Protestant membership in Northern Ireland.615

Developments such as this and the ongoing Democracy Now campaign prompted McNamara and his front bench team to produce a lengthy document, in July 1993 provocatively entitled ‘Oranges or Lemons?’616 to set out their opposition to the ideas of political integration and extension of the Labour Party to Northern Ireland. The general thrust of the document was that all the different groups, from Democracy Now to the South Belfast Labour Party, have an integrationist (and therefore unionist) agenda, Labour in Northern Ireland would fail as did the NILP and that to further Labour’s ‘unity by consent’ policy support should be given to the Irish Labour Party and to the SDLP rather than oppose them with a rival British Labour Party. At the launch of the document Kevin McNamara played on the idea that adopting an integrationist/unionist agenda would cost Labour many Irish votes; “The strength of our electoral support among the Irish in Britain is based, in large part, on the Labour Party’s historic recognition of the Irish people’s right to self determination and the Conservative Party’s historic association with coercion of Ireland and support for the Union and Unionists.”617 This is particularly questionable;

614 Irish Post op. cit.
617 Irish Post, 31 July 1993.
whether or not the Irish in Britain vote Labour for these reasons is certainly debatable considering that the majority of the Britain’s Irish community are mainly working class and constitute the type of social grouping that would vote for the Labour Party regardless of ethnic origin. What is without doubt is that Labour, nevertheless, had every reason to keep one eye on the Irish vote because, as an Irish Times/MORI poll conducted shortly before the 1992 election revealed, 49% of the Irish in Britain questioned said they would vote Labour as against only 28% who said that they would vote Conservative. The ‘Oranges or Lemons?’ document was certainly a very thorough and hard hitting attack on Democracy Now and Patrick Wintour of the Guardian claimed that “the strong tone of the document is understood to have raised eyebrows in the Labour Leader’s office.” Indeed, Kate Hoey responded by writing to John Smith to seek his disapproval of the document (which in the event was not forthcoming) and by handing in to the NEC a 1,000 signature petition in early August calling for Labour to be organised in Ulster. Nevertheless there was mounting evidence that Democracy Now did have an integrationist/unionist agenda and McNamara may well have felt vindicated by the fact that Harry Barnes, at this stage a Democracy Now supporter, began to publicly support the Unionist demand for a Northern Ireland select committee at the same time that the ‘Oranges or Lemons?’ document was published. Kate Hoey had already taken up such a position; in a debate on the talks process, in November 1992, she made a rare contribution to a Northern Ireland parliamentary debate in order to call on the government to introduce a select committee for the province. Perhaps the most interesting passage in ‘Oranges or Lemons?’ was the two paragraphs which made comparisons with other regional conflicts. Included in the

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618 Irish Times, 1 April 1992.
621 Ibid.
study were a range of comparative examples from the Basque region and Cyprus to Quebec and Sri Lanka with the argument being presented that if in any of these areas there were state-wide political parties (and in some cases such as Canada and Spain there are) then clearly such a factor has no bearing whatsoever on the political attitude of the alienated or discontented national/ethnic community. Whilst this is an unquestionable fact the document had unwittingly undermined the Irish ‘unity by consent’ idea. It was argued in the last chapter that Spanish-wide economic co-operation had done little to help reconcile the Basques to the Madrid government and thus all-Ireland economic co-operation would do little to reconcile Ulster Protestants toward the Dublin government. So this argument, that any attempt to erode nationalist parties with a state-wide party would fail, also presents a problem for those who believe all-Ireland wide political institutions and arrangements will erode Protestant support for Unionism. Of course the authors of this document were arguing that organising British parties in Northern Ireland would not reconcile Irish nationalists to the Union but conversely this highlights the fact that ‘unity by consent’ would remain an elusive goal precisely because all Labour’s plans for winning such consent involved all-Ireland economic, institutional and political harmonisation in order to win Protestant consent even though it has been argued that in other comparable regions polarisation and ethnic/national consciousness has increased regardless. Paul Dixon has argued that “if the tendency of closer European integration is towards increasing the cultural and political importance of the regions at the cost of the nation-state, then Labour’s harmonisation strategy appears to be working against rather than - as it claims - with the grain of European developments.” He also managed to gain an admission from _McNamara, K. et al, op cit. pp. 29-30._
Kevin McNamara that there is no precedent anywhere in the world for the success of a harmonisation strategy.\footnote{Bew, P. & Dixon, P. ‘Labour Party Policy and Northern Ireland’ in Barton, B.& Roche, P. (eds.) The Northern Ireland Question: Perspectives and Policies (1994) pp 156-7.}

Regardless of developments in the Labour representation debate, the most important event during this period and one which did far more to polarise the McNamara and Democracy Now camps as well as having far reaching implications for McNamara and the pro-nationalists in the PLP, was the leaking of the front bench’s proposals for joint sovereignty for Northern Ireland at the end of June 1993. On the first occasion that the story was reported a year earlier (just after the general election) nobody took any notice whatsoever. Frank Millar who first reported the existence of the plans entitled ‘Options for a Labour Government’, in the Irish Times in the summer of 1992, said at the time that although Neil Kinnock and others knew of the plans before the general election, nobody in the Labour Party was prepared to make any comment about its existence or otherwise.\footnote{Irish Times, 12 June 1992.} When the story broke again a year later panic set in and Patrick Wintour of the Guardian reported that “Labour officials said the paper had not been seen by the shadow cabinet prior to the election or by the then Labour leadership.”\footnote{Guardian, 29 June 1993.} In fact McNamara has stated that the leadership had asked the shadow team to prepare a paper in preparation for taking office. Rather than the document being the product of a few over zealous advisers and shadow team members it had been asked for by Neil Kinnock in order to provide the leadership with some alternative ideas in the event of Labour taking over at the NIO.\footnote{McNamara, K. Interview, Nov. 1997.} McNamara had previously made statements which indicated that his line of thought was shifting towards some form of shared responsibility: in January (as has already been mentioned) he had argued that if the talks process failed, then the British government...
should develop better co-operation with Dublin in order to fill the political vacuum. In June 1993 he went even further arguing that if the Northern Ireland parties could not reach agreement “The two Governments should seek to make whatever progress is possible and seek ways to share responsibility”. These statements aroused very little interest and not even the Unionists took issue with McNamara over them. The sensationalism which surrounded the ‘leak’ had everything to do with party political games within Westminster and little to do with any real shock at the plans which had never, even in secret, been agreed as Labour Party policy. In 1984 Neil Kinnock had, publicly, given consideration to the idea of some form of joint authority with very little response from unionism. The LPIS had produced a document entitled ‘Ireland: Time for Peace’ in May 1993, which also advocated a form of joint authority, but again very little interest was aroused. Everybody knew that the government needed the Unionist MPs’ support in the forthcoming Commons vote, in July 1993, on the Maastricht Treaty and so it would appear that the so-called ‘leak’ (of a document that the Tories already knew about) was timed to help ensure that the Unionists (who also already knew about it) would save the government in the crucial vote. Brendan O’Leary (McNamara’s advisor) has argued that the Unionists did not need persuading but would have voted with the government regardless, because they did not want to precipitate a general election which would almost definitely have resulted in a Labour victory. Kevin McNamara and others were to argue that it was not the ‘leak’ of a Labour document which swayed the Unionists but an alleged “squalid deal” to introduce a Northern Ireland parliamentary select committee thus fulfilling a long standing Unionist demand. The issue became very high profile with John Major immediately

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629 See Chapter 3.
630 Irish Post, 29 May 1993.
calling on John Smith to sack Kevin McNamara the day after the ‘leak’ appeared in the
Guardian,\textsuperscript{633} thus prompting many observers and even some on the Labour benches to
close that McNamara had single handedly lost Labour the chance of winning the
Unionists over to the Opposition’s side in the Maastricht vote. The Commons exchanges
became increasingly acrimonious with McNamara becoming clearly irritated by Major’s
apparent intention of abandoning any form of bipartisanship, declaring that on the Union
between Britain and Northern Ireland “we in the Conservative and Unionist Party stand
four-square behind it.” John Smith refused point blank to comment on the matter, but when
Sir Patrick Mayhew joined in the attack on McNamara he responded by delivering a
lengthy defence of himself only to be interrupted by the Speaker for using up excessive time
and so, in an untypical display of emotion and Irish nationalist jargon, declared “I can
assure you, Madam Speaker, that this croppy does not lie down before a pile of Tories
behaving like that.”\textsuperscript{634} In spite of McNamara reacting in precisely the manner that the
government and Unionists had hoped, the reality was that the whole fuss over the joint
authority proposals was a smokescreen whilst the real reason for the Tories winning
Unionist support was the alleged deal on a Northern Ireland select committee. It has been
asserted that the Unionists were responsible for the ‘leak’ and that they had possession of
the document since before the general election.\textsuperscript{635} Indeed, James Molyneaux came out and
explained that the “certain other reasons which it wouldn’t be fair to state publicly” why he
would not be willing to co-operate with McNamara if Labour were to form a government
after the 1992 election, were that he had full knowledge of the joint authority plans; “It was
for that reason that I refused to commit myself to continuing the Brooke talks if there was a

\textsuperscript{633} Hansard Vol. 227 Col. 823 (29 June 1993).
\textsuperscript{634} Ibid. Cols 1092-1103.
\textsuperscript{635} Fortnight, No. 13, Sept. 1993 (article by Jonathan Moore) & Irish Post, 24 July 1993 (article by Martin
Collins).
change of government. McNamara’s hysterical reaction at that time indicated that he knew the reason.”

The sensationalism and outrage in some quarters (Paisley said the joint sovereignty plan would lead to civil war) was certainly an over reaction to plans which were in many ways simply the logical next step after the Hillsborough accord between London and Dublin. The plan envisaged a five member Executive Joint Authority (EJA) for the province with one representative from the British government, one from the Irish and three from within Northern Ireland. But the document made clear that “Unionists are unlikely to be happy with our proposals. It is therefore necessary to reassure unionists that shared responsibility is not an immediate staging post to Irish unity. We propose that the constitution of Northern Ireland under shared responsibility can only be changed if there is overwhelming support for such a proposal.” The plan was to “give unionists a veto on integration with the Republic of Ireland and nationalists a veto on integration into the United Kingdom.” This was certainly no move towards unity but was a furthering of the process of seeking a solution from above by essentially introducing direct rule from Westminster and Dublin albeit with a devolutionary dimension in the shape of the Northern Irish majority on the EJA. It could also be argued that the plan strengthened the unionist veto and partition because, with some demographic experts predicting a Catholic majority in Northern Ireland by the early 21st century, the paper says that “Unionists, however might be attracted by the idea that if shared responsibility is justified where there is a nationalist minority of 38-40 per cent, it would be equally justified when there is a

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637 Ibid.
639 Cox, W.H. 'Uphill all the Way: Constitution Making for Northern Ireland' Parliamentary Affairs Vol. 44 (1991) In this it is argued that joint authority “would be essentially colonial.”
substantial unionist minority in the North.”  

So why would Kevin McNamara, a long standing supporter of Irish unity, agree to such a plan? First of all McNamara consistently continued advocating ‘unity by consent’ and so for him the plan was perhaps just another possible option. He also distanced himself from the IPPR report, which appeared later and advocated weighted majorities in order to make changes to the joint authority arrangement. Secondly the plan was initially born out of frustration with the failure of the Brooke talks. It envisaged that if Labour had won power in 1992 the Northern Ireland parties would be given six months to reach agreement after which time, if nothing was agreed, the Labour government should then go ahead with the joint sovereignty plan. The draftsmen of the paper took a cynical and pessimistic view of the Brooke talks and told Kinnock “We would not expect such an initiative to succeed but it would prevent accusations that the parties in Northern Ireland were not given a chance to determine their own future by a Labour government.” This apparent surrender of the principle of self-determination was paradoxically seen by many on the left as a positive step and the plan was given a guarded welcome by the LPIS and the LCI. The latter argued that “Joint sovereignty as outlined in the leaked draft document would represent an advance on existing Labour policy.” With many on the left having argued that Hillsborough had reinforced partition, the LCI was now arguing that in the light of the failed Brooke initiative “the new proposals would break the stalemate by circumventing Unionist intransigence and actively pursuing an agreement with Dublin. They represent an attempt to pursue unity by constitutional means, subtly yet crucially different from the conditionality of ‘unity by consent’ which leaves the loyalist veto intact.” The plan seemed to mean all things to all people. Clive Soley welcomed the plan but also saw it as a short term measure leading to eventual complete transfer of

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640 Labour Party, op cit.
641 Irish Times, 29 June 1993.
sovereignty to Dublin. But to suggest that it would bring Irish unity closer and sooner, was not what the document itself envisaged. The paper recognises that "Transitional shared responsibility perceived as a prelude to a British withdrawal would be destabilising" and so joint sovereignty "should be acknowledged to operate for a period of not less than 20 years." The joint sovereignty idea could not be described as part of a new direction in the British Labour movement’s thinking on Ireland; it was a plan drawn up by McNamara and a small team of advisors which was never endorsed as Party policy. Many on the left may well have been enthused about the plan precisely because of the hysterical reaction of the Unionists and the Tories. If such a document had have been produced in the Conservative Party the reaction from the Labour left would have no doubt been much more ambivalent and suspicious. And if such a suggestion might appear absurd, as the Party that had signed the Hillsborough accord it would not really have been particularly surprising.

Despite gradually distancing himself from the joint sovereignty idea, Kevin McNamara’s position was becoming increasingly threatened. When the Institute of Public Policy Research launched its extended version of the proposals, McNamara officially kept his distance. He had intended to write the introduction for the IPPR but decided against such an idea precisely because of the volatile political atmosphere. Most were happy to make their views known; Clare Short declared her support for it, Peter Hain opposed the ideas and Clive Soley said he welcomed them but still would rather pursue consensual unification. All that McNamara would say was that "Labour Party policy is Irish unity by consent and there are no plans at present to change Party policy." But the LCI

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observed that “Over the summer Labour’s pro-unionist camp has continued to pile pressure on McNamara. Austen Morgan, a well-known supporter of Democracy Now... raised the prospect of Kevin McNamara being replaced by Marjorie Mowlam, MP for Redcar. Others see the fingerprints of Peter Mandelson MP.” Kate Hoey also made public her desire to see McNamara replaced after the shadow cabinet elections in the November. Jonathan Moore wrote after the summer that “On the Labour side, meanwhile, some back benchers have turned on the party spokesperson, Kevin McNamara, blaming him for pushing the unionists into the government’s hands. One Labour source noted during the run-up to the crucial vote of confidence in July that there ‘were cabals of Labour MPs meeting everywhere. Kevin was an outsider in every one of them’.” Much was made of a whispering campaign to get rid of McNamara and Democracy Now begun to canvass support for Mo Mowlam as a replacement for McNamara in the knowledge that she indeed had ambitions to become a future Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The campaign by Democracy Now appeared to have won a small victory at the end of August 1993. In late 1992 the Labour Party’s NEC set up a National Policy Forum which would look at its Northern Ireland policy as part of a wider review. The body began work in May 1993 and four months later an organisation and development sub-committee agreed to send a delegation to Ulster to look into the possibility of setting up the Labour Party in the province. When questioned about the significance of this development Clare Short played down the decision saying that “It wasn’t an urgent matter but we agreed to it. There wasn’t a long discussion about organising in Northern Ireland.” Nothing came of the delegation and what appeared to be a small victory was later overshadowed by the

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embarrassing news that the CLR had announced that it was suspending all activities and
dissolving itself “because the issue which it put on the Labour agenda has been hijacked and
prostituted to the interests of Ulster Unionism by the group of English MPs and Ulster
Loyalists called Democracy Now.”\textsuperscript{653} The timing was just right for Kevin McNamara,
coming the week before Labour’s 1993 annual conference. The CLR made clear that it
was unhappy about Democracy Now’s “somewhat hysterical campaign against McNamara”
and had in fact tried to counter it. In the organisation’s final bulletin they said that
“Democracy Now... is working to a narrow unionist agenda and sees Labour representation
as a means of undermining the party’s commitment to Irish unity by consent.” It went on
to argue that Hoey had “systematically and with much deception, developed her
Democracy Now group in hostility to the CLR.”\textsuperscript{654} David Morrison forwarded these views
to the Labour Party leader, John Smith, and McNamara and his team, having been vilified
by some for the ‘Oranges or Lemons?’ paper, must have felt vindicated.

The political climate was also clearly affected by the fact that the Conservative
government had shifted its position to an attitude of clearer sympathy for Unionism.
McNamara frequently took issue with the fact that the government had shifted from the
position adopted by Peter Brooke. In November 1990 Brooke had declared that Britain
had ‘no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland’ and McNamara went as
far as to say that “This was the most important speech made by a British politician about
Ireland since 1921. Eight hundred years were apparently erased in that one speech... It was
a liberating speech even for a Tory.”\textsuperscript{655} McNamara has also admitted that he believes Peter
Brooke to have been the best Secretary of State that Northern Ireland has ever had.\textsuperscript{656}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{653} CLR Final Bulletin, Sept. 1993.
\item\textsuperscript{654} Irish Post, 25 Sept. 1993.
\item\textsuperscript{655} McNamara, K. Speech to the PLP Northern Ireland back bench Committee/Labour Party Irish Society
\item\textsuperscript{656} McNamara, K. Speech to St. Mary’s University College, 14 May 1998.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
course he was not so praiseworthy at the time, but following the joint authority affair the pro-Irish unity left were having to adapt to the changed climate and McNamara’s response was to go on the offensive. He told the 1993 conference fringe meeting on Ireland that within the North “43% of the population look to the Republic and identify with the Irish nation” and complained that “Mere lip service, putting up street names in Irish, is not sufficient.” Criticising the role of the RUC he complained that “In the eyes of the present minority they are policed by another nation... The Governments themselves must consider possible models of shared authority.”\(^{657}\) The very fact that he talked of the present minority is indicative of the thinking of McNamara and many other pro-nationalists who were no doubt influenced by certain demographic projections (mentioned earlier) which predicted a Catholic majority within the six counties early in the 21st century. However whilst he was still prepared to present models of shared authority as an option, the plan that had been drawn up by Brendan O’Leary and Jim Marshall proposed a British-Irish authority which “may be changed only through a referendum in which the consent of three quarters of the turnout of the electorally registered citizens of Northern Ireland has been obtained.”\(^{658}\) There were differences between O’Leary and McNamara on precisely this point and in opposition to McNamara’s view Jim Marshall made clear that he had finally changed his mind. Having been an assistant to McNamara since 1987 Jim Marshall was replaced with Bill O’Brien after the 1992 general election and in late 1993 in a lengthy Commons debate Marshall made known his views. McNamara had first of all reiterated his views on the government’s changes as compared with Peter Brooke’s views and attacked them for resurrecting the name the Conservative and Unionist Party. However Jim


Marshall’s contribution was perhaps an indication of the changes in thinking that were taking place throughout the Labour Party. He stated that “I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that the 50 per cent. plus one concept is a great source of uncertainty in the Province. For that reason, I no longer accept the main thrust of the Labour party position because I should like to see a constitutional settlement which would be fair to both communities but durable and not subject to the uncertainty which surrounds the 50 per cent. plus one rule.” “I now accept, and an increasing number of people accept, that Northern Ireland cannot be stably eased into purely Irish institutions. I have espoused the official Labour party policy for a decade, and have spoken in its favour at many private and public meetings. It is with some reluctance that I discard the views that I have held for the past decade.” He concluded that, precisely because the two communities in Northern Ireland each looked to two different nation states and because the Protestants “cannot be pushed into a united Ireland”, shared authority was the only arrangement that could provide a stable and lasting settlement.  

Jim Marshall was also a co-author of the 1988 Labour Party statement, ‘Towards a United Ireland’, and so this was a significant shift on his part and one which puts a slightly different complexion on the state of the PLP on the Irish question, in spite of Kevin McNamara’s forthright stance and his very different view of the purpose of any joint authority proposals. Ian Paisley criticised McNamara over the fact that he opposed majority rule within Northern Ireland (in other words a return to Stormont) but if a majority favoured reunification then the wishes of such a majority would be respected.

By the end of 1993 Kevin McNamara’s position as Party spokesperson appeared slightly more secure. In the shadow cabinet elections McNamara’s vote had actually

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660 Ibid. Vol. 245 Col. 975 (30 June 1994).
increased from 61 votes in 1992 to 87 votes in October 1993, despite the row over joint authority. The misjudged optimism was summed up by Jim Marshall (ironically) who predicted wrongly that this trend would continue so that next year McNamara’s vote would increase by the same percentage so that he would become a fully elected member of the shadow cabinet. The ‘unity by consent’ policy was reaffirmed at the annual conference in early October and the Democracy Now composite resolution, which was opposed by the NEC, was defeated on a show of hands. Democracy Now had gained the support of the UCW but their general secretary, Alan Johnstone, hit out at the left’s campaign against those calling for Labour representation in Ulster, condemning an anonymous leaflet that was circulated at conference entitled Exposed: Who are Labour’s Ulster Unionists? and complained of “the smear, innuendo and disgraceful tactics that have been used by those who don’t want to discuss the issues.” Democracy Now, and Kate Hoey in particular, did gradually make their position on Northern Ireland’s constitutional position more and more clear. In September 1993, at precisely the same time that the CLR was disbanding because of Democracy Now’s ‘Unionist agenda’, Kate Hoey and Nick Raynsford wrote an article in the Sunday Times in which they made it explicitly clear that “Like most Labour Party members we support the policy of Irish unity by consent.” They argued that Labour should organise in the province because “Far from contradicting a policy of unity by consent, it would build bridges between a divided working class and build the basis for consent. And when unification comes, Labour in the north would fuse with Labour in the south.” So “the suggestion that Democracy Now is supporting a Unionist agenda is laughable.”

662 Hansard, op cit.  
written by Kate Hoey and Scottish Labour MP, Calum Macdonald, for the Sunday Telegraph in which they argued that "Labour's current policy of 'unity by consent' is a glib slogan which gets us nowhere." They went on to argue that the policy was only adopted in 1981 to appease the 'troops out' element and the traditional nationalist sympathisers. But now "It is time unionism, in the strict sense of wishing to uphold the unity of the United Kingdom, stopped being considered a dirty word in Labour Party circles." Rather than Hoey's views evolving into this unambiguous support for Unionism, one must conclude that she had held these views for some considerable time and only felt that this was the most opportune moment to declare her position. What is of greater significance, therefore, is the fact that she felt that the atmosphere and mood within the Labour movement was right for her to take up her pro-Unionist position publicly and without fear of being ostracised by her colleagues.

After the 1993 conference and shadow cabinet elections Kevin McNamara, with the support of a large majority of the PLP, directed his efforts into dealing with the government's plans to introduce a parliamentary select committee on Northern Ireland. The idea had, of course, been suggested by Stuart Bell prior to the 1987 general election and was therefore seen as a sop to the Unionists. A contradiction obviously exists here, because Stuart Bell and Peter Archer still argue that the idea then was simply a sensible addendum to existing parliamentary arrangements. The Labour front bench in 1993 certainly did not see it as such despite the argument that since the end of the Northern Ireland Assembly there had been a democratic deficit (see Chapter 3) and even the Dublin government had taken a decision not to express an opinion on the subject. McNamara

declared “If we believe that proposals are being introduced into the House which are integrationist in nature; which seek to tighten the bond between Northern Ireland and Britain, either administratively, legislatively or in the procedures of this House; or if they seek to pretend that Northern Ireland is purely and exclusively British, they will be firmly and rigorously opposed.”

Along with the irritation of having a small minority, which included Kate Hoey, on the back benches supporting the government’s plans, McNamara was aware that it would not be entirely appropriate to create too much conflict with the government because of wanting to support the impending Westminster/Dublin joint statement, designed to aid the emerging peace process, and because John Smith and Tony Blair, the shadow home secretary, were seeking an accommodation with the government over the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The significance of a parliamentary select committee was not as great as the Unionists might suggest and so Archer and Bell’s compliant attitude is, to a certain degree, understandable. But in Kevin McNamara the Labour Party had a spokesperson who saw his opposition to Unionism as a personal crusade and, with the issue of the Maastricht vote and the criticism he suffered fresh in his mind, he was particularly angry at witnessing this rare Unionist victory. The select committee was to end up with ten Tory and Unionist members and three Labour and SDLP members. Labour tried to have their representation increased because of what they described as a Stormont style Unionist majority and David Trimble argued that they should have no representation as the Labour Party had no Northern Ireland membership and barred Northern Ireland citizens from joining the Party.

The outcome was that Labour was to have just two members, namely Clive Soley and Jim Marshall, and McNamara complained that “the sense of betrayal is only heightened by the knowledge that the government chose to over ride their principled stance

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669 Irish Post, 6 Nov. 1993.
for the sake of a squalid deal.” That deal had “nothing to do with peace in Northern Ireland and everything to do with the government’s narrow and unstable majority in the House.” Ken Maginnis replied that that was “the type of performance we expect to hear from third-generation expatriates.” McNamara was further frustrated by the knowledge that Albert Reynolds had agreed to the introduction of a Northern Ireland select committee, during talks with John Major on the forthcoming Downing Street Declaration, as a sweetener to the Unionists. The agreement that Labour had hoped for on the Prevention of Terrorism Act was never achieved because details of a secret meeting between John Major and John Smith were leaked to the *Sunday Express* by Tory right-wingers who feared a removal of the provision for exclusion orders in the Act. The frustration was made even worse by the fact that the Unionists were prepared to back Labour on the exclusion orders but the Home Secretary, Michael Howard, would not agree to the changes and so the Continuance Order was agreed once again with the Parliamentary Labour Party voting against the government although many, especially Tony Blair, genuinely wanted to be able to vote for the Act with the changes they sought in place.

The ‘principled stance’ that McNamara had spoken of, referred to the Downing Street Declaration signed by the British and Irish premiers and signalling the furthest step the British government had taken to date in recognising Irish nationalist aspirations. The Declaration stated that “The British government agree that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South,

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672 McNamara, K. Interview, Nov. 1997.
to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish.” This historic step, as with so many previous developments, had an immediate impact on the debate within the Labour movement. As a Party steadily moving to the right, the Labour left broadly thought it wise to support the Declaration; after all, the above statement is almost identical to the ‘unity by consent’ policy for so long criticised as the product of fringe left pressure. Ken Livingstone became a late convert to ‘unity by consent’. He said “Many of us used to feel that ‘unity by consent’ was a bit of pious nonsense. But by a miracle the British Labour Party policy is just what is needed now.” He later argued that “the Labour Party has exactly the right policy for the situation... What were marginal debates about demilitarisation and self-determination are now part of the mainstream discussion. The danger for the left is to be mesmerised and isolated as sideline spectators.” This last statement is virtually what did, ultimately, take place with the left but at the time the rapid realignment on the Labour left appeared to favour McNamara and leave the Democracy Now elements looking slightly isolated. Whilst John Smith stated that he welcomed the Declaration “with enthusiasm” and had the backing of the overwhelming majority of the PLP on the matter, Kate Hoey took issue with the inclusion in the Declaration of the famous words “Britain has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland.” She put it to the government that “Even if Hon. Members do not like it, they must accept that many people in Northern Ireland will regard that as a betrayal, even if we think it is wrong” and said to John Major “Does he, as a British Prime Minister, think that British citizens, many of whom lost members of their families fighting for this country in the war, might feel a little sad?”

Although a number of Tories supported her position, Hoey was very much on her own

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676 Downing Street Declaration (1993)
within the PLP in this regard. However even Tony Benn, who had taken up a renewed interest in the Northern Ireland debate, began to develop a subtle change in his position. (The shifting ground on the Northern Ireland debate was generating new thinking even amongst the old troops out enthusiasts, such as Benn and Livingstone.) While maintaining a devout belief in bringing British governance of Northern Ireland to an end, Benn recognised that Britain could not impose unity, not least because he argued that Dublin did not want to try to take responsibility for the North and stated that “If Irish unity came, by no stretch of the imagination could it mean the reabsorption of the north into a constitution which was devised for the Republic.” When Jim Molyneaux tried to anticipate him by asserting that he was going to argue for Ulster independence (as Callaghan had once done), Benn replied “I am determined not to be another British politician with an answer to the problems. I am speaking about the British involvement.” He did argue that Dublin should not be asked to give up articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution unless Britain gave up its claim to Northern Ireland, but the essence of his position was that Britain should disengage from Ireland regardless of whether the outcome was unity, repartition or an independent northern state because that, he now believed, was a matter for the Irish people and their political representatives. Despite the realignments that were taking place throughout the Labour movement, the state of flux within the Party and the ever developing debate within Irish nationalism, Kevin McNamara maintained the traditional nationalist position on retaining articles 2 and 3. In late 1993 he told an Irish audience that “unilateral abandonment of articles 2 and 3 would not bring peace to the island of Ireland, because they are at most a symptom of the present discontent, not the cause...” “It would damage the position of the SDLP and would serve to encourage the extremists in the

Republican movement” and “It would do little to assuage the Unionists’ ‘siege mentality’. John Smith was rather concerned about this particular speech and McNamara was in fact called to the leader’s office over the matter to explain himself but argued that his words had been taken out of context and exaggerated by the press. He then took the opportunity to make his position clear in the House of Commons presenting the argument that articles 2 and 3 should not be abandoned unilaterally because neither should the other “competing sovereignty claim”: the Ireland Act of 1920 which established the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom. In other words, the articles could indeed be negotiated away but only as part of a wider constitutional settlement which took into account nationalist aspirations over the 1920 Ireland Act. Regardless of how McNamara modified his position this was, nevertheless, an almost unique situation: a politician aspiring to government office, arguing that another state’s constitutional claim to territory within his own jurisdiction is not only perfectly acceptable but that any move to unilaterally abandon the claim should be opposed.

On the 12 May 1994 an event took place which was to lead to drastic changes in the Labour Party’s position on Northern Ireland, regardless of the peace process. The death of John Smith led to the election of Labour’s most moderate or centre-right leader since Hugh Gaitskell, namely Tony Blair. Blair went on to remove clause four of the Party’s constitution, steered the PLP back to simply abstaining on the Prevention of Terrorism Act and marginalised the left to the extent that the NUM leader, Arthur Scargill, left Labour to form the Socialist Labour Party. Blair had never previously made his views known on the Irish question but during the campaign for the leadership he issued a

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statement outlining his views on Northern Ireland which said little about the constitutional question except that there “should be no transfer of sovereignty without the consent of a majority.” The other two candidates, John Prescott and Margaret Beckett, also said very little except to endorse the current policy of ‘unity by consent’.

It was for this reason that neither the LPIS or the LCI would give their backing to any one candidate. The anti-nationalists in the Labour Party were clearly encouraged by the prospect of Tony Blair becoming leader and their isolated position began to change. As a Blair victory began to look inevitable a renewed campaign began against Kevin McNamara. Edward Pierce, writing in the Guardian, called on Tony Blair to sack McNamara, if he won the leadership, because his Irish nationalism was an embarrassment to the Labour Party. In reply, Kevin McNamara and Harry Barnes appeared to interpret the Downing Street Declaration and the peace process differently. McNamara defended his position by arguing that ‘unity by consent’ was as good as government policy now and that he too was prepared to be flexible declaring that he would support changes to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution if it was achieved as part of an overall settlement. Harry Barnes, with a new found confidence, directly attacked Party policy; he argued that “Labour adopted the ‘unity by consent’ formula in 1981 to marginalise extreme ‘troops out’ positions. Provo apologism is now an irrelevant rump within the Party.” Despite Blair winning the leadership election at the end of July 1994, any hopes of an immediate change in policy were unrealistic, but the rumours and innuendo over McNamara’s position continued over the next three months.

With the IRA announcing its ceasefire in August 1994 the new positive and optimistic political climate that was created did not have such a great impact on the debate.

685 Ibid. 6 July 1994.
within the Labour Party. Whilst Ken Livingstone and others on the left wanted the Labour Party to become ‘persuaders’ for a united Ireland and Kevin McNamara immediately began calling for demilitarisation, Harry Barnes, conversely, argued that the Downing Street Declaration and the IRA ceasefire “have created entirely new historical circumstances and made redundant Labour’s 13-year old policy of seeking a particular outcome for the Irish people: unification.” He went on to call for the Labour Party to do what was done in 1981 and begin a major review of its Northern Ireland policy. The paradox was that although developments were moving in a nationalist direction (the Unionists were growing increasingly frustrated at the fact that what they described as a ‘pan-nationalist front’ was setting the agenda) the left was no longer in a position of strength and thus unable to set the agenda in Britain, even though they felt they should take some credit for the direction in which both government and opposition policy had gone, and so did eventually become ‘isolated as sideline spectators’. Speculation began almost immediately that Tony Blair was going to try and give comfort to the Unionists who were becoming deeply suspicious of the government. Blair held a meeting with Jim Molyneaux shortly after the ceasefire was announced, but McNamara was not in attendance. The DUP openly said that now that relations were so strained with the government they would be seeking dialogue with the Labour Party. Blair then took a rather unusual position on the peace process, in a radio interview, when he said that the Downing Street Declaration had in fact overtaken the traditional position of all the parties and went on to apparently support the unionist veto stating “The important thing that has changed, and where I think the Downing Street Declaration puts the whole future of Northern Ireland in a different context, is that it is

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689 Irish Post, 10 Sept. 1994.
agreed by both the Republic and by the British government that it is for the people of Northern Ireland to determine their future. Now the important thing is not that the government takes up the role of pushing people in one direction or another, but that they facilitate the wishes of those in Northern Ireland to be paramount.”\textsuperscript{690} The sharp divisions and differing interpretations of the Downing Street Declaration caused embarrassment to McNamara whose supporters played down the affair arguing that there had simply been a misunderstanding and that Tony Blair had probably not been very well briefed.\textsuperscript{691} Those close to Blair also considered the affair to be an embarrassment because most commentators interpreted the interview as a policy shift\textsuperscript{692} and the LPIS felt obliged to respond with a spokesperson pointing out that “No individual can overturn policy - that is a matter for the whole party. I am sure that Labour conference this year will be concentrating on the next steps to facilitate unity on the island of Ireland.”\textsuperscript{693}

At the Labour Party’s annual conference in the October it was widely believed that the leadership would still be pushing for a change in policy. In fact the NEC prepared a statement before conference reaffirming the Party’s “historic commitment to the unification of Ireland by consent”.\textsuperscript{694} The conference proved to be a great success for Kevin McNamara; he was said to have been in his element with Ireland being debated on a Wednesday afternoon, rather than its usual Friday morning slot, and John Hume, his important political ally, receiving a standing ovation having addressed conference with an historic speech on the peace process. There had been nine pro-Irish unity resolutions and amendments as well as thirteen welcoming the ceasefire, of which only three called for a review of Party policy. An aggrieved Kate Hoey complained during the conference “It is

\textsuperscript{690} \textit{Irish Times}, 6 Sept. 1994.
\textsuperscript{691} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{692} \textit{Sunday Times}, 4 Sept. 1994
\textsuperscript{693} \textit{Irish Post}, 10 Sept. 1994.
time unionism stopped being a dirty word in the Labour Party” and “Instead of cajoling or badgering the unionists into joining a state they wish to reject, Labour’s job should be to ensure there is no backsliding by the Conservative government on the democratic commitment made in the Downing Street Declaration.” Martin Collins of the LCI wrote after the conference “Having seen off the pro-unionist lobby in the Labour Party and gone some way to distance himself from last year’s leaked options paper which appeared to advocate an imposed settlement, Kevin McNamara now faces a new battle to keep his place on the shadow cabinet.” It was a battle that he was to lose. After the shadow cabinet elections in late October Kevin McNamara’s vote dropped to just 70 with Mo Mowlam securing 125 votes and coming eighth. One must conclude that the explanation for this is that first of all the pro-unionist lobby had not in fact been cowed but in the coming years actually became more confident and secondly and most importantly Blair’s influence was having an impact on the PLP so that McNamara, despite his enthusiasm for the new mood and emerging peace process, was seen as very ‘Old Labour’ and, for some, the debacle over joint authority had not in fact been forgotten.

Tony Blair replaced McNamara with Mo Mowlam as the Party’s Irish affairs spokesperson immediately after the shadow cabinet elections. Despite Mo Mowlam’s immediate declaration of support for current Party policy the fact that she and Tony Blair were now in charge of Northern Irish policy meant a very new direction for Labour on the Irish problem. This in itself is one of the major problems with the ‘unity by consent’ policy: Blair chose not to alter the policy precisely because it did not matter to his plans, it had always been more of an aspiration rather than a practicable policy and so under the

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guidance of Blair and Mowlam it was to ultimately mean something very different to what it did under Clive Soley and Kevin McNamara. This is a development all the more interesting considering Mo Mowlam had served with Kevin McNamara and Jim Marshall during 1988-89 in what was probably Labour’s most pro-nationalist Northern Ireland team, producing as it did the Party’s detailed ‘Towards a United Ireland’ document. Although this undoubtedly constituted the end of an era, the question posed is was it the consequence of deep rooted changes in the Labour movement or was it the result of John Smith’s untimely death thus leading to the election of Blair and the beginning of ‘New Labour’? One must conclude that the latter explanation is unfortunately too simplistic. Of course Blair had an immediate impact but Labour’s steady drift to the right can be traced back to 1983 and Neil Kinnock’s leadership. By 1994 an individual such as Kevin McNamara was seen by Labour’s new modernisers as an anachronism. As Ed Pearce in Fortnight wrote cruelly “The point about Kevin McNamara is that - to be brutal - he was a Catholic Irishman allowed to take more latitude than a responsible opposition party should ever afford a departmental spokesperson”... “a clean break was necessary and a secular politician with no religious baggage had to be put in Mr. McNamara’s place.” 698 Blair was to write to McNamara to argue that “I believe that the bipartisan approach is the best way to peace and that to disturb it, particularly now, would be irresponsible and wrong. I have felt a deep responsibility to do all I can to help the peace process and strongly held the view that should not attack the government over it unless I believe they are fundamentally ill-intentioned or mistaken, in respect of it, which I don’t.” 699 Kevin McNamara had argued precisely the opposite. He sent Blair a confidential memorandum a year after his dismissal in which he argued that ‘unity by consent’ should be maintained because continuity of

698 Fortnight, No. 27, Nov. 1994.
policy would actually help the stability of the peace process: "First our policy has been part of the environment in which John Hume has been able to persuade Sinn Fein and the IRA that unification can occur through consent... Secondly, our policy position is one which will encourage unionists to negotiate the best possible deal for themselves in the next two to three years. If we shifted policy, unionists might be encouraged to hold out against any pressure from the Conservatives to compromise - in the belief that we will prove a softer touch." This may very well be Tony Blair's line of thought. The Irish question has never been important to him and the commitment to unity was perhaps altered precisely to ensure that Labour might be able to win some Unionist parliamentary votes in their struggle to unseat the Tory government.

To begin with Mo Mowlam was at pains to make clear that nothing had changed, following her appointment as shadow spokesperson on Northern Ireland, and that the 'unity by consent' policy remained intact. Despite not bringing with her any specific ideological baggage in the same manner as Kevin McNamara, she was careful to quote often from his last speech to conference and she asked for her name to be removed from a petition calling on the Labour Party to be organised in Northern Ireland. She kept up good relations with Democracy Now and with New Consensus (which later became New Dialogue) but her basic position on the Northern Ireland problem was perhaps best exemplified by the fact that the front bench policy adviser Brendan O'Leary was to explain that "During McNamara's time as Labour's front bench spokesperson, O'Leary's role was often to defend the interests of unionists in discussions and policy papers... By contrast, after Mowlam became Labour's shadow spokesperson, O'Leary was often to defend the

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700 Ibid.
interests of northern nationalists in discussions, drafts of speeches and policy papers.\textsuperscript{702} The debate on Northern Ireland had become markedly changed as compared with the polemic which took place in the eighties. Mowlam was operating in an unusual climate with an IRA ceasefire in place and the old left campaigners such as Clare Short and Ken Livingstone remaining curiously reticent in comparison with the outspoken positions they took up just a few years earlier. With the publication of the government’s ‘Framework Document’ there was also a feeling that developments were moving in nationalist Ireland’s favour and so the confrontational attitude of the left in the eighties was no longer required.

The document discussed at length the proposal for “a new North/South body or bodies” which it envisaged would develop an important political and economic role throughout the island of Ireland.\textsuperscript{703} The Parliamentary Labour Party gradually made clear that a return to bipartisanship would take place precisely because of the delicacy of the peace process. Mo Mowlam went on a personal diplomatic crusade to build good relations with all sides, both governments and all parties but she did continue to reiterate Labour’s commitment to ‘unity by consent’. After the publication of the framework document she set out the four requirements that she felt were needed for a lasting settlement: first a strong devolved assembly elected by proportional representation, secondly legislation to ensure fair employment as well as improved policing and legal institutions to achieve equity of treatment and parity of esteem between the two communities (the latter phrase she used frequently), thirdly cross border co-operation and finally a new negotiated constitutional arrangement “securely and appropriately guaranteed.”\textsuperscript{704} These proposals would undoubtedly appear more suited to Soley or McNamara than to Mason or Concannon, so

\textsuperscript{704} \textit{Tribune}, 24 Feb. 1995.
why was it that Mowlam was hailed as being more Unionist friendly? The reasons were that she simply was not as clearly Irish nationalist friendly as Kevin McNamara nor was she associated with the joint authority proposals of 1992 and also the political climate was such at the time that many on the Tory benches could have been forgiven for suggesting the proposals outlined above.

As Mowlam began to try and foster good relations with the Unionists she was received positively. Despite the fact that there was officially no change in Labour Party policy following the change on the Labour front bench, Mowlam’s appointment was met with some satisfaction in Unionist circles not least because after seven years with Kevin McNamara as spokesperson the change was, from their point of view, a move in the right direction. In February 1995 she addressed the constituency association of the Ulster Unionist MP, William Ross, thus arousing a great deal of media interest and speculation. Of course it would have been highly unlikely for Kevin McNamara to have been invited to such a meeting but the media reaction suggested that the meeting was designed to cement Labour’s inclusive approach towards the Unionists. In her speech to the Unionists at Garvagh in County Londonderry she set out her four key proposals described above and she did make clear that Labour Party policy was to continue “to support the unification of Ireland by consent - consent being crucial, which is why we support the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Downing Street Declaration.” She also stated (as she was to do repeatedly) that no one will benefit from prevarication or procrastination in the hope that in a few years time a Labour government might deal with the peace process in a manner more favourable to them. Nevertheless, in spite of making clear to journalists that the reason for her presence in Garvagh was not because of a deal between Labour and the UUP, the

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Sunday papers carried stories of Mowlam’s “ground breaking speech” and Labour’s newly established rapport with Unionism. Part of the reason for the fuss was that journalists were continually speculating about the voting intentions of the smaller parties in Parliament because of the Tories small and fragile majority; but Mo Mowlam made it clear that on the question of Northern Ireland Labour would not seek to gain political advantage in the House of Commons. She stated this in the Garvagh speech and again in an interview in the *New Statesman* that “there should be no deal with any Northern Irish parties either to bring this government down or to keep them in power. If there was a vote of confidence in the government on the framework document, we would not support that motion.” However it was argued by some that admittedly the Labour Party were not looking to make political gains but that the Unionists were trying to cause problems for the government. Ken Maginnis said that Labour were now “rowing back from a united Ireland” and one Labour source suggested, following a similar statement from the new UUP leader, David Trimble, that this was all simply a Unionist ploy to bring pressure to bear on the government. Despite this the controversy still prompted left-wing MP, Max Madden, to threaten that if Blair went ahead with a deal with the Unionists then there would be a rebellion by up to fifty Labour MPs. The truth of the matter is that there was no policy change at this stage, there was not going to be a deal with the Unionists but Mo Mowlam did want to initiate a more inclusive attitude towards the Unionists in addressing their concerns. The Garvagh speech took place shortly after excerpts from the governments framework document (with the proposals for the North/South body) had been leaked to the media and so the Unionists were feeling particularly isolated in the face of these Irish-British

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709 Ibid.
government proposals and the pan-nationalist front. As the *Observer* stated "The Unionists are actively flirting with Labour in an evident attempt to raise Tory concerns - and Labour is not repelling the advances."710

Over the next six months very little developed in terms of debate or policy changes in the Labour Party although in the wider debate on Northern Ireland, the framework document created a great deal of discussion and then the call for decommissioning of paramilitary weapons took centre stage, ultimately frustrating the peace process. On the two latter matters Labour continued to support the government line and they supported the ministerial level talks with Sinn Fein which took place in April 1995. However there were still to be no changes in terms of Party policy. Despite some predictions of a change in Labour's position on the anti-terrorist laws the PLP continued to oppose both the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act. It was self evident that the Labour leader and Party managers were deeply uncomfortable about continued opposition to the anti-terrorist legislation. Tony Blair was determined to push on with his modernisation of the Party and to improve the public perception and electability of New Labour. If the Labour Party was to be seen as truly responsible - a party to be trusted in power - it did appear inevitable that they would not continue to oppose legislation which Tony Blair and Jack Straw would undoubtedly continue to implement once a Labour government was elected. What the PLP had sought for some time was an accommodation with the government on the PTA but they had always been frustrated in their attempts. Labour had consistently made three demands on the PTA: first an end to exclusion orders (a demand which had Unionist support), secondly provision for judicial review of the extended detentions for seven days and finally a comprehensive, independent

review of the workings of the Act. In the debate on the Continuance Order of the PTA in March 1995, Jack Straw admitted that “It is the Opposition’s fervent hope that there should be a bipartisan agreement on the measures that are needed to defeat terrorism. Unfortunately, such a bipartisan agreement has proved no easier to achieve this year than last, but our endeavours to reach such an agreement will continue beyond tonight’s vote.” The PLP voted against the Continuance Order.\textsuperscript{711} In the debate on the EPA Continuance Order in the June, Mo Mowlam explained that the reason for Labour’s opposition was that the Act still contained provision for the introduction of internment without trial and because, under the Act, only limited access is provided for legal advice for those in the holding centres. Again the PLP voted against the order.\textsuperscript{712}

Although all appeared satisfactory in so far as that there had been no change in official Labour Party policy, there was in fact a growing frustration during the summer over the bipartisan arrangement in the House of Commons and at the lack of progress in the peace process generally which eventually led to the resignation of Kevin McNamara from Labour’s front bench in September 1995. Mo Mowlam supported the government line on almost every issue including the early release in July of Private Clegg, the paratrooper convicted of murder in Belfast. McNamara was particularly uneasy about this matter which he claimed was a “shameful example” of John Major trying to improve his standing in the Tory Party and ensure his re-election as leader having resigned in late June.\textsuperscript{713} The SDLP were also becoming frustrated with the slow progress of the peace process and following Mowlam’s declared support for the release of Private Clegg, Seamus Mallon challenged her to explain what she would have done differently to Sir Patrick Mayhew. Mowlam refused

\textsuperscript{711} \textit{Hansard}, Vol. 256, Cols 357 & 395-7 (8 March 1995).
\textsuperscript{712} Ibid. Vol. 261, Cols 513 & 546-7 (12 June 1995).
\textsuperscript{713} McNamara, K. Resignation letter to Tony Blair, 13 Sept. 1995. (Documentation supplied by Martin Collins).
to reveal any differences, answering only that "I will not draw a clear distinction between us and the Government in relation to the peace process."714 The stumbling block to all party talks had become decommissioning: an unforeseen problem which critics accused the government of allowing to prevent progress because of Unionist demands for IRA weaponry to begin being handed in as a precondition to talks. Mo Mowlam supported the government's position and, despite the frustration, the Labour left remained rather muted. The political climate during the peace process was such that there remained something of a consensus in the Labour Party that rather than criticise and attack the leadership, or otherwise, everybody should simply wait and see what the peace process threw up once talks actually began. There existed on the left a confident expectation that ultimately the two governments would agree some sort of an "almighty fudge" involving a cross border body, Dublin participation and reform of the RUC to satisfy nationalists, along with a Northern Ireland Assembly and constitutional guarantees to satisfy unionists.715 This perhaps explains the curious silence on the part of those such as Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone and Clare Short as well as Jeremy Corbyn. A more cynical explanation is that of the Provisionals who believed that the Labour Party spin doctors wanted to promote a Unionist friendly image in case their votes were to be needed in the event of a hung parliament and so Kate Hoey was to be permitted to speak as often as possible whilst Clare Short was to be silenced.716

When Kevin McNamara did in fact resign in September 1995 as the Party's front bench spokesperson on the civil service, it was rather unexpected considering the main reason he stated was the Party's decision to "follow the government down the cul de sac of

715 Corbyn, J. Interview, October 1995.
decommissioning" when McNamara had, for so long, prided himself on his outright opposition to the physical force tradition in Irish nationalism. It was also rather unexpected because there had been so little criticism from the left of Mowlam’s handling of the decommissioning issue. Mowlam herself argued that Labour’s policy had not changed but that Labour’s role had changed in response to the new and ever changing circumstances.\footnote{McNamara, K, op cit.}

In addition the Labour Party conference in October 1995 again endorsed the ‘unity by consent’ policy.\footnote{Irish Post, 23 Sept. 1995.} It was in fact an interview in the \textit{Irish Times} with Tony Blair which prompted Kevin McNamara to resign. In the interview Blair repeatedly declared his support for the government’s position on each issue about which he was questioned and he stated that “A lot of people feel that we should have been on the back of the British government all the way through this, sort of pushing them forward, prodding them and all the rest of it. I think that would have been deeply unhelpful to the peace process.” But what was most interesting was his analysis of the Tory Party: “You have to remember that they have got their own group of people within their own party... You have to remember, too, that there has been a huge historic shift in the Conservative Party, in a sense, in its attitude to Northern Ireland.”\footnote{Report of the 1995 Labour Party Conference.} This was of course true, but that shift had been developing ever since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. The interview also highlighted a significant difference of emphasis on the question of Irish unity between Blair and Mowlam. Although the latter continued to support the policy of ‘unity by consent’, when Tony Blair was asked about Irish unity in the \textit{Irish Times} interview he said that “I believe that the most sensible role for us is to be facilitators, not persuaders in this, not trying to pressure or push people towards a particular objective. I may say if we did try
and push them towards that objective [Irish reunification] I think it would be almost certainly counterproductive."\textsuperscript{721} This was the clearest indication from a Labour leader to date that Labour’s ‘historic commitment to Irish unity’ had been jettisoned in all but name. The attempts over the previous twelve or thirteen years to develop a strategy to turn the ‘unity by consent’ policy into an achievable objective now appeared simply a futile exercise as Blair made clear that Labour would no longer favour any one “particular objective”. In the light of this, McNamara’s resignation does not appear so surprising and indeed Blair did not ask him to reconsider when he did in fact inform the Labour leader of his intentions. It is also a fact that there were political factors at play beyond the subject of Northern Irish policy. Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ crusade had succeeded in removing Clause 4 of the Party’s Constitution (which committed the Party to common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange); a move which had the support of Mo Mowlam.\textsuperscript{722} Kevin McNamara was seen as very much ‘Old Labour’ and was concerned about Blair’s plans to reform the Labour Party’s relationship with the trade unions and to shift from what he saw as the traditional democratic socialist vision.\textsuperscript{723}

During December 1995 to January 1996 the government began to adopt what critics regarded what was a broadly unionist agenda announcing, first, support for Senator Mitchell’s idea of a ‘twin-track’ approach involving arms decommissioning along side all-party talks and, secondly, Northern Ireland elections to an assembly or forum for negotiations. The latter proposal was determinedly opposed by the SDLP, Sinn Fein and some elements on the Labour left. Again the Labour leadership gave full support to each and every government proposal despite growing left-wing/nationalist anxiety. Then in

\textsuperscript{721} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{722} 	extit{Tribune}, 10 Feb. 1995.
\textsuperscript{723} McNamara, K. op cit.
February 1996 the IRA ceasefire was brought to an end with the Docklands bombing. Following McNamara’s resignation in the September, Brendan O’Leary resigned as an adviser to Labour’s front bench team in December 1995 explaining that he felt that the Labour Party’s support for the recommendations of the Mitchell report would have a detrimental effect on the peace process; he was to consequently argue in the aftermath of the Docklands bombing that he was indeed proved right in his reading of the situation. Kevin McNamara was also no longer prepared to hold back in his criticisms of the government especially as he was now in support of his old allies, the SDLP. In addition there were many in the Labour Party who, behind the scenes, felt that Blair and Mowlam had been caught off guard by the government’s announcement of Northern Ireland elections. Despite the hostility of the SDLP to the announcement, Blair responded by stating simply that “We agree that this proposal deserves serious consideration” and ultimately chose to support the planned elections. The SDLP argued that elections were not in fact one of the Mitchell recommendations, they were unnecessary as all that was needed was to bring the Parties into talks as they stood at the moment and that the plan was part of the Unionists’ agenda who saw elections as an opportunity to display their electoral strength. These arguments were echoed by Kevin McNamara who was actually heckled by his own ‘New Labour’ back benchers and was specifically criticised by Kate Hoey. After the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire only Tony Benn was prepared to try and blame the government, accusing Major of setting aside the idea of the twin track

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725 Soley, C. Interview, Dec. 1996. Soley also stated that Blair did not want to push Major because of the problems that the Tory-right could cause on Northern Ireland.
approach and favouring the election plan without proper consultation with Dublin.\textsuperscript{729} The accusation that the government was trying to woo the Unionists because of their slender majority in the House of Commons had appeared again and again in the media, but only the likes of Tony Benn and Kevin McNamara were prepared to raise the issue publicly. Blair and Mowlam would not direct such accusations at the government except for the one occasion when Blair put the suggestion to John Major and following the Prime Minister’s reassurance never pursued the matter again.\textsuperscript{730} One can speculate, once again, that Blair and Mowlam knew perfectly well that the government had to try and keep the Unionists on board but were not prepared to push them on matters relating to Northern Ireland because when in government themselves Labour would not want a difficult time from a Tory opposition. At the launch of Labour’s draft manifesto in July 1996 Blair explained that “We have supported the present government strongly in the Northern Ireland peace process. We will continue to do so. There will be as great a priority attached to seeing that process through under a new Labour government as under the Conservatives... We will expect the same bipartisan approach.”\textsuperscript{731}

As the probability of Labour forming a government became greater and the historic general election drew closer, Blair and the shadow home secretary, Jack Straw, took the decision to bring to an end Labour’s opposition to the anti-terrorist emergency legislation. The decision was taken after the Docklands bombing and announced by Jack Straw on London Weekend Television at the end of February 1996. In spite of the fact that the shadow Home Secretary drew to a close thirteen years of Labour Party opposition to the Prevention of Terrorism Act without any debate and simply announced the decision in a

\textsuperscript{731} Belfast Telegraph, 5 July 1996.
television interview, the left-wing rebellion that many might have predicted did not in fact materialise. The Labour Committee on Ireland immediately wrote to members of Labour’s NEC and much of the PLP urging them to maintain opposition to the PTA and Kevin McNamara led the attack on Jack Straw accusing him insulting Neil Kinnock, John Smith, Roy Hattersley and Gerald Kaufman, all of whom had consistently upheld the Party’s opposition to the emergency legislation in the House of Commons.732 In 1982 when the PLP abstained on the PTA Continuance Order, 52 out of the 209 Labour MPs rebelled and voted against the Act, but after Jack Straw’s decision just 25 out of a total of 271 defied the whips and opposed the PTA Continuance Order in March 1996. (Amongst those voting against were McNamara’s one time assistant Roger Stott and the ‘unionist friendly’ Harry Barnes.)733 Party discipline was such at this stage that a left-wing rebellion could be thwarted with the determined efficiency that had become typical of ‘New Labour’s’ renowned slick professionalism. Nothing was to be heard from some of the old opponents of the PTA such as Clive Soley, Harriet Harman and even Clare Short. A heated PLP meeting took place before the vote on the PTA Continuance Order in which Party unity was demanded and a resolution from Max Madden demanding continuing opposition to the Act was defeated. However Jack Straw did give a firm undertaking that when in government he would make certain that the provision for exclusion orders would be removed.734 In the event Jack Straw had more of a problem with the government than with his own back benchers. Michael Howard put Jack Straw on the defensive because the latter argued that Labour had abstained on the second reading of the EPA in the February because Sir Patrick Mayhew had announced that there would be a review of emergency legislation under Lord Lloyd. This was not the case; Labour had in fact still voted against

732 Irish Post, 2 March 1996.
the EPA and so Straw had to apologise to the House.\textsuperscript{735} Despite this embarrassment Straw continued to argue that this newly announced review was reason enough for Labour not to oppose the PTA. It has also been suggested that Labour had been briefed by the government that intelligence reports indicated that an IRA ‘spectacular’ was likely to take place at the beginning of April, on the 80th anniversary of the Easter Rising, and so the Labour leadership took the decision to abstain on the PTA rather than face the possibility of being castigated for opposing anti-terrorist measures when the IRA were still such a potent threat.\textsuperscript{736}

The relative ease with which Labour’s thirteen year opposition to the Prevention of Terrorism Act was overturned was remarkable and indicative of the state of and nature of the Labour Party by the mid-1990s. The policy of opposition had appeared firmly entrenched and even a number of trade unions had adopted policies demanding repeal of the Act following the quashing of the convictions of the Guildford 4 and the Birmingham 6. The T\&GWU had done so in 1991, ASLEF had in 1991, the GMB in 1990 and the TUC had adopted a comprehensive policy statement in 1989 on civil liberties issues which included the demand for repeal of the PTA.\textsuperscript{737} In addition to this the Labour Party’s 1995 annual conference had reiterated support for “the dismantling of emergency legislation”.\textsuperscript{738} The dramatic shift by the Labour Party was not solely indicative of changing attitudes on Ireland, but was also an indication of the authority that the ‘New Labour’ leader had and his obsession with presenting the Party to the electorate as a responsible and trustworthy alternative government. Opposition to the PTA had not necessarily been based on concern

\textsuperscript{734} Irish Post, 9 March & 13 April 1996.
\textsuperscript{735} Hansard, Vol. 273 Col. 1136-37 (14 March 1996).
\textsuperscript{736} Irish Post, 6 April 1996, Article by Martin Collins.
about British treatment of Irish nationalists but, rather, it was based on civil libertarian concerns about what was seen as an abuse of human rights; even the Unionists had opposed the use of exclusion orders as a form of internal exile. Anger at the Labour Party’s decision was limited to the 25 back benchers, the LCI and Labour Party Irish Society and the victims of miscarriages of justice, such as Paddy Hill and Billy Power of the Birmingham 6, as well as Judith Ward (wrongly convicted of the M62 coach bombing). Along with the persistent demand that Labour Party unity must be seen to be maintained in order to be certain of electoral success, other tactics were also employed. For example the left-wing Labour MP, John Austin-Walker, addressed the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis in Dublin and blamed the Tory government for the collapse of the peace process with the ending of the IRA ceasefire. Tony Blair and the Labour chief whip put enormous pressure on him and publicly castigated him for the speech. He was finally forced into making a public apology, but he was also reassured that Labour had to be seen to speak with one voice and was assured that once in government Labour would begin making changes to the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Having voted with the rebels in the March vote on the PTA, when the government introduced further measures giving the police new stop and search powers in the April Austin-Walker fell in line and abstained with the rest of the parliamentary Party whilst only 14 Labour MPs opposed the Prevention of Terrorism (Additional Powers) Bill. Tony Blair was intolerant with those in the Labour Party who still wanted to associate themselves with Sinn Fein, but with the matter of the emergency legislation the leadership were remarkably successful in avoiding a large rebellion partly by their reassurances on amending the PTA when in government.

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739 Irish Post, 16 March 1996.
740 Ibid. 30 March 1996.
During the IRA cessation of violence there had been maintained, throughout the Labour movement, a consensus and unique lack of division on the Irish question. However, from February 1996 and the Docklands bombing divisions began to appear once again with the pro-Irish unity lobby being re-established through Kevin McNamara with the launch of a new pressure group entitled the Agreed Ireland Forum. The group was set up in late 1995, after McNamara’s resignation, with one of its main stated aims being the maintenance of Labour’s ‘unity by consent’ both in opposition and government.\(^{742}\) The Forum had the support of individuals such as Ken Livingstone and Clive Soley. Kevin McNamara was by no means reticent following his resignation and essentially returned to his old role as a back bench opponent of bipartisanship. At the same time Kate Hoey also began, increasingly, to come clean with her unionist sympathies. Writing in the *Ulster Review* (the magazine of the Young Unionists) in March, she predicted that Labour was soon to drop its “outdated and contradictory” policy of ‘unity by consent’ and stating her approval for the removal of McNamara said that “It was time for new Labour to build a new union.” Attacking anti-unionist sentiment in the British Labour movement she said that “As a politician in England I have had to listen to some of the most uninformed and biased views on Ulster Unionism. Few people have had to endure so much misunderstanding and abuse...” She did not disguise her admiration for Unionists such as David Trimble and Bob McCartney and she displayed contempt for the SDLP who she declared could “continue to be a Catholic Nationalist Party” but called on the UUP to modernise by breaking its links with the Orange Order.\(^{743}\) In addition to those such as Harry Barnes, Calum MacDonald and Nick Raynsford supporters of her position in the Labour Party were becoming less and less reticent. For example the Labour MP Andrew

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\(^{742}\) Agreed Ireland Forum, statement 1995.

\(^{743}\) *Ulster Review*, Issue 19, Spring 1996.
McKinlay addressed a meeting in Belfast, in the March, of the Ulster Unionist Labour Group to “dispel the age-old myth of old Labour ideas about a united Ireland.” The importance of these developments (especially in the light of the moderated positions adopted by those such as Clare Short and Ken Livingstone) was that such arguments and such activities were unprecedented in the Labour movement, not even in the late seventies when Labour sympathy with Irish nationalism was considered to be at an all time low were such pro-unionist sentiments so unashamedly aired.

One can assume that the Labour leadership and Party managers did not see a problem in those such as Kate Hoey presenting such arguments - they certainly were not threatened in the way that John Austin-Walker was - and the intolerance of flirtations with Sinn Fein was clearly evident. As the 1997 general election approached, intelligent political debate was considerably stifled as nervousness and trepidation characterised what political debate there was. The Labour leadership were particularly careful to ensure that no embarrassing problems emerged in the run up to the election. It was for this reason that, for example, Tony Blair went as far as to threaten Jeremy Corbyn with having the Labour whip removed following his invitation to Gerry Adams to visit Westminster in September 1996. The situation was resolved when Adams finally decided to turn down the invitation. The incident did have the effect of impressing the Ulster Unionist leader, David Trimble, who was also no doubt aware of the strained relationship between the SDLP and the Labour Party. Relations between the two parties reached a new low following Blair’s decision to support the government’s plans for elections to a Northern Ireland forum. In late January Tony Blair had held a meeting with Seamus Mallon and John Hume to discuss the government’s plans but Blair was unsympathetic to the SDLP’s

744 Irish Post, 30 March 1996.
position. They also asked Blair if a future Labour government would introduce proportional representation for Westminster elections in Northern Ireland but again Blair disappointed them and finally John Hume walked out of the meeting. The Labour Party appeared, at this stage, to actually have better relations with unionism than with nationalism. In stark contrast to the sympathy displayed by the Labour left to Sinn Fein in the early eighties, in January 1996 Labour controlled Lambeth council refused to lease Sinn Fein a building in the borough (prior to the Docklands bomb) for use as a London headquarters after protestations from local Labour MPs Glenda Jackson and Frank Dobson.

Despite Blair’s relative indifference towards Irish nationalism one could describe Mo Mowlam as slightly more sympathetic towards both the SDLP and Sinn Fein. In January 1996 she held meetings with both parties and then during the summer there was, for the first time, a slight strain in the bipartisan relationship with the government. For the first time she began to criticise the government for dragging its feet and picked out Michael Howard, the Home Secretary, for particular criticism on the question of Irish prisoners. Whilst the Irish government had been prepared to release certain IRA prisoners early in response to the IRA ceasefire the British government had been reluctant to follow such a policy and there had been complaints by Peter Hain, for example over the Home Secretary’s refusal to transfer back to Ireland the IRA prisoner Patrick Kelly who was suffering with cancer. Mo Mowlam’s calls for greater flexibility over prisoners had been ignored by Howard of whom she said “I have seen no evidence whatsoever to suggest that he is interested in facilitating the peace process. Just the reverse.”

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750 *Irish Post*, 18 May 1996.
the political stalemate in the peace process she began to make the kind of criticisms that McNamara had been making over the government procrastinating. In a speech in Belfast she said that “If a ceasefire is called by the IRA there should be an acknowledgement of the IRA decision and a welcome to Sinn Fein into the talks process. Any procrastination, calls for validation, would rightly be seen as unfair and unjust calls for further preconditions to Sinn Fein’s entry into talks and should be rejected. Why relive the problems and the logjam of the last 18 months?” She seemed to be gradually moving towards the analysis of those such as McNamara and Tony Benn who were arguing that the Tories had squandered the chance offered by the IRA ceasefire. Benn argued that there was a pointless refusal over 18 months to include Sinn Fein in talks “Had other Governments followed that principle, there would have been no peace process in the middle east or settlement in South Africa.” After the Drumcree crisis in July 1996 Mo Mowlam was prepared to launch attacks on both Mayhew and the Ulster Unionist leadership. She attacked Mayhew for “a lack of political leadership, as well as a failure of initiative, for which he must take much personal responsibility.” And whilst displaying some sympathy for the SDLP, she called on the Unionist leadership “to show some humility and acknowledge their part in this present escalation of violence when the Orange Order threatened the rule of law by a show of power and the threat of violence at Drumcree.” David Trimble was to make clear that he preferred Blair to Mowlam who he said had “made a good impression when she was first appointed [but] latterly there has been some concern, particularly with her view that ‘the status quo is not an option’.” It should also be noted that the Unionists were always careful to read into an individuals national and religious origins (most notably with Kevin

751 Irish Times, 4 June 1996.
752 Hansard, Vol. 279, Col. 116 (11 June 1996).
753 Irish Times, 15 July 1996.
754 Times, 2 Dec. 1996.
McNamara) and were, no doubt, aware that Tony Blair’s mother was an Ulster Protestant.755 Regardless of events surrounding the Drumcree crisis Mo Mowlam had made clear at the beginning of the summer that she was going to change tack; she was not going to maintain the overtly non-confrontational attitude towards the government and she continued to reiterate Labour’s support for the idea of cross border bodies and for eventual reunification by consent.756 However, this was relatively short-lived and by the beginning of 1997 most people’s minds seemed to be concentrated on the forthcoming general election with the result that debate on Northern Ireland was sidelined by the desire to focus on the crucial election issues of tax, education, ‘sleaze’, Europe and constitutional reform, including devolution for Scotland and Wales but not Northern Ireland.

One of the very reasons for the gradual disappearance of the ideological debate on the Irish question within the Labour movement was that the general purpose of the peace process, which had the support of the entire British party political scene, was to facilitate talks involving those who were party to the conflict to seek a resolution based upon an accommodation of their various fears and aspirations rather than seeking to impose a resolution from above. For years the polemic in the Labour Party evolved, very often, around seeking a resolution for Northern Ireland whereas the peace process sought to place the onus on the Northern Irish parties to seek a resolution among themselves. This move away from conflict and argument over Ireland was aided by the fact that a new Labour leadership particularly disliked those trying to articulate the republican argument in the Party. Blair also did not want to feel bound by the pro-nationalist policy which favoured Irish unity and was established before he had even been elected to Parliament and when Labour was dominated by the old left. In July 1996 Labour launched its draft election

756 Irish Post, 18 May & Irish Times, 4 June 1996.
manifesto which stated that “On the basis of consent, Labour is committed to reconciliation between the two communities and the unity of the peoples of Ireland.”\textsuperscript{757} Despite this the final Labour Party manifesto launched in March 1997 made no mention of Irish unity and in actual fact the policy statement said a lot about what Blair’s strategy had been over the previous two years. The resignation of Kevin McNamara, the return to bipartisanship and the weakened relationship with the SDLP set the scene for Labour’s neutral and non-committal election manifesto statement. No conference decision had been made to drop ‘unity by consent’ but Blair’s authority and influence was such that hardly a complaint was made by the left.

Such was the state of the Labour left by the time of the general election that in the Commons vote on the PTA Continuance Order of March 1997 only 15 Labour MPs voted against.\textsuperscript{758} In addition to this, perhaps the most remarkable indication of the transformation in the Labour Party was the decision by Ken Livingstone not to join the rebels in the lobby and the one time hate figure of the Labour centre-right - following the Enniskillen bombing - asked the government the following question shortly before the general election: “Given the Government’s clear determination to exclude Sinn Fein until the IRA campaign stops, and given the frequent statements from the republican leadership that it has no intention of restoring the ceasefire, does the Minister have any proposals for increased security measures to defeat the IRA campaign - or are the people of Northern Ireland doomed to live with the situation forever?” (Even the Northern Ireland Minister, Michael Ancram, noted what a remarkable change this was for Ken Livingstone.)\textsuperscript{759} One can speculate that Livingstone had his eye on a job in a future Labour government but what is certain is that

\textsuperscript{757} Belfast Telegraph, 5 July 1996.
\textsuperscript{758} Hansard, Vol. 291 Col. 959 (5 March 1997).
\textsuperscript{759} Ibid. Col. 419 (27 Feb. 1997).
Blair was confident enough of his authority to expect little resistance to the moderate manifesto statement which also made clear that he expected a quid pro-quo from the Tory Party in the event of Labour forming a government: “There will be as great a priority attached to seeing that [peace] process through with Labour as under the Conservatives... We will expect the same bipartisan approach from a Conservative opposition.” Also, for the first time, the Labour leadership clearly omitted Irish unity and explained its reasoning and logic for so doing: “Labour recognises that the option of a united Ireland does not command the consent of the Unionist tradition, nor does the existing status of Northern Ireland command the consent of the Nationalist tradition. We are therefore committed to reconciliation between the two traditions and to a new political settlement which can command the support of both.” To argue that Labour had come full circle since 1979 in time for its return to power in 1997 would be simplistic and inaccurate. The metamorphosis through which the Labour Party went over the seventeen years in opposition must be analysed against the backdrop of enormous changes in British party politics, most especially the Conservative attitudes to the Irish problem, enormous changes in the international arena and dramatic shifts in the political situation in Ireland both north and south. The changes in the politics and economy of the Republic were of immense importance as an exogenous factor influencing attitudes to the North. The Republic’s economy had become far stronger than that of the North and the beginnings of a gradual process of secularisation had help sweep away the old Unionist arguments about the backward South. A consensus had also developed within the Irish party political establishment which was much more pragmatic and cautious, with enthusiasm for taking on responsibility for the six counties visibly waning in view of the stable and ethnically

homogenous state which had developed in the South.\textsuperscript{762} It is for these reasons that trying to make comparisons between Labour’s leaders of 1979 and 1997 is fraught with difficulties. For example, if one chooses to compare Mason and Callaghan with Mowlam and Blair most observers would describe the latter two as much further to the centre-right, not least because of their attitude to clause 4. However, Mo Mowlam was undoubtedly much more Irish nationalist friendly compared with Roy Mason and before the general election she was still making clear that she favoured early inclusion of Sinn Fein in talks if the IRA were to call a new ceasefire (a position she has in fact held to in government).\textsuperscript{763}

But, whilst the Labour Party of 1997 did contain those such as Kate Hoey and Harry Barnes there were still more in the PLP who would have greater sympathy with the views of Kevin McNamara and Tony Benn. As for the official Labour policy spelt out in the election manifesto, the very reality of taking office must have affected the psyche of a Party which had learnt that the electorate were not persuaded by policies which appeared more idealistic than realistic. Blair and the Party ‘modernisers’ no doubt concluded that ‘unity by consent’ did not fall into the latter category and perhaps believed that it would have been a millstone around Mo Mowlam’s neck when Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

\textsuperscript{763} \textit{Sunday Times}, 30 March 1997.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Whilst there is a temptation to take a rather cynical view of Tony Blair’s Labour government as having precisely the same view as the Tory Party on Northern Ireland and as having simply come full circle since 1979, the reality is in fact far more complex. It may appear that Labour have conveniently chosen, at certain times, to talk of their ‘historic commitment’ to a united Ireland but, in very sharp contrast to the Tories, Blair’s cabinet does contain those such as David Blunkett, Frank Dobson, Harriet Harman and Mo Mowlam, all of whom, at some time or another, have advocated Irish re-unification. So too have government ministers Clare Short, Tony Banks, Michael Meacher and Peter Hain. Admittedly the Conservative Party changed its attitude towards the ‘Irish dimension’ drastically during its eighteen year term of office in comparison with the Party which tried to maintain Stormont up until 1972; but the nature of the Labour Party is such that, despite the return to bipartisanship with ‘New Labour’, there still exists (to varying degrees) an instinctive sympathy with Northern Ireland’s nationalist community and a suspicion towards the political leaders of unionism. The change that has taken place during the Labour Party’s eighteen years in opposition has been a gradual adoption of a pragmatic and less partisan position in response to various developments. Those developments are as follows: changes in the debate within Ireland which include a more pragmatic Sinn Fein and the dropping of irredentism in the Republic; changes in the Conservative Party which has shifted away from overt unionism and fostered greatly improved relations with nationalist Ireland and finally enormous changes in the international arena with the end of the cold war and the beginning of attempts to resolve regional conflicts such as the middle east and South Africa as well as a general mood of understanding and tolerance replacing the conflict and intolerance of the eighties. All of these factors presented the Labour Party
with a challenge as to whether the policy and attitudes adopted in 1981 could be maintained
into the next century or could the Party adopt a new position which did not entail a return
to the policies and attitudes of the Rees/Mason era. To try and take the problem facing the
Labour Party and reduce it into simple terms, the problem was and still is that most who
approach the Irish problem from a left-wing/non-unionist position are caught between two
motivating factors. The first is to try and pursue what is considered to be morally and
historically correct and the second is to pursue what is politically practical and equitable. In
other words, whilst there are those such as Clare Short and Kevin McNamara who may feel
that taking into consideration that the Catholics are the indigenous, majority population on
the island and who suffered with the Penal laws, the suppression of the Irish language, the
confiscation of land by settlers, the Coercion laws and the Famine, that it is their aspirations
and their (nationalist) agenda to which the Labour Party ought to be more sympathetic. It
was this thinking which was perhaps in the ascendant in 1981 when, after another tragic
episode for nationalist Ireland entered the history books, the Party elected to pursue a
nationalist agenda. The criticism with the Irish unity policy was subsequently always its
practicability. For example, some may argue that all Australian land which once belonged
to the Aboriginal people should be returned to them en masse. This may be morally and
historically favourable but it is not practicable because history cannot be reversed and the
present day demographic and political circumstances make such a policy impossible and
unachievable. Clare Short once argued that “if all the people that had been born in
Northern Ireland - since it was partitioned - were still living there, there would already be a
nationalist majority.”\^{764} The implication being that, had it not been for systematic
discrimination forcing many Catholics to emigrate, a united Ireland would have been

\^{764} Transcript of BBC Radio 4 interview with Clare Short by John Humphrys, 4 Feb. 1987. (Kevin
McNamara archive collection, University of Hull.)
democratically achieved so that today's politicians have a moral obligation to right that historic wrong. The problem for a British government pursuing Irish unity is that, in crude terms, the kind of question that arises is that (favourable though it might be to an Irish nationalist population that has for so long aspired to a completely independent unitary Irish state) how could an Irish national police force maintain control over east Belfast or patrol the Shankill Road? Or how could Dublin Government policy be implemented throughout the densely Protestant populated regions of north Down or south Antrim? It is this dilemma over what is desirable and what is practically achievable that brought the Labour Party to the position it arrived at in 1997. What basically took place in the 1990s was a shift away from the partisan/pro-nationalist position partly because of the changed political circumstances listed above and so a struggle took place between those who continued to adhere to sympathy for the nationalist cause and those such as Blair and Mowlam who sought to achieve parity of esteem between nationalism and unionism rather than come down in favour of one or the other. Harry Barnes and others in New Agenda articulated the latter position and described themselves as simply 'neutrals' - a new concept within the Labour movement - whose stated intention was to avoid taking a partisan position but to act as facilitators for the two traditions in Ireland to come to agreement amongst themselves. In 1981 such a notion would have appeared rather cowardly and conservative; in the era of conflict and class struggle it was felt that Labour had to decide which side they were on, yet in 1997 such a notion itself had begun to appear rather simplistic and outdated.

During the eighties there also existed the simplistic supposition that to be left-wing was to support Irish nationalism and that to be right-wing was to support Ulster unionism. However this simplistic analysis was to be challenged as the honeymoon period of friendly
relations between Sinn Fein and the Labour left gradually came to an end in the aftermath of the Enniskillen bombing. The violence of Irish republicanism had always repulsed most in the Labour movement and the extent to which Sinn Fein had moved to the left during the eighties was not enough to seriously challenge the SDLP as Labour’s official political ally in Northern Ireland. Despite the position that the SDLP held as technically the sister party in Ulster, many in the Labour Party knew that this was more of a nationalist party than a socialist party. It was well known that the SDLP had expelled Paddy Devlin in 1977 because he opposed the Party’s nationalist direction and that Gerry Fitt left them two years later for the same reason. The demise of the old Northern Ireland Labour Party and the non-existence of any other moderate socialist party meant that the SDLP continued as Labour’s ally in the province. It should also be noted that many in the Labour Party were rather sympathetic to the Workers’ Party and were frustrated that this particular brand of Irish socialism did not achieve the same electoral success as Sinn Fein or the SDLP. Harry Barnes openly conceded that the Workers’ Party made a considerable impression on him, as did the one time front bench spokesperson, Peter Archer.\textsuperscript{765} The SDLP usually voted with the Parliamentary Labour Party and although relations between the Tories and the Unionists became increasingly strained, especially following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, they would rarely vote with Labour in the House of Commons. This is one of the principal reasons why support for unionism is so often perceived as a reactionary position in the Labour movement.

The Ulster Unionist Party’s links with the Orange Order, their historic association with the Conservative Party and their record as the party responsible for the discrimination, the gerrymandering and the use of internment and excessive police measures during the

\textsuperscript{765} Barnes, H. Interview, Nov. 1997 & Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996.
Stormont years all help to alienate them from the overwhelming majority of the British Labour movement. Even as late as 1993 this image was not helped when, on a vote in Parliament on the government’s planned pit closure programme, the Ulster Unionists refused to join with the Labour Party in opposing the Tories. (Even Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party voted with the Labour Party). A few months later Roger Stott summed up the feelings of many in the Labour movement thus: “I say to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (James Molyneaux) and his colleagues on the Unionist Bench that there are thousands of families in the coalfield communities of this country, mine included, who will not lightly forgive or forget the part played by the Ulster Unionist party in aiding and abetting the Government in the butchery of the British Coal industry. Loyalism is a two-way street.”

Nevertheless to dismiss unionism in all its forms as reactionary and alien to the principles of the Labour movement would be inaccurate and simplistic. Those such as the Labour MP Harry Barnes, and of course Kate Hoey, began to argue for a more favourable attitude towards unionism during the 1990s. It is well documented that the difficulties faced by the Protestant working class are no different to those faced by the Catholic working class in Northern Ireland and so as the debate has matured, the admission has increasingly been made that unionist fears (having to exist in an all-Ireland state) and unionist aspirations (self-determination within the United Kingdom) are of equal validity to nationalist fears and aspirations. This view is what Mo Mowlam frequently likes to describe as ‘parity of esteem’. The emergence of political parties from the Loyalist paramilitaries, namely the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party, has also help to thwart the idea that unionism means Ian Paisley and David Trimble. The presence of these new parties and that of Chris McGimpsey (UUP councillor in the

working class district of the Shankill) has introduced the concept of a working class or progressive unionism into the debate. The Ulster Unionist Party, and latterly the two Loyalist parties, have often ensured that they are present at the Labour Party’s annual conference fringe events.

The fact that the Labour Party has also consistently refused to extend its organisation to the province has also given a revealing insight into the Party’s attitude to Northern Ireland. In spite of the CLR’s and Democracy Now’s claim that this was a denial of the right to vote Labour in the province, as an independent political party it was and still is Labour’s right to choose where it wishes to organise. The conclusion that one must draw is that, although the CLR claimed that the Party would cut through sectarianism, Labour’s leaders feared that they would either be drawn into the sectarian ‘dog fight’ or else the venture would prove fruitless, resulting in the same fate as the old Northern Ireland Labour Party. The only major external political parties to try and organise in the province have been the Irish Labour Party in the 1950s and the Conservative Party in the 1990s both of which were unsuccessful. The deterrence for parties from both the Republic of Ireland and from Britain is the fact that the nature of Northern Ireland politics is very different to the politics in their own states which centre around the ‘bread and butter’ issues of tax, jobs, health and education. This is one of the most important reasons why Labour has recoiled at the idea of becoming involved in the province. There has consistently existed in the British Labour movement a deep sense of disillusionment with the sectarian nature of Northern Irish politics and the culture of conflict over national and religious identity; both being anathema to a movement which espouses a modern, secular, internationalist politics. It would also be particularly over optimistic to predict that the presence of British parties in
Northern Ireland would result in a change in the political culture in the province.\textsuperscript{767} Another important factor is that, whilst the Tories could entrust individuals in Northern Ireland to take on the job of organising the Conservative Party with few problems, the Labour Party would have been opening the way for individuals such as David Morrison, Ben Cosin, Bob McCartney and perhaps even Kate Hoey to take up the leading positions in the Northern Ireland Party. The problem would have been that these people had all opposed Labour’s policy of Irish unity and so the Labour leaders would have feared a Labour Party developing in Northern Ireland which would not have followed the Party line but would evolve into an organisation with a very different political complexion to the Labour movement in Britain.

There have been many arguments presented and predictions made about organising Labour in the six counties, but rather than becoming involved in that rather emotional debate the argument presented here is that regardless of what may or may not happen to the Labour Party in the province, the leadership in Britain will not countenance such a move precisely because the culture, the history and the very nature of Ulster politics is considered so alien. Admittedly the argument presented here challenges those who claim that the introduction of class politics or ‘ordinary’ politics would help to challenge sectarianism and help to secure Northern Ireland as a stable, integral part of the United Kingdom. But presented here is the reverse argument: it is precisely because Northern Ireland is not perceived as an integral part of Britain, where the Labour movement has evolved over a century with its own distinct political culture, that it is a forlorn hope to expect them to challenge a three-century-old Ulster political culture, especially with a

\textsuperscript{767} This is the basis to the arguments presented in McNamara, K., Scott, R & O’Brien, B. \textit{Oranges or Lemons? Should Labour Organise in Northern Ireland?} (1993) and also argued in McGarry, J. & O’Leary, B. \textit{Explaining Northern Ireland} (1995) p. 134.
leadership which believes in devolving power down to the people rather than seeking solutions ‘from above’. If an attempt was made by people on the ground to set up a Labour Party in Northern Ireland, the British Labour Party would not try to stand in their way, but the one prediction that can be made with confidence is that the Labour Party will not, at any time in the years ahead, attempt to extend its organisation to Northern Ireland.

The problem of devising a policy for Northern Ireland had to be pursued by dealing with a broad spectrum of opinion throughout the Labour Party. Opinion was not simply divided between those who did and did not favour Irish unity. The situation was far more complex because the Party contained those who favoured decentralisation and devolution, those who favoured a solution ‘from above’ such as unity or shared authority, those who favoured a solution from within Northern Ireland such as power sharing and those who were basically indifferent (such as Foot, Kinnock, and Smith) which in itself was actually part of Labour’s problem. Of course the picture is not nearly as black and white either; for example the 1988 document ‘Towards a United Ireland’ still included the proposal of devolution for Northern Ireland. The 1993 document ‘Northern Ireland: Sharing Authority’ envisaged a five member executive with Ulster politicians having three seats and Irish and British representatives just one member each. When one considers the myriad of different policy ideas, from Jim Callaghan’s Ulster independence to Ken Livingstone’s united Ireland, the only consistent theme which existed throughout the movement was clear opposition to any return to Stormont. If one tries to look for a clear trend in policy over the eighteen year period it is that the Labour Party wanted to move on from the Mason/Rees era of crisis management and so adopted the policy of ‘unity by consent’; then as the peace process emerged in the mid-1990s it became apparent that there was no reason for the Party to hold to a particular policy on the constitution but instead to provide for
talks enabling the local politicians to agree a settlement for themselves. As has already
been explained this is how the ‘neutrals’ one the argument over the pro-nationalists and
Blair and Mowlam were able to abandon the commitment to a united Ireland. The policy of
‘unity by consent’ had been overtaken by events. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and
then, more explicitly, the Downing Street Declaration offered the possibility of
constitutional change if there was majority consent. To some consent had actually become
the obstacle to unity and the left in the mid-1980s wanted Labour’s policy revised precisely
because they considered consent as representing a veto for unionism. Now that Labour are
in power the term ‘consent’ is used persistently by the Unionists and by Tony Blair because
instead of being viewed as something to be won over to support re-unification it is now
seen as the reason why there cannot be unity. In other words the policy has been turned on
its head and the contradictions in ‘unity by consent’ have been used to argue for the status
quo: there will be unity if there is consent, but there is not consent and so partition must be
maintained. If Labour had wanted to adopt a pro-nationalist policy, they could have chosen
British withdrawal or Irish unity. They chose the latter but with a get out clause: the
consent of the very people whose existence and political identity was based on their
opposition to Irish unity. If, during the early eighties, Labour had added to its policy of
unilateral nuclear disarmament a proviso that no such move could take place without the
consent of NATO, the policy would have been ridiculed as a cynical ploy designed to
appear radical knowing that in actual fact unilateral disarmament would not take place.
But, despite these problems and contradictions the policy of ‘unity by consent’ was never
seriously challenged, not least because of the aforementioned indifference.

It is also important to consider the accusation that the British Labour Party does not
have the political will to take on the challenge of the Northern Ireland problem and has
proved to be altogether rather fickle on the subject. If a comparison is made between the historic developments in Northern Ireland and the changes in attitude, emphasis and even publicly stated policy it is evident that the Labour Party has all too often responded to events. The 1981 decision by the Party to support a policy of Irish unity has already been examined closely and the causative factors include the Party’s sharp move to the left during 1980-81 and the impact of the H Block hunger strikes. However close analysis of events makes clear that it was the latter event, or more accurately the electoral display of support for the hunger strikers in the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election, which was decisive in ensuring that an Irish unity policy was adopted. In other words it is wrong to conclude that the 1981 decision was just another part of the shift to the left. As the NEC minutes reveal and as Dick Barry (himself unsympathetic to Irish nationalism) conceded the by-election and the deaths in the H Blocks during the summer months of 1981 made a united Ireland policy inevitable. The Labour movement was relatively content with this policy and the pro-nationalist bias that the Party maintained throughout the early eighties until the Hillsborough Agreement was signed in 1985. Although there was enthusiastic support for the Agreement the public show of resistance on the part of the Protestant/unionist population undoubtedly had an impact on the Labour Party reminiscent of the effect that the UWC strike had on Merlyn Rees and the then Labour government in 1974. This fickleness is an important indication of the nature of the British Labour movement. There is no question that individuals throughout the Labour movement have deeply held convictions on matters such as the maintenance of the NHS, redistribution of wealth or an egalitarian education system, but there are very few that have such deeply held convictions on the subject of Northern Ireland. Those such as Kevin McNamara and Kate Hoey are very much the exception. The individuals who led the Labour Party during the eighteen
years in opposition have, without exception, been completely agnostic on the issue. Very few would look at the images of Orange parades or loyalist demonstrations and feel any great compunction about challenging unionism as a matter of principle. Clare Short and Tony Benn might, but the priorities of the Labour leadership are such that taking up an explicitly confrontational position to Unionism is considered neither practical nor desirable. However, it would be wrong to give the impression that the sympathy that emerged in 1981 following the hunger strikes and the electoral rise of Sinn Fein in the following years, was completely overturned during the late eighties. A consensus does now exist in British party politics that both Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism are equally formidable political forces and that trying to side with one in the hope of defeating the other is a political path fraught with danger.

This problem leads to another important matter in relation to the nature of Labour as a party of government. Coupled with a lack of conviction in relation to Northern Ireland, the Labour Party (by virtue of its history and social roots) has to contend with a credibility problem and an image problem as a movement seen to be potentially subversive, unpatriotic and irresponsible. No doubt, these issues were foremost in Tony Blair’s mind in attempting to make the Party an electorally viable force. Because the Party’s social base has historically been in the working class and the trade unions and because they have consistently opposed upper class privilege whether it be in the shape of the House of Lords or the public school system, the Party’s leaders have had to be prepared for an onslaught from an alliance of the establishment and upper classes in the form of the Tory Party, the Lords, the newspaper magnates and the military establishment. During the mid-eighties Kevin McNamara warned that this factor had to be taken seriously because loyalist opposition to Irish unity “will be formidable in terms of its ability to present an acceptable
face and to appeal to allies in the British Establishment (1912 style)." When, in early 1995, it emerged that the government had been maintaining secret contacts with the IRA, Sir Patrick Mayhew managed to ride the political storm with relative ease. Brendan McClua pointed out in his 'Dolan' column in the Irish Post that only the Tories could survive such an affair with few political scars but for a Labour government the attacks by such an alliance would have "savaged" them precisely because of their historic vulnerability to being portrayed as the party of pacifists, trade union militants and unpatriotic internationalists. If this conservative alliance were to rally together to resist a Labour government pursuing an Irish nationalist agenda one could predict that, whether the Party were led by Tony Blair, John Smith, Neil Kinnock or Michael Foot, they would almost certainly back down and change course. This is by no means an attempt to draw parallels with 1912 when the Tory Party were willing to go to extraordinary lengths in support of the Union. In spite of Kevin McNamara's warnings, it is highly unlikely that the modern Tory Party would behave in such a way, because it would not serve their class interests in the way that keeping the Union with a heavily industrialised Ulster did in 1912 or when it was considered of such strategic and symbolic importance for the British Empire in the early part of the twentieth century. However, we can still surmise that a very image conscious Labour Party would not wish to precipitate a conflict over a matter which is simply no great priority. The Labour government was elected in May 1997 with a 179 seat majority and had the confidence and public support to proceed with plans for devolution for Scotland and Wales with little to fear from a Tory Party still reeling from its electoral disaster and a press still coming to terms with the size of the Labour landslide. This is an unusual position for the

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768 McNamara, K. 'Obstacles on the Path to Unity' (paper for the NEC/PLP joint policy comittee) Labour Party RD: 3502/May 1985.
Labour Party to find itself in but the leadership would still be unwilling to try any bold moves in relation to Northern Ireland because the potential for a destabilising outbreak of violence is such that the prospect of facing this alliance of the establishment in tandem with trying to maintain law and order in the province would be too much for a political party which simply does not have the political stamina or convictions on the Irish question to face such a battle.

It is also clearly evident that after more than ten years of trying to maintain a distinct policy on Northern Ireland, Labour returned to bipartisanship, partly as a matter of political expediency, but mainly because of the changes that had taken place in the Conservative Party and in the political situation in Northern Ireland itself. Paul Dixon has argued that, in effect, bipartisanship was never in fact dropped even during the mid-eighties with Clive Soley and Kevin McNamara. It can unquestionably be asserted that this argument is incorrect as far as party policy is concerned and as it was articulated from the front benches. As has already been argued, 'unity by consent' was no different to the commitment made on Northern Ireland's constitutional position by the Tory government in the Anglo-Irish Agreement and Labour unreservedly supported the Agreement. However, what is important is that there was of course a very significant difference of emphasis as well as a determination by the Labour front bench to be seen to be maintaining a partisan position distinct from the government. The Tories proposed that change in Northern Ireland's constitutional position would be permitted if there was consent because it shifted the onus of responsibility onto the electorate within the six counties rather than letting the British government be portrayed (in the US and elsewhere) as an imperial power interfering

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771 Archer, P. Interview, Dec. 1996. See also Chapter 3.
in Ireland against the popular will. The Labour Party, with those at the helm such as Soley, Archer and most especially McNamara, proposed that change in Northern Ireland’s constitutional position was something that they positively favoured and would be pursuing with a view to Irish re-unification were they on the government front bench. The acid test of a party’s position on Northern Ireland is perhaps the response of the Unionists and, as has been well documented, the Unionists made known their disquiet at the prospect of Kevin McNamara becoming Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in a manner that was quite unprecedented. Paul Dixon has explained that the advantage of bipartisanship is that it “prevents those groups [Northern Irish parties] from exploiting the political differences between the British parties and playing one off against the other and holding out on agreement.”

This is precisely what Tony Blair and Mo Mowlam argued was the rationale behind the decision to return to bipartisanship in 1994: the peace process required the British parties to unite around the consensus that no one was to pursue their own favoured outcome or be persuaders for a particular outcome, but would simply be facilitators in letting the Northern Ireland parties achieve an agreement amongst themselves. This is where the political situation - namely the IRA ceasefire and the peace process - helped to determine a return to bipartisanship in addition to the changes in the political complexion of the Labour Party following the launch of Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour Party’. During the Brooke talks of 1990-92 bipartisanship was evidently not in existence because, with the possibility of Kevin McNamara taking over at the Northern Ireland Office, there was clearly a great deal of concern within Unionism and a lack of enthusiasm about continuing with the Brooke talks as the 1992 general election approached. There might be some justification for the criticism that Labour dropped bipartisanship and

772 Dixon, P. op cit.
adopted an Irish unity policy, during the heady political days of the early eighties, in order
to simply be seen to be opposing the Tories on Ireland. During the late eighties Kinnock
argued, in his speech announcing his opposition to continuing with a policy of unilateral
nuclear disarmament, that with the emergence of Gorbachev and the thawing of the cold
war there was no longer any need for such a policy; so Mowlam and Blair were responding
to an equally changed situation in Northern Ireland. Because of the confrontational and
volatile political climate during the early eighties many in the Labour movement could not
stomach and would not have tolerated a continuation of bipartisanship with Thatcher on
Northern Ireland. The pragmatism of 'New Labour' was such that this type of overtly
adversarial logic would not be entertained especially considering that Blair was very much a
long term planner and was, no doubt, anticipating the importance of earning a quid pro quo
from the Tories for returning to bipartisanship in 1994.

The historic period that has been looked at has also been one of enormous changes
in the international arena and it is imperative that the changes in the Labour movement and
its attitude to the Irish problem be analysed against the backdrop of the global political
trend. Although there has been a great deal of confusion over the global political direction
in the wake of the fall of Soviet communism, the apparent increase in regional conflicts and
the steady move towards greater European integration, one can assert that by the time of
the general election of 1997 the Labour Party appeared to reached a fairly accurate analysis
of the future of international political development. The assumption has been made by
some that as the world had become smaller in terms of trade, transportation, language
barriers and communications so the more local forms of government would be superseded
by larger institutions such as the European Union. Peter Archer has stated that he is in
favour of this particular analysis and during the early nineties such an analysis was
presented as reason for believing that the Irish border would ultimately become irrelevant. However, the Labour Party under Tony Blair has recognised that in actual fact the international trend is two-fold: first of all there is an ever developing global economy dominated by multi-nationals and globally organised financial institutions which cut across national boundaries but secondly there is an ongoing political trend towards devolving political power down which is demanded by people regardless of the development of the European Union or of the global economy. The trend towards devolution is evident across the globe and attempts at trying to either ignore it or thwart it has result in the proliferation of regional conflicts. Even within the EU the problem continues in a number of member states including Belgium, Italy and of course Spain.

As the Labour Party decided on a programme of devolution for Scotland, Wales and perhaps eventually the English regions after their return to office in 1997, they clearly recognised the need to fulfil regional/nationalist aspirations whilst also taking a much more favourable attitude towards the development of the European Union. The significance of the Labour Party’s ideological commitment to devolution was that if it was to be translated into seeking a resolution to the Northern Irish problem then there was always likely to be a continued distancing of Party policy away from the ideas of a solution ‘from above’. The basic thrust of the ideas of Soley, McNamara and others, be it in the shape of re-unification or joint authority, was towards drawing up a blueprint for a new Ireland for Ireland rather than being facilitators for a solution from within Ireland. If there was one broad ideological shift from the Labour Party of the early eighties to the Labour Party of the late nineties it was this. Labour gradually gave up ‘unity by consent’ and replaced it with no specific plan or policy but rather a commitment to continue the Conservative policy of trying to shift the onus of responsibility towards the Irish in the shape of the Dublin government and the
Northern Irish parties. Neil Kinnock once described any talk of British withdrawal as the 'politics of Pontius Pilate' (see Chapter 4) but there developed a gradual recognition that this maybe precisely how a solution could be found. Pilate decided that Christ's fate should be determined by the Jews; the Labour Party, whilst not countenancing British withdrawal as long as a majority oppose it, tried to adopt a neutral position on the constitutional question and allow Northern Ireland's fate to be determined by the Northern Irish, ultimately in a referendum. In other words the Labour Party under Tony Blair, with its ideological commitment to devolving power down and empowering people at a local level, became committed to trying to seek a solution 'from below'. Although this may have drawn the criticism that it would result in another failed attempt at an internal/partitionist solution, Labour continued to include the Irish government in the search for a solution precisely to avoid such accusations and to ensure a continuation of the Conservative recognition of the importance of the 'Irish dimension'. It was also fortuitous for the Labour Party that they returned to office at a time when the Northern Irish political climate was far more favourable compared to that which existed in the 1970s. They also had a large enough majority not to have to worry about needing Unionist votes. However, shortly after the historic general election of May 1997 Tony Blair delivered a speech in Northern Ireland from which the Unionists drew great comfort. Blair stated that he believed that "none of us in this hall today, even the youngest, is likely to see Northern Ireland as anything but a part of the United Kingdom. That is the reality because the consent principle is now almost universally accepted."773 All the indications were that there was very little difference between Tony Blair and John Major on Northern Ireland, but Tony Blair is not the Labour Party. The Labour Party is a very broad church which Blair

773 Bew, P., Patterson, H. & Teague, P. Northern Ireland: Between War and Peace, the Political Future of Northern Ireland (1997). (appendix.)
will have to carry with him and if the new attempt at devolution fails and the Northern Irish situation begins to deteriorate once again then the diversity of opinion in the movement may well begin to reveal itself again. The fact that the diversity of opinion exists even amongst government ministers makes the prospect of failure with the peace process and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement all the more intriguing and to try and predict the consequences of such a scenario would be almost impossible.
Appendix A

Contingency plans in the event of Irish re-unification
drawn up by Clive Soley (Shadow Home Office 1985)*

A: POSSIBLE POLICIES - LEAST BAD UNIONIST RESPONSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action by Government</th>
<th>Unionist Response</th>
<th>Government Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Appointment of Secretary of State known to be in favour of united Ireland.</td>
<td>Demonstrations; sporadic or weakly-supported strikes; sporadic killing.</td>
<td>Sit it out. Use security services to deal with paramilitaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Statement of policy by Secretary of State.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Announcement of intention to enter into high-level discussions with Irish Government.</td>
<td>Apathetic response.</td>
<td>Introduce positive measures e.g. joint citizenship, Human Rights Court, economic policies to alleviate poverty and unemployment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Setting up of joint UK/Eire inter-departmental committees.</td>
<td>Apathetic response.</td>
<td>As above, but also bring in economic orders from the South, subsidised by UK; if necessary, e.g. ships from Harland &amp; Wolff, aircraft from Shorts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Announcement of cross border plans e.g. All-Ireland Development Committee; All-Ireland Court or Police.</td>
<td>Refusal to co-operate but divided and confused response.</td>
<td>Increase farming benefits either directly or via EEC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Harmonising of social and economic policies.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Involvement of people from the South e.g. courts, police, juries, civil servants, business-people.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Establishment of British/Irish Council.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Statement of British/Irish plans for unity.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Act of unity.</td>
<td>As above plus possibility of emigrants to Britain.</td>
<td>UK to continue financial support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### B: POSSIBLE WORST RESPONSE BY UNIONISTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action by Government</th>
<th>Unionist Response</th>
<th>Government Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Appointment of Secretary of State known to be in favour of united Ireland.</td>
<td>Very real danger of strike and/or demonstrations and killing of Catholics.</td>
<td>Sit out demonstrations; break strike or sit it out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Statement of policy by Secretary of State.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Announcement of intention to enter into high level discussions with Irish Government.</td>
<td>Difficult to predict but possibly as above.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Setting up of joint UK/Eire inter-departmental committees.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>As above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Announcement of cross border plans e.g. All-Ireland Development Committee; All-Ireland Court or Police.</td>
<td>Possibility of boycott; killing of Irish or Roman Catholic members of these institutions.</td>
<td>Structure institutions in such a way that they can function in the absence of some groups and parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Harmonising of social and economic policies.</td>
<td>Boycott; strikes (selective to organisations concerned?)</td>
<td>Continue policy and sit out or break strikes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Involvement of people from the South e.g. courts, police, juries, civil servants, business-people.</td>
<td>Selective strikes and boycotts; killing of selected individuals (possible kidnapping).</td>
<td>As above plus some anti-terrorist activity, especially security services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Act of unity.</td>
<td>General or sporadic violence.</td>
<td>Use troops - where possible Irish, backed by British.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This document appeared in the Campaign for Labour Representation's *The Labour Party and Northern Ireland An Official History* (Belfast, 1986) and its authenticity was verified by Clive Soley; letter 3 November 1997.
Appendix B

Annual Conference decisions on composite motions calling for Irish re-unification and British withdrawal*

1979  Motion defeated on show of hands.
1980  Motion defeated on show of hands.
1981  Card vote on motion:  708,000 in favour.
       5,003,000 against.
1982  Motion defeated on show of hands.
1983  Card vote on motion:  356,000 in favour.
       5,142,000 against.
1984  Card vote on motion:  450,000 in favour.
       4,625,000 against.
1985  Motion defeated on show of hands.
1986  Card vote on motion:  402,000 in favour.
       4,408,000 against.
1987  Motion defeated on show of hands.
1988  Motion defeated on show of hands.
1989  Card vote on motion:  600,000 in favour.
       5,308,000 against.
1990  No motion.
1991  Card vote on motion:  384,000 in favour.
       4,447,000 against.
1992  No motion.
1993  No motion.
1994  No motion.
1995  No motion.
1996  No motion.

* Figures taken from Labour Party annual conference reports at the Labour Archives, Manchester.
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