



THE BANK DOORS MAY BE THE DOORS OF PARADISE

ILLUSTRATION BY LONDON

by Claudia Dreifus BERNADETTE AND HER LANDSMEN AT THE U.N.

Last Thursday was a great day for the Irish. Nearly four thousand Irish-Americans had massed at United Nations Plaza to demonstrate their distaste for British domination of Northern Ireland and to show their support for the civil rights movement of Ulster. Though some of the slogans were familiar, the demonstrators looked nothing like the usual lot one finds picketing in front of the United Nations. The demonstrators, most of whom were affiliated with the New Jersey chapter of the Americans for Human Rights in Northern Ireland, were an aged group, decidedly over forty. Clad in kelly-green outfits, the assemblage of longshoremen, police-officers, attorneys, housewives and bartenders took a day off from work to demonstrate for civil rights in the North of Ireland. They carried placards that read: "Equal Rights, NOW!", "One Man—One Vote," and "It's not a religious war—It's an Anglo-Irish war." One elderly man, who sported a kelly-green beret and an Esso Service Station shirt, carried a sign that read "England has no more right to Northern Ireland than Russia has to Prague!" As the group marched the kilt beclad St. Columcille Fife and Drum Band provided background music by playing such traditional Irish folk ballads as "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "As Those Cassons Go Rolling Along."

The crowd had come to the United Nations Plaza for more than just a demonstration. They had come to hear Bernadette Devlin, the petite twenty-two year old Derry street-fighter and Member of Parliament.

The day before, the determined Miss Devlin had taken it upon herself to telephone United Nations Secretary-General U Thant to ask for an appointment. "I told him I had an urgent problem to discuss with him," she reported later, "and he agreed to meet me on Tuesday morning." U Thant, of course, proved highly sympathetic to the plight of the persecuted Irish Catholic minority of Ulster. However, he explained to Bernadette that unless Britain should ask for United Nations assistance, there was really little he could do to protect the lives of the Catholics of the North.

Bernadette Devlin arrived at the demonstration with nothing but U Thant's sympathy to report. Politics and diplomacy being what they are, she had not really expected much more from the Secretary-General.

Greeting her four thousand cheering supporters, Miss Devlin told the group that Northern Ireland's Catholics would never go back to the intolerable conditions prior to their revolt of August 12, 1969. Addressing an audience that included many metropolitan area policemen, she referred to the B-Specials, the Ulster Auxiliary Police force, as "a group of uniformed thugs."

Though Miss Devlin was exhausted from a heavy touring schedule and from lack of sleep, she thought this a good opportunity for political education. "It is never the justice of any cause that makes politicians take action," she cried, "and that is why I am calling on all Americans of good will to boycott British goods. We call for this action so as to put pressure on Britain, where she will feel pressure most. It seems you can only win justice and decency from politicians when you hit them where it hurts them most: in their pocketbooks. And that's what we have to do with Harold Wilson. We have to make the oppression of Catholics in the North, hurt the Prime Minister's purse. When oppression becomes too costly, his policies will surely change. But isn't it a crime that in a democratic country, in the twentieth century, that pressure has to be put on the government to do what is humanely just, what is decently just, and what is necessary for the preservation of life?"

Bernadette's appeal ended with a rousing chorus of "As Those Cassons Go Rolling Along," performed by the St. Columcille Fifers.

Armed with the fire of her speech, 4,000 Irish-Americans began a militant march around U.N. Plaza. The spirit of the demonstration was strangely paradoxical, as the Easter Rising, the American Civil Rights movement and the American Legion were all invoked by marchers as the inspiration for their action.

Leading the march was Martin J. Loftus, the President of the New Jersey chapter of Americans for Human Rights in Northern Ireland. Though Loftus was an attorney, he was not a "law and order" man, when it came to revolts in Ulster. He saw nothing wrong with Bernadette Devlin erecting barricades around the Bogside district of Derry and fighting off police with rocks and Molotov cocktails. "So far as I know," the grey haired attorney said, "her actions in reference to the barricades were defensive

and not offensive." I wondered how long it would take for people to say the same about Blacks in Newark.

An off-duty police officer John Silvers, marched, while carrying a Celtic cross which had inscribed on it the names of the 1916 Easter Sunday Martyrs. He spoke of the Easter Sunday Rebellion with great intensity: "This was the first time that Ireland was free from the English and we're doing this again now in the North," he said emphatically. "Now, we want the North FREE also. Away from the English."

Seventeen year old Mary Lennon was probably the youngest person on the picket line. She had come to U.N. Plaza "because I'm Irish and my people need me. Today when everybody's revolting, there's something in Northern Ireland that we must do." Mary saw a definite connection between the movement for Black liberation and the fight of Catholics in Ulster. "People all over the world are fighting for the same thing," she explained.

The March was an odd potpourri of former IRA men, lodgers from the Knights of Columbus, teenagers from parochial school, radicals enchanted with the Irish cause and housewives who had never marched before. It was hardly a revolution, but as I listened to the ultimately bizarre sound of bagpipes playing "Yankee Doodle Dandy," I had the feeling that the Irish-American community was beginning to wake up. It seemed hopeful, very beautiful, but only a beginning.

AMERICAN BLACKS ORGANIZE FOR BIAFRA

While most of the Black activist community has supported the Nigerian federal government in the civil war between Biafra and Nigeria, a small group of militants led by Carlisle Calnek, Shirley Washington, and Mary Harden Umolu, have organized the Joint Afro-American Committee on Biafra. JAACOB is the first Black organization in America to specifically support the breakaway West African state. The organization hopes that it can develop massive support for rebel Biafra in the American Black community through political and educational programs.

"The Irish help Ireland," said Mary Harden Umolu, an American who married a Biafran, "and the Jews work hard to support Israel. So why shouldn't Black people get together and support their own kind in Biafra?"

People are starving to death over there because they want nothing more than their freedom and the right to know they can live. They need our support." Mrs. Umolu hopes that JAACOB will become an effective lobby to change the official State Department position of "neutrality" in favor of Nigeria, in this conflict.

The civil war in Nigeria is one of the most politically confusing in history. Nigeria enjoys massive military support from Britain, extensive moral and military support from the Soviet Union and unfettered public assistance from the International Red Cross, the U.S. government (we send them doctors, nurses and relief supplies) and Unicef. Biafra, on the other hand, is blockaded by Nigeria and receives few relief supplies. Though its citizens are perishing from starvation at the rate of one million per year, the International Red Cross refuses to send emergency relief planes to Biafra. The reason given for this inaction is "danger to pilots." France has sent Biafra a few small arms. And from Communist China, the breakaway state has received a handshake and the best wishes of Chairman Mao. Yet, despite little noticeable outside support, the Biafrans have survived as a nation for two years of bombing, starvation and constant war. Most Black leaders support the idea of a united Nigeria and consider Biafra's mere existence a threat to the unity of Africa.

Shirley Washington explained some of the reasons for lack of support for Biafra in the Black Community:

"Many people feel that the most important thing for Black people is unity, and that is very true! But we have to consider what kind of unity we are talking about. It is impossible for Black people to live in a harmonious situation with a man like Wallace since he is trying to kill us. And the fact that there are two Black groups fighting in Nigeria doesn't make the situation any less deadly for the Biafrans. They feel that the Nigerians want to kill them and the fact that 30,000 Ibo tribesmen were slaughtered three years ago and that millions have died since, confirms this fear. So long as the Biafrans don't feel safe in Nigeria, theories about unity have nothing to do with the situation."

JAACOB, which is planning to open up a storefront in Harlem, is currently headquartered at its chairman's home, Carlisle Calnek, 3 Serpentine Drive, New Rochelle, New York.

BLACK LEADERS FIRED FROM BELL TELEPHONE

Ed Hall and Lion Atkinson are two militant young men who until recently worked as Trunk Assingors for the Bell Telephone Company of New York. Both men were fired on August 11th, ostensibly for illegally distributing copies of their "Black Newsletter" to Bell employees outside the company headquarters. While basic tenets of labor law would probably hold the dismissals as illegal, it is highly unlikely that Atkinson and Hall will win their jobs back without a struggle. They were fired not because they were illegally distributing literature, but because they were leaders of an unofficial black caucus among Bell's employees. (The newsletter distribution, was actually quite legal, as it was not performed on company time or property.)

"The situation at the phone company is incredibly racist," said Ed Hall. "Most of the menial jobs are performed by Blacks and the good jobs are held by whites. Most intermediate level supervisors and most executive personnel are white. 95 percent of the telephone operators are Black though, and the operators work under terrible conditions: split shifts, low pay, night hours, no smoking, no talking etc."

Before he was fired, Lion Atkinson was a shop steward at Bell for the Communications Workers Union of America. Atkinson, who knows the internal workings of the union well, is convinced that the CWU will probably not take meaningful action on his behalf. "Our feeling," Atkinson said, "is that if two white guys had gotten fired, the union would have immediately called a job action or a slow down or something. But all they tell us that they're doing for us is 'going through the proper channels'—whatever that means." Atkinson is convinced that the Communications Workers Union is unlikely to support him because most of the organization's leadership is lily-white and because the leaders view Black caucuses as a threat.

Lion Atkinson and Ed Hall intend to fight their dismissals from Bell Telephone—even if they get no help from the union. To help them in their fight for reinstatement, they've retained the American Civil Liberties Union as their attorneys. "We've got to win our jobs back," said Ed Hall, "because workers back at Bell are looking to see what will happen to us. If the company can throw us out successfully, that means no one at the phone company is ever going to really get organized. We're going to fight damn hard to win."

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