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Conor Cruise O' Brien and the Northern Ireland conflict: formulating a revisionist position.

Northern policy was central to Conor Cruise O' Brien's politics from the point at which he returned from New York to forge a new career as a member of the revitalized Irish Labour party. This article looks at the thinking behind Conor Cruise O' Brien's views on commemorating the 1916 Easter Rising during his period as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in the Irish coalition government of 1973-77. It begins by reflecting on his attitudes towards the Rising as indicated in his important article 'Embers Easter' of 1966, and moves from there to examine his shifting attitudes towards political violence from his period in Ghana and reflections on the Congo imbroglio and the death of Hammersjold, to his querying of his former liberal commitment to student protests against the Vietnam War which he had initially supported. These positions are reflected too in articles like his arresting and brilliant 'Passion and Cunning' on the politics of William Butler Yeats and in further essays. The life writing in which all of these positions cohere and lend shape to his future vision is the extraordinarily powerful and influential *States of Ireland* (O'Brien, 1972).

Thinking about commemoration was a key component of the northern policy of the 1973 to 1977 Fine Gael-Labour coalition government. Conor Cruise O'Brien played a core role in articulating and shaping a critique of existing governmental commemorative activity. Through the new National Day of Reconciliation, later designated a national Day of Commemoration, which was designed to end all other government commemorative performances is not well known.

Reframing 1916 within St Patrick's Day, as proposed and executed in 1974 was Conor Cruise O' Brien's achievement. This was not a popular success. Despite this it framed the marginalization of Easter 1916 as a site of Irish government commemoration until 2006. The commemorative policy of the Irish government was ideologically linked to wider security policies. As I have written elsewhere, new British counter-insurgency policies in Ulster after 1975 facilitated new popular mobilization and new commemorative practices there as republicans insisted on utilizing the pantheon of Irish commemorative dates.

Though commemoration is 'protean, fugitive and resistant to state control, the lesson of the mid- nineteen-seventies is that Irish governments could, through the state apparatus, partially refashion public norms in relation to commemoration'. This was 'the Cruiser's' achievement. This was not possible in 'the north'. Though the policies of the Irish government as formulated by O' Brien were articulated in the language of not encouraging northern violence, their real success was in reshaping the public culture of the 'little platoon' of the Irish state .

Irish governments sought to commemorate the origins of the Irish state in the rebellion of 1916 in Dublin which proclaimed an Irish republic, but found that the illegal or 'subversive' Irish Republican Army wished to claim that same point of origin as a platform for a violent campaign to end the partition of Ireland. The stubborn actuality of partition, the continued existence and revival of various manifestations of the IRA (English, 2003; Bishop and Mallie, 1988; Hanley, 2010; Bowyer Bell, 1997), and after 1969 protracted armed conflict in Northern Ireland, successively complicated and politicised sovereign Ireland's desire to celebrate or commemorate the past like other western democracies. Commemoration became a site of contestation for the meanings of republicanism and its ownership, both within government and among historians in Ireland. Debate about dealing with the commemoration of the rebellion of 1916 at that time became a key moment in the attempted revision of official Irish state nationalism it led to a hardening of the distinction between state and nation, and was one component of repressive legislation that the Irish government introduced against the contagion of northern violence.

Who owned republican legacies, memory and cultural capital in Ireland? After the outbreak of renewed violence in Northern Ireland in 1969, and especially after the military campaign of the Provisional IRA began – and particularly when it switched from defending Northern nationalists against attacks by loyalists and special constables in to go on a self-proclaimed national liberation offensive in 1971 - Dublin governments were confronted by a critical question. Why had the 1916 insurrection against British rule been morally and politically correct, whereas the then contemporary campaign of the Provisional IRA was not? Deciding what Northern policy to pursue destabilised the governing Fianna Fail party, led by Taoiseach Jack Lynch. Should the government peacefully support

Northern Ireland Catholics who had been subjected to pogroms in West Belfast, or actively supply them with means of self-defence? Should it prepare for possible military intervention? Disagreement, rivalry and volatility among ministers culminated in ‘the Arms Trial’ (O’Brien, J, 2000; Kelly, 1971; 1999). Government ministers, most notably Charles Haughey, the former Minister for Finance and the son on an Ulster IRA man, were found not guilty of conspiring to import and disseminate arms.

For most of the next two decades Fianna Fail was rent by a faction fight between Lynch’s and Haughey’s supporters, and it did not end when Haughey replaced Lynch as party leader in 1979. The arms crisis and Fianna Fail divisions contributed to the defeat of Lynch’s government in 1973, and its replacement by a new coalition government led by Liam Cosgrave of Fine Gael and Brendan Corish of the Irish Labour party. Within that government Labour’s Conor Cruise O’ Brien, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, which included public broadcasting, became the key ideological critic of the Provisional IRA. As Garret FitzGerald, sought to become principal policy-maker on Northern Ireland as Minister for External Affairs but FitzGerald was a more central guide to northern policy after 1982 than in that seventies coalition where the balance of the cabinet on northern policy did not lie fully with him.

In *States of Ireland*(1972), O’ Brien provided a compelling narrative that defended the Irish state, accepted partition and criticised the irredentist aims of the Provisional IRA and other Irish republicans. The *States of Ireland* argument is a classic articulation of what can now be seen as an ideological counter-insurgency reading of how terror is sustained in sympathetic ideological waters. O’Brien’s argument was that wider Irish nationalist and in particular republican cultures were a common cultural and ideological ground.

Irish citizens or politicians could not simply proclaim that they did not support the IRA, or simply condemn the actions of militant Irish republicans in the IRA. If, as O’ Brien argued, the whole public political culture of the republic was irredentist, more strenuous efforts were required to remake it. . The wider Irish nationalist and in particular republican culture was a common space, one shared by the Irish state, wider Irish nationalism and the Provisional IRA. To condemn the actions of militant

Irish republicans in the IRA, while ignoring the fact that the public political culture of the republic was irredentist, was not good enough. A cultural transformation in the public sphere and in hearts and minds was required. So Conor argued.

According to this argument central to the Republic's political culture was what O' Brien called the cult of 1916, the glorification of the rebellion that had been hailed as the foundational moment of the Irish republic and its charter document '*Poblacht na hEireann The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the people of Ireland*, The proclamation contained certain fundamental statements about the nature of Irish historical experience. It proclaimed Ireland to be an ancient nation, regaining its freedom from a hostile power. It declared the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, 'to be sovereign and indefeasible'. Further it claimed 'the long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished that right, nor can such a right ever be extinguished'. It declared, most importantly for the revisionist focus of O' Brien, that in every generation the Irish people had asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty – 'six times during the last three hundred years they have asserted it in arms' (O'Callaghan, 2017), and justified the republic 'in the name of God and of the dead generations' through which Ireland was entitled to reclaim its 'old tradition of nationhood' (de Paor, 1997).

According to multiple governmental actions, the Proclamation was the founding charter of the state – officially named the Republic of Ireland in 1949. But the Provisional IRA and other 'subversive' republican formations also drew their political lineage from the Proclamation and sought to challenge British rule in Northern Ireland and the ownership of republican memory in the Irish state on that basis. The IRA claimed to be the keepers of the republican flame, which like a phoenix could always rise from its own ashes, and like the 1916 insurrectionaries did not require a prior democratic mandate.

The early years of the Troubles increasingly challenged the stability of the Irish state, existing improved relations with Great Britain, and raised again questions about the price of order and security

within the achieved Irish state, as opposed to the bloodily evoked potential future of the Irish nation. The coalition government of Liam Cosgrave in 1973 partly represented continuity with the Lynch and O' Malley axis within Fianna Fail, but Conor Cruise O' Brien's presence in cabinet represented a dramatic opportunity to change the public culture of the south in relation to its former shaky republican consensus, at least rhetorically, on the north. As studies of the negotiation and fateful collapse of the Sunningdale agreement make clear Conor Cruise O' Brien did not win all battles in that coalition government, but he may have won in the short term a battle about commemoration. His strongest allies in that coalition appear to have been the more conservative Fine Gael members of the party- Cosgrave himself, Patrick Donegan the Minister for Defence, and Patrick Cooney the Minister for Justice. They took an unsentimental approach to what they viewed as the posturing of 'republican fellow travellers', sneaking regards, armchair republicans, ballad-singing traditionalists and what they viewed as mawkish one- nation fantasists.

O' Brien sought to reframe the terms of debate, with considerable success. As he saw it the issue was whether or not the whole culture required changing if it was not to succumb to the lure of the 'sneaking regards'. i.e. those in the south not prepared to fight with or actively support the Provisional IRA but who were prepared tacitly to wish them well in what they saw as a final stage in the battle to win a thirty-two county Irish republic. For O Brien this broader Irish nationalist culture and its symbols, pieties, commemorations, narratives and fantasies provided the cultural capital and ideological sea in which the northern Provisional IRA campaign could swim. It was this culture that required transformation to prevent atrocities being perpetrated in the name of the Irish people and to safeguard the independence and stability of the independent Irish state to which the IRA presented a fundamental threat since it sought to present itself as the authentic government of the whole island.

O' Brien never fully succeeded in this push for change, but the coalition government arguably accomplished multiple policy initiatives that significantly squeezed the ideological ground on which the IRA stood in the Republic. This policy did not simply grow from O' Brien's talents in communication and public relations. His approach and that of the government recapitulated and refreshed the policy and aims of the Cumann na nGaedheal government during the civil war, and the

Fianna Fail government before and during the World War 2, when the IRA threatened the Fianna Fail government policy of neutrality. Both the Free State governments of the 1920's and the Fianna Fail government of the Second World War years had seen their central object to be the maintenance of independent Ireland ' – ' the state' as they both so lovingly called it .

Both earlier Irish governments had either accepted partition reluctantly, as the elder Cosgrave's government did in 1925 after the failure of the Boundary Commission, or they had looked to end partition through diplomacy with the British government, not through supporting violent insurrection. The threat for the Free State government in the 1920's had been the republicans under De Valera who would not accept the terms of the Treaty of 1921 which circumscribed Ireland's sovereignty; The threat to Fianna Fail in government during the Second World War came from former republican 'comrades', banned and designated subversives, who sought to undermine neutrality as part of a wider aim which was to end partition. The primary aim of the 1970's cross-party governmental cohort lead by Cosgrave was the preservation of and maintenance of the 'little platoon' of the independent Irish state. The new threat came from northern violence and the Provisional IRA.

The public political debate on new ways of commemorating, or rather restraining commemorating the rebellion or Rising of 1916, began with the Labour TD Michael O' Leary's parliamentary question while Fianna Fail were still in power. In February 1973 in a 'Memo for Government from the Minister for Defence, the new coalition government minister Paddy Donegan wrote supporting a National Day of Reconciliation. Conor Cruise O' Brien responded in April 1973 by proposing St Patrick's Day as the Day of Reconciliation, endorsed by the Department of Defence in April 1973. On June 19 O' Brien wrote to Cosgrave 'so that the government should have an early opportunity of considering the desirability of substituting a single day of national reconciliation for the various ceremonies that are now held. I have asked Paddy Donegan to arrange to have the matter submitted to the government as soon as possible.' [ref needed] The Donegan agreement with O' Brien preceded the consultation with Cosgrave. It was 'recommended that there would be only one day on which the state would participate in public commemorations, and the ceremonies were to include church services and two minutes silence for those who died for Ireland and for the victims of civil

strife in Ireland as well as prayers for peace and reconciliation between Irish people of different traditions.’¹ The cabinet approved these proposals on 10 July 1973. The Minister for Defence Passy Donegan was ‘considering a parade of unarmed soldiers’ and the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs Conor Cruise O’ Brien, favoured a purely religious ceremony.²

The new National Day of Reconciliation was publicised by a press release on 15 August 1973. Donegan wrote to O’ Brien, ‘I am wondering what department should take on the task of looking after the matter from now on. It doesn’t seem quite appropriate that the Department of Defence should be actively concerned except as regards military participation in the ceremonies’.³ He included a list of suggestions for the conduct of the proposed St Patrick’s Day event. The main event should take place at the Garden of Remembrance with some military ceremony, a reception in Dublin Castle. However, in a reply of 7 November 1973 Cruise O’ Brien argued against state participation at either the Garden of Remembrance or at Arbour Hill.⁴ O’ Brien wrote to Liam Cosgrave in January 1974 suggesting that the Garden of Remembrance was seen as ‘exclusively Republican and Gaelic’, and would exclude many who commemorated Irishmen who fell serving Great Britain in World War One. He also viewed a separate event at Arbour Hill as a departure from the idea of one common day.

The Garden of Remembrance at the top of O’ Connell Street in Dublin was a memorial garden specifically dedicated to those who had died in the fight for Irish freedom. Arbour Hill was a military barracks where the executions of the leaders of 1916 by British crown forces under martial law were annually commemorated by the Irish army. Almost all state commemorations of 1916, including the large-scale jubilee commemorations of 1966, had been under the direction of the Minister of Defence, because the Irish Army, Oglaiġ na hEireann were seen as core to them. Nicholas Simms, son of the Church of Ireland Bishop of Armagh and O’ Brien’s son-in-law through marriage to his daughter Fidelma, was appointed as his assistant in this and other matters. Dr Buchanan, the Church of Ireland Bishop of Dublin raised with Simms the question of the British Legion Commemoration Sunday in November, and asked whether Cruise O’ Brien would be prepared to meet with British Legion leaders before finalising any plans. Buchanan added ‘I think it would be right to attempt to solve this problem. Otherwise we- the bishops - might only be able to give a partial

consent'.⁵ Cruise O' Brien replied that this would not be a problem. He was primarily concerned with 'state participation'.

In February 1974 O' Brien proposed establishing a committee for the coordination of the new arrangements under the chairmanship of an officer of the Department of the Taoiseach and with representatives from the Government Information Services, possibly including the head of the Government Information Service Muiris MacConghail,⁶ and the Department of Defence, as well as Nicholas Simms. He also suggested that President Childers might give an address in St Patrick's Cathedral for the first commemorative occasion. On 4 March Liam Cosgrave wrote to Cardinal Conway, Roman Catholic Primate of All Ireland, Archbishop Simms, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, the President of the Methodist Church, the Chief Rabbi, the Head of the Society of Friends referring to the decision as to a Day of National Commemoration and offering the suggestion that services on that day might include a special prayer, followed by a silence for all who lost their lives as a result of war or civil strife. The Taoiseach also notified them that President Childers would broadcast a message on radio and television on St Patrick's Day. The file simply states that the 'response from the church leaders was favourable'.⁷ The Department drafted the speech for President Childers and he delivered it on St Patrick's Day 1974. It included the statement 'This year- and for the future- you are being asked to make St Patrick's Day a Day of National Commemoration – the day on which we remember all who died for Ireland and all victims of civil strife in Ireland'. The purpose of the National day of Reconciliation had been to stop the drip-feed of annual commemorations of the militant strain in Irish nationalism; the cult of commemorating republican violence had been that which the amalgamations had sought to close down.

In a memo dated 16 February 1978 the civil servant Frank Murray wrote: 'It can be argued that if the state does not commemorate the anniversary of 1916 at Easter, by default it allows the initiative in this matter to fall into the hands of subversive organisations, particularly Provisional Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA'. He also however minuted in a contradictory vein: 'The existence of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland is a constraint which has to receive consideration in determining policy on matters such as this'. In defence of the latter view Murray cited a recent

conversation he had with Sean O hUigin of the Department of Foreign Affairs. O hUigin had said that in his recent meeting with William Craig the latter had expressed the view that the Irish government did not appear to be interested in reconciliation in Northern Ireland. There was also reference to the Taoiseach's call for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.⁸ In the circumstances the civil servants advised suitable military ceremonies at the GPO and the Garden of Remembrance without a military parade or a march past. They further advised that there be 'no announcement as to next year'. The summary on file states that commemorations at Easter were held up to and since 1971, consisting of a military parade and a march past. For 1972 and 1973 it was alleged that 'due to heavy demands on the Defence Forces, mainly because of security duties' the parade and March past were not held. It claims that 'a suitable military assembly at the GPO and the Garden of Remembrance were held on Easter Sunday in these years'.⁹

1976 marked the end of the IRA ceasefire, the removal of special category status, a steady gain for emerging Irish government policy against the IRA, and a significant further shift in the Irish government's attitude towards the commemoration of the Easter Rising. This went in tandem with a new initiative by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs to push the Washington Irish Embassy to further marginalise Noraid, and set up the Four Horsemen political initiative (McLoughlin, date). The Irish government's policy directions were bound up in their post- Sunningdale interpretation of the Northern Ireland problem, and their position in relation to the commemoration of 1916 remained central.

In January and February of 1976 the Irish government's case against the British government was brought again to the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg.¹⁰ 1976 was the second worst year of the Troubles, if intensity is measured by the number of people killed. The Provisional IRA had arranged a spectacle for Gaughan's funeral and sought to model Frank Stagg's funeral on 25 February 1976 in the same manner, which again challenged the Irish government. The previous year had appeared to indicate to certain key southern figures in the leadership cadre of the Provisional IRA that the talks between the British government and the IRA might lead to some form of British withdrawal.¹¹ Viewed retrospectively these were unrealistic expectations, though recently available

material from the Duddy archive indicates how far the ‘southern’ leadership of the Provisional movement was prepared to go in order to secure a settlement. Retrospectively their hopes look naive. After Sunningdale’s failure in 1974 a variety of British government options had been considered, including withdrawal (FitzGerald, 2001). The failure of the Convention, reasonably clear at the beginning of 1976, represented the closure of any possibility of a renewed devolved administration in the medium term. The Gardiner Report, published in January 1975, had opposed the continuation of special category status in the prisons. By March 1976 the new prison regime was in place in Northern Ireland, ending special category status. The ending of internment in 1975 paved the way for Diplock courts and convictions without jury trial.

On 25 April 1976 the Provisional Sinn Fein staged an Easter commemoration march in Dublin on the sixtieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. This was a clear challenge to the authority of the Irish government. Banning the march testified to the coalition government’s intention to cease any ambiguities in relation to the IRA. Addressing the crowd from a ‘tri-colour covered lorry platform’, Daithi O’Conaill said that ‘those who set out to defile Easter Week merit nothing but contempt’. He said Britain had spurned two opportunities to establish a lasting peace and had sent ‘professional assassins into South Armagh’. Liam Cosgrave pursued a policy towards the IRA that built on the banning of their 1916 commemoration in that year. The murder of the British Ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs¹² and Judith Cook, killed by a land mine as they left the residence at Glencairn in Sandyford on 21 July 1976, on top of the challenge of the Easter performance in the streets of Dublin, intensified Irish government determination to disassociate the Irish state from militant republicans.¹³

¹ Memo on D/T 2010/53/255, NAID.

² On a related file Diarmaid Ferriter has found evidence that O’ Brien’s objection to the unarmed soldiers was that their appearance could appear to indicate that the IRA was the army of the Republic. (See Ferriter, 2012: 233).

³ Paddy Donegan to Conor Cruise O’ Brien, 21 August 1973, D/T 2010/53/255, NAID.

⁴ Minister for Posts and Telegraphs to Minister of Defence, 7 November 1973, D/T 2010/53/255, NAID.

⁵ Most Rev Dr Buchanan quoted by Nicholas Simms, 2010/53/255, NAID.

⁶ For the appointment of the talented Irish television director and intellectual Muiris MacConghail as Director of the Government Information Bureau on the suggestion of Joan FitzGerald see O' Brien, C. *Memoir*, (2000: 347).

⁷D/T 2010/53/255, NAID.

⁸ Briefing paper by Murray, February 1978, D/T 2010/53/255, DAID.

⁹ Review of commemorations, D/T 2010/53/255. NAID. Key civil servants at this time were Dermot Nally, Wally Kirwan, Murray and Richard Stokes at the Department of the Taoiseach. In the Department of Foreign Affairs their counterparts were Sean Donlon and Noel Dorr, and later at that level Michael Lillis. Some spoke at the Sunningdale and Anglo –Irish Agreement Witness statement seminars held in University College Dublin. See too the Centre for Contemporary British History , Institute of Historical Research London Witness Seminars on British Policy in Northern Ireland , 11 February 1993.

¹⁰ *Ireland against the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Annexes 1 and 2 to the report of the European Commission of Human Rights, adopted 25 January 1976)* Strasbourg p. 288.

¹¹ It also clearly marked the effective end of the so-called old style southern command. But the notion that more concessions and naïveté were displayed by that older Southern leadership among the IRA has been shown to be inaccurate (White, 2006).

¹² For Irish government reaction to the killings see 'British Ambassador to Ireland- assassination, 2/7/76-18/10/78', D/T 2006/133/708, NAID.

¹³ Emergency Powers Act 1976 file, D/T 2006/133/580, NAID. This extensive file is a vital source for policy in this year and shows how the Easter commemorations, the issues of cross-border incursions, the murder of the British ambassador, and the perceived requirement for greater security, the near-constitutional crisis and the resignation of the president Cearbhal O Dalaigh are connected.

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