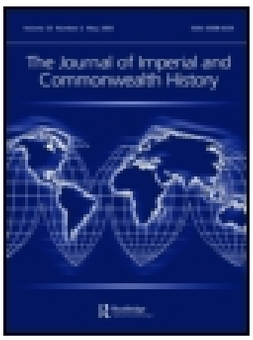

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The Northern Ireland Conflict and Colonial Resonances

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly disagreements over the applicability of a colonial framework to Ireland's relationship with Britain have neglected how political actors perceived or used ideas about colonialism and imperialism. This article argues that how such ideas resonated and were used in the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' is as worthy of consideration as their validity. It examines how militant republicans conceived of Northern Ireland as having a colonial status and identified it as fitting into a broader pattern of decolonisation, seeking links with other anti-colonial forces outside Europe. It considers how a section of British politicians used the colonial framework to argue that British withdrawal was inevitable, viewing unionists as a settler community beyond the boundaries of Britishness. The dominant British discourse that opposed this framed self-determination differently, rejecting the utility of colonialism as an explanation of the dynamic of the conflict. When faced with charges of colonialism abroad, however, the rebuttal offered by those articulating this discourse had to be tailored to a suspicious international audience; the arguments available to British diplomats were narrowed by Britain's colonial past. To overcome this, the unionist cause was omitted and select Irish voices within constitutional nationalism were promoted. Colonial analogies and comparisons shaped overall thinking on Northern Ireland, whether they were valid or not.

KEYWORDS

Northern Ireland; colonialism; imperialism; rhetoric; political identity

Scholars have had lengthy and significant disagreements over the applicability of a colonial framework to the understanding of Ireland's past. They are most divergent on the question of how to conceive of the unionist community. Richard Bourke portrays imperialism as a mirage; as it 'rose in the minds of its various critics to the heights of omnicompetence, it disappeared from the field of reality as a definite plan of action associated with a specific set of agents.' Instead, 'when the ghostly remnant is allowed to bow out, it is the fact of a million Protestant unionists which remains as a solid political

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reality'.[1] The political scientist Brendan O'Leary, by contrast, sees this group as a legacy of settler colonialism. He claims the sixteenth and seventeenth century plantations of Protestants 'shackled Ireland more firmly to London governments' and 'the settlers' descendants came to regard Ulster (and Ireland) as their home', making them 'no different from settler communities throughout the world'.[2] The Acts of Union in 1800, O'Leary argues, produced a shift from external colonialism to internal colonialism, with Ireland brought into the core political system but not fully integrated. Social policies aimed at 'the equalisation of the status of the natives and settlers' took most of the nineteenth century, but the 'natives' responded 'by demanding powers akin to the self-governing colonies'. For Northern Ireland, he sees colonialism as lasting until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, first enduring 'reconfigured settler rule' with the unionist-controlled Northern Ireland government from 1921 to 1972 and then direct rule by Westminster.[3]

Many Irish historians position themselves between these two poles, acknowledging the dominating influence of Britain in configuring political structures in Ireland on thoroughly self-interested lines, but observing a greater complexity than colonialism's explanatory power is thought to offer. Kevin Kenny observes that the always/never a colony positions are not much use to the historian, because both 'posit some ideal colonial form against which the Irish case can be judged as either adequate or deficient, but no such form existed in historical practice'.[4] Keith Jeffery remarks on the 'paradox that Ireland was both "imperial" *and* "colonial"', that it 'was part of the metropolitan core of the empire, supplied many of its soldiers, settlers and administrators' as well as producing a political tradition in opposition to it; the Irish people 'both sustained and undermined the British imperial system'.[5] Vincent Comerford writes that the historical record offers 'more than enough' to 'sustain the imagery and rhetoric of dispossession, grievance and persecution on the one hand, and of settlement, cultivation and siege on the other', but that: 'The definition of unionists as the descendants of the planters and settlers of earlier centuries collapses in the face of even a modestly sophisticated examination of the question of ancestry.'[6] Sean Connolly finds that Ireland was 'too physically close and too similar to Great Britain to be treated as a colony, but too separate and too different to be a region of the metropolitan centre; inheriting an undoubted division between settler and native, yet without the racial distinctions that could make these absolute'.[7] This final argument in particular is dismissed by O'Leary as a mix of 'equivocations and significant concessions'.[8]

Such differences in part accord with the inclination of the social scientist to essentialise, contrasting with the historian's predilection for seeing inconvenient evidence as vital context. To this can be added a consciousness of how these narratives sustain conceptions of the Northern Ireland conflict – there is here a specific historian's distaste for the moulding of several centuries of the past into a neat, moral story. Amidst this dispute, relatively little analysis has been offered on how protagonists in that conflict used ideas about colonialism and

imperialism. While political scientists have offered substantial consideration of Marxist analyses of the conflict that make reference to imperialism, and have also produced a comparative scholarship that considers similarities between Northern Ireland and other contemporary conflicts, there has been insufficient attention dedicated to those moments when protagonists in the Northern Ireland conflict drew such comparisons themselves or to the consequent effects such moments had.[9] This article attempts to shift the focus beyond assessing the truth-value of comparisons based on a colonial framework and to argue instead that how ideas resonated and were used is as worthy of consideration. Richard English writes that in Northern Ireland 'political theory is constantly chased, and often mauled, by engaged political practitioners'.[10] Rather than ignoring or chastising this, the present article traces the process and its consequences.

It considers protagonists' responses to the outbreak of the Northern Ireland conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s, noting the significance of the temporal proximity to British decolonisation elsewhere in the world. It examines how militant republicans conceived of Northern Ireland as having a colonial status and how, as the first decade of the conflict progressed, they increasingly sought links with other anti-colonial forces beyond Europe. It also considers how a section of British politicians used the colonial framework to argue that withdrawal from Northern Ireland was inevitable. The dominant discourse that opposed this framed self-determination differently to reject the utility of colonialism as an explanation of the dynamic of the conflict and instead emphasise the legitimacy of unionist identity. It is found that within that dominant group key individuals such as the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson still deployed their own colonial analogies in private, viewing unionists in Northern Ireland as possessing a similar mentality to white settlers in Southern Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe). This analogy led to an overestimation of the likelihood of a unilateral declaration of independence occurring in Northern Ireland. When the flawed nature of this thinking was exposed, it marked a settling of British understandings of the conflict in Northern Ireland as a peculiar place apart, with the British state as a neutral participant trapped there.

The final part of the article finds that this understanding could be sustained at home but not abroad, where Britain's imperial past meant that claims of neutrality or benevolence were unlikely to be heard sympathetically. Britain had to modify its case, this time emphasising the legitimacy of constitutional nationalism and the Republic of Ireland state. Tellingly, claims about Northern Irish unionists' British identity were left out of the narrative presented abroad, being judged less convincing to outsiders. Dissenting views on whether Northern Ireland could be classed as colonial thus shaped the way that the conflict was presented by those involved, even when a colonial framework was explicitly rejected. Comparison was a useful tool for establishing legitimacy and an unavoidable part of political discourse.

Irish Republicanism and Anti-colonialism

Irish republicans consistently presented their militancy with reference to a colonial framework. The usage preceded the outbreak of the Northern Ireland conflict and was apparent in both of the IRAs that emerged from the split of the winter of 1969-1970. That split was borne of the communal violence of August 1969 but had its roots in divergent responses to the failure of the earlier 1956–62 IRA Border Campaign. In the 1960s, the IRA's Chief of Staff Cathal Goulding and others sought a new approach oriented towards conditions in the Republic of Ireland, noting the difficulty of appealing to a people who failed to see the relevance of partition to their daily lives. Drawing on previous inter-war initiatives from social republicans, the decade saw a period of engagement with sections of the Irish left and discussion of a broader approach in meetings of the Wolfe Tone Society – initiated by republicans to commemorate the bicentenary of the 1798 rebel's birth. This marked a new prominence to claims that the Republic of Ireland was a neo-colony. Under the leadership of Seán Lemass, the Republic of Ireland phased out protectionism, keenly seeking foreign capital investors and preparing to join the European Economic Community. This allowed republicans the opportunity to make arguments that broadened their notion of sovereignty; the dominant party Fianna Fáil were 'local managers of imperialism' and Britain was 'increasingly anxious to weld Ireland more tightly to her side as a secure neo-colony'.[11] Neo-colonialism was a useful concept for republicans seeking to widen the appeal of their struggle. The logic followed that independence had not been achieved in the Republic of Ireland either, seemingly providing the basis for a campaign relevant to the whole of the island. The IRA could seek a broad national liberation front, combining with socialist and trade union groups to rid the whole island of British influence. In the northern context, this meant participation in the civil rights movement's campaign against discrimination towards the Catholic community.[12] The concept of neo-colonialism offered new opportunities.

Traditionalist republicans by contrast feared that this approach side-lined the IRA's commitment to military action against the formal control exerted by Britain in Ulster. The violence in Belfast in August 1969 seemingly confirmed this. Seven were killed in Belfast and roughly 1500 Catholic families were forced from their homes in what became a defining moment for Irish republicanism. A narrative emerged in the nationalist community that the IRA was inactive during the violence and that locals had responded by painting 'I Ran Away' on gable walls. This became an important feature of the traditionalists' critique.[13] The trigger for a split in the IRA came in December 1969 as the IRA General Army Convention voted in favour of the policy of a national liberation front with radical leftists and to drop parliamentary abstentionism. At Sinn Féin's ard fheis (party conference) the following month, ending abstentionism received a majority of votes but not the two-thirds proportion required.

The IRA and Sinn Féin split into Goulding's Officials and the new Provisionals. Ultimately, the Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Féin became the dominant republican movement, with the Official IRA going on indefinite, conditional ceasefire in May 1972 to, as Hanley and Millar write, 'avoid descent into full-scale sectarian civil war'.[14] The Officials continued with their broad-front anti-imperialist strategy and engaged in sporadic acts of violence, but lost significance.

Stephen Howe states that 'The first uses of the colonial model for Northern Ireland after 1969 did not come from the Provisional IRA or its close supporters – they had, after all, just broken away from the left-wing coalition-building 'anti-imperialist' strategy of Cathal Goulding and Roy Johnston.'[15] While not the first to articulate a colonial model, it was nevertheless an important facet of Provisional republicanism's perception of the situation. In retrospective interviews, leading figures in the new organisation traced their anti-colonialism back to the 1940s and asserted that it led to their participation in the 1956–62 campaign. Seán Mac Stíofáin, the first Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA, told sociologist Robert White of his wish to avoid being conscripted into fighting colonial insurgencies for the British army when facing compulsory national service, having been born in England. Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, the first President of Provisional Sinn Féin, similarly described his politics as being of the anti-colonial era following the Second World War and lamented that 'our question isn't finished and all these people have passed us by'.[16]

There is a risk with interviews looking back decades later that the subjects overstate the consistency of their views, read subsequent influences backwards, or have honed particularly useful arguments that strengthen their position and then incorporated them into their narratives. More precise insights that reflect the context of specific moments in the conflict can be gained from examining the publications regularly produced by the two main organs of the movement: the Dublin-based *An Phoblacht* (The Republic) and the Belfast-based *Republican News*. These papers were edited by prominent republicans and carried messages from the movement's leadership. While armed struggle was the focus of Provisional IRA volunteers, rather than propagandising, the papers' contents provided evidence to support their outlook, justifying the violence. In a less top-down sense, they developed over time into a site of debate, with contributions from active IRA members and prisoners. The two papers served as the main source for articulating or debating perspectives within Provisional republicanism and conveyed a strong belief in the colonial dynamic of the conflict they were engaged in.

An Phoblacht was keen from its first issue to defend against the perception that the split was between 'progressives' and mere 'traditionalists': 'While we take our inspiration and experience from the past we are realistic as to what will strengthen the people's will to resist British Imperialism and what will weaken that will. Participation in the institutions designed to frustrate our

people's progress to full freedom is certain to weaken that will to resist.'[17] Expanding on this in its second issue with a critique of the Officials' desire to end abstentionism and of the mainstream Republic of Ireland parties Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the paper declared: 'Some of these groups tell us that they only use the State apparatus as a propaganda machine or as a springboard, from which to jump on to the solid rock of the Republic. Unfortunately for this country all those who got on to the springboard missed the rock in their dive and went down into the morass of Free State Imperialism.'[18] The colonial model was in essence the same for Officials and Provisionals, with both identifying the core problem as formal British control in unionist-dominated Northern Ireland and the neo-colonial character of the Republic. The difference was strategic: the Officials sought to oppose British imperialism through a combination of physical force, the building of a broad-based movement inclusive of left-wing political organisations and by taking parliamentary seats in Irish institutions in order to transform them, while the Provisionals were committed to a rejectionist tradition and prioritised armed struggle.

Irish history dominated early issues of both *An Phoblacht* and *Republican News*, using it to assert the importance of tradition and secure legitimacy for Provisionalism, but this also fitted into the colonial narrative. In May 1971 *An Phoblacht*'s front page featured a photograph of British troops in Dublin in 1916 side-by-side with one of troops in Belfast in 1971. The headline read 'The same enemy, the same declaration, the same vows'. Below followed the text of the Easter Proclamation and images of its signatories, offering an endorsement of violent action against an occupying force.[19] *Republican News*, meanwhile, contained prominent and extensive pieces across multiple issues on the United Irishmen of the 1790s. Particular emphasis was given to Theobald Wolfe Tone, described as 'the Irish Separatist par excellence', but a regular column titled 'Protestant patriots' offered biographical pieces which singled out numerous Presbyterian radicals to demonstrate an egalitarian and non-sectarian republicanism.[20] There was a clear message in the paper that denied any sectarian dynamic to the movement's violence and constructed the conflict as a straightforward confrontation between Irish and British forces, with the latter as an imposing imperialist entity that fostered sectarianism to keep Ireland divided.

From this followed a positioning of Ireland within a pattern of divide and rule elsewhere. The February 1971 issue of *Republican News* stated: 'the whole source of our trouble has been the coercion of Ireland by a once great power. A country that knew of no greater method of splitting a country in two than by creating a division in her people.' India, Cyprus and Palestine were given as other examples of Britain's history of partition, while South Africa and Rhodesia were added as places of conflict that would not 'be settled until the people of that country take control of their own destiny'. The key, the author argued, was to transcend division and heed Wolfe

Tone's injunction to unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter against British rule.[21] To depart from this focus on the British as the enemy and sole source of division was to vacillate on the most important principle. When *Republican News* warned of the dangers of allowing elected politicians to negotiate with 'the most able and accomplished political schemers the world has ever had to witness', it cited not just Ireland's partition but also Cyprus: 'EOKA beat the British army to a standstill yet those who negotiated on her behalf have left Cyprus a torn and divided island.'[22] Cyprus was used to warn of the dangers of placing hope in either the Irish government or the constitutional nationalist Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), whose willingness to co-operate with Britain threatened to compromise Irish nationality. In September 1972, *An Phoblacht's* front page detailed a series of sectarian killings by loyalist paramilitaries in Belfast and used the example of Cyprus to suggest British involvement. It argued that at a point where EOKA were winning, the British established secret assassination squads which targeted civilians of both communities to increase 'inter-racial hate and strife', thereby forcing the Greek-Cypriot group to reduce its actions against the British army. The article continued that it was 'believed that the Special Assassination Squads, the SAS … has been responsible for some of the seemingly sectarian murders in Belfast'. *An Phoblacht* concluded: 'The British tried this same game of "divide and conquer" in Aden, in Cyprus, in Kenya etc. and succeeded to a certain extent, but in the final analysis the people were the victors and the British had to get out.'[23] The Provisional IRA's newspapers provided its volunteers with colonial analogies that confirmed the necessity and moral rectitude of armed struggle, as well as the deficiencies of other strategies.

This continued as the decade progressed and incorporated more liberation movements. A September 1973 piece on 'the flight from Aden' stated: 'Guerrilla war began in South Yemen in 1966 when the Brits announced that, despite repeated demands for self-determination, expressed peacefully for generations, they would not leave "Aden" until they had established a "stable government"'. The piece celebrated that the British 'were forced to haul down their butcher's rag Union Jack to laughs and jeers from the people they had jack-booted just a short time before'.[24] *Republican News* published an article in March 1976 headlined 'The drums of freedom are beating in Africa'. It asserted that 'the road to armed resistance in Africa has many parallels with the struggle for self-determination now being waged in Ireland'. An anonymous African National Congress member warned that the enemy would do everything to divide and cause confusion, drawing on the help of traitors seeking money and favours from the oppressor. Returning to the theme of betrayal by constitutional nationalism, *Republican News* added: 'Those words could have been taken from a Republican speech attacking the anti-revolutionary SDLP who have aided the British in their war against the Irish Freedom Fighters.' The article quoted Oliver Tambo, President of the ANC: 'Revolution calls for supreme vigilance, organisation and

capacity to sacrifice … Men and women, students, workers, peasants, religious people – all must join in the struggle and find a place in it.' It concluded: 'The words of Tambo, like the words of Connolly and Fanon, Pearse and Torres, Mellows and Guevara, are the words of victory.'[25] The pairing of Irish idols with contemporary African and Latin American revolutionaries illustrates how an omnifarious colonial framework reinforced the pre-existing outlook of republicans on conditions at home. As a *Republican News* article put it in June 1974, 'Ireland was Britain's proving ground' and 'Britain was able to grab and control such a vast empire only by using the same slaughterhouse methods and Machiavellian tricks which had been developed by her in Ireland'.[26] The understanding of colonial conflicts presented in these organs was one that confirmed what republicans felt they already knew from Irish experience, both past and present. It positioned the Provisional IRA as being part of an international struggle, while insisting on the centrality of Ireland.

Escalation and the Inevitability of Withdrawal

The idea that Northern Ireland fitted into a wider colonial context surfaced in British parliamentary debates, albeit controversially and accompanied by much dissent. Speeches predominantly from Labour backbenchers attacked the bipartisan approach of the leadership of both the Conservatives and their own party for failing to recognise the inevitability of British withdrawal. A systematic reading of parliamentary debates offers insight into how the recent experience of decolonisation in Asia and Africa was used as evidence of the inability of the British to sustain a presence in parts of the world where it was held that they did not belong. The dissent was voiced in the House of Commons as a direct challenge to both the Conservative government and the Labour leadership, reaching its height during key votes on security policy. The leaderships of both parties, meanwhile, sought to contest this colonial analogy, arguing that Northern Ireland was a different case from recent decolonisation and that an abandonment of it would lead to chaos.

The rise in violence over the course of 1970 and 1971 prompted expectations amongst some British politicians that the public in Great Britain would not tolerate the deployment of troops for long. The Provisional IRA killed its first British soldier in February 1971 and by mid-July a total of eleven had died in Northern Ireland, with the execution of three off-duty Royal Highland Fusiliers on 9 March having particular impact.[27] It was anticipated that the pain of soldiers' deaths would lead to a building domestic pressure for withdrawal. This increasingly led politicians at Westminster to engage in arguments about the relevance of withdrawals elsewhere. On 5 August 1971, former Foreign Secretary and Labour MP Michael Stewart reflected on the descent into violence and warned that 'before long the public in this country will say that this cannot go on any longer'. The British, he thought, were 'going down a road

of blood that leads nowhere' and this led him to the conclusion that there could 'be no solution of this problem except in the context of a united Ireland'.[28] Conservative backbencher Angus Maude responded:

> Because this has happened in Cyprus, in Aden, in Palestine, and we have got used to it in the context of the colonial situation, it is only too easy—as he did—to draw a parallel and say that this is a similar situation. This is not a similar situation. This is not a case of occupying a colony with the Army in the midst of a hostile population, or even of a hostile majority.

Maude emphasised that Northern Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom and this was because the majority were in favour of the union.[29] The response was a typical one to the suggestion that withdrawal was Britain's best option; he denied that Northern Ireland had any colonial character and emphasised the will of the majority of the region, dismissing those who saw the partition of Ireland as illegitimate. He presented the principle of consent as the core argument against any radical constitutional change; Northern Ireland alone would decide its relationship with Great Britain. As Paul Dixon has argued, this commitment formed the basis of a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland adhered to by both Conservative and Labour governments throughout the conflict.[30] It framed self-determination around the boundaries of Northern Ireland, rejecting a colonial dimension. It did not, however, go uncontested and for significant portions of the first decade of violence its maintenance was not guaranteed.

This unwillingness to change Northern Ireland's status against the wishes of the unionist majority prompted Labour MP Richard Crossman to draw on the examples of Palestine and Cyprus in rejecting the bipartisan line. Crossman was a former minister in the previous Labour government and had been a pro-Zionist critic of the Labour government's policy towards Palestine in the 1940s. He argued that in Palestine the British government gave the 'terrorists' what they had denied constitutionalists, 'with the result that the whole tradition of Israeli politics is now based on the assumption that in international affairs words are not listened to. It is action on which states are founded and action is what leads to beginnings.' He extended this to Cyprus as well: 'the Jews would not have got their State without the terrorists murdering … Cyprus would not have got as far as it did if it had not been for the terrorists.' The lesson was clear: 'They knew the British Government never conceded to reasonable sensible people but conceded only when the heat was put on.' Crossman argued that the best way to help republican paramilitaries in their cause was to 'go on saying that the subject of the boundary is not to be discussed'; if the boundary was not up for discussion, he argued, 'then the terrorists are justified in getting it changed by force'.[31] In reply, Lord Balniel, Conservative Minister of State for Defence, spoke of his own military service in Palestine and remarked, 'there is a big difference in that in those countries there was not a democratically-elected government'. Northern Ireland's government, by

contrast, was secured by universal adult suffrage. Crossman replied with a rejection of partition: 'This is not a natural state of any kind at all. It is an artificial political product created to destroy political rights and to maintain one group of people in permanent power. By its very essence it denies every principle of democracy and always has from the time this House of Commons created it.' He called for the British government to 'get out as fast as we can'.[32] Crossman's depiction of the experience in Palestine focussed entirely on the Jewish cause and ignored the existence of Palestinian Arabs. Mirroring this, his proposal for Ireland ignored the existence of unionists. When pressed to acknowledge them as a factor, his reply dismissed their aspirations and focussed on Britain's responsibility for creating Northern Ireland.

Crossman's arguments for withdrawal were not rooted in sympathy for Irish nationalists. He echoed a common sentiment in Great Britain that the Irish should be left to confront each other. In March 1972, following the suspension of Stormont and the introduction of direct rule, Crossman told parliament: 'If the Irish are left with the delusion that they can have the convenience of having us in Northern Ireland taking all the blame and all the kicks and paying for it forever, they will never do anything to settle it. Southern Ireland sits pretty without any settlement.' 'The Northern Irish', meanwhile, 'can go on being themselves in their very unattractive way as long as we let them.' If withdrawal was announced for 'the end of the year, come what may', however, they 'would begin to think sensibly'.[33]

By contrast, the leader of the Labour party, Harold Wilson, declared in September 1971 that he rejected 'the facile, so-called solution that Britain, and in particular British troops, should withdraw and leave the two embattled factions to fight it out, or, as too many are saying, to kill one another'. Referring to India and Pakistan, Wilson said he was worried that 'the crude doctrine that Britain should withdraw and let the bloodbath follow' was 'becoming an instinctive reaction to the Northern Ireland problem', asking 'How often must we tell them that this is not a quarrel on our doorstep even? It is within our house, within our national family.'[34] This thoroughly unionist sentiment and its consideration of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom was not, however, typical of Wilson's unfolding position and he was not committed to keeping that family intact. In November he outlined a fifteen-point, fifteen-year plan for a united Ireland which included the entry of the Republic of Ireland into the Commonwealth and the adoption of an oath of allegiance (the latter a since dismantled element of the 1921 settlement which had contributed to the outbreak of the Irish Civil War). This was an unlikely scenario both because of deep hostility to these provisions in the Republic and because Wilson insisted that it could only occur with the consent of the population of Northern Ireland, a majority of which were unionists. It was also predicated on violence ceasing first and 'the men of violence' being 'destroyed or compelled to retire'.[35] While it differed from the Conservative party's consistent support for the

union, it still shared the assumption that withdrawal would lead to tremendous violence.

The Labour party's spokesman on Northern Ireland, Merlyn Rees, also dismissed Crossman's view 'that the only way to force people in Ulster to face up to their responsibilities … is for us to pull out'.[36] When four years later Crossman's diaries were serialised after his death, Rees, now Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, looked back on the call for withdrawal with great contempt. He depicted it in his own diaries as the glibness of an aloof bourgeois intellectual that had no sympathy for working people: 'I'm sure he would have got a first, or a double first, or even a treble first, for the careful ebullient purple passages he had written. The only trouble is it would have been absolute balls in carrying it out … '.[37] More publicly, Rees acknowledged in November 1972 that many saw Northern Ireland 'in colonialist terms', but the 'fundamental fact that they fail to see is that the Irish Government and the political parties in the South are not seeking unification on the same terms or in the same way as the IRA'.[38] Far from 'sitting pretty', as Crossman had put it, militant republicanism was a serious threat for the Irish state. In March 1973 Rees insisted 'that all the political leadership in the South faces the fact that if there were a premature withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland there could well be a bloodbath in Belfast that could easily rebound on all of us'. He asked the Conservative Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, whether he agreed that it was dangerous in such circumstances to make comparisons with Algeria, Cyprus and Palestine. Whitelaw replied that he was 'bound to agree entirely' and that 'comparisons of any sort with events in Northern Ireland on the whole are perhaps unwise'.[39]

The dominant trend at Westminster was to reject the colonial analogy and to assert Northern Ireland's unique nature, pointing to the Republic of Ireland government's opposition to the IRA as proof that the conflict was more complex than the simple denial of national self-determination that militant republicans claimed it to be. The Labour and Conservative frontbenches maintained bipartisanship and continued to emphasise the need for consent from the Northern Ireland population for any constitutional arrangements. When the Northern Ireland parliament was prorogued in March 1972 after unionists refused the transfer of security powers to Westminster, this shifted to mutual support for the restoration of devolution in a revised form inclusive of nationalist representatives.

In June 1973, there was an election for a new Northern Ireland Assembly and the Conservative government pressed for the formation of a power-sharing executive with an all-Ireland institution for co-operation across the border. This followed with the Sunningdale Agreement in December 1973 and a Northern Ireland Executive, including ministers from the Ulster Unionist Party, cross-community Alliance and SDLP, took office on the first day of 1974. Even as the negotiations were taking place, some Labour MPs continued to

demand British withdrawal. A fortnight before the Assembly elections took place in June 1973, and during a debate on legislation to allow for the creation of a power-sharing executive, Labour backbencher Eric Heffer remarked: 'Whether it has been Cyprus, Aden, Africa or anywhere else, our troops have had to come home. Our people are getting to the stage of saying, "Our boys must come home. We do not want much more of it."'[40] Gerald Kaufman argued that Ireland was 'the last of Britain's colonial problems'. The British could not suppress terrorism, he argued, because methods 'far more severe than those tried in Algeria will fail in Northern Ireland' and public opinion at home would not tolerate their use.[41] In July 1973, Kaufman told the Commons: 'the sooner we accept that Northern Ireland is simply the last in a series which included Palestine, Aden, British Guiana and Cyprus … the sooner will the British people—my constituents—stop being killed and the sooner will the Irish be able to settle their own problems'.[42] Britain should abandon its part in the conflict because of its outsider status.

That these arguments appeared at a time when the potential for compromise between constitutional nationalism and unionism had not been exhausted demonstrates the potency of memories of decolonisation. The outlook of those British politicians for whom colonial analogies were relevant was fundamentally pessimistic. Rather than accepting the republican case, these supporters of withdrawal proposed a less sympathetic approach of leaving the Irish to solve their own problems even if that meant greater violence. There was little faith in the capacity of Britain to negotiate a compromise. Many of these contributions preceded the Provisional IRA's bombing campaign in England, which began only in March 1973. They reflected a concern about the deaths of British troops, at their height in 1972, and a belief that the British public would not tolerate these much longer. This suggested something of a Vietnam syndrome but the recent pattern of British withdrawals received greater rhetorical emphasis. In 1973, government ministers rejected these arguments because of the evident merits of seeking a compromise between unionists and nationalists to restore devolution. When the open revolt of a section of the unionist community led this to fail the next year, the colonial framework crept into thinking at the highest levels as ministers grappled with the nature of Protestant identity and some concluded that they possessed a settler outlook.

Loyalist Resistance and Settler Analogies

Devolved power sharing between nationalists and unionists was short-lived, failing after five months in office. The February 1974 Westminster general election returned a Labour government but also saw a coalition of anti-Sunningdale unionists take eleven of Northern Ireland's twelve seats. In May, a loyalist general strike led by trade unionists in essential services and backed up by a campaign of paramilitary intimidation led to the collapse of the Northern

Ireland Executive and a return to direct rule from Westminster. During the strike, Prime Minister Harold Wilson delivered an angry televised speech. Highlighting the financial subvention to Northern Ireland, he declared: 'people who benefit from all this now viciously defy Westminster, purporting to act as though they were an elected government … Who do these people think they are?'[43] For some British politicians, including Wilson himself, the experience of decolonisation offered a basis for the answer to his question. The strike enhanced an already present tendency amongst politicians from Great Britain to see unionists in Northern Ireland as outside the boundaries of Britishness.

The Labour government responded to the collapse of power sharing by publicly proposing a Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention, tasking elected representatives with seeking an agreement without involvement from London or Dublin. There was no expectation of this succeeding and the despairing mood prompted analogies with India, Algeria and Rhodesia. In November 1974, the Provisional IRA's killing of twenty-one civilians in two no-warning pub bombings in Birmingham stimulated an even more desperate tone. A week after the attack, the Commons debated the new Prevention of Terrorism Bill. When Labour MP John Lee referenced Lord Mountbatten's 1947 announcement 'that we were going to leave India, like it or not, and, whether or not the Hindus and the Moslems were prepared to accept each other', Conservative MP Patrick Cormack shouted the interruption 'There was a bloodbath.' Pressing on, Lee remarked: 'I have many constituents who have come from Jullundur, Amritsar and Lahore, and so I am not insensitive to the scope and tragedy of what happened. But how much worse it would have been if we had held on in India … The time has come for us to say that we shall depart from Northern Ireland and for the Irish people to work out their own destination.'[44] Another Labour MP, Leo Abse, argued: 'Those who say that this is not a colonial situation are deceiving themselves. It has become increasingly clear that as far as they exist at all the loyalties that come from many in Northern Ireland are to yesterday's Britain, certainly not to today's.' Abse compared unionist opposition to power-sharing with white Rhodesian opposition to majority rule: 'Britain can no longer contain those who flout our contemporary commitment to full parity of esteem for all religious bodies … Those who, like the white Rhodesians, refuse to accept that principle must accept their self-determined destiny and not expect the British people to follow them down their doomed paths.'[45]

In December, Labour MP Tam Dalyell made a number of comparisons with Algeria. He challenged the claim that civil war would follow British withdrawal, quoting Provisional and Official IRA volunteers' as saying they did not think it would happen. He also cited a television interview with Provisional IRA Director of Publicity Dáithí Ó Conaill.[46] Dalyell quoted Ó Conaill's reference to the 'precedent of Algeria' in discussing the potential fate of the unionist population:

'Many of them did opt out, which was a great tragedy, but the major section of the French-Algerian people remained behind, and it is a fact that today they are playing a positive productive role in free Algeria.' Dalyell added, 'To historians of the French Empire, all sorts of faults can be found with the comparison, but the message is clear enough. The Provisional IRA, rightly or wrongly, thinks that it can settle down and play a useful role once the British have gone.'[47] SDLP leader and West Belfast MP Gerry Fitt attacked Dalyell for what he called 'an appalling speech'. Fitt pointed out that the vast majority of French colonialists left Algeria, adding mockingly: 'If someone listens avidly to and accepts as pearls of wisdom the words that fall from the mouth of David O'Connell [Fitt's anglicization], he can be given the wrong impression.' Fitt declared his own desire for the eventual withdrawal of British troops and Irish unification, but said that this required the creation of a climate that would allow it to happen peacefully.[48] The speech did not influence Dalyell, who continued to press the analogy, telling the Commons a fortnight later: 'The exit would be inglorious, but, then, de Gaulle had to make an inglorious exit from Algeria'.[49]

The resonance of colonial analogies followed from a particular reading of the recent past. The sense of inevitability related to the perceived overwhelming power of one or both of two forces: domestic public opinion and anti-colonial resistance. The logic followed that the deaths of British soldiers would not be tolerated by the public and that Irish national self-determination would eventually follow, whether those fighting for it should be viewed with sympathy or not. The unionist community served as an obstacle to a logical progression, much as settler communities had in Africa, and the best way to respond was to deny their Britishness. This was aided by the perception that Northern Ireland was a product of 'divide-and-rule', but it also contained assumptions about the fundamental difference in identity between Northern Irish unionists and the people of Great Britain. Dalyell's Algerian analogies portrayed a scenario in which unionists should assimilate with the rest of Ireland and abandon their settler mentality or leave. For Abse, their Britishness was founded on an exclusivist, illiberal past that Britain had rightly abandoned.

These vocal Labour backbenchers tried and failed to overhaul bipartisan policy and the principle of consent. What they were unaware of was that the leader of their party, also prime minister from February 1974, privately shared their use of a colonial framework despite his public claims to reject it. Harold Wilson's pre-existing antipathy towards unionists at Westminster, who so often voted with the Conservatives during his first administration, swelled with the collapse of Sunningdale. The primacy of parliament was vital in Harold Wilson's conception of Britishness, as can be seen in his 'sponger's speech', and the antagonistic relationship between unionists and the majority at Westminster seemed to him bound to lead to a fundamental break. On the day that the May 1974 loyalist general strike ended, Wilson wrote to his Personal Private Secretary Robert Armstrong. He called for the

drafting of a 'doomsday scenario' in which the unionist community rejected any proposals and launched another general strike. Here he believed the army would be 'virtually powerless to maintain essential services'. Wilson thought that in these circumstances the government should give Northern Ireland dominion status, tapering off financial support and gradually removing British troops. Stating that he was 'affected by Rhodesian negotiations', he suggested cutting off financial support and introducing economic sanctions if the new semi-independent entity failed to maintain civil rights.[50] Wilson's thinking drew from Britain's decolonising template, shifting from his earlier 1971 proposals for a united Ireland within the British Commonwealth to an independent Northern Ireland dominion requiring punishment with Southern Rhodesia-style sanctions. His letter merely called for contingency planning, but imperial precedents preoccupied the British Prime Minister.

In May 1975, the United Ulster Unionist Council won a majority of seats in the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention on a manifesto rejecting power-sharing and all-Ireland institutions. They were able to control decisions on the final Convention report, which was delivered in November 1975 and called for a restoration of devolution to Northern Ireland with majority rule, perpetually excluding nationalists from government. A civil servant committee investigating constitutional options repeatedly rejecting radical changes such as Irish unification, full integration with Great Britain, dominion status and repartition. It instead favoured a reconvening of the Constitutional Convention and the continuation of direct rule if it failed. The Northern Ireland Secretary Merlyn Rees, who argued that the British government did not have the power to impose a solution and should be prepared to wait for Northern Ireland to arrive at one itself, backed the officials.[51] Wilson, who continued to raise the idea of dominion status, then shifted to proposing an all-party conference at Lancaster House, which had been used in the 1950s and 1960s to negotiate the independence of countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda (and which was used in 1979 for the transition from Southern Rhodesia to independent Zimbabwe). Rees insisted that there was 'no analogy with the situation in a colony moving towards independence' and warned that Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher and Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe were too ignorant of Northern Ireland to be safely allowed to deal with its politicians in an all-party setting.[52] Wilson acquiesced and the continuation of indefinite direct rule was announced.

Unionism and Britishness

Those who rejected the colonial analogy were ultimately the strongest influence on British government policy and after Harold Wilson's retirement as Prime Minister in April 1976 there was a decline in comparisons of Northern Irish unionists with white settlers in Algeria and Rhodesia. It was a comparison on

which the subjects themselves were largely silent. Donal Lowry claims that unionists in Northern Ireland were sympathetic to white Rhodesians, sharing 'a recognisably dated variation of British imperial identity'.[53] He depicts Ulster Vanguard leader Bill Craig as a supporter of Southern Rhodesian premier Ian Smith and points to Ian Paisley's *Protestant Telegraph* having defended white settlers there, seeing the British government's treatment of the country as setting a precedent for betrayal. Corresponding with Ulster Unionist Party MP and Grand Master of the Orange Order, Martin Smyth, Lowry found him also to be sympathetic when asked about the fate of white Rhodesians. Smyth noted their 'betrayal' by the British Foreign Office and equated this with the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. For Lowry when set 'in an imperial rather than a domestic context the paradoxes of Ulster's loyalist rebellions seem typical rather than strange. Ulster's Britishness was and remains primarily an imperial, not a metropolitan variety of Britishness.'[54] This is a significant leap, however, from expressions of sympathy (some prompted by Lowry) to proof of a common settler mentality. As Stephen Howe also rightly warns, 'the expressions of solidarity or identification [Lowry] cites are mainly from extreme loyalist currents rather than the mainstream of unionism'.[55]

Mainstream unionism showed little interest in colonial analogies. The Ulster Unionist Party had previously provided the Conservatives with junior and shadow ministers such as Knox Cunningham, Stratton Mills and Robin Chichester-Clark. Their contributions on decolonisation during the 1960s lacked any Ulster distinctiveness or analogy, offering criticisms of Labour governments on thoroughly Conservative lines while defending the record of the latter. Many of these Ulster Unionist MPs with close ties to the Conservatives either chose to leave or were evicted from their seats by anti-Sunningdale unionists in the February 1974 election. Few of their successors had anything to say about decolonisation and those that did made very little of parallels with their own situation and Rhodesia. Between 1970 and 1983 James Molyneaux, MP for South Antrim and leader of the party from 1979, offered only two sentences on Rhodesia in parliament, both sarcastically referring to the British refusal of majority rule for Northern Ireland and displaying little interest in Zimbabwe itself.[56] Molyneaux's colleague Enoch Powell was unusual as an Ulster Unionist in both his interest in empire and his Englishness. His only response to the colonial analogies of Labour MPs came while still a Conservative MP, telling Gerald Kaufman that there was 'no similarity' between Algeria, Palestine, Cyprus, Aden on the one hand and Northern Ireland on the other. This was because 'the majority of the inhabitants of Northern Ireland identify themselves with this country, regard themselves as part of this country and wish to remain indefinitely part of this country'.[57] These two key figures within the Ulster Unionist Party combined sharp criticism of both main political parties in the British system with a desire to bind Northern Ireland closer to it through full

integration, illustrating how anger at British government actions did not translate into a desire to break from Britain itself.

Outside of the then still dominant Ulster Unionist Party, Ian Paisley offered a comparison with the Rhodesia conflict only once in parliament, prompted by the killing of some of his constituents there. In 1978 he spoke after a massacre of twelve people at an Elim Pentecostal mission in the Vumba mountains. The victims included Reverend Roy Lynn of Cullybackey, County Antrim, his wife and his three-week-old daughter. He criticised MPs who had offered 'ready and simple solutions to the Northern Ireland problem' and undermined 'the credibility of those African leaders who are prepared to sit round the table and talk'. He blamed the forces of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front for the murder of his constituents and said that, as in Northern Ireland, 'certain people will never know reconciliation or agree to any settlement'. In his speech, he called for two principles to govern the response of the Commons: 'that violence will not pay and will not be supported by this House' and 'the recognition and discipline of the ballot box'. Asserting a parallel in Northern Ireland, he added: 'If we do not recognise the discipline of the ballot box, the only other discipline will be anarchy and the power of the gun.'[58] Paisley drew policy prescriptions from the analogy but omitted identification with settlers.

A lack of expressions of affinity for settlers does not mean that there were no similarities between the unionist community and other self-proclaimed loyalists elsewhere in Britain's shrinking empire. There was, however, an obvious incentive for unionists not to draw these comparisons because they pointed towards a dark future for their community; the very thing that made the colonial framework resonate with republicans led unionists to shrink from it. The process of decolonisation, and the international consensus on the unacceptability of colonies, made arguments with reference to empire useless to unionists and encouraged a construction of their political identity that excluded them. It was more beneficial for Northern Irish unionists to express physical and emotional proximity to Great Britain through the use of phrases like 'the mainland' and 'across the water' than to identify with racist minorities steadily losing power in Africa. Unionist political culture already included a long-standing affinity with Scotland expressed in flute bands, the flying of flags and other visual displays. While a sense of ancestry connected with the seventeenth century plantations played a significant role in this, Graham Walker has shown that the connection was more intimate than the settler narrative that might be constructed from it and that a common historical and cultural ground was sustained between the two. The prevalence of Orangeism in Scotland is merely the most obvious example.[59] The common preference for flying Scottish flags over English ones reflected the utility for unionists of the argument that resistance to British policy stemmed in part from the unequal relationship between the constituent parts of Britain and that being deferential to the English was not a prerequisite of British identity.

Loyalist resistance to the actions of generally English politicians had a long-standing history but did not have to follow the Rhodesian path that Harold Wilson and others predicted; it was seen as a necessity to preserve the British nation in line with how unionists conceived of it. Despite Ian Paisley's emphasis on the discipline of the ballot box in 1978, a year earlier he had again embraced extra-parliamentary agitation, launching another general strike in collaboration with loyalist paramilitaries in an attempt to restore devolution under majority rule. The strike lacked popular support and quickly collapsed, with those behind it finding that it was harder to argue that direct rule threatened the union.[60] By the end of the 1970s, the level of violence declined and the assumption that Britain's presence in Northern Ireland was unsustainable looked less convincing, to the relief of unionists. The colonial framework did not have meaning for them and independence was neither desirable nor necessary. Their silence on it should be read as an indication of how aspects of political identity can ebb and flow according to pragmatic consideration.

Contesting Anti-colonial Solidarity

At the same time as disputes took place within Britain over the utility of the colonial framework for understanding Northern Ireland, diplomats were required to reject swiftly charges of colonialism abroad. As they did so, the refinement of their counter-arguments produced a certainty missing from parliamentary debates and private policy-making. The image of Northern Ireland developed by diplomats in correspondence with the Northern Ireland Office fitted with the policy of indefinite direct rule; the British state was understood to be a neutral party trying to navigate an internal, essentially Northern Irish dispute. While self-serving, the official view also had the merit of complementing popular bewilderment in Great Britain; the internal conflict paradigm became ubiquitous in British understandings of the violence. Britain's imperial past meant, however, that articulating this beyond the UK and Ireland required a tactical approach. Some dimensions to the conflict were neglected at the expense of others in order to be more persuasive, particularly as Irish republicanism sought from the mid-1970s to secure solidarity with other groups on the basis of a shared anti-colonial ideology. The nature of unionist identity did not lend itself to a simple narrative and instead diplomats focussed on promoting the claims of constitutional nationalism and the Irish government to undermine republicanism's efforts to portray itself as a liberation movement.

In September 1976 Ghanaian officials passed to the British Embassy in Algiers letters sent by the President of Provisional Sinn Féin, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, to their Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as Hashim Mbita, Executive Secretary to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Liberation Committee.[61] The following January the British Embassy in Addis Abada, Ethiopia, was passed a similar letter sent by Ó Brádaigh to Peter Onu, Director of Political

Affairs at the OAU's headquarters.[62] In the letter Ó Brádaigh described a meeting in Vancouver of the United Nations Habitat Conference, at which he and Sean Keenan (Provisional Sinn Féin's Ulster co-ordinator) had discussions with representatives of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, the ANC of Zimbabwe, the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). He asked that the OAU consider an application 'for the recognition on merit of the Revolutionary Republican Movement in Ireland as a Liberation Movement', on the same basis as the PLO, the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor and the National Liberation Front in Vietnam and Pathet Lao.[63]

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Information Research Department (IRD) noted other evidence of recent Provisional republican enthusiasm for solidarity with 'Third World' liberation movements. The intention to bring the case to the OAU had been declared in early July in the pages of *An Phoblacht* as a means of 'awakening the world to the fate of the Irish people, because we also are a colonised people'. Whereas earlier the colonial argument was based almost exclusively on Irish experience and the history of the island alone, greater effort was now made to draw parallels with other parts of the world. This attempt to secure legitimacy also contained a strong competitive element. The Official republican movement established contact with the Muzorewa-Sithole faction in Zimbabwe and its President Tomás Mac Giolla attended the International Conference on the Rights of Peoples in Algiers. There Mac Giolla announced 'our claim to third world status and thus for assistance and solidarity in our liberation struggle from progressive forces throughout the world'.[64]

The British Ambassador in Algiers John Robinson warned that the Provisional IRA would probably have made a specific approach to the Algerians and their 'reaction is unlikely to be all that we would wish'. He proposed speaking to their Algerian Foreign Ministry to 'put them on notice that their reactions were being carefully watched'.[65] The Republic of Ireland Department (RID) was also concerned, noting the Ghanaians 'appear to be under no illusions about the true nature of the Provisionals' campaign' but that 'clearly we cannot afford to be complacent about it'. The Algerian government was again identified; they had 'shown themselves to possess a quite remarkable lack of understanding of the Irish problem' and if this led to the OAU 'seal of approval, the consequences could … be quite far reaching'. They also raised Libya as a problem, with the fear that endorsement might give Gaddafi an excuse to resume his supply of arms to the Provisionals, which had stopped after the 1973 capture of the *Claudia* by the Irish Navy. Bill Harding of RID suggested asking posts in OAU countries to pay close attention to any reference to Northern Ireland and proposed involving the Republic of Ireland government, observing that the Ghanaians had been influenced more by Irish than British analysis and that there co-option might help.[66]

Hickman from the British Embassy in Dublin also supported involving the Irish government despite the risk of 'stimulating the familiar Irish argument that our propaganda efforts against the IRA are usually counter-productive and that the field should therefore be left to them'.[67] Another official remarked that the Republic of Ireland's 'credentials as an anti-colonialist power are much better than ours' and their voice 'in many places … carries more weight than ours'.[68]

In October, Provisional Sinn Féin announced at its ard fheis that it was setting up a foreign affairs bureau to develop its links with liberation movements abroad. Ó Brádaigh declared that the bureau would 'add a global dimension to our own liberation struggle'. The *Irish Times* reported his call for the disentangling of Ireland from power blocs like the EEC in favour of joining 'the post-colonial and non-aligned countries of the Third World in Africa, Asia and Latin America in their struggles against all forms of imperialism'. It quoted his additional support for 'the captive nations of Western Europe – the Bretons, the Basques, the Corsicans and the Catalonians to name but some of those struggling for liberation and national identity'.[69] Increasingly, republicans turned to minority nationalisms and the Third World.

A telegram was dispatched to the diplomatic missions in each of the OAU countries, with the exception of Uganda, where the East African Department warned that 'reference to this subject would not simply be unlikely to get anywhere with [Idi] Amin but could actually encourage him in further expressions of support'.[70] Most of the missions replied that there was no sign of interest, with telegrams confirming this from Zaire, Zambia, Tunisia, Nigeria, Lesotho, Morocco, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Egypt, Kenya, and Botswana.[71] In Mozambique the mission noted 'a propensity here, particularly in the press, to regard the IRA as a liberation movement fighting against British colonialism'. The British embassy in Maputo had written to the editor of the city's daily paper *Noticias* protesting at its coverage of Northern Ireland, which tended 'to take agency reports and rewrite them, adding 'heroic freedom fighters' to mentions of the IRA and 'colonialists' to references to ourselves'. Government interest in Ireland ('or any intra-European problems') was 'small', however, and the President and Minister for Foreign Affairs were deemed 'reasonable men … open to argument against recognition' of the Provisionals.[72] The embassy in Mogadishu, meanwhile, replied: 'Although criticism of British policies in other parts of the world appear regularly in state controlled media, Northern Ireland is rarely mentioned and we have noted no sign of interest in this subject by the Somali government.'[73] By 20 December Peter Onu informed the British that the OAU were not going to take action on Ó Brádaigh's request for recognition.[74] The Republic of Ireland Department noted with satisfaction that 'the message which comes through loud and clear is that almost all governments of OAU member countries have very little interest in the problem of Northern Ireland'. Even Libya's position seemed satisfactory, with Gaddafi realising that recognition of the IRA

'would merely cast doubt on his good faith and dash his hopes, which seem genuine, of a new chapter in UK/Libyan relations' (his supply of arms to republicans resumed in the following decade after this brief positive interlude failed).[75]

While interest in Africa was almost absent, the episode triggered a rethinking and redrafting of the materials provided to British embassies on colonial analogies and the Northern Ireland conflict. A new document was produced at the end of 1976 titled 'The Provisional IRA and Third World Liberation Movements'. More of Ó Brádaigh's rhetoric was included, such as his renouncing 'western individualistic capitalism' and 'Eastern Soviet state capitalism': 'In seeking a third way Irish republicans are in the broad stream of the world wide movement of progressive forces and the achievement of the rights of man'. He claimed that 'the dispossessed and economically exploited peoples of the former colonies of the Third World stand with us on the world stage in our struggle for peace with justice'.[76] The rest of the document continued with exclusively Irish voices. It pointed to dissent within republicanism, recording the Official IRA's exchanges of messages of solidarity with the Angolan MPLA, the Rhodesian (Zimbabwean) African National Congress and the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. It referenced Mac Giolla's speeches in Algiers, along with his claims to have returned with a signed document from the PLO stating that no one had been authorised to claim the organisation's support. An attack by Bernadette Devlin on the Provisional IRA's Irish-American supporters for racism towards African Americans was also added. Speaking in Boston at the Conference Against International Racism, she declared, 'They must face the fact that they are against oppression in Ireland and for oppression here.'[77]

A more direct and full rejection of the Provisional's campaign was offered from Roman Catholic clergymen. Bishop Cathal Daly was quoted as arguing that republican violence 'so far from liberating the oppressed … is binding them into new and worse forms of oppression, of which violence and hate are themselves the chief'. A television interview was cited with Father Aquinas, a parish priest in Belfast's Ardoyne, who said that the Provisionals had transitioned from defenders of the Catholic community to something 'quite different from anything anybody had visualised in the past'; they were 'sheer gangsters, murderers … who are simply using the situation for their own benefit'. The paper stressed a contempt for the will of the people with a quote from the Provisional IRA's leadership that 'a revolutionary movement does not depend on a popular mandate as a basis for action'. To this was appended a statement from the Irish government's Conor Cruise O'Brien: 'It is probably [the case] that no 'war of liberation' has ever been fought with so little support from the people who are supposed to be being liberated, and in the face of so much outright rejection and condemnation by that same people.'[78]

Officials sent the brief to the Northern Ireland Office, who suggested some revealing changes. J.E. Henderson wrote to colleagues in the department that he opposed the inclusion of Bernadette Devlin because her remarks appeared 'to give some credence to her claim that there is oppression in Ireland'. He also thought it 'dubious' that 'Third World recognition might be withheld from the IRA because of the reactionary politics of the Provisionals' financers and fellow-travellers in the USA'. He acknowledged the purpose was 'ammunition, rather than literal truth' but found the claim unconvincing: 'Political alliances are often made of stranger stuff than this.' He thought Conor Cruise O'Brien was less useful as his support for emergency legislation in the Republic had 'exhausted much of his credit as a liberal and enlightened Irishman'. He was now regarded 'by some as being more Brit than the Brits'. The NIO official was also 'a little unhappy that such prominence is given to the words of two Catholic clergymen', which 'would surely carry less weight in the Third World' than with conservative Irish-Americans.[79] John Bourn wrote to the Republic of Ireland Department passing these points on, stating of Bernadette Devlin that the issue of Irish-American racism did not serve the purpose intended as 'most liberation groups are willing to accept money from any source'. On Conor Cruise O'Brien he supported his inclusion in light of his 'having been involved in the Congo' but warned that 'his present reputation in the Republic possibly stands less high than once it did'. Bourn was less dismissive of the inclusion of Roman Catholic clergy, noting that they could be valuable 'in certain Third World circles, where respect is still paid to the Catholic Church', but asked that they be balanced out by quotes from Gerry Fitt or other non-violent constitutional nationalist politicians.[80]

The brief was revised after the NIO's comments. Bernadette Devlin was removed entirely as was Father Aquinas, while Cathal Daly's quote was replaced with a newer one: 'We are being dragged by our professed 'liberators' into a situation of endemic violent crime such as used to be associated with people like the Mafia or with the Chicago of Al Capone. To that extent the campaign is being waged against Ireland, not for Ireland.' Gerry Fitt was included as requested; he believed 'the campaign of the Provisional IRA has brought untold disaster to thousands of people in Northern Ireland'.[81] The material given out to British embassies to rebut charges of colonialism in Northern Ireland was silent on British policy and the unionist cause. British proclamations of innocence would be treated with suspicion in those parts of the world that it had recently ruled. The omission of the unionist community suggests that its identity was too difficult, or not useful enough, to articulate. Far more effective were the arguments of those who shared republican aspirations for a united Ireland but rejected the use of violence to secure it. How the British government articulated its message abroad was based less on its perception of what was the case, so much as how the message would be received. The legacy of colonialism meant that it had to focus on promoting constitutional

nationalism and its rejection of violence. It continued with a commitment to the principle of consent, which set the boundaries of self-determination as the borders of Northern Ireland, thereby maintaining the unionist position, while promoting the legitimacy of constitutional nationalism and its objective of changing those borders by consent.

Conclusion

An examination of how the colonial framework resonated or was rejected by various protagonists during the Northern Ireland conflict shows the value of thinking beyond the basic question of whether Ireland was or was not a colony. Scholars should take the contemporary application of a theoretical framework by protagonists in conflicts much more seriously. The attraction of the colonial argument lay in its simplicity. For republicans it matched Irish historical experience, offered a sense of similarity with others, and delivered a clear moral narrative that supported their desires. It positioned the British state as being solely responsible for conflict in Ireland, thereby providing a justification for not taking unionist identity seriously; Ulster Protestants were Irish men and women manipulated by the British in a classic imperialist process of divide and rule. It also allowed republicans to situate Northern Ireland in a wider pattern of recent British withdrawal that offered hope of success. British politicians that were conscious of the previous decades' experience of withdrawal and imperial decline also felt such colonial resonances. They were most meaningful to left-wing Labour MPs whose reading of the past led to a crisis of confidence in the ability of Britain to negotiate a compromise. They placed great emphasis on the significance of domestic public opinion and the impact of British soldiers' deaths. Anti-colonial nationalism was held to be an irresistible force. The accuracy of this historical perspective and its applicability to Northern Ireland matters less here than its influence. It had to be contested by political leaders and though the argument for withdrawal was unsuccessful, this was not guaranteed. It penetrated further than was apparent in public, influencing Harold Wilson and demonstrating the importance of the cultural, emotional and intellectual linkages identified by Keith Jeffery as being key to the British imperial and post-imperial world.[82] Wilson found it difficult to think about unionism without turning to Southern Rhodesia for explanation.

An awareness of these linkages also shaped how the British presented their case in those parts of the world that had only recently escaped European domination. There was a transnational influence on Britain's narrative of the conflict. An already present impulse to minimise Britain's role and responsibility was reinforced by the realisation that claims of benevolence or an articulation of Britishness that included Northern Ireland would be received with suspicion. The range of arguments that could be made by diplomats was narrowed by having had an empire. The most successful approach was one that

publicised selective Irish voices, specifically those of constitutional nationalism and the Republic of Ireland government. These two best challenged the Provisional IRA's claims to be a liberation movement fighting colonialism.

The colonial argument waned in British understandings of Northern Ireland as the conflict progressed. It became apparent that domestic public opinion was not the threat some thought it to be. The arguments of left-wing politicians were based in part on a panic about the expected effects of British soldiers' deaths. Northern Ireland was not Vietnam and the army's presence proved more sustainable than either these MPs or Irish republicans thought. Unionism proved to be a stronger obstacle than some wished it to be. The expectation of civil war if the Protestant community was forced outside of the United Kingdom was a strong influence on civil servants and British ministers, as was the attraction of seeking some sort of compromise with constitutional nationalism that maintained Northern Ireland's existence into the distant future. Reactions to loyalist resistance to British policy demonstrate, however, a mutual incomprehension. For some British politicians, unionists' proclaimed loyalty was purely instrumental. The settler analogy seemed to offer an answer to the question of their real identity. The heightened expectations of a unilateral declaration of independence that followed from this proved to be mistaken. Although politicians in Great Britain continued to be ambivalent or hostile to unionists' conception of Britishness, the connection survived. After a decade of conflict, the colonial framework resonated only with Irish republicans and their sympathisers. Elsewhere, the internal conflict paradigm and notions of Northern Ireland's exceptionalism reigned.

Notes

1. Bourke, *Peace in Ireland: the war of ideas*, pp 33–5.
2. O'Leary, *A Treatise on Northern Ireland, volume I*, p. 109.
3. Ibid, 123–5, 130.
4. Kenny, *Ireland and the British Empire*, p. 2.
5. Jeffery, *Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire*, 1.
6. Comerford, *Ireland: Inventing the nation*, 77.
7. Connolly, *The making of modern Irish history: revisionism and the revisionist controversy*, 26.
8. O'Leary, *A Treatise on Northern Ireland, volume I*, p. 130.
9. McGarry and O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: broken images*; Ruane and Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: power, conflict and emancipation*; Guelke, *Northern Ireland: the international perspective* and Lustick, *Unsettled states, disputed lands*; McGarry (ed.), *Northern Ireland and the Divided World: Post-Agreement Northern Ireland in Comparative Perspective*.
10. English, *History of Political Thought*, 555.
11. Patterson, *The politics of illusion: a political history of the IRA*, 101–2.
12. Hanley and Millar, *The lost revolution: the story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party*.

13. Hanley, *Irish Historical Studies*, 671–87.
14. Hanley and Millar, *The lost revolution*, 180.
15. Howe, *Ireland and empire: colonial legacies in Irish history and culture*, 172.
16. White, *Out of the ashes: an oral history of the Provisional republican movement*, pp 33–4.
17. *An Phoblacht*, February 1970.
18. *An Phoblacht*, March 1970.
19. *An Phoblacht*, May 1971.
20. *Republican News*, June 1971; *Republican News*, September-October 1970; *Republican News*, November-December 1970; *Republican News*, December-January 1971; *Republican News*, January-February 1971.
21. *Republican News*, January-February 1971.
22. *Republican News*, July 1971.
23. *An Phoblacht*, September 1972.
24. *Republican News*, 1 September 1973.
25. *Republican News*, 6 March 1976.
26. *Republican News*, 8 June 1974.
27. McKittrick, Feeney, Kelters, McVea, and Thornton, *Lost lives: the stories of the men, women and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland troubles*, 64–78.
28. Stewart, *Parliamentary Debates*, cols 1889-91.
29. Ibid, col. 1896.
30. Dixon, *Contemporary Record*, 147–87.
31. Crossman, *Parliamentary debates*, cols 242–44.
32. Ibid, cols 244–7.
33. Crossman, *Parliamentary debates*, cols 308–11.
34. Wilson, *Parliamentary debates*, col. 22.
35. Wilson, *Parliamentary debates*, cols 1571–92.
36. Rees, Ibid, col. 1665.
37. Diary transcript, undated (1975), London School of Economics, Merlyn Rees papers, MERLYN-REES/1/6, 36–7.
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