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IMPERIALISM  
and the  
IRISH NATION

James B. Mahaffey

IMPERIALISM

AND

THE IRISH NATION

The main conflict which affects the lives and destinies of the Irish people today is that between English imperialism and the Irish nation. The great majority of the Irish people, who make up the Irish nation, are adversely affected by imperialist domination and pressure, as they have been for many years. Conflicts within the nation and between different sections of the nation must be judged and assessed in the light of the relationship between Ireland and Britain and in terms of the effect they have on the outcome of that struggle.

The character of conflicts within the nation can be of vital importance in affecting the struggle between the nation and Britain, primarily because the divisions within the nation affect the character of the national independence movement: *they give rise to the existence of compromising sections who may seek to do a deal with imperialism in certain conditions.* A correct assessment of the character of these sections and their attitude to the national independence struggle and to imperialism is of vital importance for the successful prosecution of the national independence struggle.

The most important conflicts within the nation are those between employers and employees, between British and foreign-owned

business and Irish-owned business, and between the pro-imperialist section of the population, mainly the Unionists in the North and the Fine Gael Castle Catholics in the South, and the rest of the nation.

### NATIONALITY

*What is a nation?* A nation is a community of people sharing a common territory, economy and language, with a common history, traditions and culture, and whose members therefore are bound together by ties of sympathy and common interest.

*What is a free nation?* This question was answered by James Connolly when he said: "A free nation is one which possesses absolute control over all its own internal resources and powers, and which has no restriction upon its intercourse with all other nations similarly circumstanced except the restrictions placed upon it by nature". And again Connolly said: "Freedom to control all its own resources is as essential to a community as to an individual. No individual can develop all his powers if he is even partially under the control of another, even if that other sincerely wishes him well. The powers of the individual can only be developed properly when he has to bear the responsibility for all his actions, to suffer for his mistakes, and to profit by his achievements".

In other words, the claim of the Irish people to independence is based on the fact that they, and they alone, are best able to look after their own interests, rather than any foreign government. This claim of the Irish nation and people to genuine political

and economic independence has been disputed by the British Government, overtly and covertly, for generations. This because Britain is an imperialist power, and the British government an imperialist government. To understand the character of Britain's relationship to Ireland, it is necessary to have an understanding of the character of modern imperialism.

### IMPERIALISM - ITS CAUSES

*What is imperialism?* Imperialism is a system whereby the big industrial and financial monopolies of the advanced industrial countries dominate and control, by political or economic means, the markets, sources of food and raw materials and industrial units of other countries and hence the political destinies of their people. The essential economic characteristic of imperialism is the export of capital from the imperialist country to the colony or neo-colony, with a view to obtaining ownership of raw materials and industries in the colony for the imperialist country and the big business interests that rule it.

Contrariwise, there is an export of the economic surplus (*i.e. capital representing the excess of output over input*) from the colony or neo-colony to the imperialist country, in the form of profits, dividends and interest on investments. Ownership, and therefore control, of the means of producing wealth in the colony or neo-colony passes into the hands of the monopolies in the imperialist country, whose interests the imperialist government serves. The political, military and cultural aspects of imperialist domination have as the prime aim

the protection of the investments of imperialism in the colony or neo-colony and the weakening and undermining of national independence movements which would threaten those investments and sources of cheap food and raw materials by demanding that their ownership and control be taken into the hands of the people of the dominated country, or of its government, if it has a government of its own.

*What is the cause of imperialism?* The cause lies fundamentally in the fact that the owners of large capital in the imperialist country (nowadays generally in a monopolistic or semi-monopolistic position of their home markets and closely linked with banks and financial institutions) see the opportunity of making a higher rate of profit by investment abroad than by investment at home. This in turn has several causes, the main ones being the relatively low level of demand for goods in the home market because of the reluctance of the monopolies to increase wages and salaries at the expense of profits; and secondly, the relative political and economic weakness of the underdeveloped and developing countries vis-a-vis the imperialist government and monopolies, which makes it easier for the latter to extract higher and easier profits from them than would be possible by investment internally.

In the last century, the chief exporters of capital in this way were Britain, France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Portugal and Italy. In the present century they have been joined by America and Japan. All

of these countries have economies dominated by giant concerns that seek more profitable investment opportunities abroad than are available at home. In the last century too the imperialist countries regarded direct political annexation and domination of colonies as the best way of securing their supplies of cheap primary products and protecting their investments.

In the latter part of the 19th century, most of Africa and Asia were parcelled out among the various imperialist powers as colonies or spheres of influence: disputes between the powers over the control of such colonies and the redivision of the world into spheres of influence were one of the main causes of the world wars of this century. The present century, however, has seen the rise of national liberation movements all over the world in the former colonies. Ireland was one of the first of these.

#### NEO-COLONIALISM

It has become impossible for the imperialist powers to maintain direct political control over their former colonies; hence the evolution of the policies known as neo-colonialism, whereby formal political independence is given to the colony, while economic domination continues, and is intensified. So far as possible, the imperialist power seeks to hand over to a government which is pro-imperialist, or linked to imperialism by the economic interests of the section of the people it represents. It did this in Ireland when Britain did a deal with the representatives of Irish trading and commercial capital - Griffith and his colleagues - at the time of the Treaty, and in 1938 when

De Valera and the representatives of Irish industrial and manufacturing capital did a deal with Britain in the Anglo-Irish trade agreement of that year, which was inevitably to bring the movement towards economic independence to a halt, the final capitulation being signalled first by the abolition of the Control of Manufacturers Act in 1958, then by the Free Trade Agreement of January 1966 and the take-over by British monopolies of the commanding heights of private industry in Ireland - a process then accelerated and extended to the point where E.E.C. entry took place.

From the point of view of an examination of imperialism and neo-colonialism, the Common Market represents an alliance between the governments and monopoly concerns of Western Europe so that they may be better able to maintain themselves against the competition and capital penetration of American big business, as well as maintaining their dominating position over the economies of the underdeveloped nations.

At the same time, the West European monopolies continue to have rivalries among themselves, which reflect themselves in divisions of policy between their respective governments: France, Germany, Italy, and so on. It should be said also that in present-day conditions, the granting of formal political independence to a former colony frequently saves the imperialist power much expense - of government, military occupation, administration; it may also serve to draw the teeth of the independence movement in the neo-colony, which now seems to have

obtained political independence, although the reality of imperialist economic dominance remains. The expressions of the latter are usually much more difficult to identify and organise popular opinion against than straightforward political domination and military occupation.

Imperialism, acting through the methods of neo-colonialism, uses many different methods and has a wide variety of devices at its disposal to maintain its dominance over subject nations and economies. The techniques used in relation to one nation may not be used in relation to another. The character of the national independence movement in the subject nation and its political traditions mainly determine the manner in which imperialism maintains control. The national independence movement must analyse all aspects of imperialist domination, and develop the various means and techniques appropriate to countering them.

It should also be appreciated that imperialism is primarily the expression of the interests of the giant monopolies in the imperialist countries, seeking higher rates of profit abroad than are available at home. It is not a policy which is fundamentally in the interest of the ordinary people of the imperialist country: it burdens them with the high cost of military expenditure on the protection of colonial and neo-colonial interests abroad (*Britain's "East of Suez" policy and military expenditure cost over £2,000 million a year*). It may lead to underinvestment in the home economy as funds chase higher profits abroad, which bring in

more wealth to the rich, but do not develop the productive power of the country of origin. This is one of the main reasons why Britain, the oldest imperialist power, has an economy today that is much more backward than those of its competitors, the imperialist powers of more recent vintage, even though some of these -Germany, Italy, Japan- lost the last war. For these and other reasons, then, the ordinary people of the imperialist countries have an interest in securing the independence of the anti-imperialist nations, and are potentially valuable allies of the latter in their struggle for national freedom.

This is not to deny the fact that huge sections of the people of the imperialist country are influenced by the jingoism, chauvinism, and prejudice against emigrants from the colonies, which is sedulously cultivated by the educational and propaganda agencies of the imperialist government: *in so far as they are like this, they facilitate the monopolies in these countries in maintaining their influence, and are acting against their own interests.*

#### POTENTIAL ALLIES

In relation to Britain, it is important for the Irish national movement to recognise the existence of potential allies among the 'democracy' of Britain - the common people - and particularly in the Labour and trade union movement in that country. There has always been a tradition of support - though frequently a very slender one, for Irish national aspirations among the most progressive and anti-imperialist sections of the British people, and particularly

the British workers who numerically predominate in that country. This dates from the time of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, who were in touch with the English corresponding societies and radicals. It was evident at the time of the Chartists and the Fenians, and at the time of the post-1916 independence struggle.

As the development of events may make more of the British people realise the burden imperialism is to them, the importance of these potential allies should increase. They are in a particularly good position to bring pressure to bear on the British government in relation to the Six Counties, which remain politically part of the United Kingdom, and whose administration and occupation cost the British taxpayer millions of pounds annually, mainly for the benefit of Britain's rulers and the big business interests who own most of the major Six-County industries.

The Irish emigrants in Britain can play a big part in this. There are at present one million emigrants who were actually born in Ireland. If organised, they could play a tremendous part in putting pressure on the British government from within Britain to withdraw from Ireland, to reduce the economic pressure on the country, and at least to expose unionism before the British people and win a greater measure of democracy and civil liberties for the people of the North, which would be of great benefit to them in organising against imperialism and its local minions. The Irish in Britain can themselves, and in alliance with the best and most anti-

imperialist elements of the British people, do a tremendous job in exposing and discrediting unionism and in making Britain's domination of Ireland that much more difficult. They are situated right at the heart of British imperialism, in Britain's own towns and cities and industries, and are in an ideal position for putting pressure on the British government from within. They can be the indispensable auxiliary for the national movement at home in the coming years, as the Irish in America were in the years after 1916.

## PART 2

In Ireland today, the main elements of British imperialist domination are as follows:

### 1 Political union with the Six Counties, and military occupation of that area by British forces.

The 1800 Act of Union still remains valid here. The main powers of government for the area are held by the Westminster parliament and government, certain powers - for example, over housing, justice, local government - were transferred to the Stormont parliament and government in 1920 but the exercise of even these powers could be overridden or withdrawn by fiat of Westminster, if the parliament there so desired.

The overriding power of Westminster was demonstrated in March 1972 when the Stormont Parliament was prorogued and its powers transferred to a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland appointed by the Westminster Government. This action restored the Six

Counties to precisely the same status as the whole of Ireland was in following the Act of Union - the status of a crown colony.

### 2 Economic domination of the Six Counties by Britain and by foreign monopolies, mainly British; consequent capital outflow, insufficient investment in industrial development, unemployment and emigration.

Since the end of the last war, almost all the businesses of any size in the Six Counties that were owned by Irish people have been taken over by British, and to a lesser extent by other foreign monopolies. Native capital in the North, whether in the hands of unionist or anti-unionist Irishmen, has become almost wholly subservient to imperialist capital. The reason for this is that there is no government able to defend the interests of the Irish capitalists involved, and of their workers, against British take-overs and British competition.

Only the government of an independent republic could do this: *the powers which Stormont had were insufficient, even if the Government there desired to use such as they had.* Because of its position in the United Kingdom rather than in a united Ireland, the Six-County economy is primarily export-oriented with a slender home-market base. It is thereby exposed to all the vagaries of foreign demand for its products and its traditional heavy industries - shipping and aircraft in particular - are dependent on British government orders for continuing in being, although in a united Ireland they would have an essential role to play in

industrialising an all-Ireland economy, and developing a heavy engineering base for that economy, together with a powerful merchant marine suited for the needs of an island country.

Other important aspects of British economic dominance of the area are the channelling of savings and capital abroad through the British-controlled banking system for investment in Britain and overseas, and the control of credit policy for the area in accordance with the needs of the imperialist power rather than of the development of the Six-County - not to speak of an all-Ireland-economy.

3 Lack of democracy, and the fostering of discrimination to divide the people of the area, in the interests of imperialism and to prevent the mass of the Protestant workers seeing that a true understanding of their real interests should align them with the national independence movement. Other aspects of this are the lack of democracy in the area, infringement of civil rights, the existence of a police state in effect, gerrymandering, the past few years has seen an everincreasing use of repression - rather than a lessening - torture, internment, and so on - *all designed to create conditions where it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for opponents of imperialism and unionism to work effectively to weaken the hold of Britain and the Unionist forces.* This explains the savage reaction to the Civil Rights movement both by the Stormont regime (RUC) and the British Government (BA) and their determination to divert the

struggle into sectarianism and purely military confrontations.

The Twenty-Six Counties:The 26-County area was conceded a formal political independence in 1921, but this in fact conceals the reality of a continuing, and increasing, economic dependence. The 26-County government has considerably more powers than Stormont had to oppose this process, but, with the exception of a brief period in the 1930s, the interests deciding 26-County government policy have been extremely conservative, representing the rich business interests most prone to compromise with imperialism, and the powers of the 26-County state have not been used to oppose imperialism, but rather to link the economy more closely with Britain, and on occasion to actively serve the interests of imperialism by repression of the anti-imperialist movement: *republicans, Labour and farmer organisations, etc.* Whereas the Six Counties are still a direct colony of Britain, united to the imperialist country, the 26 Counties form a neo-colony. The main features of neo-colonialism in relation to the 26 Counties are as follows:

The exploitation of Irish agriculture by artificial rigging of the British market so that many Irish agricultural products can only be sold there below their cost of production if they are to be sold at all. This is done in the following way: *food produced by British farmers is sold to British customers below its cost of production. The difference is made up to the farmers by subsidies from the government (so-called 'deficiency payments') raised out of taxation (about £300 million annually is involved).*

This keeps food prices in Britain low, and means that foreign exporters of food to Britain - and they provide half of Britain's food requirements - must also sell at low prices, frequently below cost, if they are to find a market in Britain. Britain thus gets cheap food at the expense of the food-producing countries exporting to her from abroad, of which Ireland is one.

The main Irish agricultural product which gets a fair price in Britain is store cattle, on which deficiency payments are made once they have been a period of time in Britain. This is because Britain needs Ireland's supply of beef cattle as she cannot supply sufficient herself, and she wants to ensure her supplies from a neighbouring country; but this trade, based on 'dog and stick' farming, brings little gain in employment in Ireland, and mainly benefits the cattle dealers, graziers, and larger farmers within Ireland, *whose interests are therefore substantially aligned with the British connection, expressed politically by many in support for Fine Gael.*

Britain thus selectively allows certain sections of Irish agriculture to develop, and inhibits others. Being a developed industrial country, Britain is in favour of free trade in industrial goods, in which she has an advantage, but opposed to free trade in agricultural goods, which are of such vital importance to the non-industrial countries.

It should be pointed out that the Common Market countries also exploit the

agricultural and primary producing countries of the world by rigged market arrangements, although they use a different system from the British. In the modern world, the countries dependent on agricultural and raw material production are being exploited by the imperialist industrial countries by means of such arrangements. The costs of industrial goods, in which the imperialist countries have a monopoly to a large extent, are continually going up, while the costs of food and raw materials on which the poorer countries are dependent are continually falling.

This is one of the main reasons for the widening gap between the incomes and standards of living of the rich industrial countries and the poorer agricultural ones, among whom Ireland for this purpose can be legitimately numbered. It is a major form of imperialist economic exploitation in the contemporary world.

#### 4 Foreign investment in Irish industry, take-overs of existing Irish businesses by British and foreign companies, the increasing domination of imperialist capital over Irish capital in the Irish economy.

This process has already gone to extremes in the Six Counties. Under the Control of Manufacturers Act, passed by Fianna Fail in the 1930s during that party's brief anti-imperialist period, the majority of shares in newly-formed Irish companies had to be in the hands of Irish nationals. This Act was repealed in 1959, and since then, British and foreign capital has penetrated the Irish

economy on an extensive scale, putting existing Irish companies out of business, taking over and amalgamating with Irish companies and reducing them to the position of subsidiaries of British enterprises. Already, almost all the large private-enterprise companies in the 26 Counties are either wholly or predominantly owned by British and Foreign parent companies.

The medium-sized and smaller Irish-owned companies are coming under increasing pressure as British capital seeks newer fields of investment and extends its control more widely throughout the economy, (*This is most marked in the fields of distribution, where British-owned supermarkets are decimating Irish-owned enterprises.*) This process will accelerate and extend further under free trade, whether with Britain alone under the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement or when the 26 Counties enters the EEC (*The Free Trade Agreement restricts the powers of the 26-County government to interfere with foreign take-over of Irish industry and business, and in the E.E.C. the Treaty of Rome guarantees free movement of goods, capital services and labour and free rights of establishment between member states*).

The main adverse consequences of this imperialist investment in Ireland are:

(a) The ownership of the bulk of private manufacturing industry passes into the hands of British monopolies, and the wealth produced by the labour of Irish people working in them is channelled abroad in the form of profits and dividends to the foreign parent companies.

(b) Control passes into the hands of foreign companies whose prime interest is in no way the development of the Irish economy or the satisfaction of the needs of the Irish people: *Irish companies can be closed down and their workers unemployed as a result of decisions taken in London and Brussels in the interests of British and foreign companies.*

(c) The scope of Irish capital for development in Ireland is gradually eliminated, and the government in Dublin, whose policy it has become to open the country to foreign capital take-over, is unlikely to be willing to use their powers, or the capital of State-sponsored companies, to interfere with or curtail the activities of foreign capital. Native capitalism is becoming increasingly insignificant in the 26 County economy. Foreign imperial capital is dominant and makes all the major economic decisions.

5 Outflow of native Irish capital through the banks and insurance companies and through private investment abroad by Irish holders of small and medium-sized capital seeking higher and quicker returns by investment in Britain and overseas than by investment in Ireland for home development.

Almost £1,000 million of capital from the 26 Counties was so invested in 1971. This process is facilitated by the close tie-up of the banking system of Britain and Ireland, the 'Irish' banks being predominantly British-controlled, and by the fact that Ireland has not got an independent currency and credit control system, and by the unwillingness of the Dublin government to interfere

with the 'rights' of private Irish investors to invest abroad rather than in home development, even though this is against the national interest. Monetary and fiscal policy serves the interests of imperialism rather than native capitalism.

#### 6 Political subservience to British imperialism in the field of foreign trade and policy.

Where there is economic dependence, there is political dependence. As the 26 Counties approximate more and more to the position of the Six Counties in the degree of their economic subservience to Britain, any pretensions of the Dublin government to having a line independent of Britain in relation to other states becomes more and more spurious. The Government spokesmen and other pro-Market speakers during the E.E.C. referendum campaign in the Spring of 1972 made this very clear when they boldly stated as their ultimate argument - "*If Britain joins, then we have 'no alternative' but to join also.*"

If the establishment of trade links and diplomatic relations with other countries would displease the British government and seem to represent an effort to reduce dependence on Britain, then no such attempts are made. On foreign policy, the Dublin government follows the British government's line on all questions of importance today, despite a period of relative independence on some issues in the 1950s. The stock of Ireland as a champion of national independence struggles in other countries is today abysmally low.

In the United Nations today, the Dublin government votes with Britain and the colonial powers on all such issues, or else it abstains from voting, a device which deceives nobody. It is never to be found with that vast majority of United Nations members when it comes to vote on colonial matters. Yet there was a time when Ireland led the national liberation movements of the world.

#### 7 Economic and political subservience to British imperialism entails cultural domination by British imperialism.

This shows itself in many different ways, particularly in a crisis of confidence over the question of the national language, the most distinctive badge of a people's nationality. If Ireland is to be a satellite of Britain, why seek to maintain or revive a minority language? A people who have lost faith in their ability to maintain themselves politically and economically independent of imperialism cannot maintain a cultural or linguistic independence, not to speak of distinctiveness.

The domination of the Irish market by the material commodities produced by the imperialist country makes inevitable the dominance also of imperialism's cultural products and of the language of the imperialist country. This is evidenced by the ubiquitous influence of British culture and attitudes on Irish life, education, publishing, communications, literature, the arts, and recreational patterns. The Dublin Government makes bureaucratic gestures in favour

of Irish culture and the language, *but as it is a government which has sold out the country to British imperialism politically and economically, it cannot be sincere or have real faith in such measures, which are of little effect in stemming the tide of cheap and shoddy foreign cultural influence.*

On the other hand, the development of a strong and vigorous anti-imperialist movement in the political, economic and social field would give a tremendous boost to the development of our indigenous cultural traditions and particularly to the language. The defence of Irish culture and language is an indispensable part of the national movement and cannot be divorced from its political and social aspects.

A movement against British imperialism must have its political economic and cultural sides. The cultural and language movement is of vital importance in raising the morale and national consciousness of the people and in preventing the complete sapping of the Irish people's faith in themselves which is at present going on apace.

As the above are the principal ways in which British imperialism oppresses the Irish nation, a programme to unite the people against imperialism and for the real political and economic independence of the country will have to be based on developing the appropriate policy in all these areas. Only such a programme can win the support of the mass of the people - the workers, small farmers, small business people, and the best elements of the intellectuals - who are

adversely affected in various ways by British domination of Irish life, can neutralise the influence of those elements among the people who are prone to compromise with imperialism; and can expose the British government, British and foreign business in Ireland, and Britain's allies among anti-national people within Ireland, as the main obstacle to the progress of the Irish people.

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