

Imperialism – Ireland and Britain

Introduction

This paper is one of a number being produced by éirígí throughout 2007. Each will focus on a topic of significant importance to modern Ireland and its place in the broader world. These papers are the result of internal discussions and reflect the collective views of the membership of éirígí.

This paper is focused on the issue of imperialism, both historic and contemporary, and the profoundly negative effect that imperialism, as a policy, has had on the development of humanity across the globe in general and in Ireland in particular. We in éirígí reject the notion that imperialist policies and strategies are of a bygone era and instead assert that these policies are as real today as at any point in history.

Imperialism

Imperialism, the policy of one country extending control over another, has blighted humanity for millennia. Countless millions of lives have been lost through war, famine and poverty caused as a direct consequence of such policies.

Imperialist policies are primarily motivated by the desire of countries, or more precisely the ruling class of some countries, to acquire wealth. While there are many other contributory factors leading to the adoption of such policies it is greed that is the common denominator for all imperialism, although this will be rarely admitted or acknowledged by those who implement such policies. Imperialism in tandem with capitalism has over the centuries ensured that an ever-greater portion of the world's wealth is held by an ever smaller portion of the world's population.

All imperialism is underpinned by a philosophy that deems the colonised in some way inferior to the coloniser. Racism, discrimination and exploitation are intrinsically linked to a policy which justifies the right of one people to dominate and exploit another. In rejecting imperialism, we in éirígí are also rejecting philosophies that place one human being as superior to another. We hold that all human beings are born equal and entitled to a set of basic human rights which allow them to fulfil their own potential.

The world we know today has been largely defined by the empire-building policies of a small number of the world's countries. We live with the consequences of their efforts to establish global empires, which have repeatedly seen huge swathes of the earth's surface, and the people who inhabit them, arbitrarily divided up between these imperial powers. The modern-day borders of countless countries have been determined in this way. Such borders were, and are, always drawn to benefit the political, military and economic interests of the relevant imperial power with scant consideration given to the interests of those who actually have to live within these borders. Many of the world's most embittered and longest running conflicts have their roots in such decisions.

Imperialism is not just responsible for the creation of artificial borders and territories. It also creates, and relies upon, an entirely unequal and unjust distribution of the world's wealth and wealth-generating resources. Our world is regularly divided into those countries which are deemed 'developed' and those that are deemed to be 'developing'. It is both more accurate

and more honest to divide the world into those countries whose peoples are materially rich and those whose peoples are materially poor. It is no coincidence that the vast majority of those countries which form the poor world are those same countries which endured, and are enduring, the imperialist policies adopted by many of those same countries which now form the rich world. Indeed it is the systematic robbery of the hugely valuable natural and human resources of the poor world that has made the rich world rich.

21st Century Imperialism: New Form – Old Result

éirígí recognises that imperialism in its twenty-first century form rarely necessitates the physical occupation of a given territory, although this option is always retained. Modern imperialist policies tend to be more subtle than previous forms although the end result is the same: the rich world harvests the wealth of the poor world. In the age of modern communications and a globalised economy it is often more profitable to exploit a country through political, cultural and economic means rather than military.

Imperialists have learned that it is often easier to gain access to the resources and markets of a given country by identifying allies within that country who are willing and able to facilitate such exploitation. In this regard the rich world routinely impinges upon the sovereignty of the poor world, interfering in the internal political life of such countries to ensure that the chosen ally gains, or retains, state power. Where such allies oversee dictatorial, inhumane or cruel regimes the rich world has long-since perfected the art of double-think, refusing to question the internal affairs of such countries.

Where such allies cannot be found other means are deployed. One has to look no further than organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to see how effectively countries can be coerced into adopting economic and social policies that serve the interests of the rich world far more than the interests of their own people. éirígí stands in opposition to imperialism in all its forms.

éirígí believes that humanity can only reach its full potential when policies which pit human beings in competition with one another are replaced by policies based upon co-operation and mutually beneficial relations. This is true at both a national level within countries and at an international level between countries. Such relations can only be built upon the principle of respect for the right of each country to choose its own destiny free from foreign interference, in short the right to self-determination. Having thus chosen a system of governance international political, economic and cultural relations can develop upon a just and mutually beneficial basis.

Imperialism and Ireland

We in Ireland have a unique perspective on imperialism and the manner in which it divides people from each other and from those things necessary for a dignified and independent existence. Our country has for eight centuries been the subject of British aggression and interference. Much of our history has been marked by oppression, famine, poverty and forced emigration. In this we have a shared history with the bulk of the world's countries. However unlike the vast majority of these countries we are part of the European continent and as such now find ourselves to be part of the rich world.

Therefore we are simultaneously the victim of imperialism, through the British occupation, and the direct beneficiaries of imperialism, by our location within the rich world.

The joint system of twenty-first century imperialism and capitalism relies upon a passive acceptance of a racially-based exploitation. Much of the material wealth that the people of Ireland enjoy comes at a cost of human suffering that we would be unwilling to pay if the victims were Irish, or indeed white. Hard-fought for rights that we in Ireland take for granted are unknown to billions of our fellow human beings.

Those who promote imperialist policies have, unfortunately, no shortage of allies in Ireland. There are many who would bring Ireland into formal military and political alliances with those same countries which for centuries past to the present day treat their fellow human beings as resources to be exploited in pursuit of material gains. We in éirígí believe that the agenda of these Irish apologists for imperialism should be challenged and exposed at every opportunity, be this in relation to the use of Shannon airport by the US military, the British occupation of six Irish counties, membership of the EU rapid reaction forces or the proposed entry of the twenty-six counties into NATO.

We in Ireland have a humanitarian duty to reject the capitalist/imperialist system and the exploitative philosophy underpinning it. Furthermore, we must endeavour to pursue a form of governance and international relations based upon justice and co-operation, and use our position within Europe to encourage others to do likewise.

Ireland and Britain

The national territory of Ireland includes the island of Ireland, her waterways, airspace, islands and seas. The right of the Irish people to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, is sovereign and inalienable.

For eight centuries relations between Ireland and Britain have been defined by Britain's ambition to conquer and colonise the island of Ireland. For eight centuries this ambition has been thwarted by the determination of the Irish people to be free. The resultant cycle of invasion and occupation, rebellion and resistance has led to the deaths of millions and the impoverishment and enforced emigration of millions more.

Throughout this period Britain has carefully fostered false divisions among the Irish people. These divisions, be they on the basis of class, religion, gender or ethnicity have been used to maintain the British presence in Ireland and to ensure that wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the few at the cost of the many. Such "divide and conquer" strategies have been used by Britain and other imperialists the world over. Central to the success of this strategy is Britain's ability to identify a sufficiently large, or powerful, section of the Irish people willing to support and administer British rule in Ireland. Throughout our history Britain's rule in Ireland has been at its most tenuous at those points in history where such a section of the population could not be identified, most notably in the 1916-1921 period.

The continuing British occupation of six Irish counties is a clear violation of the right of the Irish people to national self-determination. This is the context within which relations between the peoples of Ireland and Britain are defined.

éirígí wishes to see the normalisation of relations between the peoples of Ireland and the peoples of Britain but believes that this can only occur when Britain respects the right of the Irish people to self-determination. This in effect means the ending of Britain's constitutional claim to part of Ireland and the withdrawal of the apparatus of occupation. There can be no other basis for the normalisation of relations between the peoples of these islands.

While it would be highly desirable for a British government to unilaterally commence the process of disengagement from Ireland, we in éirígí believe this to be a highly unlikely scenario. The lessons of history teach us that Britain will concede only as much as is necessary to weaken and divide any political movement that challenges its authority in Ireland. Our history is littered with military campaigns, treaties and statutes designed by Britain to neutralise such movements and prolong the occupation.

The most recent of such treaties, namely the Belfast and St Andrews Agreements, of 1998 and 2006 respectively, contain many of the features that have defined British treaties in Ireland for centuries. Three such features stand out most clearly.

- Firstly, central to both of these agreements is an absolute acceptance of the legitimacy of British rule in Ireland. The constitutional status of Britain's occupation will not change until a majority of those within the occupied six counties so decide— in effect one sixth of the Irish people will hold a veto over the other five-sixths.
- Secondly Britain's long history of nurturing false divisions in Ireland continues with power being allocated on the basis of a crude sectarian head-count designed to deepen and prolong false divisions along religious lines.
- Finally, as with all British treaties, there is the apparent potential for those who support Irish freedom to achieve a long-term victory if they are willing to support the status quo in the short-term. In this the British government is at its most devious. Britain has conceded enough to convince some who oppose British rule in Ireland that these latest treaties are substantially different to all previous treaties and therefore worthy of support. In this the British draw upon their not insubstantial experience in negotiations and hope to neutralise the demand for British withdrawal and Irish Freedom. Failing this the British hope to lay the seeds of division among those who would nominally desire Irish freedom but disagree upon how it may be achieved.

We in éirígí are convinced that these two most recent treaties are considerably more likely to solidify British rule in Ireland than they are to end it.

Others have argued that Britain no longer has ambitions of empire and is in fact preparing to withdraw from Ireland, using the establishment of the Stormont assembly and increased levels of cross-border co-operation to support this hypothesis.

We in éirígí reject this analysis. We believe that the evidence indicates the opposite to be true. Britain is simply re-shaping and modernising the occupation and in doing so is attempting to portray her role in Ireland as neutral while simultaneously co-opting an ever larger section of the population into supporting the occupation. The current British government have over the last number of years implemented a policy of regionalised parliaments and assemblies with the objective of securing the long-term integrity of the so called "United Kingdom". The British establishment has moved to neutralise the demands

for complete independence for Scotland, Wales and Ireland by conceding limited powers to locally elected representatives. This tactic, and variations of it, has been successfully used on many occasions throughout history. This is the context within which the Stormont Assembly was established.

Increased co-operation between the Dublin and London governments and increased co-operation between the business classes on both sides of the border is in reality simply part of a broader pattern of globalisation and European Union-wide integration and not evidence of a gradual British withdrawal.

If further evidence of Britain's contemporary imperial ambitions is required one need only look to Britain's role in the invasion and occupation of both Afghanistan and Iraq. For those who have claimed that Britain is now a force for good in both an Irish and a global context, the lie has been well and truly exposed.

The Future

It is now more than ninety years since Pádraig Pearse read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic from the steps of the General Post Office on Easter Monday 1916. This act signalled the start of a most momentous phase in Irish history which culminated in the ending of the British occupation of twenty-six of Ireland's thirty two counties, after more than seven hundred years of attempted conquest. As we approach the centenary year of the Easter Rising freedom has yet to be achieved with six Irish counties remaining under British occupation.

We in éirígí view this occupation and the denial of democracy it represents to be the single most substantial challenge facing the Irish people today. For as long as Ireland remains occupied it will be impossible for the Irish people to choose a system of governance that truly "cherishes all the children of the nation equally" which we hold to be the only form of governance worthy of the people of Ireland.

Recent years have seen the demand for Irish freedom largely neutralised as Britain has attempted, with some success, to co-opt ever greater sections of the Irish people into administering British rule in Ireland.

Irish freedom will only be achieved when the demand for British withdrawal is once again placed centre stage of the Irish, British and International arenas and when the cost to Britain of holding Ireland outweighs the benefits of withdrawal. We believe the time is approaching when that demand will once again be loudly voiced.

That is the task now facing Socialists, Republicans and Nationalists; the building of a new social and political movement for Irish freedom. While ultimately such a movement will need support internationally, including most probably a section of the British people, it is at home and most particularly within the occupied counties where the renewed call for freedom must first be made.

In the building of such a movement inspiration can be sought, and lessons learned, from our own history. In the period prior to the 1916 Rising Ireland witnessed a cultural revival encompassing the Irish language, music and sports. The same period saw the growth of both a separatist movement advocating Irish freedom and a revolutionary form of socialism and

trade unionism. It was by drawing support from all three of these trends that that the most successful Irish Rebellion to date, and the following five year revolutionary period, occurred.

The international arena also offers insight into how modern day social and political movements develop. There are now numerous examples across the globe of people challenging global capitalism and imperialism through “bottom up” social and political movements. Any new movement for Irish freedom should seek to encompass not only traditional political parties but also organised labour, community groups, cultural organisations, campaign groups as well as non-aligned individuals.

While advocating the development of a new movement for Irish freedom we in éirígí believe that freedom is only of value if we, the Irish people, use it to create a society based upon genuine equality and social justice. Ninety years of nominal freedom for twenty-six counties has produced a social and economic order that is in no way substantially different to that of the old imperial order. The words of James Connolly have proved typically prophetic:

If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the socialist republic, your efforts would be in vain. England would still rule you. She would rule through her capitalists, her landlords, financiers, and through the whole array of commercial and industrial institutions she has planted in this country and watered with the tears of our mothers and the blood of our martyrs. England would still rule you to your ruin, even while your lips offered hypocritical homage at the shrine of that freedom whose cause you betrayed.

éirígí believes that the creation of a Democratic Socialist Republic represents the best framework within which the needs of all the Irish people can be met. We assert that any new movement for Irish freedom needs to recognise that the pursuit of national freedom is inextricably linked to that of social and economic freedom.

We in éirígí also wish to see an end to the false divisions that Britain has so carefully fostered in Ireland and believe that a new political and social movement may offer a mechanism to do just that. We challenge those who may historically have believed that their interests were best served by supporting the British presence in Ireland to re-examine their position in the context of the twenty-first century. We appeal to members of this community to join us in a political movement for the creation of a new all-Ireland Republic where all the people of Ireland will be entitled to an equal share of the nation’s wealth and equal access to power regardless of class, religion, gender, ethnicity, or other false division.

We in éirígí intend to play a full part in a new movement for Irish freedom and appeal to people the length and breadth of Ireland and beyond to do likewise and to contribute, in whatever way they can, to completing the unfinished business of Irish freedom and the establishment of a Democratic Socialist Republic.