

IRISH OPPOSITION TO APARTHEID¹

by

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Irish outlook on apartheid

The Irish people over the last decade have shown an increasingly active concern with the plight of the oppressed peoples of South Africa. For historical reasons, Ireland has always manifested an instinctive solidarity with the struggle for freedom in South Africa; the Irish people have themselves undergone the experience of imperial rule and in this century have had recourse to force to free their land and themselves from foreign domination.

There have been different strands in the Irish opposition to colonialism and racialism. There has been that of the socialist, James Connolly, one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, who saw racialism as one of the obscene consequences of imperialism, of national oppression and economic exploitation.

The other strand was that represented by the mainstream of the national movement. It is best explained in the speech by the then Irish Minister for External Affairs, Mr. Frank Aiken, at the United Nations in 1966:

“One of my earliest recollections of international conflict was the South African war. I remember the sympathy of our family and neighbours for the Boers who against overwhelming odds fought so gallantly and suffered so grievously in defence of their independence. The Irish people recall with pride the organization of the Irish Brigade. The memory of the Irish soldiers who fought shoulder to shoulder with their South African comrades through the war is cherished in the hearts of our people equally with the memory of Irish soldiers who fought for the freedom of our own land...

“I intervene in this debate, therefore, not as an enemy of any section of the South African people but as one who has at heart their best interests and who wishes to see them living in peace and harmony as a multi-racial society and developing the resources of their rich and beautiful land for the benefit of all its citizens of every colour, class and creed.”

¹ United Nations. Unit on Apartheid. *Notes and Documents*, No. 3/71, February 1971. Since this was written, the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement obtained much wider support and was engaged in many activities against apartheid.

Other factors also assisted in the development of an anti-racial attitude in the public consciousness of the Irish people and in the policy of the Irish Government. Not being citizens of a colonial country themselves, very few Irish people have been affected by the inevitable feelings of racial and cultural superiority engendered by colonial systems which propel so many otherwise civilised persons into identification with the policies of apartheid and racial superiority.

The sense of identification with the "new" states of Africa which has undoubtedly affected the policies of the Irish Government and the attitudes of those who care about Irish foreign policy has been assisted by Ireland's non-involvement in military blocs.

Many thousands of Irish men and women have worked in Africa as technicians, teachers, doctors and clergy. Many have come to realize that the principal danger to African peace, progress and integrity is the threat that comes from the racist regimes of southern Africa, and from South Africa in particular. There can be no doubt that this identification with the fortunes of independent African countries has had a profound effect on the response towards racialism and apartheid.

The Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement has thus been able to build on the foundation of traditional sympathy with peoples fighting for their own freedom. The Movement has been successful in shifting public opinion from an attitude of condemnation of apartheid and race rule to actual solidarity with the majority of the South African people fighting against the oppression by an internal minority.

On the other hand, there have been difficulties arising from certain geographical and political considerations. Ireland is a small country, many thousands of miles from South Africa. She has considerable problems of her own. There have never been strong economic and political links between Ireland and white South Africa as is the case with some other Western European countries and, except in the case of sport, there has been the difficulty of isolating burning issues which generate public controversy and, therefore, individual involvement. Finally, Ireland's foreign policy is not normally considered a matter for public debate and controversy: it is only in recent years that the annual external affairs debate in the Dail,(the lower chamber in the Irish Parliament) has evoked public interest.

Tasks and organization of the Anti-Apartheid Movement

When the Anti-Apartheid Movement was established in Ireland in April 1964, a number of individuals who had earlier been active on the question of racialism and apartheid readily gave the Movement their support. A few public representatives, trade-unionists and South African

students had formed a Boycott Movement in 1959 as a response to the now-famous call by Albert Lutuli, then President-General of the African National Congress of South Africa, to isolate South Africa because of its racial policies. Public meetings were addressed by South African leaders and demonstrations were held. Added impetus was given to the Boycott Movement's work after the massacre at Sharpeville in 1960.

However, no permanent structure was in operation and one of the first tasks of the new Anti-Apartheid Movement was to establish itself as a national movement with a composition reflecting all sections of Irish society and being strictly non-party political and non-sectarian. These are aims which the Movement has successfully pursued since its inception and it now has branches and members in most parts of the 32 counties of Ireland.

With the object of making the maximum impact on public opinion, a number of persons active and well-known in political, artistic, academic and trade-union circles were invited to sponsor our Movement. The Movement was itself launched at a public meeting in Dublin and one of its immediate tasks was to mobilize public feeling and opposition to the trial of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and the other persons arrested at Rivonia. Anxiety lest the death penalty be meted out was reflected in the Irish Government making representations to the South African Government and in the poignant speech made at a public meeting organized by the Movement by the elderly General MacEoin who recalled his earlier activities on behalf of the Boers.

Besides reacting to events and developments in South Africa, we saw our first tasks as those of publicity and propaganda against apartheid and on life in South Africa. We have always felt that widespread publicity and dissemination of information on apartheid would persuade the majority of the people to give us their support. This general support is translated into active commitment when a specific issue arises.

The best example of this, and one which provided us with valuable insights for the future, was our campaign on the South African rugby tour in the spring of 1965. This campaign was planned about three or four months before the actual tour and during these months absorbed virtually the entire efforts of the Committee. Individual sportsmen and rugby clubs were extensively circularized and 50,000 leaflets were distributed through Dublin letter-boxes. A declaration to be signed by those boycotting the match was made available and this enabled us to carry the campaign into a wider field than that of purely sporting interests. Press conferences, press statements and a huge public meeting ensured the Movement a steady amount of publicity and it was extremely successful in drawing public attention to the issue. A large-scale boycott of the international match did in fact take place.

The Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement has always attempted to remain a mass movement. Since the Movement's inception it has made a point of providing its members with as much information as possible. It distributes a monthly newsletter, *Amandla*, to members, a number of influential contacts and to a large mailing list of people who have attended its public meetings. It distributes the valuable United Nations publications on apartheid to schools, to newspapers and to members of the Irish Parliament and it acts as Irish distributors of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement's monthly newspaper, *AntiApartheid News*. Members and officers of the Movement have also written articles in newspapers, church magazines and trade-union publications. The Movement itself has published occasional booklets, including a 100-page study of apartheid entitled *Ireland and South Africa - the case against apartheid* (1965), which became the basic campaigning and recruiting booklet and ran to two editions. It has also published the text of two speeches. The first, by the then-Chairman of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien, was entitled *Ireland, Southern Africa and the United Nations* (1967); When Canon L. John Collins, President of the International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, inaugurated the Albert Lutuli Memorial Lecture, his speech was subsequently published under the title, *South Africa Today* (1970).

As the only Irish organization directly concerned with the struggle against racial discrimination and apartheid, the Movement has viewed the struggle for freedom in Angola and Mozambique and in Rhodesia with sympathy. After the illegal declaration of independence in Rhodesia, the constitution of the Movement was amended to cover the Portuguese colonies, Rhodesia and South West Africa (now Namibia). The Movement's activities have increasingly emphasized the identification of policies of the rulers of these territories and the similarity of the struggle waged by the liberation movement in these areas. South Africa's active involvement in these territories and the threats uttered by successive Ministers of Defence against neighbouring independent African states constitute a grave threat to the peace, not only of that part of Africa, but of the world.

Activities of the Anti-Apartheid Movement

Basically, the Work of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Ireland covers three areas. These are not distinct and independent but interact on each other. Broadly they can be divided into educational activities, campaigns on specific issues, and the making of representations to the Irish Government. Firstly, there are the educational activities aimed at establishing the uniqueness of the situation in South Africa for South Africa is the only country in the world with an official policy of racial supremacy with a minority holding a monopoly of political and economic power.

Educational activities have in the main taken the form of public meetings (usually three to four major meetings a year), supplemented with film shows. The Movement has found that activities directed at specific sections of the community can attract support that it would not otherwise

have uncovered in the course of our general campaigns. For instance, it has organized an essay competition on racialism for all secondary school children; it has held two extremely successful special conferences for schools, the latter for Human Rights Year in 1968 when thousands of copies of a special folder on apartheid were distributed to all Irish schools; two conferences for trade unionists have been held and there can be no doubt that working class and trade union involvement in subsequent activities, especially in the sports area, can be attributed to the Movement's earlier educational activities.

Secondly, the Movement has planned and executed a number of campaigns, usually in co-operation with other anti-apartheid movements or at the request of the liberation movement. Occasionally, these activities have been in response to political or legal developments in southern Africa itself, as with the Human Rights Year campaign on the treatment of political prisoners in South Africa and Rhodesia or the boycott of South African goods. For these activities, public meetings, demonstrations, vigils and fasts have been organized and other organizations and groups such as divinity students have been associated with the campaign.

The boycott of South African goods is part of the Movement's continuing work. Hundreds of thousands of leaflets listing South African goods sold in Ireland have been distributed to housewives, trade unions and political parties. Shops have been picketed and local authorities have been contacted requesting them not to purchase goods of South African origin for their hospitals and schools. Currently, the Movement is attempting to persuade commercial concerns with large catering departments not to purchase South African goods and it hopes to identify and then contact the principal importers of South African produce in order to stop the entry of South African goods at source.

It is very difficult to estimate the success of the boycott campaign in economic terms. Irish trade with South Africa has stabilized itself in the past two to three years and is largely limited to the purchase of fresh and tinned fruit and wines. South Africa has not participated in any of the commercial trade fairs held in this country and this may be a measure of the success of the work of the Movement. The Irish Government is obliged to give certain preferences to South African goods under the Commonwealth Ottawa Agreement but the extent of the trade is not significant. South Africa's motive in wishing to extend trade links with Ireland is not economic but strategic and political. This will be described in another section. What the boycott has certainly achieved is to provide for many thousands of people a feeling of personal identification with the Movement and its work and the plight of the majority of South Africans. This has often resulted in a greater political commitment to the freedom struggle in South Africa.

In any case, the "boycott campaign" is now subsumed under the general heading of "No Collaboration with Apartheid". Since 1961, in common with anti-apartheid movements in other parts of the world, we have utilized the various General Assembly resolutions in attempts to

break the cultural, political and sporting links that help to sustain apartheid in South Africa. In 1965, more than 150 Irish academics undertook to sign a public declaration not to work or teach in South African universities so long as apartheid existed; a year later, leading Irish playwrights, including those with an international reputation, declared that they would not allow their plays to be performed before segregated audiences in South Africa.

Another successful campaign was that conducted against the recruiting of Irish men and women to emigrate to South Africa. No further public efforts at recruitment have been made since the campaign. By Western European standards, the rate of emigration to South Africa from Ireland is negligible.

Sports boycott

The greatest impact has been made in the area of sport. From its earliest days, the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement established links with the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee and the first visit to Ireland by Dennis Brutus in 1966 introduced new dynamism in our work. Until then, pickets and demonstrations against all-white boxing, hockey, and bowls teams had been held. The Movement also joined in the international campaign to expel white South Africa from the Olympic Games by lobbying members of the International Olympic Committee.

South Africa's expulsion from various international sporting bodies impressed on the public the incompatibility between the principles of international sport and racial discrimination. The most significant victory for the Movement was the withdrawal of an invitation in 1967 to a team of all-black athletes to run in Ireland. This was a transparent attempt to confuse Western European public opinion by the South African Olympic Council. The stratagem failed in Ireland, but this team did run in some other European countries.

The most dramatic and far-reaching campaign in the short history of the Movement was undoubtedly that launched against the all-white South African rugby tour in 1969-1970. Because of the painstaking preliminary work done since 1964, there was massive trade-union objection to the tour for the first time. This was not limited to political opposition only; in many cases the decision to oppose the tour encompassed the idea of withdrawal of services by workers. For many weeks before the tour, thousands of leaflets were distributed and vigils, pickets and public meetings were held. The most representative declaration ever signed by a group of Irish men and women declared its opposition to the tour and all sections of the community rallied to the campaign.

The main fixture of the tour, the international match in Dublin, did in fact go on but the white South African players were subjected to the kind of life non-whites are inside South Africa. Police and demonstrators outside the hotel virtually kept them under house arrest and the match

was played behind barbed wire. The President of Ireland, the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and Ministers deliberately did not attend and the match was miserably attended.

In contrast, the anti-apartheid march to the rugby grounds mustered huge and heart-warming numbers of people from all over Ireland - not less than 8,000 protestors against injustice and racialism. This was the biggest demonstration against the tour, which also embraced England, Scotland and Wales. It was a day on which Ireland marched. No other anti-apartheid campaign has stimulated so much discussion and so many pages of newsprint. As a result, it is highly unlikely that the South African rugby or cricket authorities (it is only in these international bodies that white South Africa is neither expelled nor suspended) would venture a trip to Ireland again. The Irish sporting authorities would certainly not dare to invite racist sporting bodies to Ireland again.

Humanitarian assistance

The Anti-Apartheid Movement is an entirely voluntary organization which does not maintain a full-time office and all its personnel work in an unpaid capacity. Most of the funds which are raised are channeled towards the work of the International Defence and Aid Fund to which the Movement is affiliated. Although it receives occasional appeals from different parts of southern Africa for assistance, the resources are too limited to provide this type of help direct but it refers these appeals to other organizations whose purpose is to do this type of work.

One of the Movement's most successful activities during the last five years has been the appeal for Christmas cards to be sent to political prisoners, house arrestees and detainees and their families. Many thousands of Christmas cards have been sent annually and the ensuing correspondence between Ireland and South Africa in many cases has brought home to ordinary Irish people the reality of life in South Africa for people who have been persecuted for their beliefs.

Irish Government and Parliament

The third area of the Movement's activities is concerned with influencing the attitudes of members of the Irish Parliament and the Government. One of the earliest campaigns was the political prisoners campaign conducted around the Rivonia trial in 1964 and all members of the Dail were requested to sign the world petition circulated then. On important issues, the Movement's newsletter and United Nations information material are circulated to deputies of the Dail. Sympathetic deputies readily ask parliamentary questions. Since personal contact is more feasible in a small country such as Ireland, the first "lobby" of Dail members was particularly effective in persuading deputies of the value of our policies.

Visiting leaders of the liberation movement such as Oliver Tambo have had extremely useful meetings with members of the Irish Parliament and, more recently, Canon L. John Collins, President of the International Defence and Aid Fund, met Dr. Hillary, the Minister for External Affairs.

Foreign affairs and especially those of southern Africa, are not treated as a party political matter. There may be differences of emphases and tactics but there is no disagreement on the principle of opposition to apartheid. Therefore, the Movement has succeeded in a debate in the Senate on the question of the treatment of political prisoners in South Africa. As a result of this initiative, the Irish Government has been one of the members of the United Nations to make contributions to the United Nations Trust Fund for South Africa. Its contribution for 1969 was \$3,000. The Irish Government has also contributed to the United Nations Educational and Training Programme for Southern Africa and its contribution in 1969 amounted to \$5,000, which within the budgetary and economic limitations of the country, is not an inconsiderable sum. In 1970, the Department of External Affairs announced its contribution to the Trust Fund on March 21st, to coincide with the anniversary of the Sharpeville Massacre and the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Political links between Ireland and southern Africa are virtually non-existent. Ireland has no diplomatic relations with the Republic of South Africa and each country maintains an honorary consul. Ireland's diplomatic representation in Lisbon is at the level of a Chargé d'affaires and the sanctions ordered by the Security Council against Rhodesia are vigorously pursued.

The Anti-Apartheid Movement was particularly anxious when in 1970, the semi-state Export Board, Coras Trachtála, decided to sponsor an export mission to South Africa. After considerable public controversy and the tabling of questions in the Dáil, the Minister for Industry and Commerce announced that the trade mission would not go to South Africa and that, in future, Coras Trachtála would not engage in promoting Irish goods in South Africa.

This, with the Minister's statement that the Industrial Development Authority has not in recent years encouraged South African companies to invest in Ireland (where "tax-free holidays" and various inducements to foreign investors are offered), constitutes one of the greatest victories for the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Irish Government policy at the United Nations

The attitude of the Irish Government has always been one of condemnation of apartheid and it has shown a keen awareness of the threat constituted by South Africa. In particular, the Irish delegation to the United Nations has considered South Africa's now unlawful exercise of power over Namibia to be an act of oppression against the indigenous population of that country.

Until 1961 none of the General Assembly resolutions on apartheid recommended any concrete proposals for isolating South Africa or for providing assistance to the freedom struggle and the victims of apartheid. Rather, the controversy was concerned with the competence of the United Nations to deal with a matter concerning human rights inside the territory of a Member State. Ireland's gesture in joining the small group of Afro-Asian states was highly appreciated at that time.

Since then, the General Assembly has moved away from general condemnatory resolutions towards a more dynamic approach which emphasises the need for action of two types. Firstly, there has been the persistent request to Member States to break off all links with South Africa and not to provide financial, economic, military and communications assistance to that country. Secondly, since 1966 there has been the recognition that the struggle against apartheid must be assisted in various ways. With regard to the first group of "sanctions" resolutions, the Irish position has moved from an initially oppositionist position to abstention which was maintained until the 1970 General Assembly session when Ireland voted in favour of all six of the resolutions on South Africa and apartheid. Ireland was the only Western European State to vote in favour of all these resolutions, which include recommendations for specific aid to the liberation struggle.

International Year for Action to Combat Racism

The immediate task for the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement is to enlarge the nature of the opposition to apartheid to a more concrete support for the liberation struggle in southern Africa. Public opinion must be moved to recognize the real nature of the struggle in all parts of southern Africa and to provide direct assistance - moral and financial - to the liberation movement as recommended by the General Assembly and as practised by Sweden and some other countries. The Movement must also undertake to break the kind of economic links with South African commercial concerns which buttress apartheid. In this connexion, a careful survey of the ties between Irish subsidiaries of the giant supra-national corporations and their South African counterparts is being undertaken so that demands for disengagement can be made more forcefully.

For the International Year for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, the Movement has organized activities which will enable it to reach sections not so actively involved in its work. A Lutuli Memorial Award will be instituted and this will enable Irish university students to compete for essay prizes on an annual basis on any aspect of racialism, with particular reference to southern Africa. A conference on the theme of "The Churches and the challenge of racialism in Southern Africa" will be held and a school-kit on apartheid is being prepared.

The Movement shall appeal to the Irish Government to increase its contribution to the funds for assistance to the victims of apartheid and to take steps to implement General Assembly resolution 2761 (XXV) of December 1970 on the question of sanctions on South Africa. It is also hoped to organize a special conference with leading international participants on the theme of "The Unholy Alliance", to analyse the growing military, economic and political unity of the racist and colonialist forces in southern Africa.

Thus the Movement hopes that International Year for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination will see a significant rise in the level of commitment of the Irish people and Government to the struggle against apartheid.

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