

# **The Consequences of the Use of Internment Without Trial in Northern Ireland in the Early 1970s for the Provisional Irish Republican Army**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the consequences of the use of internment without trial in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s. The main focus of the article will be how the introduction of the measure effected the foremost republican paramilitary group, the Provisional Irish Republican Army, during the conflict known as the Troubles. The effects of the measure on unionists and the British will also be considered. How internment helped to internationalise the conflict and the way it influenced other events will be highlighted. The primary argument of the article is that the internment period helped create a core republican community which provided enough support for PIRA for it to carry out its military campaign for almost thirty years.

**Keywords:** British; Internment; Northern Ireland; PIRA; Violence

## **1. Introduction**

The Northern Irish conflict, often referred to as The Troubles, arguably began in 1968 when the unionist government resisted nationalist civil rights demands. In the face of increasing street violence, the government of Northern Ireland called for help from the British government in London. As a consequence, the British Army was deployed on to the streets giving the Irish Republican Army (IRA) the opportunity to use this very presence as justification for the re-emergence of their military campaign. The conflict was to last for almost thirty years until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The turmoil of these years involved many different groupings including the Northern Ireland Government (Stormont), the British Government (Westminster), the Irish Government (Dublin), two republican paramilitary factions; the Official IRA (OIRA) and the Provisional IRA (PIRA)<sup>1</sup>, loyalist paramilitary organisations such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF); and constitutional parties such as the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

<sup>1</sup> In the rest of this article the terms IRA and PIRA will be used interchangeably.

Republicans and nationalists, mostly Catholic, wanted the reunification of Ireland, whilst unionists and loyalists, mainly Protestant, desired that the six counties, that made up Northern Ireland, remain as part of the United Kingdom. As the conflict evolved and faced with an upsurge in IRA violence Stormont asked Westminster for permission to introduce internment without trial. Internment was introduced on 9 August 1971 and was targeted solely at both wings of the IRA despite the loyalist violence that was also occurring. The accepted narrative regarding internment is that it failed in its desired objective of defeating the IRA and that it also resulted in an escalation of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The main focus of this article will be the consequences of the internment period for the PIRA. It will also consider the implications of the measure for some of the other main actors in the conflict, highlighting not only detrimental effects but also any benefits that may have arisen.<sup>2</sup>

### **Benefits for PIRA**

Perhaps unsurprisingly PIRA was greatly changed by internment. There is no doubt that the way that internment was introduced increased support for the IRA, especially the PIRA. As the British admitted as early as November 1971, it had made the 'IRA look for the first time like a mass movement instead of a small body using Catholics as cover' (Secret Perimeter, No Date, TNA:PRO CJ 4/57). In fact, PIRA declared 1972 as 'The Year of Victory' (*Republican News*, 2 January 1972); although this was to be far from the truth. As will be argued later in this article intelligence was improving and more IRA members were being interned but this could also be counterproductive. For these internees internment proved to be a useful training ground. Indeed 'they began to organise themselves into a paramilitary command structure similar to sentenced prisoners within the internment camps, conducting similar drilling and lecturing activities... and were joined by individuals who had not actually been members of the paramilitary groupings when originally arrested' (McEvoy, 2001:216).

The internment period also had a huge impact on the conflict between the authorities and republican paramilitaries in prison. On 15 May 1972 republican prisoners, in Crumlin Road, began a phased hunger strike with five new men joining the protest every week. The prisoners were demanding political status equal to those who had been interned. The prisoners stated that they were prepared to continue their protest 'until the end, realising full well that it can end only in victory or death' (*Irish News*, 27 May 1972). Moreover, it has been argued that 'The hunger strike of 1981 had its roots in a hunger strike in 1972' (Conroy, 1987:139). There can be little doubt that both strikes were connected. As McKeown outlines:

"Following a hunger strike by sentenced republican prisoners in Crumlin Road Prison, similar conditions as those enjoyed by internees were granted to all convicted in the courts who claimed to have been politically motivated, this "special category status", or "political status" as the prisoners called it, was introduced at a time when the British government was holding talks with the IRA in the hope of convening a truce. The truce came and went but "status" remained until a new ruling by the Labour government in 1975 ended it for all prisoners convicted of offences after 1 March 1976. From that date onwards anyone found guilty by the courts was to be treated as an ordinary prisoner... the policy became known as "criminalisation" and it laid the ground for five years of intensive protest by sentenced republican prisoners who demanded the return of political status" (McKeown, 2001:14).

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<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive examination see Martin McCleery, *Operation Demetrius and its aftermath: A new history of the use of internment without trial in Northern Ireland 1971-75* (Manchester, 2020), Chapter 3.

The prison dispute of the late 1970s and early 1980s was to have far reaching effects on The Troubles and began ‘When the first republican prisoner to be sentenced under the new legislation, Kieran Nugent, was taken to the H-Blocks and ordered to wear the prison uniform and do prison work he simply refused and for several days was held naked in solitary confinement before being given a blanket to wrap himself in’ (McKeown, 2001:17). Eventually in ‘1981 after a long protest, which bore no fruit, it was felt that a hunger strike was the only option left. This tactic had been considered throughout the protest particularly because of its success originally in winning political status from the government in 1972’ (McKeown, 2001:18).

So, it can be seen how the introduction of internment resulted in political status being granted to internees and then subsequently to anyone convicted of political offences; a decision which ultimately led to the prison dispute of the 1980s. During the 1981 Hunger strike ten republicans were to die. At this time republicans successfully contested several elections, including a victory for Bobby Sands, one of the hunger strikers who was to lose his life. These election victories began to convince Sinn Fein, the political wing of PIRA, of the usefulness of contesting elections which in turn resulted in the movement adopting a new policy which Danny Morrison, the party’s Director of Publicity, famously outlined in a rhetorical question ‘Will anyone here object if, with a ballot box in this hand and an Armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland?’ (*Irish Times*, 2 January 2012). This policy eventually led to the complete politicalisation of the republican movement and ultimately contributed towards the peace settlement in 1998.

Internment had provided a military and ideological stimulus to internees. Their politicalisation had led to a desire to be treated as political prisoners which in turn led to a protest campaign when the authorities attempted to criminalise them. Born out of this struggle was more involvement in electoral politics and eventually to peace. A clear line can be drawn imprisonment- education- confrontation-politicalisation-conflict settlement.

### **Decline of PIRA**

Up onto, Bloody Friday, 21 July 1972 PIRA, although it had carried out disastrous operations, retained most of the support it had gained when internment was introduced. There had also been developments on the military front that gave the IRA in Belfast reason to believe that it could stretch the British further, such as the armalite, car bomb and land mines (Moloney, 2002 :114). Moreover the increase in membership that it had received since the previous August gave PIRA the manpower and infrastructure that it needed to carry out an operation like it did on Bloody Friday when ‘the Belfast Brigade sent twenty car bombs into the city and detonated them in just over an hour, killing nine people and injuring 130, in one of the worst days of violence yet seen during the troubles’ (Moloney, 2002:116). The revulsion at the bombing was widespread and as a consequence afterwards PIRA was in decline. Furthermore, Dixon and O’Kane contend that ‘The scale and indiscriminate nature of what became known as “Bloody Friday” damaged the IRA’s standing within its own community and created the political environment for the British to take a more assertive stance against the IRA’ (Dixon & O’Kane, 2011:33). The bombing also saw a further hardening of attitudes in the loyalist community (Bew & Gillespie, 1999:54).

There seems no doubt that ‘Bloody Friday was the unionist equivalent of Bloody Sunday, and it was an unmitigated disaster for the IRA...it had a speedy political impact. Moderate nationalists put even more distance between themselves and the IRA and intensified efforts to seek negotiations with the British and Faulkner’s unionists’ (Moloney, 2002:117). However, it should not be concluded that the PIRA had lost all support or that they were doomed to defeat. It must be remembered that no matter how successful and

effective the security forces were ‘there was no prospect of eliminating urban guerrillas and terrorists so long as a substantial element in the population was alienated from the forces of law and order’ (Maudling, 1978:187).

Nevertheless, ten days after Bloody Friday the security forces launched Operation Motorman. The revulsion at the murders created the right atmosphere for them to enter the ‘no-go’ areas that had existed in some nationalist areas since the introduction of internment. Twelve thousand soldiers entered the ‘no-go’ areas ‘in an attempt to restore government control’ (Bew & Gillespie, 1999:55). Previously these areas had been controlled by the paramilitaries which made it hard for the security forces to gather intelligence and build up a relationship with those communities. However, ‘the perpetual presence of the British Army after July 1972 did mark the end of a phase where the IRA had the initiative’ (Bradley & Feeney, 2009:99). Smith and Neumann also contend that:

“When the organisation rashly escalated its campaign, culminating in the Bloody Friday outrage, the government-initiated Operation Motorman to contain the conflict within acceptable boundaries...In particular, we can see how the IRA’s campaign was contained at a lower level of violence, which we may deduce impacted on its future judgements about the efficacy of its armed struggle.” (Smith & Neumann, 2005:413-35).

Moreover, after Operation Motorman the security forces were ‘now able to put the IRA under close surveillance in both cities...British army intelligence on the IRA improved markedly. Within two years the British grip on areas like West Belfast was so tight that the Belfast Brigade was forced to move its operational headquarters... to the opulent Malone area’ (Moloney, 2002:117). Leaders of the republican movement, such as Gerry Adams, were coming under more and more pressure; by 1973 he had to live in the University area of South Belfast (Moloney, 2002:128). As Adams admits ‘In 1969–70 there had been a popular uprising...By late 1972 the popular uprising had receded to some degree...As a consequence of a mixture of sheer, hard repression and coercion by the Brits, and mistakes made by republicans, the struggle had entered a defensive mode’ (Adams, 2001:214). In a telling comment he also admits that ‘Quite sizeable demonstrations against internment were taken place, but the big weakness of our situation, was that we created no political alternative to the SDLP. Neither did we seek any accommodation with them’ (Adams, 2001:215). In hindsight Adams was admitting that the weakness of the Provisional movement was that it could not provide a clear political alternative to the military campaign. As a consequence, when operations went wrong the organisation was bound to lose support within the nationalist community.

Internment had considerably increased the manpower of PIRA and the organisation also enhanced its infrastructure giving it the resources to carry out an attack such as Bloody Friday. However, the disastrous nature of the operation had proved to be hugely counterproductive, and the authorities were able to contain PIRA to a degree afterwards and intelligence also improved further.

### **Creation of a Core Republican Community**

As alluded to earlier for many internees the internment experience had hardened their resolve to oppose British rule. Indeed ‘These men emerged from the interment centres...with more training in weaponry and

explosives than they possessed before they were interned, and with a strong sense of camaraderie, of being part of a large organisation stretched across Ireland' (Bradley & Feeney, 2009:76). Men like Gerard 'Bloot' McDonnell, who was interned from 1972 to 1975, he maintains that his experience only served to make him more determined to oppose British rule (Interview with Gerard McDonnell, 24 March 2010). This certainly seems to be the case as McDonnell was subsequently imprisoned a number of times. Brendan Hughes, a former prominent PIRA man, remembers him being in jail in the late 1970S recalling 'Some just refused to come out of their cell, people like Big 'Bloot' McDonnell. I had heard his voice...for months and never saw his face, didn't know what he looked like. He was one of those who refused to take any sort of visit or even come out of his cell to go to mass' (Moloney, 2010:219-20). His refusal was a hard-line stance against any conformity with the prison authorities. Additionally, Reginald Maudling, the Home Secretary, conceded that 'internees are conducting classes in guerrilla tactics, revolutionary warfare, weaponry, Marxist ideology and other germane topics and that although not all may have been hard-core IRA men on entry the probability is that most of them will be after a few months internment' (*House of Commons Debates*, vol.831, 24 February 1972, c.1470). Indeed, it was during internment that Patrick Magee, Brighton bomber, remembered 'Gerry Adams lecturing in Long Kesh in 1973. Does anybody here think this war will be over in two years...Does anybody think this war's going to be over in twenty years...He was very much aware that this was a long haul' (English, 2004:162-3). So, it may have been that the PIRA strategy of a long war was born in the internment camp.

The experience of prison for the internees has been further analysed:

"The prison experience itself can catalyse leadership potential. The experience intensifies the individual's grievance, and also provides, for many, an opportunity to study and examine in depth tactical and ideological issues attendant upon revolution. Leadership ability also crystallizes within the institution, as certain individuals become respected among their fellows and their advice and behaviour become models for others." (Fields, 1973:167).

Also, as a result of internment younger, more radical members were becoming more involved in acts of violence. As Feeney points out regarding Gerry Bradley, another prominent ex-PIRA member, 'The unforeseen consequence of internment was that youths like Bradley were unleashed on Belfast' (Bradley & Feeney, 2009:61); as other IRA men were on the run. It can also be observed that the list of ex-internees reads like a 'who's who' of the republican movement and includes Gerry Adams, Danny Morrison, Freddy Scappaticci, Denis Donaldson, Patrick Magee, Martin Meehan, Leo Martin and Dominic McGlinchey, to mention just a few. Many other important republicans joined the IRA during this period most of them being in their formative teenage years. Indeed, all of the ten men who were to die on hunger strike in 1981 were teenagers when internment was introduced in 1971. Men like 'Patsy O'Hara who did not come from a traditional republican background. A British soldier had shot and wounded him in late 1971. Three years later he was interned, and on his release in April 1975 he joined Costello's new movement' (McDonald & Holand, 2010:213). Also, in June 1972 Bobby Sands moved to Twinbrook after being harassed out of his home in Rathcoole by loyalists; he was 18 years old, shortly afterwards he joined the IRA (Conroy, 1987:147). Internment also influenced 'Francie Hughes who died on 12 May after fifty-nine days on hunger strike...In 1971 as a fifteen-year-old... he had seen one of his older brothers, with whom he was

sharing a bedroom, taken from the house in the early hours of the morning and interned' (Adams, 2001:298). But these were not the only young people to be affected by the introduction of internment. Many other teenagers were influenced by the introduction of internment and subsequent events. As IRA man Eamon Collins, who was to become an informer and was murdered in 1999, recalls:

"In September 1971...I remember going to an anti-internment rally near my home at Camlough, attended by a huge crowd. A recently released internee spoke about the brutality to which he had been subjected. His ravaged appearance added force to the harrowing story he told of beatings, torture and cruelty. You could actually feel the anger in the crowd as he spoke...But I was young, and the idea of political violence began to work its way into my mind. I had a sneaking regard for the IRA, a gut sympathy. If I had to choose between a Catholic IRA man and a representative of the Protestant state, I somehow knew on which side I would err." (Collins, 1997:43-4).

The introduction of internment had a huge impact on many lives; people like Dolores Fox and her family from Lurgan. Dolores's paternal grandfather was a Protestant, who at the age of seventeen had fought for the British army in WW1, later in life he married a Catholic and his children were raised as Catholics. Consequently, Dolores and her three brothers and one sister were also brought up as Catholics. She recalls that there was absolutely no republican tradition in her family but in 1972 due to unforeseen circumstances her family moved into a republican housing estate in Lurgan. It was at this stage that her brother Dessie, at the age of fifteen, joined the OIRA. In 1975 he sided with the Costello side in the split in that part of the republican movement. In the 1980s he was to spend two lengthy prison sentences in Long Kesh. Eventually he was murdered in 1996 during an internal INLA feud. Dolores says that her family has never been the same since. She believes that his death was directly linked to that decision to move into a republican housing estate in 1972 (Interview with Dolores Fox, 29 June 2011).

There is no arguing that internment resulted in a huge growth in support for the IRA and that equally from 1972 this support did shrink considerably; however enough republican activists remained in the movement to ensure that the troubles would not be over quickly. In other words, 'August 1969, the Lower Falls Curfew in West Belfast, internment and Bloody Sunday guaranteed that the IRA would always have a base of support' (White, 2006:191). Additionally, as Charles Townshend outlines technology had 'transformed the power of the portable weapons used by insurgents and made possible urban guerrilla operations by very small groups (or cells) with the capacity for very destructive military action' (Townshend, 1986:71). As conceded by the authorities themselves 'There can be no purely military solution...and even small numbers of terrorists can cause havoc' (*House of Commons Debates*, vol,833, 16 March 1972, c.737.). It was the internment period that left militant republicans with enough support to carry on a prolonged campaign. The key aspects needed for militant republicanism to survive had been established by the time internment was ended. As English outlines, 'The true explanation for nationalism lies with the concepts of community, struggle and power' (English, 2007:432). Within republican areas these themes had been reinforced.

How had internment changed PIRA? What was the main long-term legacy of the internment period for the conflict in Northern Ireland? As previously stated undoubtedly internment resulted in an increase in support for the PIRA which gave the organisation an increased capacity to carry out operations. However, this growth in capacity also resulted in atrocities like Bloody Friday. Although the nationalist community since August 1971 had perceived itself under attack, and indeed in many ways it was, it was clear that there was

little support for such atrocities. From Bloody Friday onwards PIRA was on the back foot and would not receive as much popular support again until the Hunger Strike of 1981. In the final analysis perhaps one of the most lasting legacies of the internment period was that it helped to leave militant republicanism with enough core support to bridge this decade. As Joseph Ruane outlines:

“The ‘republican analysis of the situation’ consisted of the following propositions which for republicans had the status of axioms: the British government was an imperial presence in Ireland; partition was a denial of the Irish right to self-determination; as long as the British remained there would be people who would resist by force of arms; Northern Catholics could never get equality while partition remained; the British government and establishment could not be negotiated with or trusted; only violence would persuade it to withdraw; the campaign of the IRA was a war, and as in all wars innocent people would die; this time the war had to continue until the British left; the war would succeed. Not all nationalists, still less all Catholics, could be persuaded to accept each and every one of these propositions. But enough were persuaded to constitute a core republican community.” (Ruane, 2004:121-22).

Admittedly the creation of this core militant republican community was the result of a number of factors. Support for or involvement in republican paramilitaries depended on friendships, family connections, location, tradition and the rejection of decades of unionist domination but it was also connected to the actions of the authorities in the early 1970s. The use of repression and the failure to recognise the mistakes made also contributed to the establishment of such a community and in turn to a continuation of the conflict. Of course, PIRA was not the only group impacted by internment.

### **Unionism and Loyalism**

It was quite obvious that unionism lost out as a result of the introduction of internment. Within a year of its introduction direct rule from Westminster was imposed replacing the unionism dominated government that had lasted five decades. Indeed Brian Faulkner, the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, was aware from the moment he asked for internment that if it failed then the only option Westminster felt it would have would be to introduce direct rule. As McGrattan contends the evidence suggests that it was ‘the decision (internment)...that led directly to the prorogation of Stormont the following March’ (McGrattan, 2010:46). The deployment of direct rule infuriated unionists so much so that on 28 March 1972 more than 100,000 Protestants assembled on the mile-long approach to Stormont to protest against its imposition (Kelley, 1983:168). Additionally, Paul Dixon argues that unionists were further angered by what they perceived to be a soft approach adopted by the Conservative government with the introduction of direct rule which had been a key IRA demand. Edward Heath’s, the British Prime Minister, speech in November 1971 did not provide unionists with much comfort when he declared that nationalist aspiration for Irish unity by democratic and constitutional means was legitimate and that if a majority in Northern Ireland wanted Irish unity ‘I do not believe any British government would stand in the way’ (Dixon, 2004:140).

The ongoing escalation of the conflict following the introduction of internment also contributed to a hardening of attitudes within loyalism. As evidenced by the formation of the UDA in September 1971. The UDA was formed out of a wide range of vigilante and paramilitary groups. Its membership was largely working class and at its peak in 1972 the UDA has a membership of between 40,000 and 50,000 men. The organisation provided an outlet for working class loyalists to channel their frustrations at the deterioration

in the security situation by attending marches and manning barricades. It also had an intensely sectarian element dedicated to attacking Catholics (Bew & Gillespie, 1999:39-40). Indeed, the UDA, which was also used the name the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), was to go on to murder over 400 people during the Troubles. (McKittrick et al., 2007:1553).

The introduction of internment had led to the fall of Stormont, a perception among unionists that the British government had softened in its attitude towards nationalists, and a hardening of the military mind-set within loyalist communities because of an upsurge in republican violence.

### **British**

Obviously, the British did not desire the escalation of the conflict that happened but one way in which the internment period did benefit the authorities was that it was easier to recruit informers; a tactic that was to be used many times throughout The Troubles. It was in November 1971 that the army began using techniques which had been pioneered by Frank Kitson, during the Mau Mau rising, in Kenya. The idea was to induce somebody from the other side to work for you. These informants became known as 'Freds' and could be induced to work for the security forces by financial reward or freedom from conviction (Taylor, 2002:127-8). As Frank Kitson outlined the tactic was to develop information by 'exploiting the characteristics of special people such as captured insurgents' (Kitson, 1971:100). The large influx of new IRA members, derived from the introduction of internment, must surely have meant that it was easier to plant informants within the republican movement. As remembered by one prominent republican, Rita O'Hare, who recalls that at the time of internment 'there was a tremendous openness...In a way the openness was extremely bad. It gave the Brits the opportunity to plant spies and so on' (Kennan-Thompson, 2010:233-4). Gerry Bradley also admitted that 'The big battalions, which had grown, to hundreds of volunteers in 1972, were bound to be leaky' (Bradley & Feeney, 2009:128). Indeed, internment was also proving more effective largely as a result of improved intelligence on republicans, as O'Halpin states 'The secretary of the JIC found that intelligence had much improved in January 1972 compared to a year earlier although there was still difficulties over sharing intelligence between the police and army' (O'Halpin, 2008:658-680). In fact, between 9 Aug 1971 and 14 Feb 1972 2,447 suspects were detained with 934 released (McEvoy, 2001:211). As a result of the improved intelligence virtually all internees by this stage were paramilitaries. As some republicans have admitted 'There were few innocent men in Long Kesh after 1972' (Bradley & Feeney, 2009:117). The fact that intelligence was improving, as one government minister outlined, was also due in part to the point that 'There must be no doubt in the first instance that co-operation on the part of the whole population with the security forces is a vital feature in the security of any state. Co-operation from the population of Northern Ireland...has been increasing all the time, is still increasing, and is a major factor in the improving success of the security forces' (*House of Commons Debates*, vol.856, 10 May 1973, c.726-7).

At the same time the British were examining alternatives to internment. They appointed Lord Diplock to investigate alternative legal procedures and his report was released in December 1972. The report found that, despite improved public cooperation 'The main obstacle to dealing effectively with terrorist crime in the regular courts is intimidation by terrorist organisations of these persons who would be able to give evidence for the prosecution if they dared' (Diplock, 1972:7a). Its proposals included that 'Terrorist offences were now designated Scheduled Offences and trials for Scheduled Offences were to be heard by a High Court or a County Court Judge sitting alone with no jury and the usual rights of appeal' (Diplock, 1972:7g). Furthermore 'the onus of proof was changed and 'A confession made by the accused should be



admissible as evidence in cases involving the Scheduled Offences unless it was obtained by torture or inhumane or degrading treatment' (Diplock, 1972:7k). The Diplock system was used by the authorities for the majority of the conflict as an effective way of dealing with suspected paramilitaries.

However, internment while it lasted still proving useful for the authorities, as it could be used as a bargaining tool by the government in negotiations for the Sunningdale Agreement in December 1973.<sup>3</sup> For example, the SOS repeated his 'declared aim of releasing all persons detained without trial until November 1973 when he also announced the creation of the new power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive' (Spjut, 1986:712-737). This increase in releases, in December 1973, was part of the strategy to get the SDLP to make concessions and join the power-sharing executive. Equally the increased use of arrests, with the potential for internment, in April 1974 can be seen as a sop to Unionists prepared to participate in the executive, although Merlyn Rees maintains this increase was due to an upsurge in PIRA violence (Spjut, 1986:712-737).

Internment, it can be seen then, did have benefits for the British. The increased IRA membership made it easier to recruit informers, more cooperation was coming from the general public, it led to the creation of a legal system that was used throughout the Troubles; it could also be used as an effective bargaining tool in political negotiations.

### **Bringing in the International**

Internment also helped to internationalise the conflict in Northern Ireland, as Brendan Brandon argues 'it was the internments of 1971—that brought the attention of the world to the use of special powers in Northern Ireland' (Brandon, 2004:981-97). After internment was introduced, Faulkner received many letters of complaint from Britain and across the globe. Concern was expressed by countries as far apart as the USA, Australia, New Zealand, France, Romania, Sweden and even Uganda (Note on foreign reactions to situation in Northern Ireland, no date, TNA PRO FCO 33/1475). Perhaps more importantly, certainly in the long-term, was the attention that internment brought from Libya. On 16 August 1971 Joe Cahill, Chief of Staff of PIRA, gave a press conference, which was broadcast worldwide, at which he claimed that during the internment operation 'only thirty IRA men have been detained' (Bew & Gillespie, 1999:36). Many miles away, the twenty-nine-year-old Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was assessing the significance of the conference (Anderson, 2002:231). He was impressed by Cahill's nerve in appearing on television (Anderson, 2002:265). Indeed, it was around this time that Cahill says that 'Muammar Gaddafi's roving ambassador began making contact, through intermediaries' with him (Anderson, 2002:238). Of course, in the years to come the supply of arms from Libya was to become a major factor in the PIRA ability to carry on their campaign. As Christopher Andrew outlines 'When large-scale arms smuggling from Libya began in 1985, it was to transform the Provisional's operating capability' (Andrew, 2009:623). Internment brought the eyes of the world onto the Northern Irish conflict and helped PIRA gain both financial and military support from abroad.

### **Bloody Sunday**

Another aspect of internment that has not been fully analysed is how the measure was also at the heart of other events that further escalated the conflict. Events such as Bloody Sunday which took place on 30

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of this point see: Tony Craig and Martin McCleery, 'Political bargaining chips: republican internees in Northern Ireland 1972-75 in *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (2020) 31:3, pp.639-660.

January 1972 when British paratroopers fatally shot fourteen unarmed civilians at a civil rights parade in Derry. Although it is more precise to describe the march as an 'anti-internment protest' (Moloney, 2002:110). because the civil rights movement was moribund until the introduction of internment. By 1971 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement (NICRA) had achieved most of its major objectives (Shanahan,2009:62), with the exception of the repeal of the Special Powers Act which gave the authority for internment without trial.

Bloody Sunday would never have happened without the march that took place on that day and that march was a direct result of the policy of internment and the way it was implemented. Indeed, Hennessey maintains that 'Bloody Sunday was the event that ensured that the Provisional IRA would have the manpower to replenish those lost to the attrition of internment' (Hennessey, 2007:313). He elaborates further that internment was having its effect until the Bloody Sunday killings, 'So in January 1972, IRA activity had been reduced with internment grinding down many IRA units in terms of personnel and material...But these successes were soon to be nullified by the events of January 1972' (Hennessey, 2007:226). Nevertheless, the connection between internment and Bloody Sunday is clear and places internment at the heart of the further increase in support that occurred.

## 2. Conclusion

The impact of internment went far beyond PIRA. It led to the fall of the long-standing unionist government. In its aftermath the attitude of the British government towards nationalists made unionists realise that the British would not just blindly support them no matter what. Militant loyalism became even more determined to defeat republicans in the wake of increased levels of republican violence.

Internment did prove beneficial in some ways for the British. Of course, the increased violence was not desirable, but a larger PIRA membership made it easier to recruit and plant informers, as violence increased the general public became more co-operative, an effective legal system for dealing with paramilitaries was born out of the desire to do away with internment, and also importantly when the measure was still in operation-controlled releases and arrests could be used to persuade political parties to enter dialogue.

There is no doubt that internment benefitted the republican movement, especially PIRA. This article has provided a more comprehensive exploration of the gains that PIRA received following the introduction of the measure. Internees through their prison experience received more military training and developed their political thinking which in turn strengthened the republican movement. Indeed, the politicalisation of republicanism was in no small part due to the conflict that was to take place in the prisons which started following the introduction of internment.

Internment increased support for PIRA and it proved to be an excellent recruiting agent for the organisation too. It also brought the attention of the international community to the Northern Irish conflict, resulting in increased financial and military support for PIRA. At the same time better arms and improved finances helped provide the ability to launch attacks such as Bloody Friday. However, this growth proved to be a double-edged sword as disastrous attacks like this only opened up the opportunity for the authorities to limit PIRA actions and also to improve intelligence.

Internment was ended on 5 December 1975 (*House of Commons Debates*, vol.902, 8 December 1975, c.74.) In total 2,060 suspected republicans and 109 suspected loyalists were interned between 1971 and 1975 (McEvoy, 2001:212). How can we judge the full impact of internment on PIRA? Perhaps some

indication can be drawn from the words of Gerry Fitt, an SDLP leader, about the ending of internment, ‘On 9 August 1972, 73, 74 and 75 the PIRA lit bonfires on the streets of Belfast to celebrate the introduction of internment—the greatest weapon in its armoury—there were no bonfires on the streets of Belfast when internees and detainees were released last week’ (*House of Commons Debates*, vol.902, 8 December 1975, c.33.). In other words, republicans themselves saw that their movement had been greatly enhanced by the mistaken way internment had been introduced. In the final analysis perhaps the lasting legacy of internment was that it had helped to create a core republican movement which was strong enough to sustain PIRA until it received a further boost during the Hunger Strikes of the early 1980s.

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