

Omagh bombing used to push through draconian security measures

Chris Marsden
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Last Saturday's bombing of Omagh in Northern Ireland by the dissident republican group the Real IRA (RIRA) is being utilised to legitimise a fundamental erosion of democratic rights on both sides of the border.

The bombing left 28 dead and over 200 injured, seven of them critically. A daily media barrage claims that the magnitude of the suffering caused by the bomb demands the suspension of due legal process and that the police should be granted powers to arrest and imprison without proof of criminal wrongdoing.

In the Irish Republic, the coalition government has approved unprecedented legal measures against those suspected of membership in a paramilitary organisation. Criminal offences now include directing an illegal organisation, withholding information, unlawfully collecting information, possessing firearms and training others in the making of firearms. The maximum period for detention of someone suspected of these offences is extended from 48 to 72 hours. This can be further increased by 24 hours with a judge's authorisation.

A discussion between Irish premier Bertie Ahern and Northern Ireland's new First Minister, David Trimble of the Ulster Unionist Party will take place tomorrow.

Other measures proposed earlier include the return to internment without trial for those suspected of being members of terrorist organisations or political parties sympathetic to them. Ahern said this 'remains an option'. Calls for internment won widespread backing in ruling circles. Writing in the *Irish Times*, former Irish premier Garret Fitzgerald explained that when internment was last used between 1971 and 1976, it backfired. Its operation in the North was seen as partisan, being directed exclusively at republicans and Catholics, and was accompanied by 'extensive

brutality... half of those arrested were brutalised and 14 were subjected to treatment which the European Commission on Human Rights subsequently found to be torture'. Fitzgerald is still concerned at public reaction to its re-introduction, but felt that, 'following the vote by five-sixths of the people of this land in favour of the Belfast Agreement and in the immediate aftermath of the Omagh massacre, internment is once again an option'.

A return to the situation that existed until 1976, when those accused of being members of proscribed political groups could be arrested and imprisoned for up to two years on the word of a police Chief Superintendent and without any corroborative evidence, is still under discussion.

The British government will decide on its response soon, but it has prepared the way with a plethora of statements like that of Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam that the 'animals' will be taken 'off the streets'.

The scope of these new measures is being arbitrarily widened to all those republican groups who have opposed the Northern Ireland Agreement. The RIRA has now admitted responsibility for the bomb and is naturally being targeted for state operations. The 32 Counties Sovereignty Movement is also included as it is suspected of being the political wing of the RIRA, which they deny. Ahern appealed to other republican groups linked to paramilitary splinters and opposed to the Northern Ireland Agreement to declare a cease-fire immediately if they did not wish to suffer the fate of the RIRA. The Irish Republican Socialist Party immediately appealed to the Irish National Liberation Army to do so.

Without detracting from the appalling losses resulting from the RIRA's actions, or apologising for their manifest political bankruptcy, all those concerned with

the preservation of democratic rights should pause for a moment to consider the following question: Why is there such an indecent haste to impose these draconian measures?

The RIRA has a base of less than 100 supporters according to Ahern and only 30 according to Mowlam. In the face of the massive public outcry over Omagh they are totally isolated and without support and have already been forced to declare their own 'cease-fire'. For its part, Sinn Fein has not only signed up to the Northern Ireland Agreement, but its leaders Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness have also said they will help the British government deal with those who continue terrorist actions. Yet, despite the overwhelming support throughout Ireland for an Agreement that promised democracy and peace, plans are well advanced for a return to the most authoritarian measures associated with the 30-year history of the Troubles.

If it were just a case of dealing with a handful of nationalist and unionist extremists, none of this would be necessary. But there is a broader political agenda that is as yet undeclared, an indication of which is provided by Vincent Brown in the *Irish Times* of August 19.

Brown states that the actions of the RIRA are proof that the struggle of the Irish republican movement against Britain has always been wrong. So too was virtually every movement for social and political emancipation in history. He writes that, 'the very act of such revolutions is a defiance of the equality of humankind that supposedly inspired these revolutions. And yes, this means that the 1916 revolution was wrong, that the War of Independence was wrong, that the American revolution was wrong, that the French revolution was wrong.'

Why is such a frankly ridiculous calumny on history necessary? Working people in the north and south supported the Agreement believing it offered the prospect of peace and the promise that political stability would bring with it increased investment and economic prosperity for all. This promise, however, is illusory. Both governments are intent on slashing wages and social spending in order to transform the whole of Ireland into a cheap labour investment platform and fund tax breaks for the global corporations. The broader intention of the proposed security measures is to

strengthen the state apparatus in preparation for dealing with opposition to the interests of big business by working people that will inevitably emerge in the near future.

See Also:

The Omagh bombing and the dead-end of nationalism
[18 August 1998]



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