

Ireland's Bernadette Devlin McAliskey deported from the US

Steve James
5 March 2003

Prominent Irish republican and civil rights activist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey was deported from the United States on February 21.

US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officials at Chicago's O'Hare airport seized McAliskey who was travelling on a flight from Dublin to New York via Chicago for a short holiday. She was photographed, fingerprinted, had her life threatened, and was summarily deported on the grounds that she posed a "serious threat to national security".

It is not yet clear whether McAliskey's deportation arose primarily from the routine paranoia that is being inculcated in all levels of US officialdom, particularly the INS, or from a higher decision emanating from Washington or London. Either way, the incident is a further indication of the enormous threat to free speech and democratic rights posed by the trajectory of the Bush administration.

Bernadette McAliskey and her daughter Deirdre were both cleared through US immigration by American INS officials in Dublin, having filled in their visa waivers, and were allowed to board their flight. The pair then crossed the Atlantic, but the INS in Dublin had second thoughts for unknown reasons and faxed O'Hare airport—insisting that McAliskey was ineligible for entry to the US and should be detained and deported.

McAliskey told *Newsday* that as they were negotiating baggage reclaim at O'Hare a call came over the public address system for them to make their way to an information desk. They were then surrounded by three men and a woman who grabbed their passports and accused McAliskey of being a threat to the United States. McAliskey said she explained who she was, that she had been travelling to the US for 30 years, that she had been a member of parliament, and that their actions were crazy. One of the agents retorted, "If you tell me

one more time that this is crazy, I'll put handcuffs on you and throw you into a cell."

McAliskey insisted that she had the right to travel freely, that she had human rights and the right to be protected under the US Constitution. Deirdre heard an INS official reply, "After 9/11 no one has any rights."

According to Deirdre, another officer "pulled his chair right up to mommy and I heard him say 'don't make my boss angry. I saw him fire a shot at a guy last week and he has the authority to shoot.'"

Questioned about her six months jail sentence, imposed by the British government, Deirdre heard an agent say, "See, that makes her ineligible to be in the country. She knew that. She snuck past the people in Dublin."

Devlin McAliskey was elected to the British Parliament from Northern Ireland in 1969, aged just 21, making her the youngest-ever British MP. In August 1969, she was arrested during the so-called "' Battle of the Bogside,' " a riot by mainly Catholic youth in Derry in protest at the British occupation of Northern Ireland. She was convicted of inciting a riot in 1970 and sentenced to six months, of which she served four months in prison while still an MP. She left parliament in 1974, but continues to be active in republican politics in which capacity she has made numerous speaking tours of the US.

McAliskey pointed out that current US rules only make ineligible for entry someone who was spent two years in jail, and that her ineligibility has been lifted. After further exchanges and a search of computer records, one of the INS agents conceded that, yes, it was crazy, but nevertheless, she had to be deported. She was duly placed on the next Aer Lingus flight to Ireland, while Deirdre went on to New York. Neither of the women had their baggage searched.

Deirdre said that while her mother was being detained, four men with Arabic sounding names were also questioned. She believes the men were later taken to jail.

Questioned by *Newsday*, the Justice Department, the INS and the State Department declined to comment, but an anonymous official claimed that McAliskey was deported because of an “expired visa waiver.” She was temporarily banned from entering the US in 1983 on account of her role in fundraising for the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), a rival group to the Irish Republican Army that at the time projected a more left-wing brand of nationalism. Commenting on the deportation, Jeanne Butterfield of the American Immigration Lawyers Association said that “to stop people who may have been sympathetic to the IRA, it’s frightening to me. It’s chilling.... It suggests that [the] noose is tightening on all of us.”

It is entirely possible that McAliskey was targeted for bureaucratic harassment because of her current opposition to the war against Iraq, or her long-standing opposition to both British rule and the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. But there is no evidence of direct involvement by the British government or Washington in her deportation.

One can only conclude that anyone with a political record of an oppositional character attempting to visit the US is liable to harassment, deportation, or even imprisonment.

It is not, however, the first time that McAliskey and her family has faced harassment by the state. Her other daughter, Roisin, was arrested on November 20, 1996, under Emergency Law after being identified by Northern Ireland’s Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), without any evidence, as being one of the perpetrators of a terror bombing in Germany.

It was only following her arrest by the RUC that the German authorities requested her extradition. Aged just 24 and pregnant, she was held for 16 months despite having an alibi that made clear she was not even in Germany at the time of the bombing.

Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, who has been made a citizen of New York and San Francisco on account of her republican activities, and her daughter Deirdre intend to pursue the matter of their treatment in Chicago’s O’Hare airport with the US and Irish authorities.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact