

Sinn Fein's McGuinness joins Irish president in toasting Queen

By Jordan Shilton
15 April 2014

“On a day brimming with powerful symbolism in honour of the first state visit by a President of the Republic of Ireland, there were so many historic moments to choose from ... But even the clattering pomp of a full state carriage procession through cheering Windsor streets festooned with the Irish tricolour could not match the significance of Martin McGuinness—in white tie and tails—rising to toast the Queen and the British people at last night’s state banquet.”

So wrote the arch reactionary *Daily Mail* in a piece that also noted that the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland for Sinn Fein was seated just 12 seats down from Prince Charles and that he shook the queen’s hand for the second time, the first occasion being her Diamond Jubilee visit to Northern Ireland in 2012.

The piece, in order to assume an outraged tone, was accompanied by a “charge sheet” against the former military commander of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) under the title “Lest we forget”. It included the ludicrous claim that it was McGuinness who “sparked Bloody Sunday with a single shot” and, as head of the IRA Army Council, played a part in ordering the murder of Lord Mountbatten, “the cousin of the Queen and Prince Phillip’s uncle.”

But the piece contained numerous references to the queen’s conciliatory statements, such as her declaration, “We are walking together towards a brighter, more settled, future. We shall remember our past but we will no longer allow our past to ensnare our future.” And it finished with a resigned verbal shrug: “Still, that’s progress for you.”

Aside from arch right-wing Tory Norman Tebbit stating, “We can but hope” that a “Real IRA will be so outraged by Mr. McGuinness bowing to the Queen that

they might shoot him in the back for it,” there was in fact little negative comment to be found on McGuinness’s presence.

Quite the opposite, because his political role is as much a key to securing the interests of British imperialism, the Republic of Ireland and major investors such as the United States as was the official visit of the president of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, that occasioned the toast and handshake.

Higgins was the first head of state to pay an official visit to Britain since Irish independence in 1922. It followed the visit by the queen to Ireland three years ago, the first time a British monarch had visited the country since it gained independence.

At the state banquet, the queen pledged that a representative of the royal family would in two years time take part in Irish commemorations of the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, led by nationalists and socialist James Connolly against British rule and privilege that ended with hundreds dead and thousands wounded or imprisoned and 15 executions, including Connolly’s.

Higgins responded to the queen’s blandishments that while relations in the past had been “often troubled”, they were now characterised by “mutual respect and close partnership.”

McGuinness was present at Higgins’ speech to a joint session of the House of Commons and House of Lords on the first full day of his visit.

The embrace of the monarchy is an acknowledgement of the common interests of the ruling class on both sides of the Irish Sea and their hostility towards working people. It is a final historical verdict on bourgeois nationalism’s claim to represent the interests of the Irish population as a whole and to be able to liberate Ireland from imperialist domination.

Rather, the Irish bourgeoisie has succeeded in securing its own right to share in the exploitation of the working class on both sides of the border. Indeed McGuinness, Gerry Adams and company differ from their southern counterparts only in that they more recently secured their own place within the state apparatus.

In his parliamentary address, Higgins spoke for McGuinness also when he praised the Good Friday Agreement as a major advance for democracy. The agreement brought Sinn Fein into government in Northern Ireland's Assembly, alongside the pro-British Unionist parties. By making all legislation dependent on acceptance by those deemed to represent two rival "communities", the agreement entrenched sectarian divisions and has facilitated a series of violent outbursts in recent years. It expressed above all the desire of Britain, Ireland and the US to open up the north to global investment by creating a cheap labour platform and stable environment for major corporations to do business.

This is what is now being celebrated. A recent BBC report noted that US investment funds were on a "shopping spree" in the north. New York-based Cerberus Capital had assumed "a dominant role in the Northern Ireland property market" by acquiring the loans of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA). This organisation was set up at taxpayers' expense by the Dublin government to bail out Ireland's failed banking system and take over management of their toxic assets. Working people paid for this with devastating austerity measures and job losses, while Cerberus paid just a fraction of the £4.5 billion face value of the 850 property portfolio.

Other deals in Northern Ireland included the sale of loans worth £1.3 billion by Bank of Ireland, another bailed-out institution, to California-based Kennedy Wilson Capital. The BBC noted that when the Irish government unveiled the winding up of the remainder of Anglo-Irish Bank earlier this year, a move that took place with extreme rapidity, Cerberus was involved in purchasing a large quantity of its loan portfolio.

The *Irish Independent* commented tellingly that the ties between Dublin and London were "far too close for any discomfort." It enthused over Britain's provision of a bilateral loan of €3.8 billion (£3.2 billion) as part of the European Union-led bailout to Dublin in 2010. "It simply wasn't in Britain's interests to have Ireland

suffer," the paper stated.

The loan was aimed at securing the considerable investments of British banks in the Irish financial sector. The bailout programme as a whole has facilitated a massive transfer of wealth from working people to the ruling elite, including the slashing of government spending equivalent to 20 percent of economic output, a huge drop in wages that is comparable only with Greece, and a sharp increase in social inequality and poverty.

Higgins ran for president as a Labour candidate, the party that has played a central role in implementing billions of euros in spending cuts in coalition with Fine Gael. Business cooperation has never been so strong. The *Irish Independent* reports that 50,000 directors of British businesses were born in Ireland and 56,000 companies in the UK had been set up by people from Ireland. British exports to Ireland are greater than those to Brazil, China and India combined, while more than half of all Irish beef exports and 16 percent of industrial exports go to the UK.

Higgins' visit was to coincide with "Ireland day" at the London Stock Exchange. According to reports, over 120 business leaders and investors attended the event. At a meeting with Prime Minister David Cameron, Higgins proposed a joint trade mission to be carried out by the two countries at prime ministerial level with the aim of attracting international trade and investment. Ireland's Taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny confirmed at a business breakfast held in London's Mansion House that such plans were already being worked on.

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