

‘I was altogether out of tune with my colleagues’: Conor Cruise O’Brien and Northern Ireland, 1969–77

STEPHEN KELLY*

Liverpool Hope University

ABSTRACT. *This article critically re-assesses Conor Cruise O’Brien’s attitude to Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1977. It argues that O’Brien’s most significant contribution to public life was the ability to deconstruct many aspects of Irish nationalism, specifically his rejection of the Irish state’s irredentist claim over Northern Ireland. In doing so, it contends that O’Brien was one of the most important, and outspoken, champions of so-called ‘revisionist nationalism’ of his generation. The article examines three themes in relation to O’Brien’s attitude to Northern Ireland: his attack on the Irish state’s anti-partitionism; his rejection of Irish republican terrorism; and his support for the ‘principle of consent’ argument. The article illustrates that O’Brien was criticised in nationalist circles and accused of committing political heresy. Indeed, his willingness to challenge the attitude of most mainstream Irish politicians on Northern Ireland invariably left him an isolated figure, even among his own Labour Party comrades. Writing in his Memoir, O’Brien neatly summed up the difficult position in which he found himself: ‘I was altogether out of tune with my colleagues over Northern Ireland’.*

This article critically re-assesses Conor Cruise O’Brien’s attitude to Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1977.¹ It argues that O’Brien’s most significant contribution to public life was the ability to deconstruct many aspects of Irish nationalism, specifically his rejection of the Irish state’s irredentist claim over Northern Ireland. As a result, O’Brien emerged as one of the most outspoken champions of so-called ‘revisionist nationalism’ of his generation.² Indeed, while Roy Foster suggests that Jack Lynch, the Fianna Fáil leader from 1966 to 1979, might

* *School of Humanities, Liverpool Hope University, kellys@hope.ac.uk*

¹ The article does not address O’Brien’s relationship with the Northern Ireland peace process in any detail. This topic is examined elsewhere, including Joseph Morrison Skelly, ‘Appeasement in our time: Conor Cruise O’Brien and the peace process in Northern Ireland’ in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, x (1999), pp 221–36; Paul F. Power, ‘Revisionist nationalism’s consolidation, republicanism’s marginalization, and the peace process’ in *Éire-Ireland*, xxxi, nos 1 & 2 (spring/summer 1996), pp 89–112.

² Power, ‘Revisionist nationalism’s consolidation, republicanism’s marginalization, and the peace process’, p. 90.

be labelled the ‘father of modern Irish political revisionism’, perhaps O’Brien deserves this accolade.³

I

O’Brien was not afraid to court controversy in relation to Northern Ireland. He was a fierce critic, brilliant polemicist, occasionally pompous and unapologetically a lifelong troublemaker. Like his mentor, the anti-authoritarian Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, O’Brien combined strong liberal tendencies with an unremitting hostility to political violence.⁴ ‘Love him or loathe him’, Seamus Kilby commented, ‘few can deny his seismic influence on late twentieth-century Irish political thinking ... He was in essence an illuminator of the darker recesses of the national psyche.’⁵ Perhaps Mary McAleese, president of Ireland between 1997 and 2011, provides the most accurate depiction of how O’Brien was perceived by his contemporaries. In an interview with *Magill* magazine in 1998, McAleese explained that: ‘If ever anyone was a culture shock, Conor Cruise O’Brien was to me. Here was this extraordinarily arrogant man in the process of revising everything that I had known to be a given about Irish history and he set in motion a way of looking at Northern Ireland that we are only beginning to grow up and grow out of.’⁶ In relation to Northern Ireland, O’Brien was undoubtedly not afraid to ‘shock’ his contemporaries. At times, he seems to have deliberately courted controversy, and it appeared that he enjoyed being at war with his intellectual and political opponents. However, there was also a soberer side to O’Brien’s attitude to Northern Ireland. He cared deeply about the loss of civilian life which he believed was morally unjustifiable. Consequently, he argued that the Provisional Irish Republican Army’s (P.I.R.A.) campaign of terrorism was illegitimate and morally bankrupt.⁷

Apart from providing a brief introduction to the genesis of O’Brien’s thinking on Northern Ireland, this article focuses centrally on his nine years in frontline Irish politics as a Labour Party T.D. (1969–77), and a cabinet minister in the Fine Gael–Labour coalition government (1973–7). Three specific themes are examined. First, it is argued that O’Brien’s attack on the use of anti-partitionism in the pursuit of a united Ireland, what he labelled the ‘usual anti-partition rubbish’,⁸ was a defining feature of his political outlook. From the mid 1950s, and for the remainder of his life, O’Brien argued that the ‘sore thumb’ approach of continually stressing the injustice of partition was politically futile, that rather than criticise the Belfast and London governments, Dublin should focus its resources on building better

³ R. F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: a brief history of change, 1970–2000* (London, 2008), p. 71.

⁴ *Irish Times*, 20 Dec. 2008.

⁵ Seamus Kilby, ‘The many incarnations of Conor Cruise O’Brien’ in *Fortnight*, no. 464 (Mar. 2009), p. 20. See also Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), p. 326.

⁶ *Magill*, Feb. 1998, p. 20. See also J. J. Lee’s comments regarding O’Brien’s ability to ‘shock’ his contemporaries: *Ireland, 1912–1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 476.

⁷ See, for example, Conor Cruise O’Brien, ‘Liberalism and terrorism’ in *International Security*, ii, no. 2 (fall 1977), pp 58–61.

⁸ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Memoir: my life and themes* (Dublin, 1999), p. 146.

relations with the forces of Ulster unionism.⁹ Secondly, the article shows that following the outbreak of the Northern Ireland conflict in the late 1960s O'Brien mounted a sustained attack on republican terrorism, skilfully dismantling the intellectual case for the use of violence in the pursuit of a united Ireland. His willingness to make uncomfortable revisions to the cherished views of 'Romantic nationalists', as O'Brien put it, ensured his reputation as the bogeyman of orthodox nationalist Ireland.¹⁰ Lastly, it is proposed that O'Brien's advocacy for the principle of consent argument represented his greatest contribution to the revisionist nationalist school of thinking. In O'Brien's seminal publication *States of Ireland* (London, 1972), he rejected republican terrorism, instead championing the principle of consent argument: that Northern Ireland should not cease to be part of the United Kingdom without the consent of the majority in that region.¹¹ O'Brien was ridiculed in nationalist circles and accused of committing political heresy for his views on terrorism and his argument in favour of the principle of consent. Indeed, his willingness to challenge the attitude of most mainstream Irish politicians on Northern Ireland invariably left him an isolated figure, even among his own Labour Party comrades. In his *Memoir: my life and themes* (Dublin, 1999), O'Brien neatly summed up the difficult position in which he found himself operating: 'I was altogether out of tune with my colleagues over Northern Ireland'.¹²

The article examines four historical case studies to demonstrate the extent to which O'Brien found himself increasingly marginalised, in some cases ostracised, because of his attitude to Northern Ireland. First, the article re-examines O'Brien's reaction to the 'dangerous' direction of the Fianna Fáil cabinet's Northern Ireland policy during August 1969 and the ensuing arms crisis (1969–70).¹³ Secondly, it explores O'Brien's reluctance, during the negotiations that led to the signing of the Sunningdale Agreement in December 1973, to support a demand on behalf of the Irish government that London agree to include a so-called 'Council of Ireland' in plans for a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland. Thirdly, it analyses O'Brien's highly controversial declarations during the mid 1970s that not only was he 'no longer working actively for Irish unity',¹⁴ but that he opposed British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.¹⁵ Lastly, it re-assesses O'Brien's decision in 1976, in his capacity as minister for posts and telegraphs, to amend section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960.

A number of scholars have addressed O'Brien's attitude to and writings on Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1977: Richard Bourke,¹⁶ Margaret O'Callaghan,¹⁷ Niall

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁰ See Martin Dillon, 'Irish republicanism's holy war: Conor Cruise O'Brien interviewed' in *Fortnight*, no. 216 (16–31 Mar. 1985), p. 6.

¹¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1972), pp 14, 295–7.

¹² O'Brien, *Memoir*, pp 353–4.

¹³ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxlvii, 882–8 (8 May 1970).

¹⁴ Frank Callanan, 'O'Brien, Conor Cruise (1917–2008)' in *D.I.B.*

¹⁵ See Garret FitzGerald, 'The 1974–5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland' in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, xvii (2006), p. 148.

¹⁶ See Richard Bourke, 'Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles' in *Journal of Modern History*, lxxxiii, no. 3 (Sept. 2011), pp 544–78.

¹⁷ Apart from a critique of O'Brien's *State of Ireland*, O'Callaghan's work does not examine in specific detail the issues covered in this article. See Margaret O'Callaghan, 'Conor Cruise O'Brien and the Northern Ireland conflict: formulating a revisionist position' in *Irish Political Studies*, xxxiii, no. 2 (2018), pp 221–31.

Meehan,¹⁸ Richard English and Joseph Skelly Morrison,¹⁹ and O'Brien's two most prominent biographers, Donald Harman Akenson²⁰ and Diarmuid Whelan.²¹ However, the subject has often been overlooked in the relevant secondary literature.²² Indeed, apart from several political autobiographies by O'Brien's contemporaries, O'Brien's role vis-à-vis Northern Ireland remains understudied. This article draws on a range of sources to provide a reassessment of O'Brien's relationship with Northern Ireland during a crucial period, including O'Brien's writings and hitherto under-utilised primary sources from several archives in Great Britain and Ireland, including the University College Dublin Archives,²³ the National Archives of Ireland and the Bodleian Library. This material is complemented by the use of other forms of evidence, including autobiographies,²⁴ interviews, investigative magazines and newspapers, and parliamentary debates.

II

Conor Cruise O'Brien was born on 3 November 1917, the only child of Francis Cruise O'Brien and Kathleen (née Sheehy).²⁵ Before his teenage years, Northern

¹⁸ Niall Meehan, 'The embers of revisionism: critiquing creationist Irish history' in Brian P. Murphy and Niall Meehan, *The embers of revisionism: essays critiquing creationist Irish history and Roy Foster on Ken Loach's The wind that shakes the barley* (Aubane, 2017), pp 3–23. See also Niall Meehan, 'Arrested development: Conor Cruise O'Brien, 1917–2008' in *History Ireland*, xvii, no. 2 (Mar.–Apr. 2009), pp 10–12.

¹⁹ Richard English and Joseph Skelly Morrison (eds), *Ideas matter: essays in honour of Conor Cruise O'Brien* (Lanham, MD, 2000). See also Charles Townshend, 'Religion, war, and identity in Ireland' in *Journal of Modern History*, lxxvi, no. 4 (Dec. 2004), pp 882–902.

²⁰ See Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: a biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien* (2 vols, Montreal and Kingston, 1994).

²¹ Diarmuid Whelan, *Conor Cruise O'Brien: the coldest eye* (Dublin, 2009). See also idem, 'Conor Cruise O'Brien and the legitimisation of violence' in *Irish Political Studies*, xxi, no. 2 (2016), pp 223–41.

²² Other works that have touched on O'Brien's involvement with Northern Ireland during the period under investigation in this article include: Stephen Howe, 'The Cruiser and the colonist: Conor Cruise O'Brien's writings on colonialism' in *Irish Political Studies*, xxviii, no. 4 (2013), pp 487–514; Stephen Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland, 1926–1971* (Dublin, 2013), pp 131, 277, 302, 336; Mark McNally, 'Conor Cruise O'Brien's conservative anti-nationalism: retrieving the post-war European connection' in *European Journal of Political Thought*, iii, no. 9 (2008), pp 308–30; Tom Garvin, 'Imaginary Cassandra?: Conor Cruise O'Brien as public intellectual in Ireland' in *Irish University Review*, xxxvii, no. 2 (autumn–winter 2007), pp 430–40; Gareth Ivory, 'Revisions in nationalist discourse among Irish political parties' in *Irish Political Studies*, xiv, no. 1 (1999), pp 84–103.

²³ This article draws on the Conor Cruise O'Brien papers (P82), Frank Aiken papers (P104) and Garret FitzGerald papers (P215). The Garret FitzGerald papers catalogued as P216 (Taoiseach, Northern Ireland material, 1980–87) were not available for consultation when research for this article was undertaken.

²⁴ See, for example, Paddy Devlin, *Straight left: an autobiography* (Belfast, 1993); Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a statesman* (London, 1978); Garret FitzGerald, *All in a life: an autobiography* (Dublin, 1991); Edward Heath, *The autobiography: the course of my life* (London, 1998).

²⁵ On O'Brien's family and early life, see Whelan, *Conor Cruise O'Brien*, pp 13–18.

Ireland featured very little in O'Brien's world view. He had 'no family ties with the place' nor had he much contact, if any, with northern Protestants.²⁶ It was only around the age of sixteen, while attending Sandford Park, a non-denominated school in Ranelagh, Dublin, that O'Brien first gave Northern Ireland serious consideration. As a result of the encouragement of his teacher, James Johnson Auchmuty, O'Brien recalled that he first got to know 'what the score really was about democracy in Northern Ireland'.²⁷ Auchmuty, O'Brien noted, taught him about day-to-day life in Northern Ireland, including the discrimination experienced by northern Catholics, which had 'hitherto been concealed from me'.²⁸ Thereafter, however, the subject of Northern Ireland did not retain importance in O'Brien's thinking. During his time as a student at Trinity College Dublin from 1936 until his graduation in late 1940, O'Brien was preoccupied with his studies and the subject of Northern Ireland was only resurrected following O'Brien's entry into the Irish civil service in 1942, first as a junior administrative officer in the Department of Finance (1942–4), and subsequently on his appointment as a third secretary in the Department of External Affairs (D.E.A.) in 1944.

Following the election of the first inter-party government in 1948, in which Seán MacBride (leader of Clann na Poblachta) was appointed minister for external affairs, O'Brien's interest in Northern Ireland was arguably first truly stirred. In a sequence of events that originated in taoiseach John A. Costello's confirmation that Ireland would be leaving the Commonwealth, followed by the Irish government's proclamation of Ireland as a republic in 1949, O'Brien played a prominent role in an all-party campaign against partition. Launched in the Mansion House in January 1949, and comprised of the four major political parties — Fine Gael, the Labour Party, Clann na Poblachta and the opposition party Fianna Fáil — the all-party anti-partition committee was tasked 'primarily to assist in the creation of public opinion favourable to the unification of the country, in Ireland, Britain and the United States, Australia'.²⁹ The committee employed a backroom staff led by Frank Gallagher to produce anti-partition propaganda literature, such as Labhrás Ó Nualláin's, *Ireland: finances of partition* (Dublin, 1952) and Gallagher's *The indivisible island: the history of the partition of Ireland* (London, 1957).³⁰ O'Brien, by now holding the rank of a counsellor within the D.E.A., likewise, produced an array of anti-partition propaganda in his role as editor of the department's bulletin *Éire*.³¹ At MacBride's behest, O'Brien also wrote an unpublished and now apparently lost anti-partitionist history of Ireland, which Akenson dubbed 'the Lost Book of O'Brien'.³² O'Brien's anti-partitionism took on a new level of intensity following his appointment, by MacBride, as managing director of the newly formed Irish News Agency (I.N.A.) in 1949. This outlet, established by statute and funded by an Irish government subsidy, was tasked with the production and dissemination of 'important pronouncements on partition' in favour of Irish reunification in the international press.³³

²⁶ O'Brien, *States of Ireland*, p. 140.

²⁷ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁹ See the unsigned and undated directive outlining the purpose of the all-party anti-partition committee (U.C.D.A., P104/4668).

³⁰ See Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland, 1926–1971*, p. 132.

³¹ Akenson, *Conor*, i, 131.

³² *Ibid.*, i, 134.

³³ John Horgan, 'Government, propaganda and the Irish news agency' in *Irish Communication Review*, iii, no. 1 (Jan. 1993), p. 32. See also O'Brien, *Memoir*, pp 145–6.

It was not until 1951, following the return of Fianna Fáil to government, that O'Brien finally distanced himself from the previous government's 'usual anti-partition rubbish', as O'Brien later described it.³⁴ Over the preceding years, O'Brien had slowly come to the realisation that the 'sore thumb' approach of continually stressing the injustice of partition was a 'tactic that had run out of steam'.³⁵ Instead, under the stewardship of the incumbent minister for external affairs, Frank Aiken, O'Brien directed a policy of letting 'the temperature drop to a point at which Partition could be ended on the basis of reason and goodwill'.³⁶ With Aiken's encouragement, O'Brien became the D.E.A.'s link to the nationalist community in Northern Ireland.³⁷ O'Brien travelled throughout Northern Ireland in the early 1950s, compiling information regarding the widespread 'undemocratic' treatment of northern Catholics by the Ulster unionist authorities, including access to housing and allocation of local government jobs, as well as electoral discrimination, in the form of gerrymandering.³⁸ These first-hand experiences helped to shape O'Brien's thinking, reinforcing his belief that anti-partitionism was not only useless but counter-productive. In O'Brien's thinking it was better to encourage cross border cooperation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland than to repeatedly beat the anti-partitionist drum. Instead, during this period, he championed an improvement in relations with Ulster unionists, which included the establishment of a 'Trade and Cultural' office in Belfast, a proposal that was politely declined by the Irish government.³⁹

At the end of 1955, O'Brien's direct involvement in the Irish government's anti-partition campaign 'ceased', following his appointment to the Irish embassy in Paris, as a counsellor.⁴⁰ The following year, he was appointed the head of the United Nations section of the D.E.A. in Dublin, reporting to Fredrick H. Boland in New York. In 1961, in a sign of O'Brien's growing stature, not only in Ireland, but internationally, he was appointed U.N. representative in Élisabethville (Lubumbashi). However, on 1 December 1961, O'Brien resigned from the D.E.A.⁴¹ It was during these formative years that O'Brien acquired an interest in anti-colonisation, anti-imperialism and the 'Third World'.⁴² His personal experiences in the early 1960s during his U.N. role in Katanga,⁴³ together with his outspoken criticism of white minority rule in Rhodesia and apartheid in South

³⁴ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 146.

³⁵ Stephen Kelly, 'From anti-partitionism to *realpolitik*? Frank Aiken, partition and Northern Ireland, 1948–1954' in Bryce Evans and Stephen Kelly (eds), *Frank Aiken: nationalist and internationalist* (Kildare, 2014), p. 196. See also O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 162.

³⁶ Comments by Aiken. Record of meeting between Aiken and Lord Salisbury, 28 Oct. 1952 (U.C.D.A., Frank Aiken papers, P104/8037). See also O'Brien, *Ancestral voices*, pp 146–7.

³⁷ Callanan, 'O'Brien, Conor Cruise (1917–2008)'.

³⁸ See Michael Kennedy, *Division and consensus: the politics of cross-border relations in Ireland, 1925–1969* (Dublin, 2000), p. 157.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 160–2.

⁴⁰ Callanan, 'O'Brien, Conor Cruise (1917–2008)'.

⁴¹ For coverage of this period of O'Brien's career at the U.N., see Akenson, *Conor*, i, 169–99.

⁴² On O'Brien's writings on colonialism and imperialism, see Howe, 'The Cruiser and the colonist', pp 487–514.

⁴³ O'Brien's experiences in Katanga are immortalised in his seminal (and controversial) work, *To Katanga and back: a UN case history* (London, 1965).

Africa, not to mention his opposition to the Vietnam War, 'challenged Cold War neo-colonialism'.⁴⁴ Following academic appointments in Ghana (1962–5) and New York (1965), O'Brien returned to the Northern Ireland question.

In 1966, O'Brien accepted an invitation from Owen Dudley Edwards to contribute to a special supplement of the *Irish Times* to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising of 1916. O'Brien's article, 'The embers of Easter', attacked anti-partitionism, which he argued had merely fostered bigotry and promoted suspicion between Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists.⁴⁵ Two years after the publication of 'The embers of Easter', O'Brien was approached with a proposition that would transform his life. In the autumn of 1968 Brendan Halligan, political director of the Labour Party, invited O'Brien to re-join the party (O'Brien had been a member as a T.C.D. undergraduate). He 'accepted on the spot', officially joining in December of that year.⁴⁶ In his new role as a politician, albeit an unelected one, O'Brien spoke out regularly about the unjust treatment of the Catholic minority by the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland.⁴⁷ O'Brien's denunciations of the Northern Ireland state coincided with his election to Dáil Éireann as Labour Party T.D. for Dublin North-East in June 1969.

III

Writing in 1972, O'Brien recalled that the 'Northern question hit the politics of the Republic [of Ireland] seriously, for the first time since 1925', following the outbreak of violence in the Bogside area of Derry on 12 August 1969 (the Battle of the Bogside) and the spread of conflict across Northern Ireland.⁴⁸ The events of August 1969 brought to the surface a dormant anti-partitionism in the Republic of Ireland. Initially, the Fianna Fáil-led government did not know how to respond to the emergency. In fact, the crisis exposed that Fianna Fáil had 'no coherent, or indeed realistic, Northern Ireland policy'.⁴⁹ The Fianna Fáil cabinet first met to discuss the unfolding crisis in Northern Ireland on the afternoon of 13 August. At the meeting, a consortium of vocal anti-partitionist ministers, led by Neil Blaney and Charles Haughey, demanded that taoiseach Jack Lynch sanction the Irish army to be sent into Derry or Newry or both to offer, at the very least, support to the beleaguered Catholic populations.⁵⁰ While the Blaney/Haughey request to send the Irish army into Northern Ireland was rejected by the pragmatists, led by Lynch, an agreement was reached that the Irish government request the British government to

⁴⁴ Meehan, 'The embers of revisionism', p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Irish Times*, 7 Apr. 1966; reproduced in Akenson, *Conor*, ii, 98–111.

⁴⁶ Akenson, *Conor*, i, 332–3.

⁴⁷ O'Brien first came into direct contact with the Northern Ireland civil rights movement in late October 1968 when he addressed a gathering at Queen's University Belfast on the subject of 'Civil disobedience' (O'Brien, *States of Ireland*, p. 152). For further analysis of O'Brien's attitude to the civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland, see Whelan, *Conor Cruise O'Brien*, pp 134–40. See also Meehan, 'The embers of revisionism', p. 4.

⁴⁸ O'Brien, *States of Ireland*, p. 194.

⁴⁹ Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland*, p. 302.

⁵⁰ Stephen Kelly, 'A failed political entity': Charles Haughey and the Northern Ireland question, 1945–1992 (Kildare, 2016), pp 55–6.

'apply immediately to the UN for the urgent dispatch of a peace keeping force to the six counties of Northern Ireland'.⁵¹ Later that evening Lynch addressed the Irish nation in a live television broadcast in which he said that the Irish government could no longer 'stand by' and continue to tolerate the Northern Ireland government's persecution of the northern Catholic minority.⁵²

In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of the Bogside O'Brien became personally involved in the embryonic stages of the Northern Ireland conflict (O'Brien was by then the Labour Party's spokesperson on foreign affairs and Northern Ireland). On 15 August 1969, an emergency meeting of the Labour Party parliamentary party was convened.⁵³ After a 'full discussion', O'Brien was selected as one of the Labour Party representatives tasked with visiting Northern Ireland, over a four-day period, from 16 to 19 August.⁵⁴ In Derry, along with Labour Party T.D.s Frank Cluskey, Michael O'Leary, Noël Browne and Justin Keating, O'Brien met leading northern nationalist figures, including Bernadette Devlin, M.P. for Mid-Ulster, and the civil rights activist Michael Farrell.⁵⁵ The Labour Party delegation also met members of the Derry Citizens' Defence Committee, including Paddy ('Bogside') Doherty and Michael Canavan.⁵⁶ O'Brien and his Labour Party colleagues were informed by their hosts that the Catholics of Derry 'felt themselves to be in imminent danger of death at the hands of the [B] Specials, Ulster Volunteers and the RUC Riot Squads', as O'Brien recorded in a memorandum produced at the time.⁵⁷ The assembled Labour Party T.D.s were also notified that following Lynch's televised address, on 13 August, the people of Derry believed that Irish military 'intervention was imminent',⁵⁸ a view confirmed by Derry civil rights activist Eamonn McCann.⁵⁹ In response, O'Brien and his Labour Party colleagues demanded the immediate disbandment of the B-Specials and the 'abolition' of the Stormont regime.⁶⁰ The Labour Party delegation also travelled to Belfast, via Armagh, where they met leading members of the Belfast Citizens' Defence Committees, including the republican John Kelly, on the Falls Road and held discussions with Gerry Fitt, M.P. for West Belfast.⁶¹ Reporting to Labour Party headquarters in Dublin, O'Brien wrote that he was struck by 'the great extent of physical

⁵¹ Record of Irish government cabinet meeting, 13 Aug. 1969 (N.A.I., 12 Government Cabinet minutes, 2000/9/1).

⁵² For a complete version of Lynch's speech, see 'Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr J. Lynch', 13 Aug. 1969 (N.A.I., TAOIS 2000/6/657).

⁵³ Akenson states that this meeting occurred on 14 Aug. 1969 (Akenson, *Conor*, i, 342).

⁵⁴ See Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Report of party delegation to Six Counties and the British Labour Party – 16/19 August 1969' (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/219).

⁵⁵ The Labour Party delegation also met John Hume and Eddie McAteer.

⁵⁶ Fintan O'Toole, 'The life and times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: part 3' in *Magill*, 31 May 1986, p. 40.

⁵⁷ See O'Brien, 'Report of party delegation to Six Counties and the British Labour Party – 16/19 August 1969'.

⁵⁸ O'Toole, 'The life and times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: part 3', p. 40.

⁵⁹ Author's interview with Eamonn McCann, 4 Jan. 2006.

⁶⁰ O'Toole, 'The life and times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: part 3', p. 40; Bourke, 'Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles', p. 557.

⁶¹ O'Brien, 'Report of party delegation to Six Counties and the British Labour Party – 16/19 August 1969'. Elements within the Belfast Citizens' Defence Committees would later form part of the Central Defence Committees, which would go on to form the nucleus of the P.I.R.A. See Kelly, '*A failed political entity*', p. 65.

destruction and the manifestations of a kind of siege warfare around the Catholic “ghetto” areas of the city’.⁶²

Retrospectively, O'Brien recalled that during these difficult days, ‘nationalist emotions ran high’ with the result that ‘some of those within the Lynch government [including Blaney and Haughey] actually did plan military intervention [into Northern Ireland] and supported the creation of the organisation, which later became the Provisional IRA’.⁶³ O'Brien was alluding to the arms crisis, an event that shocked him ‘a great deal’.⁶⁴ He accused Fianna Fáil of being ‘sick with a dangerous and infectious sickness’, which had incubated ‘the germs of a possible future civil war’.⁶⁵ In O'Brien's thinking the emergence of the P.I.R.A., following the split within the republican movement in December 1969,⁶⁶ was further evidence that a substantial minority of the population in the Republic of Ireland, including some prominent figures in the Labour Party (discussed below), continued to maintain an ‘each way bet’ on the use of force.⁶⁷ These so-called ‘conditional constitutionalists’, to borrow John Bowman's term,⁶⁸ were reluctant to abandon the argument in favour of the use of violence.

IV

By 1971, as the P.I.R.A. intensified its campaign of violence, sharp differences of opinion emerged between O'Brien and several of his Labour Party colleagues in relation to Northern Ireland policy. Prior to the outbreak of the conflict, in a similar vein to Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party, in the words of Niamh Puirseil, had ‘not really had a policy on the North. It had supported civil rights and still professed its support for a united Ireland, but beyond these vague goals there was nothing concrete.’⁶⁹ Since 1969, O'Brien had worked tirelessly to win support from within the Labour Party for his conciliatory and non-violent stance in relation to Northern Ireland. By 1971, his efforts had borne fruit. Under the leadership of Brendan Corish, the Labour Party unequivocally ruled out the use of force to secure a united Ireland, a position that Fine Gael had adopted in 1969.⁷⁰ However, to O'Brien's increasing frustration, a cohort of anti-partitionist Labour Party T.D.s, which allegedly included amongst its supporters Justin Keating, David Thornley and Seán Treacy, expressed sympathy, if not open support, for the use of force to secure a united Ireland.⁷¹ The Labour Party grass roots were equally divided and throughout the early 1970s there was strong support among the Dublin membership for the P.I.R.A.'s terrorist campaign.⁷²

⁶² O'Brien, ‘Report of party delegation to Six Counties and the British Labour Party – 16/19 August 1969’.

⁶³ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 326.

⁶⁴ O'Toole, ‘The life and times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: part 3’, p. 40. On the arms crisis, see Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland*, pp 314–23.

⁶⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxlvii, 882–8 (8 May 1970).

⁶⁶ On the split in the republican movement, see Kelly, ‘*A failed political entity*’, p. 69.

⁶⁷ John Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster question, 1917–1973* (Oxford, 1982), p. 287.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Niamh Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922–73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 289.

⁷⁰ FitzGerald, *All in a life*, pp 88–9. See also Ivory, ‘Revisions in nationalist discourse among Irish political parties’, pp 89–90.

⁷¹ Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922–73*, pp 289–91; O'Brien, *Memoir*, pp 339–40.

⁷² Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922–73*, pp 289–91.

O'Brien singled out June 1971 as the moment when 'I came for the first time to take a definite and distinctive position in relation to what was happening in and around the North'.⁷³ This was the point at which O'Brien concluded that the P.I.R.A. was simply a band of terrorists 'making an *unjustifiable* use of violence',⁷⁴ with 'no qualms about sectarian civil war'.⁷⁵ This metamorphosis in O'Brien's thinking occurred following a dramatic increase in the P.I.R.A.'s military offensive in Northern Ireland earlier that year. 'It was in 1971', he later recalled, 'when the Provo offensive first became unmistakable for what it was'.⁷⁶ O'Brien placed on record his opposition to the P.I.R.A.'s terrorist campaign at the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (I.T.G.W.U.) annual conference in Galway on 11 June 1971. At the event, O'Brien responded to a proposal for the release of all political prisoners: 'Is a man convicted in court and jailed for inciting and leading a sectarian mob, a political prisoner? Or a man who booby-traps a car? Or plants a bomb, injuring children and innocent people? Or a man who guns down another man?'⁷⁷ O'Brien's comments were highly controversial. Although his remarks won the backing of Brendan Corish, Brendan Halligan, general secretary of the Labour Party, reportedly told him shortly afterwards: 'Conor, you're going too fast'.⁷⁸ As Halligan subsequently noted, O'Brien was 'administering an electrical shock' to a sceptical Labour Party audience.⁷⁹ O'Brien was unapologetic. In his memoir, he wrote, 'But to question the "release of prisoners" was to refuse the minimum republicanism expected of all Irishmen, and thus to risk exclusion from the Irish nation, in one way or another ... I was henceforth and have always remained anathema as far as the Republican movement was concerned'.⁸⁰ From O'Brien's perspective, the P.I.R.A. and various other Irish republican groups were illegal terrorist organisations which misrepresented the cause of Irish republicanism. He argued vigorously that the P.I.R.A.'s military campaign was based on a fundamental fallacy. Such 'republicans' were not fighting for a unified Irish republic, internationally recognised as its own entity. Rather, O'Brien implied, they were fighting for 'the Republic of the Republicans ... more like Plato's Republic in that it is an ideal, never achieved and never likely to be achieved'.⁸¹

The controversy over O'Brien's Galway comments was the first of many disagreements that he would have with his Labour Party colleagues. In fact, O'Brien's papers contain a file relating to his proposed resignation as the Labour Party's spokesperson on foreign affairs and Northern Ireland, dated *circa* October 1971. O'Brien's threatened resignation was prompted by his exclusion from an apparent meeting about Northern Ireland at the British Labour Party annual conference in Brighton in July 1971, involving Brendan Halligan, Justin Keating and the British Labour Party M.P. and shadow home secretary James Callaghan. In correspondence with Corish, O'Brien exclaimed that his exclusion from this meeting implied that he was 'no longer [the] credible spokesman for the Labour Party on Foreign Affairs' and that there was a 'lack of confidence in me as

⁷³ O'Brien, *Memoir*, pp 332–3.

⁷⁴ O'Brien, 'Liberalism and terrorism', p. 56.

⁷⁵ O'Brien, *Ancestral voices*, p. 158.

⁷⁶ Dillon, 'Irish Republicanism's holy war: Conor Cruise O'Brien interviewed', p. 5.

⁷⁷ O'Brien, *Memoir*, pp 332–4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 334; Akenson, *Conor*, i, 373.

⁷⁹ Author's interview with Brendan Halligan, 3 Nov. 2017.

⁸⁰ O'Brien, *Memoir*, pp 333–4.

⁸¹ O'Brien, 'Liberalism and terrorism', p. 61.

spokesman'. He, therefore, 'reluctantly' offered his resignation as 'spokesman on Foreign Affairs'.⁸² In fact, Halligan and his colleagues never met Callaghan in an official capacity. Nor did they hold any official meetings with 'any Labour Party officials', as pointed out by Corish in reply to O'Brien's letter of resignation. Rather, Corish had run into Callaghan 'by accident' in the hotel that the former was staying in.⁸³ Following much arm twisting, which included the personal intervention of Frank Cluskey, O'Brien rescinded his letter of resignation.⁸⁴ The signs, however, were ominous.

V

Following these events — the arms crisis, the emergence of the P.I.R.A. and his address at the I.T.G.W.U. conference in June 1971 — O'Brien emerged as a strong defender of the principle of consent argument. While O'Brien acknowledged that Northern Ireland was 'a sectarian-tribal' entity,⁸⁵ he took the view that northern Protestants should not be 'coerced into a United Ireland'.⁸⁶ He accepted that the 'eventual consent' of northern Protestants was a 'remote' possibility in the medium term, but it was something that Irish nationalists had to 'aspire' to achieve.⁸⁷ For O'Brien, 'Irish unity could only come about' by 'agreement among Irishmen and specifically between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland'.⁸⁸ Thereafter, as Fintan O'Toole has commented, O'Brien embarked 'on a powerful public campaign' to reject what he saw 'as the dangerous lip-service paid to anti-partitionism and the ambiguity regarding the use of violence to secure a united Ireland'.⁸⁹

The high-point of this public campaign came with the publication of O'Brien's revisionist study, *States of Ireland*, in 1972.⁹⁰ This was a 'key text on Ireland', which had an 'enormous impact on Irish political culture'.⁹¹ As Tom Garvin wrote, *States of Ireland* was a 'sustained and powerful attack on the conscious and unconscious collective assumptions', which O'Brien saw as 'underlying

⁸² O'Brien to Corish, 7 Oct. 1971 (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/225).

⁸³ Corish to O'Brien, 8 Oct. 1971 (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/225).

⁸⁴ See correspondence relating to O'Brien's 'proposed resignation as Labour Party Spokesman on Foreign Affairs and as TD', Oct. 1971–Mar. 1972 (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/225).

⁸⁵ O'Brien to James Callaghan, 5 Feb. 1971 (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/222).

⁸⁶ [Conor Cruise O'Brien], 'Memorandum for consideration of parliamentary Labour Party on middle and long term prospects in relation to the situation on the Six Counties of Northern Ireland and the eventual unity of Ireland' [c.1970] (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/220). The document was not signed.

⁸⁷ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxlvii, 882–8 (8 May 1970).

⁸⁸ [O'Brien], 'Memorandum for consideration of parliamentary Labour Party on middle and long term prospects in relation to the situation on the Six Counties of Northern Ireland and the eventual unity of Ireland'.

⁸⁹ O'Toole, 'The life and times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: part 3', p. 40.

⁹⁰ During this period O'Brien delivered several talks and published a number of papers on the principle of consent argument. See, for example, the copy of O'Brien's address to the annual Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders Memorial Lecture, London, March 1972 (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/676); the (joint) lecture was published in O'Brien and Nicholas Mansergh, 'Northern Ireland: its past and its future' in *Race*, xiv, no. 1 (July 1972), pp 1–20.

⁹¹ Garvin, 'Imaginary Cassandra?', p. 437.

Irish anti-partitionism'.⁹² Indeed, the book is still regarded as one of the more significant revisionist publications, challenging its readers to re-evaluate some aspects of Irish history.⁹³ *States of Ireland* may be situated alongside 'the rise and broad diffusion of demythologizing studies of modern Irish history',⁹⁴ including work by T. W. Moody, R. Dudley Edwards and F. S. L. Lyons.⁹⁵ As Diarmaid Ferriter has observed, during the 1970s historians began to 'grapple' with the differences between history, memory and identity, which included dealing with the many contradictions associated with Irish nationalism and political violence.⁹⁶ Indeed, Alvin Jackson has commented that the violence in Northern Ireland 'implicitly encouraged some liberal academics to distance themselves from the insurgents, and from the tradition of insurgency'.⁹⁷

In *States of Ireland*, O'Brien made three powerful arguments in order to deconstruct some Irish nationalist assumptions. First, he maintained that neither Northern Ireland Protestants nor Catholics wanted a united Ireland. As he phrased it, 'Ulster Protestants obviously do not [want a united Ireland]. Ulster Catholics are interested in equality ... rather than in unity.'⁹⁸ Secondly, O'Brien argued that nationalists living in the Republic of Ireland did not seek a united Ireland nor did they really care about the plight of the Catholic minority living in Northern Ireland: 'The population of the Republic has been accustomed to assenting to a theory of unity, but in practice when we say "this country" we usually mean the twenty-six county state'.⁹⁹ Lastly, O'Brien returned to a controversial topic that had formed a major part of his revisionist thinking over the preceding years, the principle of consent argument.¹⁰⁰

O'Brien's arguments received a frosty reception from prominent Northern nationalists. John Hume, the deputy leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.), accused O'Brien of mounting a more 'subtle and effective defence of unionism than any that has come from any unionist quarter'. If O'Brien's hypothesis was accepted, Hume argued, 'his case will sentence another generation in the North to the terrible violence we have just come through'.¹⁰¹ Thereafter, O'Brien and Hume remained political adversaries. Indeed, on one occasion, O'Brien described Hume as his 'deadly enemy'.¹⁰² The solution to the repeated

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ For an important critical assessment of *States of Ireland*, and O'Brien's thinking on conflict more generally, see Bourke, 'Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles', pp 544–78.

⁹⁴ Power, 'Revisionist nationalism's consolidation, republicanism's marginalization, and the peace process', p. 90.

⁹⁵ On these historians see: Diarmaid Ferriter, *Ambiguous republic: Ireland in the 1970s* (London, 2012), pp 245–7; Alvin Jackson, 'Irish history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' in idem (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of modern Irish history* (Oxford, 2014), pp 3–8; Ian McBride, 'The shadow of the gunman: Irish historians and the IRA' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, xlvii, no. 3 (July 2011), pp 686–710; Ciarán Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish history: the debate on historical revisionism, 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994).

⁹⁶ Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic*, pp 245–6.

⁹⁷ Jackson, 'Irish history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries', pp 7–8.

⁹⁸ O'Brien, *States of Ireland*, pp 296–7.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp 295–6.

¹⁰¹ John Hume rev. of *States of Ireland* in the *Irish Times*, 9 Oct. 1972; see also O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 339.

¹⁰² O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 341.

self-denial of Irish nationalists, O'Brien argued in a short article, 'Two nations?', written around the same period as *States of Ireland*, was to reject the 'traditional shibboleths or displays of sectarian or national self-righteousness'.¹⁰³

VI

John Hume's criticism of *States of Ireland* reflected a growing divergence between O'Brien and the S.D.L.P. in relation to Northern Ireland. In fact, the O'Brien–S.D.L.P. relationship began to deteriorate prior to the publication of *States of Ireland*, when O'Brien was almost expelled from the Labour Party because of his opposition to the S.D.L.P.'s proposal for the 'joint administration of Northern Ireland'. This proposal was outlined in the S.D.L.P.'s policy document, *Towards a new Ireland*, published in autumn 1972. The basic idea, as S.D.L.P. founding member Paddy Devlin noted, was that Northern Ireland 'should be controlled by the British and Irish governments as an interim arrangement until there was consent to full Irish unity'.¹⁰⁴ In his *Memoir*, O'Brien described the proposal as 'a crazy idea'.¹⁰⁵ Soon after O'Brien's rejection of the S.D.L.P.'s proposal for joint administration of Northern Ireland, his political adversaries in the Labour Party, led by David Thornley, put down a motion for his expulsion at a meeting of the parliamentary party. Despite coming under considerable pressure to resign, O'Brien refused. The motion for his expulsion from the party failed to win a majority.¹⁰⁶

The O'Brien–S.D.L.P. relationship was irreconcilably damaged on his entry into government in 1973, under a Fine Gael–Labour coalition. O'Brien was appointed as minister for posts and telegraphs, while he retained his role as Labour spokesman on foreign affairs and Northern Ireland. He was disappointed not to be appointed minister for foreign affairs, which went to Fine Gael's Garret FitzGerald. Though O'Brien and FitzGerald were 'personally friendly', their differing attitudes in relation to Northern Ireland ensured that their relationship was occasionally strained during the life of the coalition government.¹⁰⁷

O'Brien made his first substantial contribution to the Irish government's Northern Ireland policy in his capacity as a member of Dublin's representation at the Sunningdale conference in December 1973. On 22 November 1973, following months of negotiations and in an effort to end direct rule, an agreement was reached, in principle, among the major political parties of Northern Ireland to establish an eleven-member, power-sharing executive. However, the actual nomination of an executive had to 'be deferred pending agreement in parallel to establish' a Council of Ireland.¹⁰⁸ As Henry Patterson has commented: 'It was the SDLP's insistence that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" that prevented the immediate devolution of powers following the successful conclusion of the talks'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Two nations?' (c.1972). A copy of this work is available in U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/680.

¹⁰⁴ Devlin, *Straight left*, p. 185.

¹⁰⁵ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 338.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 339–40.

¹⁰⁷ Noel Dorr, *Sunningdale: the search for peace in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 2017), p. 221.

¹⁰⁸ Author's email correspondence with Noel Dorr, 24, 30 May 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Patterson, *Ireland since 1939*, p. 240.

Following protracted negotiations, the Sunningdale Agreement was signed on 9 December 1973.¹¹⁰ Despite his own deeply-held reservations regarding the entire enterprise, as a member of the Irish cabinet and therefore with collective responsibility, O'Brien supported the Irish government's signing of the accord. Two central issues were agreed. First, an agreement was reached that a Council of Ireland should be established to encourage cross-border economic and security co-operation.¹¹¹ Secondly, although the Irish government refused to amend articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, Dublin gave a commitment that there would be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority there.¹¹² The signing of the agreement cleared the way for the formal creation of the Northern Ireland executive, which took office on 1 January 1974.

During the run-up to the Sunningdale negotiations, O'Brien had placed on the record his reservations regarding a Council of Ireland. His misgivings brought him into direct conflict with FitzGerald. Although O'Brien favoured the idea of 'bipartisan government for Northern Ireland', based on a power-sharing model, he argued that a Council of Ireland 'with the implication of progress towards a united Ireland, might be a bridge too far'.¹¹³ 'By pilling on a lot of superfluous symbolism', O'Brien wrote, 'we were in danger of capsizing the essential: the power-sharing Executive.'¹¹⁴ Noel Dorr, a prominent Irish civil servant at the time, later wrote that in O'Brien's thinking, the Irish government's demand for a Council of Ireland was 'too much, too soon'.¹¹⁵ O'Brien was not opposed to a Council of Ireland *per se*, rather he did not support the S.D.L.P.'s demand that the proposed council was to be directly linked with the establishment of a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland. If the Irish government was to support this demand, O'Brien conceded privately, it would only increase the 'resistance among the [Protestant] majority to the whole idea of the Council'.¹¹⁶ Many Ulster unionists, O'Brien pointed out, would view such a council as a Trojan horse, part of a pathway towards a united Ireland. The net result would be that many Ulster unionists might desert Brian Faulkner, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, and the Northern Ireland executive 'would then collapse'.¹¹⁷

O'Brien's protests in relation to the Council of Ireland were politely rebuffed by his cabinet colleagues. FitzGerald, who had the full support of taoiseach Liam Cosgrave, was O'Brien's main antagonist. At a meeting of the Irish cabinet during this period, FitzGerald berated O'Brien, accusing his cabinet colleague of having out-of-date information in relation to Northern Ireland. FitzGerald was adamant that the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland 'would accept the Council of

¹¹⁰ For an excellent account of the behind the scenes negotiations that led to the signing of the Sunningdale Agreement, see Dorr, *Sunningdale*.

¹¹¹ Heath, *The autobiography*, p. 444.

¹¹² At the time, Brian Faulkner argued that his party's support for the Council of Ireland was purely a 'token' concession to ensure that the Irish government 'fully accepted and solemnly declared that there could be no change in the status of Northern Ireland until the majority of the people of Northern Ireland desired a change in that status' (Faulkner, *Memoirs of a statesman*, pp 235–8).

¹¹³ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 349.

¹¹⁴ O'Brien, *Ancestral voices*, p. 166.

¹¹⁵ Dorr, *Sunningdale*, pp 381–2.

¹¹⁶ O'Brien to Declan Costello, 31 July 1973 (N.A.I., TAOIS 2004/21/670).

¹¹⁷ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 349.

Ireland without any difficulty'.¹¹⁸ As Noel Dorr recalled, FitzGerald was steadfast in his belief that the proposed Council of Ireland would not be 'a mere talking shop', that the proposed Council of Ministers would have 'executive and harmonising functions and a consultative role'.¹¹⁹ In the aftermath of this confrontation, O'Brien praised Corish for not removing him as Labour Party spokesman on foreign affairs and Northern Ireland. He felt that FitzGerald, through Keating and with the encouragement of the S.D.L.P., wanted him sacked and removed from the Irish cabinet.¹²⁰ Indeed, FitzGerald recounted some years later that because he failed on several occasions to reply to letters from O'Brien, the latter wrote 'at length to my rather bemused wife, Joan, to complain about my Northern Ireland stance'.¹²¹ Writing in December 2010, shortly after O'Brien's death, FitzGerald provided a telling insight into their close but often tense relationship. 'I was hugely privileged to have known and enjoyed' O'Brien's company, but he was 'a black-and-white man, with no time for any grey — and in politics there is often, necessarily, a good deal of grey'.¹²²

In fact, O'Brien's predictions that a provision to include a Council of Ireland model under the terms of the Sunningdale Agreement would accelerate the collapse of the Northern Ireland power-sharing executive proved correct. Not only was Brian Faulkner forced to resign as leader of the U.U.P. in January 1974, but on 28 May, after a two-week strike by the Ulster Workers' Council, the power-sharing executive and thus the Sunningdale Agreement collapsed. Faulkner simply could not maintain his support. Many potential supporters subscribed to O'Brien's view that the Council of Ireland was a Trojan horse for a united Ireland by stealth. 'Dublin is just a Sunningdale away' ran a well-known contemporary unionist slogan.¹²³ Indeed, in retirement, FitzGerald was gracious in his acknowledgement that O'Brien's forewarnings had been justified: 'any objective historian of the period will be forced to conclude that he [O'Brien] was more nearly right than I and the rest of us were in the run-up to Sunningdale and in his judgement of the conference itself'.¹²⁴ In a statement issued in July 1974, O'Brien singled out the inclusion of the Council of Ireland proposal as the single greatest factor for the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement. Northern Irish Protestants, he insisted, saw the council as a vehicle to united Ireland. As an alternative, he suggested that the Irish government and the S.D.L.P. focus their energies on building 'institutions in Northern Ireland which will be acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants there'.¹²⁵

By the summer of 1973, O'Brien believed that Hume was effectively dictating Dublin's Northern Ireland policy, with the Irish cabinet, including Cosgrave and FitzGerald, afraid to question him. In a letter to the Irish attorney general, Declan Costello, on 31 July 1973, O'Brien spelt out his annoyance regarding the S.D.L.P.'s continual interference (as he perceived it) in the Irish government's Northern Ireland policy: 'The SDLP have consistently under-estimated the extent and depth of Unionist Protestant resistance to the whole idea of being absorbed into a united

¹¹⁸ Ibid. O'Brien does not provide a precise date for this interaction.

¹¹⁹ Author's email correspondence with Noel Dorr, 24, 30 May 2018.

¹²⁰ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 350.

¹²¹ FitzGerald, 'The 1974–5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland', p. 147.

¹²² *Irish Times*, 20 Dec. 2008.

¹²³ Maurice Fitzpatrick, *John Hume in America: from Derry to DC* (Kildare, 2017), p. 39.

¹²⁴ FitzGerald, *All in a life*, p. 199.

¹²⁵ Copy of a statement issued by O'Brien, 22 July 1974 (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/249).

Ireland'.¹²⁶ In his memoir, O'Brien was particularly scathing of Hume in relation to the Council of Ireland proposal. The deputy leader of the S.D.L.P., O'Brien wrote, had been 'spectacularly wrong in the assurances he had given about the readiness of the unionist community to accept the Sunningdale Agreement, including the Council of Ireland'.¹²⁷ The period immediately following the agreement was a deeply depressing time for O'Brien. By now, he required police protection because of the threat from republican paramilitaries. He later wrote about his perception that within the Irish cabinet he was not merely in a minority of one, but 'a member of a different species'.¹²⁸ He again considered resigning as a Labour Party T.D. and consequently as a government minister, but soon 'decided against it'. 'I was', he recalled, 'altogether out of tune with my colleagues over Northern Ireland'.¹²⁹

VII

In 1974–5, further tensions surfaced between O'Brien and his cabinet colleagues, as well as within the Labour Party, as a result of O'Brien's outspoken views on Northern Ireland. His June 1974 declaration that he was 'no longer working actively for Irish unity' caused a political storm.¹³⁰ In subsequent correspondence with Bruce Arnold, a political correspondent with the *Irish Independent*, in July of that year, O'Brien explained that as far as he was concerned 'unity is not a practical possibility in the foreseeable future'. A 'demand for it and insistence that it is on its way', he protested, 'actually mitigate against progress towards peace and reconciliation in the here and now'.¹³¹ By the summer of 1975, O'Brien came into renewed conflict with some of his cabinet colleagues — again FitzGerald was his main antagonist. The issue on this occasion was O'Brien's attitude to possible British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. O'Brien's attitude to withdrawal had changed over time. Although he remained convinced that immediate withdrawal of British troops would lead to 'civil war' in Northern Ireland, as he outlined privately in 1970,¹³² in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday on 30 January 1972, he had come out in favour of setting a date 'for eventual withdrawal'.¹³³ Almost immediately, however, O'Brien abandoned this stance. Following the burning of the British embassy in Dublin, on 2 February 1972, he claimed that 'I reverted to my former view, which has been my view ever since'. British withdrawal, he maintained, would lead to 'full scale civil war'.¹³⁴ O'Brien held firm to this position for the remainder of his life.

By 1974, a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland had become a genuine possibility under the premiership of British prime minister Harold Wilson. British

¹²⁶ O'Brien to Declan Costello, 31 July 1973 (N.A.I., TAOIS 2004/21/670).

¹²⁷ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 352.

¹²⁸ O'Brien, *Ancestral voices*, p. 166.

¹²⁹ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 353.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Callanan, 'O'Brien, Conor Cruise (1917–2008)'.

¹³¹ O'Brien to Bruce Arnold, 3 July 1974 (U.C.D.A., Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, P82/218).

¹³² [O'Brien], 'Memorandum for consideration of parliamentary Labour Party on middle and long term prospects in relation to the situation on the Six Counties of Northern Ireland and the eventual unity of Ireland'.

¹³³ O'Brien, *Memoir*, pp 335–6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 336–7; see also Dorr, *Sunningdale*, pp 127–8.

cabinet papers from 1974 reveal that following the Labour Party's return to power early that year, Wilson directed that the option of British withdrawal be examined and, in May 1974, he had drafted his own 'Doomsday scenario' for Northern Ireland.¹³⁵ The British cabinet committee on Northern Ireland only rejected this proposal on 11 November 1975.¹³⁶ Privately, the Irish government was horrified by the prospect of a possible British withdrawal. In response, an Irish government inter-departmental unit on Northern Ireland, together with the chiefs of staff of the Irish defence forces, drew up secret reports dealing with 'the implications of an abrupt British withdrawal and a "Doomsday" situation'.¹³⁷ On 11 June 1975, FitzGerald submitted a memorandum, together with an accompanying report of the inter-departmental unit on Northern Ireland, to the Irish cabinet for consideration. These documents provided details regarding three 'worst case scenarios' if the British decided to withdraw from Northern Ireland. They were: negotiated independence (within a thirty-two county Ireland); negotiated re-partition; and the collapse of Northern Ireland into 'anarchy'.¹³⁸ FitzGerald's memorandum drew the conclusion that 'at all costs the third of these scenarios' had to be avoided. He suggested, therefore, that if British withdrawal was unavoidable 'the least dangerous outcome ... and the only one offering even a remote hope of a peaceful outcome, would be negotiated independence'.¹³⁹ Writing retrospectively about this period in 2007, FitzGerald recalled that 'There was a clear danger that such a withdrawal might be followed by full-scale civil war and anarchy in Northern Ireland'.¹⁴⁰

On 17 June 1975, O'Brien produced his own counter-memorandum refuting the central thesis of FitzGerald's memorandum. O'Brien argued vigorously against even considering FitzGerald's recommendations, insisting that the Irish government had an obligation to 'ensure the British stay' in Northern Ireland.¹⁴¹ According to FitzGerald, O'Brien's main grievance rested on his belief that the very fact that the Irish government was considering British withdrawal, including the prospect of negotiated independence, 'would diminish the prospect of continued direct rule and would in effect let the British "off the hook", by enabling them to withdraw in a favourable international climate'.¹⁴² O'Brien remained committed to his view that the Irish government 'ensure the British stay'. Writing in 1978, in *Herod: reflections on political violence*, for example, he recorded that if the British

¹³⁵ Bernard Donoghue, *Prime minister: the conduct of policy under Harold Wilson and James Callaghan* (London, 1987), pp 128–32.

¹³⁶ FitzGerald, 'The 1974–5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland', p. 142.

¹³⁷ 'Secret report by the study group on the military problems raised in Discussion Paper No. 2', Feb. 1975 (U.C.D.A., Garret FitzGerald papers, P215/68); see also FitzGerald, 'The 1974–5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland', p. 142.

¹³⁸ FitzGerald, 'The 1974–5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland', pp 144–5.

¹³⁹ 'Secret report by the study group on the military problems raised in Discussion Paper No. 2', Feb. 1975. This file contains memoranda prepared by the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Foreign Affairs on possible British 'withdrawal', 'negotiated independence for Northern Ireland' and the 'implications of negotiated repartition'.

¹⁴⁰ FitzGerald, 'The 1974–5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland', p. 145.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 148; Donnacha Ó Beacháin, *From partition to Brexit: the Irish government and Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2019), pp 141–2.

¹⁴² FitzGerald, 'The 1974–5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland', p. 147.

government did withdraw while the P.I.R.A. continued its terrorist campaign, the result was likely to be a sectarian civil war on ‘a Lebanese scale’.¹⁴³ Indeed, addressing a meeting of the Conservative Party Parliamentary Northern Ireland Committee, in January 1979, O’Brien noted that ‘British withdrawal would be disastrous, because it would lead to civil war’.¹⁴⁴

VIII

On his appointment as minister for posts and telegraphs in 1973, there was speculation that O’Brien would repeal section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960 and enact new legislation prohibiting the P.I.R.A. and other prominent paramilitary groups from broadcasting on Irish radio and television.¹⁴⁵ Instead, O’Brien oversaw the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act, 1976. Under the terms of this legislation the minister was empowered to proscribe the broadcast of matters which ‘would be likely to promote, or incite to, crime or would tend to undermine the authority of the State’.¹⁴⁶ O’Brien supported the amended legislation for two reasons. First, he wanted to remove from ‘any minister the power’ to dispense of any member of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland ‘at any time without reason given’ (as had transpired under O’Brien’s predecessor Gerry Collins, who had dismissed and replaced all of the members of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland in 1972).¹⁴⁷ Secondly, and more importantly, under the terms of the amended legislation, the minister was granted the power to ‘name by order’ certain organisations that would be prevented from broadcasting political radio and television interviews with named ‘terrorist’ organisations.¹⁴⁸ At the time, O’Brien made no secret of the fact that the primary organisations that he had in his sights were the P.I.R.A., the Official I.R.A. and Provisional Sinn Féin.¹⁴⁹ Addressing Dáil Éireann in November 1976, O’Brien set out his rationale: ‘The Irish Republican Army, Provisional or Official, is an illegal organisation in this State ... It would be hard to argue that known criminals should be given access to the airways.’¹⁵⁰ Regarding Provisional Sinn Féin, O’Brien was equally forthright. In his eyes, the organisation was the ‘front and propaganda arm’ of the P.I.R.A.¹⁵¹

¹⁴³ O’Brien, *Herod: reflections on political violence* (London, 1978), p. 52. See also Whelan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien and the legitimisation of violence’, pp 223–41.

¹⁴⁴ Record of Conservative Party Parliamentary Northern Ireland Committee (C.P.P.N.I.C.) meeting, 10 Jan. 1979 (Bodl., CPA CRD. 4/15/2/4).

¹⁴⁵ Under the 1960 act, the minister for posts and telegraphs was allowed to direct the R.T.É. Authority ‘to refrain from broadcasting any particular matter or matter of any particular class’ (Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960/10 (12 Apr. 1960)). See Callanan, ‘O’Brien, Conor Cruise (1917–2008)’; O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp 355–6; Brian Hanley, *The impact of the Troubles on the Republic of Ireland, 1968–79: boiling volcano?* (Manchester, 2019), pp 95–8; Colum Kenny, ‘Censorship, “not self-censorship”’ in Mary Corcoran and Mark O’Brien (eds), *Political censorship and the democratic state: the Irish broadcasting ban* (Dublin, 2005); John Horgan, *Irish media: a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p. 116.

¹⁴⁶ Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act, 1976/37 (21 Dec. 1976).

¹⁴⁷ O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp 355–6.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

¹⁴⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxciv, 162 (17 Nov. 1976).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxciv, 163 (17 Nov. 1976); see also O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 356.

O'Brien's intervention caused huge public controversy, to the extent that 'it was as if he had introduced a form of censorship that had not previously existed'.¹⁵² For many on the left, O'Brien's decision to amend the legislation merely confirmed his move 'rightwards'.¹⁵³ Indeed, he had vigorously criticised the previous Fianna Fáil government's decision to dismiss the former membership of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland in 1972.¹⁵⁴ Consequently, as Christopher Hitchens wrote at the height of the controversy, O'Brien 'found himself for the first time on the opposite side of the demarcation between censor, writer, cop, protester, peacekeeper and revolutionary'.¹⁵⁵ Although it pained him to find himself alienated from some of his old liberal allies, he felt that this was a price worth paying in order to curtail what he viewed as the propaganda of Sinn Féin-P.I.R.A. The result of O'Brien's intervention was that R.T.É. was prevented from interviewing Sinn Féin spokespersons under any circumstances, even where the subject was not related to the P.I.R.A. campaign. For the remainder of his life, O'Brien was proud of the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act, 1976, specifically section 31, and 'never backed away from it'.¹⁵⁶ In fact, successive Irish governments supported it during the 1980s and early 1990s. Only in January 1994, during the embryonic stages of the Northern Ireland peace process, was section 31 finally 'allowed to lapse' by the Irish government.¹⁵⁷

IX

O'Brien's Irish political career was brought to a surprising end (in his eyes, at least) following his failure to retain his seat at the 1977 Irish general election. He blamed his defeat partly on the efforts of Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin to depict him as 'anti-national'.¹⁵⁸ As a consolation, however, he was elected to Seanad Éireann for Dublin University. Soon after, on 20 September 1977, O'Brien resigned from the Labour Party parliamentary party. His resignation was triggered following a request from Frank Cluskey, the new leader of the Labour Party, that the former submit to him in advance any statement on Northern Ireland.¹⁵⁹ Less than two years later, in June 1979, O'Brien also resigned from his 'useless seat' in Seanad Éireann, as he described it.¹⁶⁰

O'Brien devoted himself to his role as editor-in-chief of *The Observer*, a position to which he was appointed in December 1977. During the 1970s and 1980s, Northern Ireland was the principal subject of O'Brien's journalism. He continued to argue against Sinn Féin, the P.I.R.A. and anti-partitionism in Irish public life.¹⁶¹ O'Brien believed that the years from 1981 to 1985, 'fuelled' by the hunger-strike 'rituals', produced a 'strong demand for concessions by Britain to

¹⁵² Callanan, 'O'Brien, Conor Cruise (1917–2008)'.

¹⁵³ Meehan, 'The embers of revisionism', p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ Horgan, *Irish media*, p. 116.

¹⁵⁵ Christopher Hitchens, 'Conor Cruise O'Brien' in *Grand Street*, vi, no. 3 (spring 1987), p. 148.

¹⁵⁶ Akenson, *Conor*, i, 424.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 358.

¹⁵⁹ Callanan, 'O'Brien, Conor Cruise (1917–2008)'.

¹⁶⁰ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 360.

¹⁶¹ Cited in Callanan, 'O'Brien, Conor Cruise (1917–2008)'.

the constitutional nationalists'.¹⁶² As a result, O'Brien argued, the British government, albeit reluctantly, made the monumental mistake of signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement (A.I.A.) in 1985. O'Brien later protested that this was a stab in the back for Ulster unionists. It was 'absurd', he argued, because unionists had no role in its formation.¹⁶³ O'Brien described as 'insidious' the Thatcher government's willingness, under the terms of the A.I.A., to permit the Irish government a 'consultative' role in the affairs of Northern Ireland, arguing that it was the first sign of the British government's policy of disengagement from Northern Ireland.¹⁶⁴ In protest, O'Brien resigned from the Labour Party.¹⁶⁵

By the late 1980s, apart from his continued denunciation of Irish republican terrorism, O'Brien singled out his old political adversary John Hume for criticism.¹⁶⁶ O'Brien ridiculed Hume and the Irish government's efforts to bring Sinn Féin to the negotiating table. On learning of Hume's secret talks with Gerry Adams, O'Brien protested. He claimed that the S.D.L.P.'s strength rested 'on the back of the PIRA's "armed struggle", and that the party was joining with Sinn Féin to pressurise Unionists into a united Ireland'.¹⁶⁷ It was not a surprise that O'Brien denounced Sinn Féin's participation in the Northern Ireland peace process from the late 1980s to the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998. In his thinking, republicans (and indeed loyalists) had corrupted the process.¹⁶⁸ In 1993, O'Brien opposed the Downing Street Declaration, claiming at the time that neither the S.D.L.P. nor Sinn Féin had any 'serious intention of seeking Unionist agreement. What they wanted from Unionists is capitulation'.¹⁶⁹ In a Westminster by-election in North Down in June 1995, O'Brien canvassed for the successful unionist candidate Robert McCartney, and soon after joined McCartney's United Kingdom Unionist Party (U.K.U.P.). O'Brien's conversion to Ulster unionism in later life was, at the very least, a strange move. O'Brien's decision to join U.K.U.P. certainly left him an isolated figure in political circles in the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, in the end, O'Brien was now seemingly more 'Unionist than the Unionists themselves'.¹⁷⁰

In the final assessment, O'Brien was one of the most controversial political figures of his generation. On the politically sensitive subject of consent, he was one of the first Irish government ministers to challenge, publicly, orthodox nationalist attitudes. Importantly, by the 1980s, the principle of consent, which he had advocated, became part of mainstream nationalist thinking; it was enshrined in international law under the terms of the A.I.A. and again with the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. O'Brien's pivotal role in passing the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act in 1976 was a further example of his political bravery and foresight. Many of O'Brien's old friends and backers were left 'confused' by his support for this legislation, contrasting his 'lifelong opposition to censorship in general

¹⁶² O'Brien, *Ancestral voices*, pp 172–3.

¹⁶³ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 418.

¹⁶⁴ See Dillon, 'Irish Republicanism's holy war: Conor Cruise O'Brien interviewed', p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ O'Brien re-joined the Labour Party in 2005.

¹⁶⁶ *Irish Times*, 20 Dec. 2008.

¹⁶⁷ O'Brien quoted in Farren, *The SDLP*, pp 232–3.

¹⁶⁸ Skelly, 'Appeasement in our time: Conor Cruise O'Brien and the peace process in Northern Ireland', p. 222.

¹⁶⁹ O'Brien quoted in Farren, *The SDLP*, p. 289.

¹⁷⁰ Meehan, 'The embers of revisionism', p. 5.

to his new behaviour, now that he was the censor'.¹⁷¹ O'Brien, however, always placed his sense of public duty ahead of personal considerations. Of course, O'Brien had many faults. Leaving aside his peculiar conversion to Ulster unionism in later life and his rather pompous demeanour, J. J. Lee notes that 'he increasingly failed to assess the nationalist case in the context of the unionist case'.¹⁷² This 'lack of balance' weakened his analysis for, as Lee notes, he sought to 'apply absolutes where the issues revolved around relativities'.¹⁷³ Nevertheless, his analytical dissection of Irish nationalism and ability to challenge the Irish state's attitude to Northern Ireland means that, to return to Foster's phrase, he deserves perhaps to be described as 'the father of modern Irish political revisionism'.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Akenson, *Conor*, i, 418. See also Kenny, 'Censorship, "not self-censorship"', p. 76.

¹⁷² Lee, *Ireland*, p. 477.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* For example, in relation to the Sunningdale Agreement and the Council of Ireland, O'Brien's 'utter dismissal' of Irish nationalist aspirations, as Eunan O'Halpin has argued, 'blinded him to the possibility that an "Irish dimension" would help to create a movement towards peace in Northern Ireland'. See Eunan O'Halpin, 'Labour and the making of Irish foreign policy, 1973–77' in Paul Daly, Ronan O'Brien and Paul Rouse (eds), *Making the difference: the Irish Labour Party, 1912–2012* (Dublin, 2012), p. 151.

¹⁷⁴ Foster, *Luck and the Irish*, p. 71. A version of this article was first presented at the Conor Cruise O'Brien Symposium held at Trinity College Dublin on 3 Nov. 2017 to mark the centenary of O'Brien's birth. I am grateful to the journal's anonymous readers for their critical scrutiny of this article.