**‘I was altogether out of tune with my colleagues over Northern Ireland’:**

**Conor Cruise O’Brien and Northern Ireland, 1969-1977**

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This article critically re-assesses Conor Cruise O’Brien’s attitude to Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1977.[[1]](#footnote-1) An analysis of O’Brien and the Northern Ireland peace process is intentionally omitted; this topic is examined elsewhere.[[2]](#footnote-2) It argues that O’Brien’s most significant contribution to public life was the ability to deconstruct many sacred cows associated with Irish nationalism, specifically his rejection of the Irish state’s irredentist claim over Northern Ireland. He veraciously exposed the underlining contradictions of Irish nationalism and was never apologetic of this fact. In doing so, O’Brien was one of the greatest and most outspoken champions of so-called ‘revisionist nationalism’ of his generation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, while Roy Foster suggests that Fianna Fáil leader Jack Lynch, 1966-1979, might be labelled the ‘father of modern Irish political revisionism’, perhaps O’Brien deserves this accolade.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**I**

‘The Cruiser’, as O’Brien was colloquially referred to, was certainly 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, anti-authoritarian Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, O’Brien combined strong liberal tendencies with an unremitting hostility to political violence.[[5]](#footnote-5) ‘Love him or loathe him’, in the words of Seamus Kilby ‘few can deny’ O’Brien’s ‘seismic influence on late twentieth century Irish political thinking’. ‘He was … an illuminator of the darker recesses of the national psyche’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps Mary McAleese, former president of Ireland, 1997-2011, provides the most accurate depiction of how O’Brien was perceived by his contemporaries. In an interview with *The Magill* magazine in 1998, with piercing honesty, 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.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In relation to Northern Ireland, O’Brien was undoubtedly not afraid to ‘shock’ his contemporaries. At times, he seems to have deliberately courted controversy, that he enjoyed being at war with the intellectual and socio-political establishments. However, there was also a soberer side to O’Brien attitude to Northern Ireland. He was someone who cared deeply about those innocent civilians losing their lives for a cause, which he wholeheartedly believed was morally unjustifiable. Consequently, he took it upon himself to propagate the argument that not only was the Provisional Irish Republican Army’s (PIRA) campaign of terrorism illegitimate – but also morally bankrupt.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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 TD, 1969-1977, and a cabinet minister in the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government, 1973-1977. Three specific themes are examined. Firstly, 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’,[[9]](#footnote-9) was a defining feature of his political career. 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 relations with the forces of Ulster Unionism.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Secondly, it is argued that following the outbreak of the Northern Ireland conflict in 1969 O’Brien mounted a sustained attack on PIRA terrorism, skilfully dismantling the intellectual argument that the use of violence was a legitimate weapon in the fight for a united Ireland. His willingness to make uncomfortable revisions of emotions hitherto cosily and lazily cherished by ‘Romantic nationalists’, to quote O’Brien,[[11]](#footnote-11) ensured his reputation as the bogeyman of orthodox nationalist Ireland. O’Brien, however, remained unapologetic.

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* (1972) he eloquently and dispassionately 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 (i.e. the Protestant majority).[[12]](#footnote-12)

In maintaining his anti-terrorism campaign and supporting the principle of consent argument O’Brien was ridiculed in nationalist circles, accused of committing political heresy. Indeed, his willingness to challenge the political establishments’ attitude to Northern Ireland invariably left him an isolated figure, even amongst his own Labour Party comrades. In *Memoir my life and times*,O’Brien neatly summed up the difficult position he found himself operating in, ‘I was altogether out of tune with my colleagues over Northern Ireland’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Four historical case studies are examined to demonstrate the extent that O’Brien found himself increasingly marginalised, in some cases ostracised, because of his attitude to Northern Ireland. Firstly, this article re-examines O’Brien’s reaction to the Fianna Fáil cabinet’s ‘dangerous’ direction of its Northern Ireland policy during August 1969 and the ensuing Arms Crisis,1969-1970.[[14]](#footnote-14) Secondly, it explores O’Brien 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 any plans to set up 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’,[[15]](#footnote-15) but that he opposed British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.[[16]](#footnote-16) 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).

With the exception of the works by Richard Bourke,[[17]](#footnote-17) Margaret O’Callaghan,[[18]](#footnote-18) Niall Meehan,[[19]](#footnote-19) Richard English and Joseph Skelly Morrison [[20]](#footnote-20) and O’Brien’s two most prominent biographies, Donald Harman Akenson[[21]](#footnote-21) and Diarmuid Whelan,[[22]](#footnote-22) O’Brien’s attitude and writings concerning Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1977 are often overlooked within the relevant secondary literature.[[23]](#footnote-23) Indeed, apart from several published political memoirs and autobiographies by O’Brien’s contemporaries, O’Brien’s role *vis-à-vis* Northern Ireland remains understudied.[[24]](#footnote-24)

This article readdresses this historiographical anomaly. The research on which this work is based consists of a plethora of O’Brien’s own writings,[[25]](#footnote-25) and an assortment of hitherto under-utilised primary sources from several archival institutions in Great Britain and Ireland, including the University College Dublin Archives;[[26]](#footnote-26) the National Archives of Ireland;[[27]](#footnote-27) and lastly the Bodleian Library.[[28]](#footnote-28) The use of documentary evidence is complemented by the use of reported evidence, primarily recorded interviews,[[29]](#footnote-29) online parliamentary debates,[[30]](#footnote-30) investigative magazines[[31]](#footnote-31) and newspapers.[[32]](#footnote-32)

**II**

Conor Cruise O’Brien (born Donal Conor David Dermot Donat) was born 3 November 1917, the only child of Francis Cruise O’Brien and Kathleen (née Sheehy). His father, a journalist by profession, was a leading activist in the Young Ireland Branch of the United Irish League. His mother was also in the Young Ireland Branch and the Irish Women’s Franchise League and was a daughter of David Sheehy, a member of the Irish Parliamentary Party.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Before his teenage years, Northern Ireland had 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.[[34]](#footnote-34) It was only around the age of sixteen, while attending Sandford Park, a non-denominated school in Ranelagh, Dublin 6, that O’Brien first gave Northern Ireland serious consideration. Due to 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’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Auchmuty, O’Brien noted, taught him about day-to-day life in Northern Ireland, including the discrimination of Northern Catholics by the Ulster Unionist controlled state, which had ‘hitherto been concealed from me’.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Thereafter, however, the subject of Northern Ireland retreated into the deeper recesses of O’Brien’s thinking. During his time as a student at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) from 1936 until his graduation in late 1940, O’Brien was preoccupied with his studies and adventures of insular university-life to contemplate the question of Northern Ireland. In fact, the subject 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, 1942-1942, and subsequently on his appointment as a third secretary in the Department of External Affairs (DFA) in 1944.

Following the election of the first Inter-Party government in 1948, in which Seán McBride (leader of Clann na Poblachta) was appointed minister for external affairs, O’Brien’s deep 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 …’.[[37]](#footnote-37)

A backroom staff led by Frank Gallagher was employed by the committee to produce anti-partition propaganda literature. Examples of books produced were *Finances of Partition,* by Labhrás Ó Nualláin, and Gallagher’s *The Indivisible Island*.[[38]](#footnote-38) O’Brien, by now holding the rank of a counsellor within the DEA, likewise, produced an array of anti-partition propaganda in his role as editor of the DEA bulletin *Éire*.[[39]](#footnote-39) At MacBride’s behest, O’Brien also wrote an anti-partitionist history of Ireland, never published and never to be found, which Akenson dubbed “the Lost Book of O’Brien”.[[40]](#footnote-40) O’Brien’s anti-partitionism took on a new level of intensity following his appointment, by McBride, as managing director of the newly formed Irish News Agency (INA) in 1949. This new news outlet, established by statute and funded by an Irish government subsidy, was tasked with producing and dissemination of ‘important pronouncements on partition’ in favour of Irish reunification in the international press.[[41]](#footnote-41)

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’, to quote O’Brien.[[42]](#footnote-42) 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’.[[43]](#footnote-43) 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’.[[44]](#footnote-44)

With Aiken’s encouragement, O’Brien became the DEA’s link to the nationalist community in Northern Ireland.[[45]](#footnote-45) O’Brien travelled throughout Northern Ireland, compiling information regarding the widespread ‘undemocratic’, treatment of Northern Catholics by the Ulster Unionist authorities, including access to housing, allocation of local government jobs and of electoral discrimination, in the form of gerrymandering.[[46]](#footnote-46) These first-hand experiences greatly helped to shape O’Brien’s thinking, not only reinforcing his belief that anti-partitionism was useless, but counter-productive. Instead, during this period, he championed for 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.[[47]](#footnote-47)

It was towards the end of 1955, following O’Brien’s appointment to the Irish embassy in Paris, as a counsellor, that his direct involvement in the Irish government’s anti-partition campaign ‘ceased’.[[48]](#footnote-48) The following year, in 1956, he was appointed the head of the United Nations (UN) section of the DEA 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 UN representative in Élisabethville (Lubumbashi). However, in relation to several issues not relevant to this article, on 1 December 1961, O’Brien resigned from the DEA.[[49]](#footnote-49)

It was during these formative years that O’Brien acquired a passion for anti-colonisation, anti-imperialism and the ‘Third World’.[[50]](#footnote-50) His personal experiences in the early 1960s during his UN role in Katanga,[[51]](#footnote-51) together with his outspoken criticism of white minority rule in Rhodesia and Apartheid in South Africa, not to mention his opposition to the Vietnam War, ‘challenged Cold War neo-colonialism’.[[52]](#footnote-52) It was following a period in Ghana as vice-chancellor at the University of Ghana, 1962-1965 and later in New York, as regents’ professor and holder of the Albert Schweitzer chair in humanities at New York University in 1965 that O’Brien returned to the Northern Ireland question.

In 1966, O’Brien accepted an invitation on behalf of Owen Dudley Edwards to participate in a special supplement of the *Irish Times* to mark the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising of 1916. O’Brien’s contribution was in the form of an article, ‘The embers of Easter’, published on 7 April 1966. It was both brutally honest and unapologetic in attacking the usefulness of anti-partitionism, which he argued had merely fostered bigotry and promoted suspicion between Irish Nationalists and Ulster Unionists.[[53]](#footnote-53)

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 TCD undergraduate). He ‘accepted on the spot’, officially joining in December of that year.[[54]](#footnote-54) In his new role as a politician, albeit unelected, O’Brien spoke out regularly about the unjust treatment of the Catholic minority by the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland.[[55]](#footnote-55) O’Brien’s rabid denunciations of the Northern Ireland state coincided with his election to Dáil Éireann as Labour Party TD for Dublin North-East at the 1969 Irish general election held in June of that year.

**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.[[56]](#footnote-56) This event, infamously known as ‘The Battle of the Bogside’, and which was replicated in other parts of Northern Ireland, notably Belfast, represented a total breakdown of law and order. It would take the arrival of the British Army to Derry, on the evening of 14 August, to bring this initial civil act of disobedience to an end (the British Army arrived in Belfast on 15 August).

The outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland during August 1969 brought to the surface a dormant anti-partitionist virus that quickly spread throughout the *body politic* of the Republic of Ireland. Initially, the Fianna Fáil-led government did not know how to respond to this emergency. In fact, the crisis exposed that Fianna Fáil had ‘no coherent, or indeed realistic, Northern Ireland policy’.[[57]](#footnote-57) 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 that the Irish Army to be sent into Derry or Newry or both to offer, at the very least, support to the beleaguered Catholic populations.[[58]](#footnote-58)

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 ‘apply immediately to the UN for the urgent dispatch of a peace keeping force to the six counties of Northern Ireland’.[[59]](#footnote-59) 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.[[60]](#footnote-60)

It was in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of the Bogside that O’Brien became personally involved in the embryonic stages of the Northern Ireland conflict (O’Brien was by now Labour Party’s spokesperson on foreign affairs and Northern Ireland). On 15 August, an emergency meeting of the Labour Party parliamentary party was convened.[[61]](#footnote-61) After a ‘full discussion’, O’Brien was selected as one of the Labour Party representatives tasked with visiting Northern Ireland, over a four-day visit from 16 to 19 August.[[62]](#footnote-62) In Derry, along with Labour Party TDs Frank Cluskey, Michael O’Leary, Noel Browne and Justin Keating, O’Brien met leading Northern Nationalist figures, including Bernadette Devlin, MP for Mid-Ulster, 1969-1994 and Michael Farrell, civil rights activist.[[63]](#footnote-63) The Labour Party delegation also held a meeting with members of the Derry Citizens’ Defence Committee, including Paddy (‘Bogside’) Doherty and Michael Canavan.[[64]](#footnote-64)

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.[[65]](#footnote-65) The assembled Labour Party TDs were also notified that following Lynch’s televised address, on 13 August, the people of Derry believed that the Irish military ‘intervention was imminent’;[[66]](#footnote-66) a view that was confirmed by Derry civil rights activist Eamonn McCann.[[67]](#footnote-67) O’Brien and his Labour Party colleagues, however, rebuffed this suggestion.[[68]](#footnote-68) Instead, they demanded the immediate disbandment of the B-Specials and the “abolition” on the Stormont regime.[[69]](#footnote-69)

The Labour Party delegation also travelled to Belfast, via Armagh, where they met leading members of the Belfast Citizens’ Defence Committees, including Republican John Kelly, on the Falls Road and held discussions with Gerry Fitt, MP for West Belfast, 1966-1983.[[70]](#footnote-70) Reporting to Labour Party headquarters in Dublin, O’Brien wrote that he was struck by ‘the great extent of physical destruction and the manifestations of a kind of siege warfare around the Catholic “ghetto” areas of the city’.[[71]](#footnote-71)

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’.[[72]](#footnote-72) O’Brien was alluding to the so-called ‘Arms Crisis’ of 1969-1970, an event that shocked him “a great deal”.[[73]](#footnote-73) He accused Fianna Fáil of being ‘sick with a dangerous and infectious sickness’, which had incubated ‘the germs of a possible future civil war’.[[74]](#footnote-74)

The origins of the Arms Crisis date to a meeting of the Irish cabinet on 16 August 1969, the fourth cabinet meeting in as many days.[[75]](#footnote-75) At this meeting, a collective agreement was reached amongst ministers authorising the establishment of a four-man Northern Ireland sub-committee to deal with certain aspects of Northern Ireland affairs. Along with Haughey, three border county Fianna Fáil TDs, Blaney, Joseph Brennan and Pádraig Faulkner were appointed.[[76]](#footnote-76) In reality, the committee was defunct from the start, only ever meeting on one occasion. The only committee, as such, comprised Blaney and Haughey. Both men were ‘effectively conducting their own Northern Ireland policy, at odds with official government policy’.[[77]](#footnote-77) Or to put it another way, in the words of O’Brien, Blaney and Haughey ‘now set about doing some of “the very big things” that the ghosts of a nation sometimes ask’.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Haughey combined his role on the new sub-committee with control of a special Northern Ireland relief fund of £100,000, voted for by Dáil Éireann, to provide ‘aid for the victims of the current unrest in the Six-counties’.[[79]](#footnote-79) As minister for finance, he held the most power and was responsible for ensuring that £100,000 was used for its intended purpose; what actually occurred, however, was that at the very least, approximately £50,000 was used to buy guns for Northern republicans[[80]](#footnote-80) (thus, inadvertently, as O’Brien later pointed out, helping to establish the nascent PIRA).[[81]](#footnote-81)

On 6 May 1970, following months of inaction, Lynch dismissed ministers Blaney and Haughey for their alleged involvement in an illegal attempt to import arms. On 28 of that month, the disgraced former ministers were arrested and charged with conspiracy to import arms. On 2 July, the charges of the attempted importation of arms were dropped against Blaney. Haughey, however, with his three co-accused, Albert Luykx, James J. Kelly and John Kelly, was returned for trial in the Central Criminal Court. The infamous story of the Arms Trial itself, from the collapse of the first trial to Haughey’s eventual acquittal has been told on numerous occasions.[[82]](#footnote-82) Haughey was eventually acquitted in October 1970; the jury possibly finding it difficult to accept that the arms importation did not have at least covert government sanction.[[83]](#footnote-83)

O’Brien viewed Haughey’s acquittal and the publics’ clear ambiguity towards Republican violence as symptoms of irredentist cancer that had spread throughout the Republic of Ireland. In O’Brien’s thinking the emergence of the PIRA in Northern Ireland (following the split within the Republican movement in December 1969)[[84]](#footnote-84) was further evidence that a generous minority of the Irish population in the Republic of Ireland, including some prominent figures in the Labour Party (discussed below), still had an ‘each way bet’ on the use of force.[[85]](#footnote-85) These so-called ‘conditional constitutionalists’, to borrow John Bowman’s term,[[86]](#footnote-86) were reluctant to abandon the argument that the use of violence was a legitimate weapon in the fight for a united Ireland.

**IV**

By 1971, as the PIRA intensified its campaign of violence, sharp differences of opinion soon 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 Puirséil, 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’.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Since 1969, O’Brien had worked tirelessly to win support from within the Labour Party for his conciliatory and non-violent Northern Ireland policy. 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 policy that Fine Gael had already publicly placed on the record since 1969.[[88]](#footnote-88) Indeed, while it would take until the mid-1980s before Fianna Fáil officially acknowledged the principle of consent argument, like Fine Gael, by 1971, the Labour Party signed up to this principle.[[89]](#footnote-89)

However, to O’Brien’s increasing frustration, a cohort of anti-partitionist Labour Party TDs, which allegedly included amongst is supporters Justin Keating, David Thornley and Seán Treacy, expressed sympathy, if not open support, for the use of force to secure a united Ireland.[[90]](#footnote-90) The Labour Party grass-roots were equally divided and throughout the early 1970s there was strong support among the Dublin membership for the PIRA’s terrorist campaign.[[91]](#footnote-91)

O’Brien singled out June of 1971 as the moment that ‘I came for the first time to take a definite and distinctive position in relation to what was happening in and around the North’.[[92]](#footnote-92) This was the point at which O’Brien came to the firm conclusion that PIRA was simply a band of terrorists ‘making an *unjustifiable* use of violence’,[[93]](#footnote-93) that the movement had ‘no qualms about sectarian civil war’.[[94]](#footnote-94) This metamorphosis in O’Brien’s thinking occurred following a dramatic increase in the PIRA’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’.[[95]](#footnote-95)

It was at the annual Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union (ITGWU) conference in Galway, on 11 June 1971, that O’Brien publicly placed on record his opposition to the PIRA’s terrorist campaign. At this event, O’Brien responded to a proposal for the release of all political prisoners. He asked what was a political prisoner?

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?[[96]](#footnote-96)

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”.[[97]](#footnote-97) As Halligan subsequently noted, O’Brien was ‘administering an electrical shock’ to a sceptical Labour Party audience.[[98]](#footnote-98) O’Brien, however, was again 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’.[[99]](#footnote-99) Thereafter, as he explained, ‘I was henceforth and have always remained anathema as far as the Republican movement was concerned’.[[100]](#footnote-100)

From O’Brien’s perspective, the PIRA and various other Irish Republican groups were nothing more than a mob of terrorists, misrepresenting the cause of Irish Republicanism. He argued vigorously that the PIRA’s military campaign was based on a fundamental fallacy. Such ‘Republicans’ were not fighting for a united Ireland thirty-two county Republic, internationally recognised as its own entity. Rather, O’Brien sardonically implied, such Republicans 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’.[[101]](#footnote-101)

As is examined below, this public showdown with rank and file Labour Party supporters was the first of many disagreements that O’Brien would have with his Labour Party colleagues over the following years. In fact, contained within O’Brien’s personal papers at the UCDA is a file relating to O’Brien’s 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 a meeting about Northern Ireland, held between Brendan Halligan, Justin Keating and the Labour Party MP and shadow home secretary James Callaghan, at the British Labour Party annual conference, in Brighton in July 1971.

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’, that there was a ‘lack of confidence in me as spokesman’. He, therefore, ‘reluctantly’ offered his resignation as ‘spokesman on Foreign Affairs’.[[102]](#footnote-102) 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.[[103]](#footnote-103) Following much arm twisting, which included the personal intervention of Frank Cluskey, O’Brien rescinded his letter of resignation.[[104]](#footnote-104) The signs, however, were ominous.

**V**

It was following these events – the Arms Crisis, the emergence of the PIRA and his address at the ITGWU conference in June 1971 – that O’Brien vigorously came out in defence of the principle of consent argument. Thereafter, in the words of Fintan O’Toole, 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’.[[105]](#footnote-105)

The high-point of this public campaign came with the publication of O’Brien’s revisionist study, *States of Ireland*, in 1972.[[106]](#footnote-106) This was a ‘key text on Ireland’, which had an ‘enormous impact on Irish political culture’.[[107]](#footnote-107) 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 Irish anti-partitionism’.[[108]](#footnote-108) Indeed, today this work is still regarded as one of the finest revisionist publications on Irish history, challenging its readers to re-evaluate some sacred cows associated with Irish history and the Irish nation.[[109]](#footnote-109)

*States of Ireland* sat neatly alongside the ‘the rise and broad diffusion of demythologising studies of modern Irish history’,[[110]](#footnote-110) which included amongst its authors Derry-born Protestant, F. S. L. Lyons, Provost of TCD, 1974-1981; T. W. Moody, Professor of Modern History, TCD, 1940-1977; and Robert Dudley Edwards, Chair of Modern Irish History, UCD, 1944-1979.[[111]](#footnote-111) In the words of Diarmaid Ferriter, during the 1970s historians began to ‘grapple’ with the “antithesis between history and memory”, which included the many contradictions associated with Irish nationalism and political violence.[[112]](#footnote-112) Writers, including those cited above, articulated some obvious but consistently ignored historical truths in the context of the 1970s. Foremost among such ‘ignored historical truths’ were the arguments surrounding the ‘validity on the inevitability of violence’.[[113]](#footnote-113) Or to put it another way, as Alvin Jackson wrote, the violence in Northern Ireland ‘implicitly encouraged some liberal academics to distance themselves from the insurgents, and from the tradition of insurgency’ in Ireland.[[114]](#footnote-114)

In *States of Ireland*, O’Brien made three powerful arguments to deconstruct some hitherto unchallenged monoliths associated with Irish nationalism and Northern Ireland. Firstly, 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 [chiefly] are interested in equality … rather than in unity …’.[[115]](#footnote-115) Secondly, O’Brien argued that Irish 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. In the words of O’Brien, ‘The population of the Republic [of Ireland] has been accustomed to assenting to a theory of unity, but in practice’, do not work for its attainment.[[116]](#footnote-116) Thus, ‘The Irish of the Republic [of Ireland] had got what they wanted and gone …’.[[117]](#footnote-117) Lastly, in this work, 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.[[118]](#footnote-118) Here he provided a critique of the dispute between ‘distinct religious cultures’ and the ‘… rights of sovereignty over Northern Ireland’, to quote Richard Bourke.[[119]](#footnote-119)

This latter argument was based on the principle that Northern Ireland should not cease to be part of the United Kingdom without the consent of the majority (i.e. the Protestant majority). In order words, Northern Protestants should not be ‘coerced into a United Ireland’, as O’Brien privately conceded in 1970.[[120]](#footnote-120) Instead, while he acknowledged that the ‘eventual consent’ of Northern Protestants was a ‘remote’ possibility in the medium-term it was something that Irish nationalists must ‘aspire’ to achieve.[[121]](#footnote-121)

The principle of consent was enshrined in British legislation following the passing of the ‘Ireland Act’ by the Clement Atlee-led Labour government in 1949.[[122]](#footnote-122) Significantly, the Act strengthened the Unionist position in Northern Ireland, effectively passing the veto of Irish unity from London to the custody of Ulster Unionists.[[123]](#footnote-123) By the mid-1950s, following his abandonment of the use of sterile anti-partitionism (see above) O’Brien offered his support for this principle. Although Northern Ireland, as he phrased it, was ‘a sectarian-tribal’ entity,[[124]](#footnote-124) he insisted that Northern Protestants must not be forced into a united Ireland at ‘gunpoint, or as corpses’.[[125]](#footnote-125) Instead, he argued that ‘Irish unity could only come about by ‘agreement among Irishmen and specifically between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland’.[[126]](#footnote-126)

O’Brien’s arguments received a frosty reception from prominent Northern Nationalists. The Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), founded two years previously in 1970 and by now the largest party representing Northern nationalists in Northern Ireland, accused O’Brien of mounting a ‘subtle and effective defence of unionism than any that has come from any unionist quarter’, to quote John Hume, deputy leader of the SDLP. If O’Brien’s hypothesis was accepted, Hume implored, ‘… his case will sentence another generation in the North to the terrible violence we have just come through’.[[127]](#footnote-127) Thereafter, O’Brien and Hume remained political adversaries. Indeed, on one occasion, O’Brien described Hume as his ‘deadly enemy’.[[128]](#footnote-128)

Despite the SDLP’s rejection of O’Brien thesis, he remained unapologetic. The solution to Irish nationalists’ repeated self-denial, O’Brien argued in a short article, *Two nations?,* written around the same period as *States of Ireland*, was to cease to repeat the ‘traditional shibboleths or displays of sectarian or national self-righteousness’.[[129]](#footnote-129) It was by this period that O’Brien’s academic and polemic revisionist writings on Northern Ireland and more generally Irish nationalism, took centre stage in his political career.

**VI**

John Hume’s criticism of *States of Ireland* reflected a growing divergence between O’Brien and the SDLP in relation to Northern Ireland. In fact, the O’Brien-SDLP relationship had already begun 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 SDLP’s proposal for ‘joint administration of Northern Ireland’. This proposal was contained within the SDLP’s policy document, *Towards a new Ireland*, published in the autumn of 1972. Its basic thesis as SDLP 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’.[[130]](#footnote-130)O’Brien described the proposal as ‘a crazy idea’.[[131]](#footnote-131)

Not for the first or last time O’Brien’s comments regarding the Labour Party’s stance on Northern Ireland, in this instance in relation to the SDLP, caused a political tremor within the organisation. Shortly afterwards, O’Brien’s political adversaries, led by David Thornley, put down a motion for the former’s expulsion from the Labour Party, at a meeting of the party’s parliamentary party. Despite coming under considerable pressure to resign, O’Brien refused. In any case, the motion for his expulsion from the party failed to get a majority.[[132]](#footnote-132)

The O’Brien-SDLP relationship was irreconcilably damaged on his entry to government in 1973, under a Fine Gael-Labour coalition. O’Brien was appointed as minister for posts and telegraphs, 1973–1977, while he retained his role as Labour spokesman on foreign affairs and Northern Ireland. He was disappointed not to get 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.[[133]](#footnote-133)

O’Brien’s first substantial contribution to the Irish government’s Northern Ireland policy came in his capacity as a member of Dublin’s representation at the Sunningdale conference in December 1973. On 22 November of that year, following months of negotiations and in an effort to end direct rule, an agreement was reached, in principle, amongst 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 so-called ‘Council of Ireland’.[[134]](#footnote-134) 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’.[[135]](#footnote-135)

Instead, between 6 and 9 December 1973, the British and Irish governments, together with the leaders of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the SDLP and the Alliance Party, participated at a conference, at Sunningdale in Berkshire, England, to deal with the unresolved issue of the Council of Ireland. Following protracted negotiations, the Sunningdale Agreement was signed on 9 December 1973.[[136]](#footnote-136) Despite his own deeply held reservations regarding the entire enterprise, as a member of the Irish cabinet and thus with collective responsibility, O’Brien supported the Irish government’s signing of the Accord. Two central issues were agreed.

Firstly, an agreement was reached that a Council of Ireland should be set up to encourage cross-border economic and security co-operation.[[137]](#footnote-137) 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 in Northern Ireland (i.e. the Protestant majority).[[138]](#footnote-138) The signing of the agreement, thus, cleared the way for the formal setting up 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 the provision to establish 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 the provision of a Council of Ireland ‘with the implication of progress towards a united Ireland, might be a bridge too far’.[[139]](#footnote-139) ‘By pilling on a lot of superfluous symbolism’, O’Brien wrote, ‘we were in danger of capsizing the essential: the power-sharing Executive’.[[140]](#footnote-140) As a prominent Irish civil servant at the time, Noel Dorr later wrote, in O’Brien’s thinking, the Irish government’s demand for the inclusion of a Council of Ireland provision was ‘… too much, too soon …’.[[141]](#footnote-141)

It was not that O’Brien was opposed to the Council of Ireland provision *per se* rather he did not support the SDLP’s demand that the proposed Council of Ireland was to be directly linked with the proposal to establish a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland. If the Irish government were 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’.[[142]](#footnote-142) Many within the Ulster Unionist community, O’Brien pointed out, would view such a council as a Trojan horse, a pathway towards a united Ireland. The net result would be that many Ulster Unionists might desert Brian Faulkner, leader of the UUP and the Northern Ireland executive ‘would then collapse’.[[143]](#footnote-143)

O’Brien’s protests *vis-à-vis* the Council of Ireland were politely rebuffed by his cabinet colleagues. FitzGerald, with 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 Ireland without any difficulty’.[[144]](#footnote-144) 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’.[[145]](#footnote-145)

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 SDLP, wanted him sacked and removed from the Irish cabinet.[[146]](#footnote-146) 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’![[147]](#footnote-147) Writing in December 2010, shortly after O’Brien’s passing, 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’.[[148]](#footnote-148)

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 UUP in January 1974, but on 28 May of that year, after a two-week strike by the Ulster Workers’ Council, the power-sharing executive and thus the Sunningdale Agreement collapsed. Faulkner could simply not keep his followers onside as many subscribed to O’Brien’s mantra that the Council of Ireland was a Trojan horse for a united Ireland by stealth. “Dublin is just a Sunningdale away” ran a contemporary Ulster Unionist slogan.[[149]](#footnote-149) 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’.[[150]](#footnote-150)

In a statement issued on his behalf in July 1974, O’Brien signalled out the inclusion of the Council of Ireland proposal as the single greatest factor for why the Sunningdale Agreement had collapsed. Northern Ireland Protestants, he insisted, saw the Council as a vehicle to united Ireland. Instead, he suggested that the Irish government and the SDLP focus their energies on building ‘institutions in Northern Ireland which will be acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants there’.[[151]](#footnote-151)

By now, O’Brien believed that Hume was effectively dictating Dublin’s Northern Ireland policy, with the Irish cabinet, including Liam Cosgrave and FitzGerald, afraid to question their northern neighbour. In a letter to Irish attorney general, Declan Costello, dated 31 July 1973, O’Brien spelt out his annoyance regarding the SDLP’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 Ireland’, he wrote.[[152]](#footnote-152) In his memoir, O’Brien was particularly scathing of Hume in relation to the Council of Ireland proposal. The deputy leader of the SDLP, 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’.[[153]](#footnote-153)

It was a deeply depressing time for O’Brien. By now, he required police protection because of the threat from Republican paramilitaries. He later wrote how he felt that within the Irish cabinet he was not merely in a minority of one, but ‘a member of a different species’![[154]](#footnote-154) He again considered resigning as a Labour Party TD 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 …’.[[155]](#footnote-155)

**VII**

Further tensions between O’Brien, his cabinet colleagues and more generally within the Labour Party, surfaced in June 1974 following his bombshell declaration that he was ‘no longer working actively for Irish unity’.[[156]](#footnote-156) His comments caused a political storm. O’Brien, however, was unrepentant. In correspondence with Bruce Arnold, political correspondent with the *Irish Independent*, in July of that year, he wrote 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 …’.[[157]](#footnote-157)

By the summer of 1975, O’Brien’s outspoken comments in relation to Northern Ireland again brought him into direct conflict with some of his cabinet colleagues – again FitzGerald was his main antagonist. At the heart of this latest controversy was O’Brien’s attitude to possible British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. Up to this point, a metamorphosis had occurred regarding O’Brien’s attitude to this ticking political bomb. Although he remained convinced that immediate withdrawal of British troops would lead to ‘civil war’ in Northern Ireland, as he outlined privately in 1970,[[158]](#footnote-158) in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday on 30 January 1972, he had come out in favour of setting up a date ‘for eventual withdrawal’.[[159]](#footnote-159) Almost immediately, however, O’Brien abandoned this policy 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 said, would lead to ‘full scale civil war’.[[160]](#footnote-160) Thereafter, O’Brien held firm to this belief for the remainder of his life.

By 1974, the prospect of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland had become a genuine possibility under the premiership of British prime minister Harold Wilson. British cabinet papers from 1974 reveal that following the Labour government’s return to power in early 1974, Wilson directed that the option of British withdrawal be examined and in May of that year, had drafted his own “Doomsday Scenario” for Northern Ireland.[[161]](#footnote-161) The British cabinet committee on Northern Ireland only rejected this proposal on 11 November 1975.[[162]](#footnote-162)

Privately, the Irish government was horrified by the prospect of a possible British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. In response, an Irish government Inter-Departmental unit on Northern Ireland, together with the chiefs of staffs’ branch of the Irish Defence Forces drew up secret reports dealing with ‘the implications of an abrupt British withdrawal and a “Doomsday” situation’.[[163]](#footnote-163) On 11 June 1975, FitzGerald submitted a memorandum, together with an accompanying report of the Inter-Department 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: (1) negotiated independence; (2) negotiated re-partition and finally; (3) the collapse of Northern Ireland into ‘anarchy’.[[164]](#footnote-164)

FitzGerald’s memorandum drew the conclusion that ‘at all costs the third of these scenarios’ must be avoided. He, therefore, suggested 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’.[[165]](#footnote-165) Writing retrospectively about this period in 2007, FitzGerald recalled ‘There was a clear danger that such a withdrawal might be followed by full-scale civil war and anarchy in Northern Ireland’.[[166]](#footnote-166)

On 17 June 1975, O’Brien produced his own counter-memorandum refuting the central thesis of FitzGerald’s memorandum. O’Brien vigorously argued against even considering FitzGerald’s recommendations, insisting that the Irish government had an obligation to “ensure the British stay” in Northern Ireland.[[167]](#footnote-167) 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 hock”’, by enabling them to withdraw in a favourable international climate”. O’Brien, therefore, argued against even considering FitzGerald’s memorandum, but instead try their hardest to “ensure the British stay” in Northern Ireland.[[168]](#footnote-168)

Thereafter, O’Brien was to remain committed to this view. Writing in 1978, in a body of little known essays, *Herod: reflections on political violence*, for example, he recorded that if the British government did withdraw, while the PIRA continued it terrorist campaign, what would be likely to follow was a sectarian civil war on ‘a Lebanese scale’.[[169]](#footnote-169) 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’.[[170]](#footnote-170)

**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)[[171]](#footnote-171) and enact new legislation prohibiting the PIRA and other prominent paramilitary movements, from broadcasting on Irish radio and television. O’Brien, however, soon rejected this proposition, arguing that given ‘the conditions that prevailed in Northern Ireland he would not abrogate the provision for a broadcasting ban’.[[172]](#footnote-172)

Instead, O’Brien amended the relevant legislation, passing the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act of 1976. Under the terms of the amended legislation, the pre-existing order of 1971 was reformulated and replaced the old section 31, with a clause limiting what the minister could prescribe to access to broadcasting to those ‘likely to promote, or incite to crime or would tend to undermine the authority of the State …’.[[173]](#footnote-173)

O’Brien’s motivation for forcing through these amendments to the above legislation was based on two salient motivations. Firstly, because 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 the members of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland in 1972).[[174]](#footnote-174) 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.[[175]](#footnote-175)

At the time, O’Brien made no secret that the primary organisations that he had in his sights were the PIRA, the Official IRA, Provisional Sinn Féin and other ‘subversive organisations’.[[176]](#footnote-176) 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’, he, therefore, noted ‘that known criminals should be given access to the airways …’.[[177]](#footnote-177) Regarding Provisional Sinn Féin, O’Brien was equally forthright. In his eyes, the movement was the ‘front and propaganda arm’ for the PIRA.[[178]](#footnote-178)

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’, to quote Frank Callanan, author of O’Brien’s entry in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.[[179]](#footnote-179) For many on the Left, O’Brien’s decision to amend this piece of legislation merely confirmed his move ‘rightwards’.[[180]](#footnote-180) Indeed, he had vigorously criticised the previous Fianna Fáil government’s decision to dismiss the previous membership of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland in 1972.[[181]](#footnote-181) Consequently, as Christopher Hitchens wrote, during the height of this latest controversy O’Brien ‘found himself for the first time on the opposite side of the demarcation between censor, writer, cop, protester, peacekeeper and revolutionary’.[[182]](#footnote-182)

Again, however, O’Brien was unapologetic. Although it pained him to find himself alienated by some of his old liberal allies, he felt that it was a price worth paying to curtail the propaganda of Sinn Féin-PIRA. The result of O’Brien’s intervention was that *RTÉ* was prevented from interviewing Sinn Féin spokespersons under any circumstances, even where the subject was not related to the PIRA campaign in the Northern Ireland conflict. 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’, to quote Akenson.[[183]](#footnote-183) In fact, nor did successive Irish governments 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.[[184]](#footnote-184)

**IX**

Ultimately, O’Brien’s foray into Irish politics 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 partly blamed his defeat on Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin’s efforts to depict him as ‘anti-national’.[[185]](#footnote-185) As a consolation, however, he was elected to Seanad Éireann for Dublin University, from 1977 to 1979. It was during this period, following years of threats, that O’Brien resigned from the Labour Party parliamentary party. His resignation was triggered following a request by Frank Cluskey, new leader of the Labour Party, that O’Brien submit to him in advance any statement on Northern Ireland. O’Brien refused. In protest, he resigned from the Labour Party parliamentary party on 20 September 1977.[[186]](#footnote-186)

Less than two years later, in June 1979, O’Brien also resigned from his ‘useless seat’ in Seanad Éireann, to use his own description.[[187]](#footnote-187) His departure from frontline Irish politics, in the words of Callanan, brought ‘to an end with chronological neatness an extraordinary decade as an Irish parliamentarian’.[[188]](#footnote-188) The *Irish Times*, with ‘a sour valediction’ celebrated O’Brien’s departure with the snarling comments: “a searing, sometimes malevolent, yet cleansing element is removed from Irish politics … He is a great egoist”.[[189]](#footnote-189)

Away from the glare of the public spotlight, ‘the great egotist’ devoted himself to his new role as editor-in-chief of *The Observer* newspaper (he was appointed to this role in December 1977). During these years Northern Ireland provided the principal subject of O’Brien’s journalism. Firmly in his sights was his crusade against Sinn Féin-PIRA and the remaining remnants of anti-partitionism in Irish public life. In a piece for the *New York Review of Books*, in April 1982, for example, he wrote, ‘The official ideology of the Republic [of Ireland] fully legitimises the PIRA “war” in Northern Ireland and so helps that “war” go on and on … Our ideology, in relation to what we actually are and want, is a lie. It is a lie that clings to us and burns ...’.[[190]](#footnote-190)

O’Brien characterised the years from 1981 to 1985, ‘fuelled’ by the Republican hunger-strike ‘rituals’, as producing a ‘strong demand for concessions by Britain to the constitutional nationalists’.[[191]](#footnote-191) Thus, to placate these constitutional nationalists, O’Brien argued that the British government, albeit reluctantly, made the monumental mistake of signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of 1985. This Agreement, signed on behalf of the British and Irish governments, O’Brien later protested, was a stab in the back for Ulster Unionists. It was ‘absurd’, he argued, because Unionists had no role in its formation.[[192]](#footnote-192) O’Brien described as ‘insidious’ the Thatcher government’s willingness, under the terms of the Accord, 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.[[193]](#footnote-193) In protest, O’Brien resigned from the Labour Party.[[194]](#footnote-194)

By the late 1980s, O’Brien’s writings on Northern Ireland returned time and time again to ‘general philosophical discussions of the nature of terrorism’,[[195]](#footnote-195) and his ‘vilification of John Hume’, to quote Mark Durkan, leader of the SDLP, 2001-2010.[[196]](#footnote-196) O’Brien routinely ridiculed his old political adversary Hume and the Irish government’s efforts to bring Sinn Féin out of the political wilderness and to the negotiating table. On learning of Hume’s secret talks with Gerry Adams, in 1988, under the guise of the Adams-Hume talks, O’Brien vigorously protested. He claimed that the SDLP’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”.[[197]](#footnote-197)

It should come as little surprise to learn that O’Brien wholeheartedly denounced Sinn Féin-PIRA’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 mentally and morally corrupted the process.[[198]](#footnote-198) In 1993, O’Brien opposed the Downing Street Declaration, claiming at the time that neither the SDLP nor Sinn Féin had any “serious intention of seeking Unionist agreement. What they wanted from Unionists is capitulation”.[[199]](#footnote-199)

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 non-sectarian United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP). O’Brien’s conversion to Ulster Unionism in later life was, to say the least, a strange move. The once ‘ultra-revisionist’ had now arguably come to endorse ‘partition’s rightness’, to quote Paul F. Power.[[200]](#footnote-200) O’Brien’s decision to join UKUP 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”.[[201]](#footnote-201) As ever, however, O’Brien remained unapologetic.

In the final assessment, O’Brien was certainly one of the most controversial figures of his generation for his insistence that Northern Protestants must not be forced into a united Ireland. Although he was incorrect in his apocalyptic assertions, following the signing of the AIA, that civil war might break out, he was correct on several points related to the Irish state’s attitude to Northern Ireland.

On the politically sensitive subject of consent O’Brien was one of the first Irish government ministers to rebuke publicly orthodox nationalist attitudes. Importantly, by the 1980s, his long-held crusade in support of the principle of consent argument had become part of mainstream nationalist orthodoxy, which was enshrined in international law under the terms of the AIA and again with the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. Indeed, even though it took thirty years of bloodshed, in the end, even the PIRA accepted the principle of consent argument.[[202]](#footnote-202)

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 legislative amendment, contrasting his ‘lifelong opposition to censorship in general to his new behaviour, now that he was the censor’.[[203]](#footnote-203) Yet, again, O’Brien was unapologetic. In his lifelong fight against Sinn Féin-PIRA, he always placed his sense of public duty ahead of personal considerations. In fact, to borrow Colum Kenny’s observation, ‘people who blame’ O’Brien ‘had a very simple view of history’. O’Brien had the ‘intellectual courage’ to defend the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act of 1976, when ‘others before and after him who were responsible for the broadcasting brief in Cabinet and who maintained Section 31 were less assertive of its merits’.[[204]](#footnote-204)

Of course, O’Brien had many faults. Leaving aside his peculiar conversion to Ulster Unionism in later life and his rather pompous and self-righteous demeanour, he constantly demonstrated an inability to access the Irish Nationalist case in the context of the Ulster Unionist case, to borrow J. J. Lee’s analysis. In as much as O’Brien failed to acknowledge the Israeli state’s endemic persecution of Palestinians in his commentary and writings on Middle East events,[[205]](#footnote-205) throughout his long contribution to public life O’Brien failed to submit Ulster Unionism to the ‘same clinical examination’ that he made a living out of in relation to Irish Nationalism. [[206]](#footnote-206) This ‘lack of balance’, thus, weakened his argument for he sought to ‘apply absolutes where the issues revolved around relativities’, to quote Lee.[[207]](#footnote-207) 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 argued, ‘blinded him to the possibility that an “Irish dimension” would help to create a movement towards peace in Northern Ireland’.[[208]](#footnote-208)

O’Brien was ‘the man Irish nationalists love to hate’.[[209]](#footnote-209) Indeed, for many Republicans, O’Brien’s ‘great sin’ was that he ‘humanised Protestants in Ulster’, and they never forgave him for it.[[210]](#footnote-210) Whether O’Brien was loved or loathed, he left a lasting imprint on the Irish psyche. He was a pioneer; some might say a visionary regarding his attitude to Northern Ireland. To use British ambassador to Ireland, 1970-1973, Sir John Peck’s description, O’Brien ‘will be regarded more as an analyst of the Irish than as a typical representative of them’.[[211]](#footnote-211) There is, indeed, something in Peck’s observation. O’Brien‘s analytical dissection of many sacred cows associated with Irish nationalism, his ability to debunk and revise the Irish states’ attitude to Northern Ireland, arguably secures him the accolade as the ‘father of modern Irish political revisionism’, to borrow Foster’s phraseology.[[212]](#footnote-212)

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2. See, for example, Joseph Morrison Skelly, ‘Appeasement in Our Time: Conor Cruise O’Brien and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 10 (1999), pp. 221-236. See also Paul F. Power, ‘Revisionist nationalism’s consolidation, republicanism’s marginalization, and the peace process’, *Éire-Ireland*, Vol. 31, Numbers 1&2 (spring-summer, 1996), pp. 89-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Power, ‘Revisionist nationalism’s consolidation, republicanism’s marginalization, and the peace process’, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is a legitimate argument that Garret FitzGerald deserves this accolade. Roy Foster, *Luck and the Irish: a brief history of change, 1970-2000* (London, 2008), p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Irish Times*, 20 Dec. 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Seamus Kilby, ‘The many incarnations of Conor Cruise O’Brien’, *Fortnight*, No. 464 (March, 2009), p. 20. See also Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), p. 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Magill* (Feb. 1998), p. 20. See also J. J. Lee’s comments regarding O’Brien’s ability to ‘shock’ his contemporaries. J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 476. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, O’Brien, ‘Liberalism and terrorism’, *International Security*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (Fall 1977), pp. 56-67; pp. 58-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Memoir my life and times* (Dublin, 1999), p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See ‘Irish Republicanism’s holy way: Conor Cruise O’Brien interviewed’ by Martin Dillon, *Fortnight*, No. 216 (Mar. 16-31, 1985), pp. 5-6; p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Conor Cruise O’Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1972), p. 14 and pp. 295-297. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp. 353-354. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Comments by O’Brien. Dáil Éireann (DE) Debate, 8 May 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Frank Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’ entry in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Garret FitzGerald, ‘The 1974-5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 17 (2006), pp. 141-150; p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Richard Bourke, ‘Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (September 2011), pp. 544-578. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. # Apart from a critique of O’Brien’s *State of Ireland* O’Callaghan’s work does not examine, in specific detail, the central components of this article. See Margaret O’Callaghan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien and the Northern Ireland conflict: formulating a revisionist position’, *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 33, Issue 2 (2018), pp. 221-231; p. 222.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Niall Meehan, ‘The embers of revisionism: critiquing creationist Irish history’, *The Aubane Historical Society 2017*, pp. 3-23. See also Niall Meehan, ‘Arrested Development: Conor Cruise O'Brien, 1917-2008’, *History Ireland*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (March-April 2009), pp. 10-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Richard English and Joseph Skelly Morrison (eds), *Ideas matter: essays in honour of Conor Cruise O’Brien* (Maryland, 2000). See also Charles Townshend, ‘Religion, war, and identity in Ireland’, *The Journal of Modern History,* Vol. 76, No. 4 (December 2004), pp. 882-902. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: a biography of Conor Cruise O’Brien, Volume I, Narrative* (Québec, 1994) and Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: a biography of Conor Cruise O’Brien, Volume 2, Anthology* (Québec, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Diarmuid Whelan, *Conor Cruise O’Brien: the coldest eye* (Dublin, 2009). See also Diarmuid Whelan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien and the Legitimation of Violence’, *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 21, Issue 2 (2016), pp. 223-241. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Other writers that have touched upon O’Brien’s involvement with Northern Ireland during this period under investigation include, Stephen Howe, ‘The Cruiser and the colonist: Conor Cruise O’Brien’s writings on colonialism’, *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 28, Issue 4 (2013), pp. 487-514; Stephen Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland, 1926-1971* (Dublin, 2013), p. 131, p. 277, p. 302 and p. 336.; Mark McNally, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’s conservative anti-nationalism: retrieving the post-war European connection’, *European Journal of Political Thought*, Vol 3. Issue 9 (2008), pp. 308-330; Tom Garvin, ‘Imaginary Cassandra?: Conor Cruise O’Brien as Public Intellectual in Ireland’, *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (autumn-winter, 2007), pp. 430-440; and Gareth Ivory, ‘Revisions in nationalist discourse among Irish political parties’, *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 14, Issue 1 (1999), pp. 84-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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, Garret FitzGerald, an autobiography* (Dublin, 1991); and Edward Heath, *The autobiography: the course of my life* (London, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. # See, for example, Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Two nations?* (circa 1972). A copy of this work is available from University College Dublin Archives (U.C.D.A.) Conor Cruise O’Brien Papers (P82)/680. See also O’Brien (and Nicholas Mansergh), ‘Northern Ireland: its past and its future, *Race XIV*, 1 (1972); O’Brien, ‘Liberalism and terrorism’, 56-67; O’Brien, *Herod: reflections on political violence* (London, 1978); O’Brien, ‘The Four Horsemen’, *Harper’s 262* (Dec. 1981), 14,16 & 18-20 (reproduced in Akenson, *Conor: Vol. 2*); O’Brien, *Passion and cunning: essays on nationalism, terrorism and revolution* (New York, 1988); O’Brien, *God land: reflections on religion and nationalism* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); O’Brien, *Ancestral voices: religion and nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin, 1994); and O’Brien, *Memoir*. See also ‘Irish Republicanism’s holy way: Conor Cruise O’Brien interviewed’ by Martin Dillon, *Fortnight*, No. 216 (Mar. 16-31, 1985), pp. 5-6.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This article has utilised the following personal papers held by U.C.D.A.: P82; The Frank Aiken Papers (P104); and The Garret FitzGerald Papers (P215). Readers should note that during the research stages of this article the Garret FitzGerald Papers (P216 – Taoiseach, Northern Ireland material, 1980-87) were unavailable for consultation. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. This article has utilised the follow department files held by the National Archives of Ireland (N.A.I.): the Department of the Taoiseach (DT); and the Irish cabinet meeting minutes. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This article has utilised the follow paper(s) held by University Oxford (U.O.) Bodleian Library (B.L.): the Conservative Party Archive (CPA). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See, for example, author’s interview and correspondence with Noel Dorr, May 2018; author’s interview with Brendan Halligan, 3 Nov. 2017; and author’s interview with Eamonn McCann, 4 Jan. 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See DE online debates. Available from <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See, for example, Fintan O’Toole, ‘The life and times of Conor Cruise O’Brien’, *Magill* (3 Parts: April-June, 1986). See also ‘Irish Republicanism’s holy way: Conor Cruise O’Brien interviewed’, pp. 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. This article has utilised several newspapers, including the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *The Guardian.* [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Whelan, *Conor Cruise O’Brien*, pp. 13-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. O’Brien, *States of Ireland*, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See U.C.D.A., P104/4668. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland, 1926-1971*, p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Akenson, *Conor: Vol. 1*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. John Horgan, ‘Government, Propaganda and the Irish News Agency’, *Irish Communication Review*, Vol. 3 Issue 1. (Jan. 1993), 31-42: 32. See also O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp. 145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Comments by Aiken. Record of meeting between Aiken and Lord Salisbury, 28 Oct. 1952 (U.C.D.A., P104/8037). See also O’Brien, *Ancestral voices*, pp. 146-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See Michael Kennedy, *Division and consensus: the politics of cross-border relations in Ireland, 1925-1969* (Dublin, 2000), p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid, pp. 160-162. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. For coverage of this period of O’Brien’s career at the UN see Akenson, *Conor; Vol. 1*, pp. 169-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. For further reading on O’Brien’s writings on colonialism and imperialism see Howe, ‘The Cruiser and the colonist’, pp. 487-514. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. O’Brien’s experiences in Katanga is immortalised in his seminal (and controversial) work, *To Katanga and back: a UN case history* (1965, London). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Meehan, ‘The embers of revisionism’, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See *Irish Times*, 7 April 1966. Reproduced in Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: Vol. 2,* pp. 98-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Akenson, *Conor: Vol. I*, pp. 332-333. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. In late Oct. 1968, O’Brien first came into direct contact with the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement 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 in relation to O’Brien’s attitude to the civil right campaign in Northern Ireland, see Whelan, *Conor Cruise O’Brien*, pp. 134-140. See also Meehan. ‘The ambers of revisionism’, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. O’Brien, *States of Ireland*, p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland*, p. 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Stephen Kelly, *‘A failed political entity’: Charles Haughey and the Northern Ireland question, 1945-1992* (Kildare, 2017), pp. 55-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Record of Irish government cabinet meeting, 13 Aug. 1969 (N.A.I., 12 Government Cabinet minutes, 2000/9/1). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. For a complete version of Lynch’s speech, see ‘Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr J. Lynch’, 13 Aug. 1969 (N.A.I., DT 2000/6/657). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Akenson records that this meeting occurred on 14 Aug. 1969. Akenson, *Conor: Vol. 1*, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. See ‘Report of party delegation to Six Counties and the British Labour Party – 16/19 August 1969’, by O’Brien (U.C.D.A., P82/219). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. The Labour Party delegation also met John Hume, member of the Northern Ireland Parliament for Foyle, 1969-1972 and Eddie McAteer, veteran Northern Nationalist. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. O’Toole, ‘The life and times of Conor Cruise O’Brien’, Part 3, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See ‘Report of party delegation to Six Counties and the British Labour Party – 16/19 August 1969’, by O’Brien (U.C.D.A., P82/219). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. O’Toole, ‘The life and times of Conor Cruise O’Brien’, Part 3, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Author’s interview with Eamonn McCann, 4 Jan. 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. O’Toole, ‘The life and times of Conor Cruise O’Brien’, Part 3, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Bourke, ‘Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles’, p. 557. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. See ‘Report of party delegation to Six Counties and the British Labour Party – 16/19 August 1969’, by O’Brien (U.C.D.A., P82/219). 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 PIRA. See Kelly, *A failed political entity’*, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. See ‘Report of party delegation to Six Counties and the British Labour Party – 16/19 August 1969’, by O’Brien (U.C.D.A., P82/219). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. O’Toole, ‘The life and times of Conor Cruise O’Brien’, Part 3, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Comments by O’Brien. DE Debate, 8 May 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. The contents of this sub-section were first published in my 2013 publication, Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland*, pp. 314-323. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Record of Irish cabinet minutes, 16 Aug. 1969. ‘Draft G. C. 13/14’ (N.A.I., DT 2000/6/658). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Kelly, *‘A failed political entity’*, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. O’Brien, *Ancestral voices*, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Record of Irish cabinet minutes, 16 Aug. 1969. ‘Draft G. C. 13/14’ (N.A.I., DT 2000/6/658). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. See Public Accounts Committee, *Interim and* *Final Reports* (Dublin, 1972), pp. 45-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. See O’Brien, *Ancestral voices*, 163-164. See also Kelly, *‘A failed political entity’*, pp. 62-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. See, for example, Justin O’Brien, *The Arms Trial* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 187-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. See Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland*, pp. 319-321. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. In Dec. 1969, the IRA split, setting up two factions: the Official IRA and Seán MacStiofáin’s PIRA (or Provos) and the equivalent two political wings, Official and Provisional Sinn Féin. The formal severance of the Republican movement occurred on 11 Jan. 1970 when Sinn Féin delegates met for their showdown Ard Fheis in Dublin. Kelly, *‘A failed political entity’*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. See John Bowman*, De Valera and the Ulster Question, 1917-1973* (Oxford, 1982), p.287. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ibid*,* p. 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Niamh Puirséil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. See FitzGerald, *All in a life*, pp. 88-89. See also Ivory, ‘Revisions in nationalist discourse among Irish political parties’, pp. 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. See, Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland*, p. 336 and Puirséil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73*, pp. 289-291. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. See Puirséil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73*, pp. 289-291. See also O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp. 339-340. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. See Puirséil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73*, pp. 289-291. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp. 332-333. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. O’Brien, ‘Liberalism and terrorism’, p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. O’Brien, *Ancestral voices*, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. See ‘Irish Republicanism’s holy way: Conor Cruise O’Brien interviewed’, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. See O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp. 332-334. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. O’Brien, *Memoir*, 334. See also Akenson, *Conor: Vol. 1*, p. 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Author’s interview with Brendan Halligan, 3 Nov. 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ibid, p. 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. O’Brien, ‘Liberalism and terrorism’, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. See O’Brien to Corish, 7 Oct. 1971 (U.C.D.A., P82/225). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Corish to O’Brien, 8 Oct. 1971 (U.C.D.A., P82/225). [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. See correspondence relating to O’Brien’s ‘proposed resignation as Labour Party Spokesman on Foreign Affairs and as TD’, Oct. 1971 to March 1972 (U.C.D.A., P82/225). [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. O’Toole, ‘The life and times of Conor Cruise O’Brien’, Part 3, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. During this period O’Brien delivered several talks and published papers in relation to the principle of consent argument. See, for example, copy of O’Brien’s address to the annual Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders Memorial Lecture, London, March 1972 (U.C.D.A., P82/676); and O’Brien (and Mansergh), ‘Northern Ireland: its past and its future’, *Race XIV*, 1 (1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Garvin, ‘Imaginary Cassandra?’, p. 437. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Ibid, p. 437. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. *States of Ireland*, however, has also received criticism for its promotion of a ‘political agenda’, to use Richard Bourke’s description. In this work and more generally concerning O’Brien’s ‘interpretative approach to the causes’ of the Northern Ireland conflict, Bourke questions the validity of the former’s primitivist ‘exploration of the destructive combination of religion and nationalism’. See Bourke, ‘Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles’, pp. 550-551. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Power, ‘Revisionist nationalism’s consolidation, republicanism’s marginalization, and the peace process’, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. For further reading on the above historians and their seismic impact on the writing of Irish history, see Diarmaid Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s* (London, 2012), pp. 245-247. See also Alvin Jackson, ‘Irish history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’, in Alvin Jackson (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’, *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 46(3) (2011), pp. 686-710; and Ciaran Brady (ed), *Interpreting Irish history: The debate on historical revisionism 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic*, p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Ibid, pp. 245-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Jackson, ‘Irish history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’, pp. 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. O’Brien, *States of Ireland*, pp. 296-297. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Ibid, pp. 296-297. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Ibid, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Ibid, pp. 295-296. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Bourke, ‘Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles’, 552. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Memorandum by 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’, undated and unsigned, circa 1970 (U.C.D.A., P82/220). [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Comments by O’Brien. DE Debate, 8 May 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. The passing of this Act was in response to Ireland’s repeal of the External Relations Act and the country’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1948 (and Ireland’s refusal to join NATO). In its place, the first inter-party government, under taoiseach John A. Costello, introduced the ‘Republic of Ireland Act’. See Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland*, pp. 127-128 & p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. See Henry Patterson, *Ireland since 1939: the persistence of conflict* (Dublin, 2006), p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. See O’Brien to James Callaghan, 5 Feb. 1971 (U.C.D.A., P82/222). [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Darcy O’Brien, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’, *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (spring, 1974), pp. 210-220: p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Memorandum by 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’, undated and unsigned, circa 1970 (U.C.D.A., P82/220). [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. See Hume’s review of *The States of Ireland* in the *Irish Times*, 9 Oct. 1972. Quoted in Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. See also O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. O’Brien, *Two nations?* [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Devlin, *Straight left*, p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Ibid, pp. 339-340. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Noel Dorr, *Sunningdale: The search for peace in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 2017), p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Author’s email correspondence with Noel Dorr, 24 & 30 May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Patterson, *Ireland since 1939*, p. 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. For an excellent account of the behind the scenes negotiations that led to the signing of the Sunningdale Agreement see Dorr, *Sunningdale*. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Heath, *The autobiography*, p. 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. At the time, Brian Faulkner argued that his party’s support for the Council of Ireland was purely a ‘token’ concession in order to secure 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. 235-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. O’Brien, *Ancestral voices*, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Dorr, *Sunningdale*, pp. 381-382. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. O’Brien to Declan Costello, Irish attorney general, 31 July 1973 (N.A.I., DT 2004/21/670). [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Ibid, p. 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Author’s email correspondence with Noel Dorr, 24 & 30 May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. FitzGerald, ‘The 1974-5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland’, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Remarks by Garret FitzGerald. *Irish Times*, 20 Dec. 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Maurice Fitzpatrick, *John Hume in American: from Derry to DC* (Kildare, 2017), p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. FitzGerald, *All in a life*, p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Copy of statement issued by O’Brien, 22 July 1974 (U.C.D.A., P82/249). [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. O’Brien to Declan Costello, 31 July 1973 (N.A.I., DT 2004/21/670). [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. O’Brien, *Ancestral voices*, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Quoted in Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. O’Brien to Arnold, 3 July 1974 (U.C.D.A., P82/218). [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. See memorandum by 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’, undated and unsigned, circa 1970 (U.C.D.A., P82/220). [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Record of meeting between O’Brien and British home secretary Reginald Maudling, London, circa early Feb. 1972. See O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp. 335-336. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Ibid, pp. 336-337. See also Noel Dorr, *Sunningdale*, 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. See Bernard Donoughue, *Prime minister: the conduct of policy under Harold Wilson and James Callaghan* (London, 1987), pp. 128-132. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Quoted in FitzGerald, ‘The 1974-5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland’, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. See ‘Secret report by the study group on the military problems raised in Discussion Paper No. 2, Feb. 1975. (U.C.D.A., P215/68). See also FitzGerald, ‘The 1974-5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland’, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. FitzGerald, ‘The 1974-5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland’, pp. 144-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. See also (U.C.D.A., P215/68). This file contains DT and DFA memoranda dealing with possible British ‘withdrawal’, ‘negotiated independence for Northern Ireland’ and the ‘implications of negotiated repartition’. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. FitzGerald, ‘The 1974-5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland’, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Ibid, p. 148. See also Donnacha Ó Beacháin, *From partition to Brexit: the Irish government and Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2019), pp. 141-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. FitzGerald, ‘The 1974-5 threat of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland’, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. # O’Brien, *Herod*, Introduction. See also Whelan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien and the Legitimation of Violence’, pp. 223-241.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Record of Conservative Party Parliamentary Northern Ireland Committee (CPPNIC) meeting, 10 Jan. 1979. (U.O. B.L., CPA CRD. 4/15/2/4). O’Brien reaffirmed this argument in his 1981 work, ‘The Four Horsemen’. See O’Brien, ‘The Four Horsemen’. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. # Under this act, the minister for posts and telegraphs was allowed to direct the *RTÉ* Authority “to refrain from broadcasting any particular matter or matter of any particular class”. See Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’ and O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp. 355-356. See also Brian Hanley, *The impact of the Troubles on the Republic of Ireland, 1968-79: boiling volcano* (Manchester, 2019), pp. 95-98; 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); and John Horgan, *Irish Media: a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p. 116.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act 1976, Section 31. Available from <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1976/act/37/section/16/enacted/en/html#sec16>. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. O’Brien, *Memoir*, pp. 355-356. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Ibid, p. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. See comments by O’Brien. DE Debate, 17 Nov. 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Comments by O’Brien. DE Debate, 17 Nov. 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Ibid. See also O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Meehan, ‘The embers of revisionism’, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. See John Horgan, *Irish media: a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Christopher Hitchens, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’, *Grand Street*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (spring, 1987), pp. 142-160; p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Akenson, *Conor: Vol. I*, p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. O’Brien *Memoir*, p. 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. *Irish Times,* 1 June 1979. Quoted in Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Quoted in Callanan, ‘Conor Cruise O’Brien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. O’Brien, *Ancestral voices*, pp. 172-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. See ‘Irish Republicanism’s holy way: Conor Cruise O’Brien interviewed’, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. O’Brien re-joined the Labour Party in 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Akenson, *Conor: Vol. I*, p. 467. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. *Irish Times*, 20 Dec. 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Quoted in Farren, *The SDLP*, pp. 232-233. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Quoted in Skelly, ‘Appeasement in Our Time: Conor Cruise O'Brien and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland’, p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Quoted in Farren, *The SDLP*, p. 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. See Power, ‘Revisionist nationalism’s consolidation, republicanism’s marginalization, and the peace process’, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Meehan, ‘The embers of revisionism’, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. See remarks by Stephen Collins. *Irish Times*, 20 Dec. 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Akenson, *Conor: Vol. I*, p. 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Kenny, ‘Censorship, “not self-censorship”’, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Howe argues that in his writings on the Middle East O’Brien ‘almost bizarrely, failed to register that in and in relation to Israel, it had long since become the Palestinians who were the more obviously oppressed and stigmatised community’. Howe, ‘The Cruiser and the colonist’, p. 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Quoted in Lee, *Ireland*, p. 477. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. See ‘Irish Republicanism’s holy way: Conor Cruise O’Brien interviewed’, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. See English and Morrison (eds), *Ideas matter*, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. John Peck, *Dublin from Downing Street* (Dublin, 1978), p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Foster, *Luck and the Irish*, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)