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Notes on the evolution of the B&ICO

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As the Russian-Chinese ideological dispute moved towards an open breach, anti-revisionist sympathisers emerged in other Communist parties. In Britain, the first public anti-revisionist group came out of the Communist Party of Great Britain in September 1963 — the Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity (CDRCU) — and started to publish a well produced typeset monthly paper, *Vanguard*.

A number of Irish emigrant radicals became involved in radical left politics in London in the early Sixties. Some were former republican prisoners such as Gerry Lawless, others young northern students like Eamonn McCann and Mike Farrell. Another young emigrant who entered the milieu was from the County Cork/County Kerry borderland, Brendan Clifford.

Like other Irish émigré politics in London in the early anti-revisionist struggle, Brendan Clifford was once part of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He left them in October 1963 and joined Michael McCreey's *Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity*. Elements of the London Irish left rallied to the anti-revisionist politics of the CDRCU (including Noel Jenkinson, who, as a member of the Official IRA, would be convicted for bombing the officers' mess of the 16th Parachute Brigade at Aldershot army barracks on February 22, 1972.¹)

Liam Daltun² had initiated a series of on-going discussions involving a wide spread of Irish leftists in London — Trotskyists like himself, “anti-revisionist” Communists, and left Republicans. About the same time, at the behest of the CDRCU, Brendan Clifford, and his wife Angela (nee Khalil) , had begun to organise an Irish sub-section intended to compete with the Communist Party influenced *Connolly Association* and perhaps lay the basis for a Marxist-Leninist group in Ireland.³

But by May 1964, Clifford had broken from the CDRCU and in conjunction with Irish Trotskyites, Gery lawless, Liam Daltun and Eamonn McCann, formed the **Irish Communist Group** [ICG]. The ICG

¹ Noel Jenkinson, a Dublin Protestant, was found to have played a very minor part in a bombing killing seven and injuring 19 people, in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, January 1972. Sentenced and jailed for life in Nov 1972, Noel died in Leicester Prison 4 years later of a heart attack on Oct. 9th 1976. He is listed under Sinn Fein in the Honor Roll of the Irish Republican Movement. He rests at Deansgrange cemetery in Dublin.

² Liam was a veteran of the IRA “Border Campaign” unleashed at the end of 1956. Disabused of the then very right wing Republican movement's oversimplifications, about Ireland and about everything else, he had come to London, joined the Communist Party, and then turned to Trotskyism.

Sean Matgamna **AWL's record on Ireland (and an account of the IWU, ICG and IWG)** 7 March, 2008

³ Sean Matgamna , 2008

evolved as a strange conglomeration of Stalinists, incipient Stalinists, Maoists, Republicans, and Trotskyites'. including Sean Matgamna (now of the pro-Israel Alliance for Workers Liberty) some who went on to form the League for a Workers Republic, some who went on to Saor Eire (the Dublin group) and, of course Clifford himself.

The ICG would produce a small duplicated weekly news-sheet, *Irish Workers' News*, and from February 1965 a monthly magazine, *An Solas*. The September 1965 issue had an article by Brendan Clifford criticizing Desmond Greaves. The previous May issue had an obituary praising Michael McCreery by Angela Clifford. Other contributors to the magazine included Eamonn McCann (with an appreciation of the anti-sectarian playwright Sam Thompson) Liam Daltun, Gery Lawless, Rory Moore, Roy Johnston (a guest contribution criticizing British Imperialism) and a reprint of an essay by Che Guevara.

The ICG imploded under the contentious political perspectives in the autumn of 1965.⁴ The group was torn apart by bitter arguments and split into Trotskyite and Maoist factions⁵. : **The Irish Workers' Group** and the **Irish Communist Organization**.

Brendan and Angela Clifford and Jack Lane were among those who endorsed a pro-Peking position and had formed the Irish Communist Organization in November 1965. The group began to publish detailed critiques of 'revisionism' in Ireland and elsewhere. They charged that the southern Irish communists had tailed Catholic nationalism since the 1950s and were in essence no longer revolutionary. They were also strongly anti-Trotskyite. The writings of Stalin became the touchstone for the ICO's politics. However the ICO also placed itself in the Irish radical tradition and reissued forgotten or unavailable articles by James Connolly and Liam Mellows. They produced a reprint of Roddy Connolly's report (to the Comintern) on the two sides in the Civil War. It was an analysis of the shortcomings of the anti-Treaty side. (Roddy was the young son of James Connolly, and founded the first Irish Communist Party, which only lasted a couple of years. This initial Communist Party fought on the anti-Treaty side.)

By 1969 the organization had gained a few supporters in Dublin and Belfast and was active in housing campaigns, founder-member, Dennis Dennehy, was Secretary of the Dublin Housing Action Committee, which organised a highly successful protest in the early 1960s. It took a pro Chinese and Albanian

⁴ Communist Party of Ireland (Marxist-Leninist) 'The Revolutionary Movement in Ireland in the last ten years: Part 1 The anti-revisionist miscarriage' *Red Patriot* Vol. 5 No 42-43, December 1st & 14th 1976: p24-32

⁵ Danny McGrain, 'From Peking to Aubane' *Indymedia Ireland* January 2,2007

After the split with the Maoists, the Trotskyite IWG lost momentum and became primarily based amongst emigrants in London. Some of its members, wanting an organisation actually in Ireland, set up the **League for a Workers Republic**. The LWR was primarily led by Paddy Healy and included over its lifespan quite a few well known figures, but it split in the early 1970s twice. One split went off to form the **League for a Workers Vanguard**, linked to Gerry Healy in Britain. The other split set up the **Revolutionary Marxist Group**.

The RMG was the Irish affiliate of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, the grouping which included the LCR in France and in those days the IMG in Britain and the American SWP. The USFI was riven by a factional dispute between groups which emphasized guerillaism in Latin America along with ideas like a "student vanguard", and on the other hand groups led by the American SWP which espoused a more traditional Trotskyism. The IMG in Britain was firmly in the first camp and it was the primary influence on the newly formed RMG. The most prominent member of the RMG, Peter Graham, was also a **Saor Eire** leader, was murdered in murky circumstances.

position in international politics. At this point the ICO maintained that Ireland remained oppressed by British imperialism and that the six counties were held, illegitimately, by British military force. However as for all on the Irish left the events of August 1969 transformed the ICO.

The British section of the organisation was called the **Communist Workers Organisation** and had contact addresses in north London. Originally formed by Irish emigrants, the ICO London section formed part of the anti-revisionist scene publishing the first issue of "The Communist" in March 1967 and were engaged with discussions and activities in London's vibrant student-fueled Marxist-Leninist scene.

There was the view that the CDRCU had misjudged what was needed to develop the anti-revisionist struggle. Brendan Clifford argued, after the break from the CDRCU, that it had

imagined that they could simply base themselves theoretically on a number of documents published by the Chinese Communist Party, and that the task was merely an organisational one of party building through applying these documents to the British situation, and they discouraged any thinking that went beyond that view.⁶

Clifford judged that the movement's "easy expansion in the early months appears to have bred illusion in the Vanguard group concerning the situation in which it found itself... The root cause of it is a failure to grasp the nature of the situation and develop methods of work appropriate to it..." "because of the small number of people in the movement, because of its fragmented, anarchic, decentralised nature, and because it has virtually no contact with the existing working class movement in Britain, opportunist attitudes appear to be good as any other."



While the Communist Workers Organisation had been privy to discussions amongst London MLs in the 1960s, and initiated a meeting with the *Communist Federation of Britain (ML)* leadership of Sean McGonville, Dick Jones & Sam Mauger on November 28 1970, as the renamed B&ICO were detached from the general ML movement by the start of the 1970s.

Indeed, in 1971 they complained of being attacked by the Internationalists and CPB (ML) while selling literature outside their respective meetings. R. Archbold, formerly a contributor to "The Communist" used a short-lived revival of Vanguard in 1968 to describe the ICO as "trotskyists", ironic given that ICO were consistent defenders of Stalin in the movement.⁷ In "The Communist" No 13 March 1968 they published an open letter to the

⁶ Irish Communist No.100

⁷ The ICO stated that they had failed "to discover any mistakes of a fundamental nature made by Stalin... the only Marxist criticism of Stalin's mistakes that we are acquainted with is to be found in Stalin's Collected Works". Stalin: on an article by Engels (2nd edition February 1971)

London Workers Committee entitled "On Stalin's Errors" -a critical comment on an article published in *Workers Broadsheet*⁸ that implicated Stalin in the revisionist decline of the Communist Party. Yet, the general shunning of the organization meant "they're engaged in an audience-free polemic, and thus they've had few if any hindrances to becoming absolute fruitloop-tastically bonkers."⁹ On the modern posting boards of the world wide web BICO remain an endearingly eccentric attraction, a cult without a personality, only the cipher of a signature 'B. Clifford.'

The "ICO has never claimed to be Maoist"¹⁰ and it reflected a feature of those early anti-revisionist critics that were largely motivated by a defense of Stalin and the Soviet experience and maintain that position as their political foundation. The political development of anti-revisionist politics that would include criticism of Stalin's politics that emanated from, and identified, a Maoist political perspective was not one embraced by those identified with the B&ICO. The ICO undertook an investigation into the development of Maoism, and concluded that it was not a suitable model for an anti-revisionist group. Mao had supported the development of Khrushchev's "revisionism".¹¹

A succinct explanation of the evolution of the ICO's position was provided online by Danny McGrain:

Initially the group considered that the Loyalist attacks on Catholics in Belfast and elsewhere was 'fascist' pogroms and that Catholics had a right to military defence. By mid 1970 this view had altered dramatically. The ICO began to argue that the British Army was in fact playing a progressive role in the north by virtue of its preventing a sectarian civil war. The ICO then began to formulate a view, based, they claimed, on Stalin's writings on the 'National Question' which argued that there were two historic nations in Ireland, a Catholic nation in the south and a Protestant nation in the north, both of which were equally entitled to self-determination.

By 1971 this view led to the ICO changing its name to the British and Irish Communist Organization (BICO). The adoption of the 'two nations theory' saw BICO completely reject any claim by Irish nationalists to a unitary state as reactionary. They argued that socialist and republican organisations which supported a united Ireland were allied with the 'Catholic, Nationalist bourgeoisie of the Republic.' The cause of trouble in the north was 'not Unionism or the Unionists. Responsibility for it lies at the door of the Southern ruling class which, on the basis of 'one historic Irish nation', has pursued a reactionary policy of national oppression for the past 50 years.' BICO argued that capitalism had

⁸ Notes for a critical history of the CPGB, *Workers Broadsheet* Jan-Feb 1968,

⁹ **chekov - July 17, 2007** *The British and Irish Communist Organisation, The Irish Political Review, or from here to there and back again... Part 1* July 16, 2007. <http://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/tag/communism/>

¹⁰ *The Communist* No.31

¹¹ See: *The Communist Party of China and the 20th Congress of the CPSU* Policy Statement Number Three: November 1970 and B&ICO's introduction to Neil Gould *The Twentieth Congress and After* 1973. Neil Gould was active in the Connolly Association in London, where he came into conflict with C. Desmond Greaves. In 1956 he published a pamphlet, *The Twentieth Congress and after: a Vindication of J. V. Stalin and His Policy*, in which he attacked the "de-Stalinisation" speeches at the twentieth congress of the CPSU and the reformism of Khrushchev. His life is detailed in this short biography from the Communist Party of Ireland: <http://www.comunistpartyofireland.ie/s-goold.html>

developed more rapidly in the north east of Ulster than elsewhere, producing a socially more progressive and dynamic entity. However the south had remained backward and dominated by the Catholic Church. The BICO then poured forth a plethora of pamphlets circulated these ideas far and wide publishing over 50 pamphlets by 1971,¹² examining the historic roots of capitalism in the north east of Ulster, the 'right wing' nature of Irish nationalism and the 'mythology' used to justify republican violence. Their research led them to conclude that historically in fact Ulster Unionism was a more progressive and dynamic ideology than Irish nationalism and that as the choice facing Ulster Protestants was between a 'secular democratic British state' or a 'reactionary 26 county Catholic state' BICO would defend their right to choose the former.

They refuse to campaign against internment, arguing the measure was justified in a war situation. BICO contended that the civil rights movement, directed by the IRA, had pushed northern Protestants into a position where they feared the 'war of 1922' was being resumed and understandably reacted accordingly. By 1972 the group saw both wings of the IRA as the cutting edge of an irredentist Catholic nationalist movement to subdue Ulster Protestants and felt resistance to them was justified.¹³

Not surprisingly, "two nations" position was intensely anti-republican and held some appeal for some in the ML movement including leading elements in the old Communist Federation of Britain who looked at their historical studies from a position of ignorance and distrust of the (catholic) Provo of the 70s ! There was political confusion as to the character of the Irish War .As formulated by BICO; the British were the most progressive of the social force in Ireland. They criticised the position of Marx and Engels on Ireland as "quite incorrect", and argued that only when the national struggle had been undermined -not completed as Republicans sought -would it be possible to bring class struggle to the fore. BICO did line up with the Loyalist para-military Ulster Workers Council strike during 1974 which added to their notoriety. With this variant of Bonar Law's 1912 position¹⁴ as their guide they embarked upon campaigning for Ulster Protestants' right of self-determination and when this failed to measure any response, they campaigned throughout the 1980s for mainland bourgeois parties to organize in the Six Counties to secure the integration of the British state.

Not all agreed with that perspective and there was opposition within the group based on its Cork membership. After an existence of 11 months the Cork branch of the ICO seceded from the organisation on the issue of the two-nation theory on January 31st 1971 to reconstitute itself as the **Cork Communist Organisation**.

¹² B&ICO were noted as compulsive pamphleteers churning out duplicated bulletins and pamphlets that filled the shelves of the Left-wing London Bookshops in the 1970s. They had a contact address quite close to a main London outlet for leftwing literature Collets Bookshop in Charing Cross Road. They advertised BICO Printers at 9 Denmark Street opposite Foyles bookshop. There was continuity in their propagand through the setting up of Athol Books as their publishing house. <http://www.atholbooks.org/>

¹³ Danny McGrain, 'From Peking to Aubane' *Indymedia Ireland* January 02,2007

¹⁴ In 1912, the Tory leader Andrew Bonar Law told a Unionist gathering that he could imagine 'no length of resistance to which Ulster can go in which I should not be prepared to support them'. This call, amounting to support for armed insurrection against the elected government, was made to dukes and famous, whiskered parliamentarians gathered in splendour at Blenheim Palace, the heart of Conservative England.

Andrew Marr, 'The state of the Union, RIP' *The Independent* newspaper 17 December 1993

The chairman of the Cork branch, Jim Lane (b.1938 Cork) had led the dispute in the previous summer against the use of terms like ‘fascist’ and ‘murder’ when referring to the IRA and its activities in ICO publications. The Cork branch refused to sell the literature.¹⁵ The allegation from Dublin ICO that the IRA fomented the pogroms in Belfast in the early 1920s and mid 1930s hardened the differences reflected in the Jim Lane authored document, ‘On the IRA – Belfast Brigade Area’, as an answer to an attack on the IRA in the Irish Communist article.¹⁶

The origin of some of the Cork activists was in the implicitly Republican Saor Eire. As Fintan Lane recalled:

The original Saor Eire was formed in Cork in the mid to late 1960s and its core was composed of former IRA members, some of whom (including my father) had left the IRA during the Border Campaign, when the Cork Brigade refused to sanction the continued involvement of Cork volunteers. This group picked up a few more ‘dissidents’ in the early 1960s, were known as the ‘Irish Revolutionary Forces’. Those involved included Sean Daly, Brendan O’Neill, Gerry Higgins and Jim Lane.

From this Marxist/Leninist Group evolved the Irish Revolutionary Forces that established Saor Eire in 1968. They initially produced a paper called An Phoblacht which was widely distributed among republicans and was popular among those angry at the political drift of the Republican Movement. It saw 14 issues before being superseded by Saor Eire’s paper called People’s Voice.¹⁷

The argument for the primacy of politics and that “Irish republicans have a tendency to ignore the theory of revolution, and instead view revolution solely in terms of action against the enemy” was expressed in the 1966 document, Road to Revolution.¹⁸ It stressed the need for revolutionary theory at a time when pro-Moscow entryists were attempting to shift the Republican Movement.

The organisation was critical of the Goulding leadership of the IRA because:

1. It was taking no (military) action in the north and seemed hostile to a resumption of the ‘national liberation struggle’.
2. Because of the nature of its left-wing politics. People like Roy Johnston were associated with the Pro-Moscow communist movement and this was seen as problematic because of the ‘revisionist’ line being taken in Russia. The Goulding faction weren’t viewed as authentic revolutionaries; they were considered to be reformists dressed in left-wing garb. It was believed that they were leading the republican movement towards constitutionalism.

¹⁵ Cork Communist organisation (1972) On the Resignation of the Cork branch of the Irish Communist Organisation.

¹⁶ A 16-paged pamphlet published by the Cork Workers’ Club On the IRA – Belfast Brigade Area (February 1972)

¹⁷ Fintan Lane (**October 31, 2007**) <http://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2007/10/30/the-left-archive-the-cork-communist-organisation-a-split-from-the-ico-1972/#comments>. Peoples’ Voice had a run of six issues.

¹⁸ Ger Collins, ‘Road to Revolution’ An Phoblacht Issues No.3 (Jan 1966), No.4 (March 1966) and No.6 (July 1966).

There was considerable tension between the IRF and the IRA, which turned into raids and armed counter-raids. In 1963, for example, a group of eight armed IRF members raided the Cork Sinn Féin headquarters and warned the city's IRA leaders at gunpoint because of the IRA's seizure of the group's newsletter from the printer where it was being produced. The group also seized thousands of copies of the *United Irishman*, the Sinn Féin paper, as it arrived in the local railway station. Relations between the group and the IRA were strained for much of the 1960s with the IRF regularly criticising the politics of the Republican Movement and arguing for a socialist way forward.¹⁹

Saor Eire had contacts around Ireland, particularly among those republicans disaffected with the political drift of the Republican Movement. Members went north to 'help out' when the 'troubles' broke out at the end of the 1960s.

As a Wikipedia entry claims,

Lane and his comrades brought guns and assistance to Derry in 1969 when the Bogside was under siege (see Battle of the Bogside). Despite his membership of Saor Éire, he was briefly the intelligence officer for Dáithí Ó Conaill's command area around Derry/Donegal at the time of the disturbances.²⁰

In fact, suggests Fintan Lane, despite their Maoism, "they were probably more connected to the Republican tradition than the orthodox communist tradition. I think Cork Saor Eire was really an admixture of Irish republicanism and the heady international revolutionism of the 1960s. The arrival of the Provos made them irrelevant, as it was clear that those unhappy with the republican leadership were far more willing to follow traditionalist politics than republicanism dipped in Maoism."

"A second group, using the same organizational name of Saor Eire active around Dublin, emerged in the 1960s. My understanding is that they attempted to join up with Saor Eire, but this linkage never occurred because the Cork-based crew thought that the news boys were Guevarist in outlook and thought the 'foci theory' might be worth a go in Ireland. The Cork people, despite their own IRA background, thought the new lot had the balance wrong between militarism and political action. So, a merger never occurred."

"Perhaps the merger with the ICO around 1970 happened partly because the remnants of the Saor Eire group in Cork felt their organisation's name had been irredeemably associated with 'adventurism'. Certainly, at that stage, the Provo alternative was on the road and a left-wing political alternative to the Goulding leadership was lost."

To unashamedly draw upon Fintan Lane memoirs once again:

¹⁹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Lane_\(Irish_republican\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Lane_(Irish_republican))

²⁰ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Lane_\(Irish_republican\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Lane_(Irish_republican))

The Cork Communist Organisation, based at 9, St Nicholas Church Place, Cove Street, Cork City, morphed into the Cork Workers Club, which survived into the late 1970s as a group and, afterwards, as a sort of publishing house. A principal contribution was involvement in the re-publishing of classic works from Ireland's communist history asserting the national analysis associated with James Connolly under the imprint of 'The Cork Workers' Club'.

The bookshop in Nicholas Church Place remained open until the early 1980s, when it was actually an IRSP bookshop/office. It was a centre for the anti-H-Block campaign during the hunger strikes and was later used by the Release Nicky Kelly Campaign. In its early years in the late 1960s and early 1970s, public meetings were held upstairs at times.²¹

Jim Lane was central to the anti-H-Block movement in the Cork region at the end of the 1970s and became the chairperson of the Cork City and County National H-Block Committee, which organised many large demonstrations in support of the H-Block hunger strikers in 1980-1. He also joined the Irish Republican Socialist Party and became its national chairperson in 1983, a position he held for a number of years. He was influential in steering the Irish Republican Socialist Party/Irish National Liberation Army towards explicitly Marxist politics. He stood unsuccessfully as an IRSP candidate in the 1982 general election, garnering a few hundred votes.²²

"The Peking Branch of the Orange Order" and the 'British and Irish Communist Orangemen' were the humorous, if inaccurate, nickname given to the BICO. And there were the inevitable 'urban legend' in the seventies that the B&ICO were "probably set up by British Intelligence". For instance, the anarchist C.J. Stone wrote...

“.....there was the B&ICO (The Britain and Ireland Communist Organisation), which, having an unusual number of members of northern Irish background, used Stalin's work as a basis for arguing the Two Nations Theory re. Ireland - i.e. north and south Ireland were two distinct nations and should stay that way. They also managed in a similar convoluted way to support Thatcher's war with Argentina over the Falklands. No matter what the position, they would try and find a "Marxist" way of supporting it. If they weren't actually conceived by some joker in MI5 then they ought to have been.”²³

²¹ Jim Lane's son Fintan recalls working at the Cork Workers' Club premises:

I 'staffed' the bookshop for a while in the early 1980s, when it was open only on Saturday and some week nights. There were some regular customers, but, as time moved on, few people slinked in besides the affiliated. Its heyday really was at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s when it was the place to go in Cork to get left-wing and republican literature. It was a genuine backstreet bookshop and when other places opened, such as the bookshop in the Quay Co-op in the early 1980s, it effectively no longer had much of a purpose. It was too far off the beaten track. A strange place, in some ways. Internet shopping would have wiped it out, had it survived that long, because it primarily dealt in political material that mainstream shops wouldn't sell.

²² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Lane_\(Irish_republican\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Lane_(Irish_republican))

²³ <http://www.cjstone.co.uk/pgs/others05seaside.htm>

Unfortunately, as “everyone on the Left knows” the weirder the group and its political positions the more genuine it is likely to be: the State’s strategy of “False Flags groups” usually involves shadowy groups quite orthodox in their positions. The late John Sullivan in his entertaining “As Soon as this Pub Closes” deals with BICO in sardonic fashion:

Clifford’s victory [on traditional nationalism], once quotations were verified, was almost too complete. Other groups had little choice but to adopt neo-Cliffordian positions²⁴, but unwilling to serve as a pilot to the Left through the suddenly bewildering currents of Irish politics, he spurned all ecumenical offers and pressed home his attack, calculating that if Left views on Ireland were a fantasy, the same might apply to the rest of their politics. Clifford adopted the working assumption that whatever the Left said on a given issue was wrong and he applied his training by finding examples which would demonstrate truths already established by faith and doctrine. For example: if the Left favours Irish unification, opposes the Common Market and deplores racism, we should adopt the opposite view in each case. Anyone can do that: it is more difficult to argue a case, based on Marx and Lenin, supporting the Common Market, the Orange Order or Thatcher’s immigration policies. The Jesuits have lost the knack of such apologetics since they adopted liberation theology.

And he continues:

Because the conclusion to any of BICO’s arguments can always be predicted by reversing the sign on current Left orthodoxy their writings provide little sense of intellectual discovery, but even friends who do not share Clifford’s intellectual background assure us that the argument is always a pleasure to read. Clifford’s main journal is *The Communist*, but there are a number of offshoots and Fronts, the most unlikely of which is the Ernest Bevin Society. The logic of this is impeccable: if Bevin hammered the Left for a generation, he must be a misunderstood genius, whose thoughts should be revived. In fact, if Bevin ever had any deep political thoughts, it would take Jacques Cousteau to locate them. Some thought that Clifford would become a guru of the Labour right, but that tendency is so dominated by Nonconformity, Fabianism and pragmatism that they have found him a bit of a puzzle. The discomfort is reciprocated, as Clifford does was not like the remnants of sentimental humanitarianism they still display. The gravedigger has still not found his final political resting place.²⁵

In the introduction to the 1992 edition of “the Economics of Partition”, amid all the praise about how great Brendan Clifford is, B&ICO scholars may find some interesting information: Apparently, at the height of its influence (early 70s) there were about 50 members of B&ICO. The “Economics of Partition” is claimed as an underground bestseller, having published about 5000

²⁴ Not so: criticism from all shades of the Left emerged of the BICO and its politics

²⁵ John Sullivan (2008). Go fourth and Multiply & When this Pub Closes. Coventry: New Interventions p27

copies by the 1990s.²⁶ The invaluable online discussion site on Irish politics, Cedar Lounge, had this item posted that suggests that opposition to Clifford was not restricted to Cork. It noted an interesting letter in the Irish Times of August 23 1974.

The letter, from a "P.Murphy", attacks the B&ICO and Worker's Association position on the UWC strike. P.Murphy claims to be a former member of B&ICO, and claims a third of B&ICO/WA members have left the organisation in protest.²⁷

There had been a schism in the B&ICO that saw in 1974, founding member J. Maisels established a "Marxist Leninist collective", the *Communist Organisation in the British Isles* [COBI]. He had rejected the "two nations" theory and had adopted another idiocy, that of the "indivisibility of the British Isles". Edinburgh- based, It published its platform in 1976 and produced an A5 journal called "Proletarian" (with a Leicester contact address) which was a rather eclectic mix of Maoism, DeLeonism and organisational elitism - The six signatories to COBI's founding set themselves the task of "the-comprehensive development of operational theory for the working class to become sufficiently conscious to seize and maintain power as the ruling class by crushing the bourgeoisie." (Proletarian *1 p5) .

Having the premise that theoretical advance was the priority for the foreseeable future~ strict conditions of COBI membership including reading knowledge of at least one foreign language and completion of a substantial contribution to Marxist thought. It remained a small group. COBI continued" the practice of B&ICO of heavy involvement in the reading room of the British Library. Maisels' position as editor of the New Edinburgh Review around 1973/74 saw three issues devoted to translations of Italian communist thinker, Antonio Gramsci before his later adoption by the Euro-revisionists around *Marxism Today*.²⁸

In the first issue of Proletarian, COBI stated, it would appear "only when we have something substantive to say." Four issues appeared containing reprints from the past.²⁹

The "What Is COBI?" Statement in issue 3 of Proletarian states...

1. COBI is a Marxist-Leninist collective, formed on 1st January, 1974, in secession from the British & Irish Communist Organisation, now become revisionist. Its purpose is to integrate

²⁶ Grendel - <http://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2007/08/09/the-british-and-irish-communist-organisation-the-irish-communist-from-1973/> September 17, 2007

²⁷ Starkadder -<http://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2007/08/09/the-british-and-irish-communist-organisation-the-irish-communist-from-1973/> December 4, 2007.

²⁸ New Edinburgh Review was a typeset quarterly journal published with Arts Council support by the Edinburgh University student publications. Three issues, comprising over 230 pages, were devoted to publishing 218 of Gramsci's letters from the Einaudi collection of 1947 with essays from Stephen White, Anne Showstack, Gwyn A. Williams, V.G.Kiernan, C.K.Maisels.

²⁹ The other publishing activity was a reprint of William Paul's *Origin of the State* in duplicated format, and a printed 600+ paged publication in 1982 entitled: *Political History of the Proletariat* Volume 1: Germany.

Marxist-Leninist theory with the concrete conditions prevailing in the British Isles, and guided by this concrete development of Marxism-Leninism, to promote the development of communist politics among the working-class. It aims, through its activities, to bring about political and ideological conditions in which the formation of a new communist party will be a meaningful step in the development of communist politics as a link in the chain of proletarian internationalism.

2. We take the natural economic unit of the British Isles as the area of our organisation and oppose any attempts by bourgeois or populist nationalism to fragment working-class organisation within the above economic unit... ..

4. The history of the struggle to build such a party in the British Isles has been largely one of failure. The conspicuous exception to this was the Socialist Labour Party of Great Britain, whose emblem COBI has adopted, and whose valuable experience we intend to assimilate.

From 1974 the B&ICO advocated a form of liberal constitutionalism as set out by Nina Stead in *The Communist*_No.59, this flowered by 1982: the B&ICO argued that "the political monopoly of the ruling class. That was ended in 1945, once and for all "and that "if the British working class are going to arrive at socialism, they will do so under their own steam and through Parliament."³⁰

This position had developed in the name of the evolutionary advance of consciousness that allegedly was in accordance with British particularities. It presented little more than a rehash of the Fabians concept of a working class fit to rule.

At some point in the mid 1990s the Cliffords, Lane and their supporters re-constituted themselves as the Aubane Historical Society.

The BICO milieu spawned the academic Bill Warren (1935-1978) and whose ideas are reflected in the book on the progressive qualities of imperialism, *Imperialism: Pioneer Of Capitalism* (NLB/Verso 1980). Aidan Foster-Carter, reviewed it in *Marxism Today*, thought that:

It is a sort of extreme right wing Marxism of a highly Eurocentric kind, presenting a vitually unqualified paean of praise to capitalism and imperialism as engines of historical progress, both material and cultural. Indeed, the frequent sneers at Western liberalism, moralism, and guilt complexes concerning alleged Western crimes against the Third World are reminiscent of no one so much as the archconservative Peter Bauer.³¹

Warren's original argument was that:

the prospects for successful capitalist economic development (implying industrialization) of a significant number of major underdeveloped countries are quite good; that substantial progress in

³⁰ BICO, *Problems of Communism* *21 Spring 1982

³¹ **Reviews** *Marxism Today* November 1981 p37
http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/81_11_36a.pdf

capitalist industrialization has already been achieved; that the period since the Second World War has been marked by a major upsurge in capitalist social relations and productive forces (especially industrialization) in the Third World; that in so far as there are obstacles to this development, they originate not in current imperialist-Third World relationships, but almost entirely from the internal contradictions of the Third World itself; that the imperialist countries' policies and their overall impact on the Third World actually favour its industrialization; and that the ties of dependence binding the Third World to the imperialist countries have been, and are being, markedly loosened, with the consequence that the distribution of power within the capitalist world is becoming less uneven.³²

The reaction to this unorthodox position, outside of even the broadest definition of what constituted a Marxist position, was predictable, perhaps, even welcomed by the university lecturer as a badge of maverick distinction.

Warren came up with the cock and bull theory that imperialism was the precursor of capitalism, rather than its last epoch, the epoch of decay and transition. There is a quite scathing review of Warren's book in an old issue of the British RCP's original theoretical journal, 'Revolutionary Communist Papers'. I think the review was written by Tony Allen, one of the RCP's key economics experts at the time.³³

Professor Brian Girvin, one time active in Cork stayed with the ICO/BICO and one-time editor of The New Statesman, journalist John Lloyd were also former comrades of Clifford.

John Lloyd wrote about his youthful indiscretions:

A few preferred their national communist party because, they thought, it was more rooted in the working class. (Most were, but what did that prove?) I was one such, a largely inactive member of the Communist Party of Great Britain between 1971 and 1973, and then a much more active participant in the tiny *British and Irish Communist Organisation* until 1977. I denounced my comrades, in a 20-page speech, for their Stalinism; I had just read, sweating with horror, all of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*..... But it is not just my shame; it infects everyone on the left, whether or not they now feel part of it.³⁴

On another occasion the one-time Industrial Editor of The Financial Times, wrote of his:

brief membership of the Communist Party and a longer affair with a tiny group called the *British and Irish Communist Organisation* in my twenties: but by my late thirties I was a social democrat - in these febrile times for Labour, a member on the party's right wing. I had come to that through

³² Warren's original article can be found at Bill Warren, Imperialism and Capitalist Industrialization *New Left Review* 1/81, September-October 1973

³³ Louis Proyect, Subject: Re: BICO/Irish Stalinists : [the Marxmail list](#) Date: Wed, 08 Nov 2000

³⁴ John Lloyd **Show trial: the left in the dock** Published 02 September 2002 <http://www.newstatesman.com/200209020009>

a renunciation of communism, and a sense of shame that I had attempted to embrace it: I had broken with the BICO with a speech to its annual meeting in Dublin, in which I argued that its attachment to communism was a dead end, and that its rich swath of publications and positions (one of which argued, most famously, that Ireland was two nations) were unremittingly hostile to much of the far left of the time, and were best understood as a democratic trend within the left. Losing the argument, I gave my allegiance and time to the Labour Party.³⁵

The claim to have written a long rejection of Stalinism on his departure in 1977 from the BICO, it provoked a letter to *New Statesman* from Belfast secretary, Conor Lynch;

His activities in the B&ICO involved his membership of the North London Workers' Control group (marginally) in 1974, and he was one of our two representatives on the council of the Institute for Workers' Control. Mostly I remember him as part of the group around the magazine Problems of Communism. Although he claims to have left us in 1977, the summer 1980 issue contains an article he co-wrote with Nina Fishman.³⁶

Not quite right: the names of N. Fishman and J.Llyod appear as authors of an article entitled, 'The CPGB Now' first published in Problems of Communism No15 (Summer 1979), then reprinted as 30 paged duplicated pamphlet in October of 1979.

Another of their key people was Paul Cockshott involved in the COBI split, and eventually ended up with Matt Lygate's revived Workers' Party of Scotland. Another public acknowledgement comes from Peter Wilberg, philosopher and psychologist belonging to the 'Second Generation' of refugees from Nazi Germany. His father was a German political refugee and activist in the anti-Nazi resistance in Germany and his mother a Jewish refugee.... Peter first read the Communist Manifesto at the age of fifteen. This led him into active membership of several British communist organisations. He experienced the grass roots democracy and spiritual euphoria of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution through a four-week stay in China in 1971. He was a member of the British and Irish Communist Organisation³⁷

BICO were nothing if not iconoclastic and in their vast output of pamphlets and magazines, which included Communist Comment, The Communist, Northern Star and Workers Weekly along with their ugly vitriolic rhetoric, perhaps the least appealing aspect of BICO was their exaggerated sense of their own importance.

Indeed Brendan Clifford boasted in 1974 that the group's 'social influence' was growing among 'large numbers of people who have never read a BICO publication.'

Whatever about those who had never read a BICO publication it was true that some of those that had, were indeed suitably impressed. Unlike the bemused and critical response on the Left, there is praise

³⁵ John Lloyd **Tony, the NS and me** Published 07 May 2007 <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2007/05/tony-blair-labour-editorial>

³⁶ Letters New Statesman. September 19th, 2002

³⁷ <http://www.newgnosis.co.uk/peter.html> . Some other folk who were alleged members or associates of B&ICO can be found discussed at Cedar Lounge postings.

from the Right for Clifford's political enterprise: David Kerr gave this interview to Christian Bouchet from the French journal, Nouvelle Resistance, in September 1994 touching on the BICO's thinking on development of the Ulster-nationalist movement.

“What was the significance of the British and Irish Communist Organisation in the development of political thinking in Ulster?”

Very significant. BICO published a large number of pamphlets and magazines, which argued that there is not 'one historic Irish nation' cruelly rent asunder by Britain's partition of Ireland but two Irish nations. Partition was not the cause of this division but its effect. This explanation enraged commentators, the leftist-liberal media and especially the orthodox left and the ultra leftist sects. It gave a coherent political explanation for the national conflict in Ireland. It was not as the republicans claimed the historic Irish nation against British imperialism but a conflict between two nations on the island. BICO's pamphlets have been very influential amongst former unionists and for a time some elements in loyalist paramilitary circles. Some commentators have suggested that Glenn Barr was influenced by BICO although he was never a member. It has certainly been a big influence on me. BICO has been succeeded today by the Ingram Society and Athol Books, which continues to promote its interpretation of Ulster history and politics.”³⁸

David Trimble, when a *Vanguard* activist, was an avid consumer of BICO material, according to one reviewer of a biography of his political career:

The most colourful thing about Trimble was his lifelong flirtation with Stalinist Marxism. Godson recounts how he became fascinated by an obscure Marxist organisation in the 1970's called the British and Irish Communist Organisation. The B&ICO was unique among the British left in rejecting the demand for a united Ireland, or "giving Ireland back to the Irish" as the slogan went.³⁹

The strange consequences of the B&ICO remains a fascination for scholars and 'Leftist trainspotters' alike, and given the range of publications they still churn out , a remaining source of contention after forty years of existence.

³⁸ http://www.ulsternation.org.uk/1994_interview.htm

³⁹ Iain Macwhirter's review of "Himself Alone: David Trimble and the ordeal of Unionism", Sunday Herald 4th July 2004.