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Seamus Loughran: The

Public Provo

HIBERNIA

By Jack Holland

30/1/76

AFTER SIX YEARS the Provisional movement in the North has produced few political personalities. An organisation that is actively trying to overthrow the state, in most circumstances, cannot afford to advertise its most competent men, even when they are being pushed as "just political" figures. But as well as this, rising to the top in the Provos is always a question of standing on the shoulders of the Army Council. Over the last three years the only two prominent Provisional spokesmen in the North who have managed this delicate balancing act without falling off are Maire Drumm and, more recently, Seamus Loughran.

He first came to the public attention in the South through his connection with the Provo ceasefire, which he was instrumental in establishing (in fact, it is his one political contribution to the Northern situation). But Loughran in many ways is the odd-one-out among the Northern Republicans.

The impression that he would like to give is that his "confidence" about the ceasefire is based on certain assurances; yet, among Belfast Provisionals, even the mention of his name is greeted with guffaws of scepticism: "Don't pay any attention to him—he's just a front man, a publicity seeker." Their hostility is made pretty obvious, and especially from those who would regard themselves as left-wing. To them he is anathema, a nationalist and nothing more.

Within the Sinn Fein leadership he is also regarded with some suspicion; early last summer Rory O'Brady saw fit to reprimand him sternly in public after he had said that, as far as he knew, there was no written agreement between the British and the Provos. O'Brady replied that Loughran was not in a position to know whether or not any such agreement existed. (One theory is that the Provos kept minutes of the meeting and were claiming that these were the 'written agreement.')

It was then rumours started that the erstwhile ceasefire negotiator and intermediary would be "sacked." He had overstepped the mark; but as the months rolled by Loughran continued to issue statements—on whose behalf often it was not certain. Most recently, for instance, he was employed to reprimand the Provos' one-time clerical hero, the Rev. Arlow.



Seamus Loughran

to talk with Whitelaw. He has always been a "Peace With Justice" man, and eager to convert the armed struggle into political gains as quickly as possible. It is said that as the 1972 Truce tottered on the brink of collapse in Lenadoon, Loughran spent a whole night arguing with Twomey against renewing the war. He failed, and the following day the Provo campaign was on. Loughran wasn't around long to watch its progress—he was lifted by the British again on 18th August, 1972, and held for over a year until Christmas, 1973.

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After the recent Dutch conference on Co-Operatives attended by UDA, UVF, representatives of the Provo Sinn Fein Andersonstown Co-Op, and "social workers," the Rev. Arlow issued a rather innocuous statement to the effect that he would be surprised if "other" matters had not been discussed. Rather like a priggish schoolboy accused of telling dirty stories with his pals, Loughran replied immediately: "Mr. Arlow should have said nothing. He had no right to insinuate that certain subjects were being discussed."

Loughran's continued public prominence indicates that somebody, somewhere — and certainly high up — in the Provisionals is backing him in spite of all the talk to the contrary. He first came to the public's attention in 1972, when he was one of the group who negotiated the truce with Mr. Whitelaw. Unlike most of his fellows in the Belfast Provisionals he had not come from a traditional Republican background. Born in the New Lodge Road area of Belfast in 1936, his family were involved in the fish trade, and he served his time as an electrician. He was detained for a short time in 1956, but apart from this had little "form" as a republican until the present troubles.

On 9th August, 1971, he was lifted during the initial internment swoop, and held until 6th June the following year. Some weeks after his release he flew by helicopter with Seamus Twomey, Sean MacStiofain, and Gerry Adams, to London

In Long Kesh, he quickly asserted himself. At various times he was the Camp Press Officer, O/C of his Cage, and Chairman of the Camp Council. But again, the facts of his undoubted influence are contradicted by stories about his unpopularity; one has it that, on the day he left Long Kesh for the last time, as he walked past the Cage wire-fence, his comrades still inside threw a typewriter over the wire, almost knocking him over.

After his release for the second time in Christmas, 1973, Loughran concentrated his energies on Provisional Sinn Fein, and soon was elected Chairman of the Belfast Comhairle Cheanntair, a position which he held for about a year, during which he carried out a purge of "left-wingers" from the movement. As 1974 wore on, pressure on the Belfast Provos was increasing; arrests and extensive screenings were wearing away the IRA'S capacity to strike at will. The tactic of the single sniper had to be abandoned, and the Provos resorted more and more to booby-trap bombings and infrequent (but more sensational) armed attacks on the Army and police.

Then, within the space of six months, the Belfast Brigade had three Brigade O/Cs lifted. For a period of nearly six weeks in the Summer of 1974 they had no Brigade O/C at all. It was during this period of demoralisation that Loughran's influence in the movement reached a peak. By September of that year he had helped set up the Port Salon meeting

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between the Provos and various clergymen, Loyalist organisations (including the UWC and UDA) and chaired by the headmaster of a well-known Protestant school in the north, who was later to attend the Feakle talks. The Port Salon Conference (paid for, it seems, by Bord Failte) which lasted a weekend, was in fact a kind of preliminary to the crucial peace talks at Feakle the following November. Throughout the early Autumn of 1974, Loughran supervised a general slackening of the military campaign in Belfast, perhaps as an act of good faith to the British before the meeting with Arlow.

After the Feakle meeting, as a token gesture to the militants who were against the talks, Loughran was sent on a tour of the U.S.A., where he has strong family ties, and did not return until early in 1975. He did not take part directly in the renegotiations that led to the establishment of the 10th February ceasefire, which has persisted to date.

From late 1974 to early 1975, he filled the position of Northern organiser of Sinn Fein—a position that was especially created for him, to enable him to act as a “Sinn Fein” spokesman when in fact he was an intermediary between the Provisional Army Council and the British Government. This lasted until the incident with O’Brady. Since then, he has been publically acknowledged only as the Secretary of the Provisionals’ Andersonstown Co-Op, and — more recently—a member of the Provisional Sinn Fein Ard Chomhairle. It is the Co-operative idea that seems to occupy much of his attention. The one of which he is Secretary employs over a hundred people, and consists of a building firm, two butchers, and a supermarket. The butchers alone—one in the Andersonstown Road and one in nearby Riverdale—have a weekly turnover of over £1,300. The Co-Op also boasts that it pays its building labourers a basic £53, nearly £4 more than the average rate for a labourer in Belfast. It was originally set up to give employment to ex-internees and hopefully—by future expansion—to offer more employment opportunities for the people of West Belfast. As yet, however, it represents mainly the economic interests of Provisional Sinn Fein.

The other activity that has kept Loughran firmly in the public eye, and which is tied up with his co-operative ventures, is his "Conferences" and meetings. Within the space of 18 months, he has met the UDA at least three times: at Port Salon in September 1974, at Glencolumbcille in September 1975, and at Bergin in Holland last October. As well, he has been (over the same period) on three tours—two on the Continent, and one to the U.S.A. His last was organised at the height of the Provo/Official I.R.A. feud. Just after his house was fired on by gunmen from a passing car, he was sent on a European tour, during which he met "local dignitaries" and a Dutch member of the Council of Europe. He also succeeded in establishing an Ireland-Netherlands Committee.

Seamus Loughran's relaxed manner, rather flashy style of dressing, and his comparative fluency, make him something of an asset when the Provos need a spokesman to brave a TV discussion; their only other comparatively well-known spokesman in Belfast is Maire Drumm, and her short list of slogans is quickly exhausted. But he remains where he is in the movement because he is more than just a "freelance" spokesman, or a man who runs a Co-Op. His continued public prominence in the Provos means that — whatever the Byzantine machinations of the Provo leadership — a substantial faction on the Army Council, the movement's ruling clique, continue to find Loughran of real use, and someone who fits in well with their current political ambitions.

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30/1/76.
sent. 12/2/76.

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