

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > North of Ireland (UK) > **Bernadette McAliskey: 'I am astounded I survived. I made mad decisions'**

Bernadette McAliskey: 'I am astounded I survived. I made mad decisions'

Saturday 31 October 2020, by [HOLLAND Kitty](#) (Date first published: 22 September 2020).

McAliskey, now an elder stateswoman of anti-establishment politics, reflects on a career driven by a fierce sense of justice - and how that has not been achieved in the North

Bernadette McAliskey, now 69, has never been one for the niceties of establishment politics. Indeed, beloved by many as she is, as a socialist, feminist and elder stateswoman of anti-establishment politics, she says she never contested an election with the aim of being elected.

Nonetheless, her election to Westminster in April 1969 in a byelection in the Mid-[Ulster](#) constituency was celebrated as a seismic political event in the burgeoning struggle for Catholic civil rights. She ran on a "unity" ticket, against the widow of the [Ulster Unionist Party](#) MP whose death caused the vacancy, and her victory, a week before her 22nd birthday, made her the then youngest-ever woman MP (a record only broken last year by the Scottish National Party MP [Mhairi Black](#), who was elected aged 20).

The Queen's University Belfast psychology student from [Cookstown](#), Co Tyrone, who was then [Bernadette Devlin](#), was a founding member of the college-based civil rights movement, People's Democracy.

If her success in the Mid-Ulster byelection upset the political hegemony of the Unionist Party, her maiden speech in the House of Commons five days later was a clarion call against the brutality, bigotry and discrimination the Catholic community was subjected to daily. It was described by some at the time as the finest maiden speech since Benjamin Disraeli's in 1837 and it defied the convention that such speeches should not be controversial. She told parliament: "There is no place in society for us, the ordinary 'peasants' of Northern Ireland . . . because we are the have-nots and they are the haves . . . The situation with which we are faced in Northern Ireland is one in which I feel I can no longer say to the people, 'Don't worry. Westminster is looking after you.' "

She says now of that speech that she was perhaps politically naive.

"I had a very moral view when I was younger. I thought everybody cared. I think it's part of a Catholic upbringing, that idea of universal solidarity. That was a journey for me . . . I didn't think the government was bad. I genuinely thought they just didn't know and if I just went to London to tell them, people would say, 'Do you hear that young woman there? We need to do something about that.' But then I realised: the bastards, they do know and not only do they know, they don't see anything wrong with it."

Battle of the Bogside

Later that year she helped organise the working-class residents of Derry's Bogside, in the infamous Battle of the Bogside, for which she served a short time in prison. She was re-elected in the 1970

general election, this time taking her seat as an independent socialist.

In 1972, having been present at Bloody Sunday in Derry, she was denied the right to speak about the massacre in the House of Commons by the speaker, Selwyn Lloyd. When the home secretary, Reginald Maudling, said the British paratroopers had fired on the civilians – 13 of whom died – in self-defence, she walked across the floor and slapped him.

Reflecting on these tumultuous events – the precursor to the Troubles, the 1981 hunger strikes, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, the 1998 Belfast Agreement, and the ensuing “peace process” – and whether progress for the have-nots has really been achieved, will be at the heart of the annual Field Day lecture, which she delivers in Derry next Friday, September 30th.

Her lecture, “A Terrible State of Chassis” – after the famous pronouncement first made by Captain Jack Boyle at the close of Sean O’Casey’s 1924 play, *Juno and the Paycock* – will be an opportunity to look at the aspirations of the early 20th century “and how far we have not come”, she says.

“It would be wrong to say there has been no progress at all since 1969,” says McAliskey. “But 1969 came at the end of almost 50 years of neglect by the British state, where unionists were allowed to treat the Catholic community as unequal citizens. To my mind, since then, we went round in a very long, destructive circle to end up in a place close to where we started in 1924.

Passive acquiescence

“If you see the problem purely in terms of unionism running the lives of nationalists, then you can say we have made significant progress. You can say, ‘Look, we now have Catholics at the very heart of power.’ But if that is not what you were ever about, then things may in fact be worse, because what we have is passive acquiescence in a society where the things I took for granted growing up have been destroyed.”

The economic and social brutality meted out to the Catholic, and Protestant, poor of the 1960s by a unionist-dominated Stormont is now meted out by “capitalism, neoliberalism or any other -ism you care to call it,” she says.

“I grew up in this state with the opportunity, by virtue of free education and universal healthcare, of not only surviving extreme poverty but having a university education. I look at my granddaughter now, living in the same place [Co Tyrone], going to the same university, and she will be in debt until she’s 50. If you look at those pillars, of education and health, they were accessible regardless of religion. That no longer exists. The welfare state is being destroyed.”

We are sitting in the bright cafe area of the Junction, a new three-storey building in [Dungannon](#), Co Tyrone, and home to Step (the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme), which she cofounded in 1997 “with a number of other reprobates” to work with those groups that didn’t “fit the peace narrative” – migrants, single parents, Travellers, people with intellectual disabilities.

She particularly works with migrant workers – a group that is “changing the conversation” in the North, which she says remains “as sectarian as ever”.

“I think the Catholic and Protestant middle classes minded their manners more during the war [Troubles] lest they be associated with people of violence. That fear doesn’t exist now. They are much freer about setting out, in their polite way, exactly the same prejudices.

“Everything about this place reinforces sectarianism: segregated education, segregated living.”

The “shared spaces” are the shopping centres and to some extent workplaces, but not the places where people live. The peace process was never about ending sectarianism, she says, but about “managing it and keeping it within the parameters of nonviolence and political control”. It need not have been so, she argues, laying the blame for the sectarian “peace” at the door of the British and Irish governments, and also Sinn Féin.

At the heart of this, and of the “state of chassis” across the wider politic, she sees an increasing erosion of democracy, and removal of power from the people to the elites. The people of Northern Ireland were never consulted about what kind of peace they wanted, she says.

Secret people

The embryonic “peace talks” in the early 1990s behind closed doors between Sinn Féin and, variously, the SDLP and the British and Irish governments, were “secret talks among secret people”.

“If you reflect back on it, the explanation for me is that this is a militarist philosophy, afraid of democracy. It doesn’t trust the people. [The parties] work in government in exactly the same way. It’s not that they don’t understand democracy. They don’t believe in it. And the institutions that arise from that are institutions of control.”

It suited both the British and Irish governments to acquiesce in this, she believes. “If they were serious about changing Northern Ireland, they would have insisted on a 20-year strategy for desegregating housing, desegregating education, ending our private and cultural segregation.”

Asked if this makes Sinn Féin “bad nationalists”, she says it reveals them as “bad republicans”, if republicanism is about being true to the ideals of Thomas Paine and Wolfe Tone. “If you take as the keystone of republicanism that authority exercised over a human being, without that human being’s acquiescence and knowledge, is a usurpation of that person’s rights, then by what definition are Sinn Féin republicans?”

She believes pursuit of a nationalist agenda will, in time, see parties such as Sinn Féin come unstuck, as it is no longer useful to working people.

“There’s a conflict which arises within the confines of nationalism. Fundamentally, if you are a nationalist party you have to be an all-class party, and in that context it’s the most powerful who dominate.”

The driving dynamic in today’s politics, she believes, is the rise of multinational corporations, which is increasing people’s sense of a lack of control over their lives and, in turn, fuelling the disintegration of the political middle ground.

“Nation states, which were invented as a vehicle to progress the capitalist project, have outlived their usefulness. Multinational corporations are now the vehicle. You can vote for whomever you like. You have no control. Governments increasingly have no control, and they collude in that in most cases.

“Take Apple. It is appalled – quite possibly even offended, possibly even hurt – that anyone could think they were stealing €13 billion from the people of Ireland. In fact, no part of the corporation understands what would possess people in Ireland to think that was their money. At the same time, food banks are opening everywhere, for working people. The system isn’t working, and people know it.”

Remain argument

She favoured the Remain argument in the Brexit debate, now lamenting that “the dynamic that drew people out to vote was not a debate about democracy, rights and challenging corporate control. It was about the local, the UK, being better able to meet the needs of the corporate world without regulation from Europe.

“The left-wing argument for leaving Europe got no traction because the right is on the rise. People are responding emotionally to language they understand that encapsulates how they feel, that gives them some understanding of what is happening to them.

“People Before Profit do this well. When you get out and get involved with the issues that affect daily lives of people who are hanging, the people listen. People know the thing is broke, but they don’t know how to fix it.”

While the left do this well at a local level, she says the right do better with simple messages for mass consumption.

Earlier this year she was election agent for Eamonn McCann – another former People’s Democracy stalwart, and this writer’s father – who was elected as a People Before Profit MLA to Stormont for the Foyle constituency.

“When Eamonn asked me to be his election agent, part of me thought, If you fail to elect that man again I will go berserk. Getting Eamonn into that position where that voice could be heard and those ideas carried forward was so important.”

She “might join People Before Profit at some point” and would not rule out running for election again “because I may need to run for election for something but it would not be for the purpose of being elected”.

Looking to current preoccupations, she speaks of the “refugee crisis” – an incorrect description, she says. “It is a moral, humanitarian crisis of European countries which have lost the run of themselves. The numbers of people seeking refuge in Europe constitutes the smallest percentage of the world’s population of refugees. Most refugees are being accommodated and supported in significantly poorer countries in Africa, in Lebanon, in Turkey, and then you’re looking at people whingeing here about how much additional funds they would need to extend the very limited refugee programme.”

She has a “radical position” on abortion, favouring abortion on demand. “I don’t need, and you are not entitled to, an explanation about what I do with me, to make you feel better. You can’t say some abortions are okay and some are not. You are either pro-choice or you are not. I am a hardliner and most people don’t dare enunciate that view yet. I have a clear, old-fashioned bottom line: abortion on demand is a valid demand.”

Seven grandchildren

She married her husband, Michael McAliskey, in 1973, and had three children. She now has seven grandchildren. She helped found the Irish Republican Socialist Party in 1974, but resigned in 1975 when a proposal that the INLA be made subordinate to the party was rejected. She ran, unsuccessfully, for election to the European Parliament in 1979, and to Dáil Éireann in February and November 1982.

In January 1981 she and her husband survived an assassination attempt by the Ulster [Freedom Fighters](#) at their home in Coalisland. She was shot 14 times, in front of their children. The family was moved for their safety to a housing estate elsewhere in Coalisland, where she helped found a community group “in a derelict house” with other women on the estate. This was to be the origins of

Step.

Asked if she misses the limelight of the heady days of the late 1960s, she smiles. "I look back on myself then and I am astounded I survived. I took risks and mad decisions no one else would."

She is the second-oldest of five children. Her father died when she was nine, her mother when she was 19 – a year after she started university. While other students getting involved in politics were, to varying degrees, worried about the impact on their college exams or what their parents might say, she didn't have that.

In her final year, the first-class honours student lost her scholarship as she was "bringing the university into disrepute", and she couldn't sit her finals.

"I suppose my world had been turned upside-down, but I thought I was in control of my life. Looking back on it I was like a cork being buffeted from one wave to another. I didn't set out to do anything. I really didn't. If the civil rights movement hadn't happened, neither would I as that 'phenomenon'.

"I care passionately about justice, about ideas, about principles. I love this work I do now, working with people on the margins. Living on the margins is where I get least bored. My only interest in rules is to see how far they can be pushed. I am always interested in the boundary beyond which we're told things won't work, in where the tension is that requires change, to make those things work out there."

She says she has "no idea" about the future. "I think there may be one last adventure left in me. Part of me would like to take to the streets again. There is a need, I think, especially in the North, for organising and agitating again in a very overt way. A lot of that, I think, has been pacified by the peace.

"People are afraid of upsetting the apple cart, upsetting the peace process, upsetting the funding process. But part of me still needs to tip it, and see how far it will tip over."

Kitty Holland

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Irish Times

<https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/bernadette-mcaliskey-i-am-astounded-i-survived-i-made-mad-decisions-1.2798293>