

Sean Campbell  
Cambridge School of Creative Industries  
Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

*NME*'s "Irish Troubles": political conflict, media crisis and the British music press<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article explores coverage of the Northern Ireland conflict (1968-1998) in the British music press. Focusing on the country's leading music paper, *New Musical Express* (*NME*), during its 1980s "heyday", the article shows that while many contemporaneous leftwing (and mainstream) media platforms were reluctant to address the "Troubles", *NME* strove - despite its principal remit as a popular-music paper - to cover the conflict through a sequence of feature articles and letters page debates, as well as a special themed issue in 1986. Drawing on original interviews with key *NME* writers, as well as extensive trawling of press archives, the article excavates the intricacies of *NME*'s account of the conflict, charting its shifting stance on the "Troubles", and tracing tensions that this generated between - and *amongst* - its writers and readers, whilst noting antithetical codes, at *NME*, between, on the one hand, an oppositional, counter-cultural stance (that endorsed partisan views) and a quasi-"public service" ethos (that sought to achieve "balance"). The article offers the first account of *NME*'s political coverage, and the first consideration of how the Irish conflict was addressed in this sector of the British press.

Keywords: Northern Ireland conflict; British media; music press; *New Musical Express*; 1980s.

## Introduction

Invocations of the Northern Ireland conflict (1968-98) have resurfaced, in recent years, at the forefront of British popular and literary culture via a sequence of successful novels and television series, such as *Derry Girls* (Channel Four, 2018 - ), *Milkman* (Anna Burns, 2018), *Spotlight on the Troubles* (BBC4, 2019), and *For the Good Times* (David Keenan, 2019).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this period came to constitute, explained Keenan, "a kind of Troubles 'moment'" in expressive culture.<sup>3</sup> It was not only in the creative sphere, though, that the conflict would reappear, for political discourse in Britain became eclipsed - amidst the fractious and protracted "Brexit" crisis - by the "Irish backstop", precipitating concerns about the potential return of paramilitary violence.<sup>4</sup>

Against this increased awareness of Northern Ireland (and its troubled past) came a stark reminder - via embargoed files released in 2019 - of high-level British disinterest in the region: one such document detailed that Margaret Thatcher would “switch off” when the topic of Northern Ireland came up during Cabinet meetings in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The former Conservative Prime Minister was, of course, hardly alone in this respect; for much of Britain’s left evinced a similar lack of interest.<sup>6</sup> In this context, certain Labour MPs, such as John Mackintosh, could confess that they, too, had “switched off” to the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Despite the enormous social and economic costs of the conflict then, it remained, says David Miller, “very low on the political agenda”, with Britain’s major parties showing little interest in prioritising Northern Ireland.<sup>8,9</sup>

At the same time, the “Troubles” had an especially inhibiting effect on Britain’s “fourth estate”, engendering - in Miller’s words - “a substantial chill factor” across the mediascape.<sup>10</sup> For Peter Taylor, a BBC journalist with considerable experience of covering Northern Ireland, the conflict was “the most sensitive issue in British broadcasting”.<sup>11</sup> Media accounts of the “Troubles” were often - in the words of the British television producer, David Elstein - “censored ... banned, postponed [or] cut”, with commentaries that questioned British policy being “equated with treachery, with undermining the security forces, with endangering lives, with encouraging rebels”.<sup>12</sup> In this context, then, the British mediascape became a key terrain in the project to narrate and frame the conflict, comprising the site of what Liz Curtis called “the propaganda war”, in which participants sought to secure “the hearts and minds of the British people on the question of Ireland”.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, a crucial dilemma for journalists was how to keep the public informed of the “Troubles” without simply re-circulating the information issued by its key actors, such as the British government and military, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), republican and loyalist paramilitaries, and nationalist and unionist MPs.<sup>14</sup> In light of the media’s place in this matrix, it is not surprising that a substantial body of work has explored media coverage of the conflict.<sup>15</sup>

Much of this work has been concerned with broadcast - rather than print - media, paying special attention to television, and with particular concern for the 1988 “broadcasting ban”, which served not only as “the most severe assault on media freedom during the Northern Ireland conflict”, but also as “the most stringent control of the broadcast media in Britain since the Second World War”,<sup>16</sup> prohibiting “the broadcast of direct statements by representatives or supporters of eleven Irish political and military organisations”.<sup>17</sup> Whilst the ban was, of course, a milestone in the media’s handling of the “Troubles”, it was also simply the apex of a continuous “trajectory of media control”,<sup>18</sup> that persisted throughout the conflict. To this end, this article explores the period immediately prior to the ban, focusing on the sphere of print, which has arguably been sidelined in scholarly accounts of “Troubles” coverage.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, where print has been addressed, the spotlight has been on daily newspapers.<sup>20</sup> Whilst this emphasis is, of course, understandable, it has had the effect of eliding the broader span of (weekly and monthly) print publications, and eclipsing the diverse means through which discrete papers and magazines sought to frame or stage the conflict. Significantly, this has helped to bequeath a view of print as being less critical and questioning in its coverage of the “Troubles” than, say, television (despite the fact that the latter was subjected to greater constraints than print platforms).<sup>21</sup> The publication explored here serves to complicate this view, in that it was a popular and widely-circulated print outlet whose coverage of the conflict ran contrary to the views of the mainstream press and broadcast media, and afforded a space for oppositional and alternative views.

This article’s focus on *New Musical Express* (henceforth *NME*) is, perhaps, less curious than it might first appear, as the paper enjoyed - in its 1980s “heyday” - an extraordinary public reach, achieving a weekly readership of between one and two million young people,<sup>22</sup> many of whom saw the publication in expressly pedagogical terms.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the late cultural critic Mark Fisher once explained that his “education didn’t come from school ... it came from reading *NME*”.<sup>24</sup> Beyond its

ostensible popular-cultural remit (comprising music, film and television), moreover, *NME* also engaged, at this time, with a range of social and-political themes, issuing feature articles on - and devoting front covers to - animal rights, unemployment, the miners' strike, "race" riots, South Africa, nuclear war, and environmentalism.<sup>25</sup> In this context, the paper also sought to address the Northern Ireland conflict, publishing - at key points in the 1980s - dedicated feature articles and letters page debates on this topic, and even convening a special themed issue on Northern Ireland that included (amongst other things) an interview with Martin McGuinness, who at the time was Sinn Féin deputy leader, and widely assumed to be the IRA's Chief of Staff.<sup>26</sup>

Neil Spencer, the chief editor at *NME* for most of this period, says that the paper's engagement with Northern Ireland was born of a necessary intervention against the (inadequate) coverage offered by mainstream media outlets,<sup>27</sup> which at that time had "fail[ed]", as Brian Hamilton-Tweedale explains, "in their public duty to provide a comprehensive and meaningful account of the Irish conflict".<sup>28</sup> In the absence of a commensurate discourse about the "Troubles", then, Spencer would help to prise open space to it in *NME*.<sup>29</sup> Crucially this coverage would incorporate the views not only of journalists, but also, says Spencer, of its young readers, who, he observes, often deployed "Gasbag" - the paper's letters page - "to write tirades about the Northern Irish question", noting that British youth's perspectives on the conflict were unlikely to be chronicled elsewhere in the media.<sup>30</sup>

It is undoubtedly true that *NME*'s letters page, which often served, in the 1980s, as an erudite forum for social and political debate,<sup>31</sup> featured a striking number of exchanges that addressed the Irish conflict. Indeed, *NME* would occasionally devote its entire letters section to readers' views on this issue.<sup>32</sup> It was, moreover, a reader's intervention on this topic - in the letters page in August 1980 - that instigated *NME*'s engagement with the conflict. In this missive, the reader (from Derry in Northern Ireland) assailed *NME* for eliding Northern Ireland in its coverage of contemporaneous

political concerns (the paper had published a range of political articles that year). In light of the points made by the reader, it is worth quoting their letter at length:

“*NME* does it again. The champion of the oppressed and the representative of caring humanity has again bombarded us with articles about the [nuclear] holocaust, suppression of dissidents in Czechoslovakia, genocide of Indians in Chile and other causes. Don’t get me wrong - I’m not knocking your coverage of these subjects ... It just seems strange that you deal with all these things and then dismiss events here in Northern Ireland as something that shouldn’t be dealt with. ... *NME* writers who regularly give off about violations of human rights ... tend to ignore the Irish situation. They complain about police harassment of minorities in England yet ignore the daily obscenities perpetrated by the so-called “security forces” in the ghettos of Belfast and Derry. They ignore the total disregard for such concerns as justice or even decency that keep the Northern Ireland legal system going; the H-blocks of Long Kesh are the inevitable result of this system ... Is this because, unlike many of *NME*’s pet subjects, the British government doesn’t like coverage of something so controversial? If people in England were put through a legal system which involved torture, lengthy internment periods, no jury courts and judgement by men obviously sectarian and partisan, we’d hear enough about it in your pages ... It strikes me that your political hobby-horses are all safe ones that cause little worry to those in power. The “Troubles” have gone on for 11 years now and, more urgently, the H-block question for nearly four years. You have made yourself political and therefore your failure to cover these issues is not quite the same as *Sounds*’ or *Melody Maker*’s failure - they don’t care at all but you claim you do. Ignoring Ireland won’t make it go away. The “problem” might be solved if more people in England gave a damn. Or is *NME* really full of ostriches?”<sup>33</sup>

The publication of this complaint, in the paper’s letters page, would precipitate a plethora of further missives on the matter, prompting Charles Shaar Murray - one of *NME*’s most revered writers - to

observe that letters on Northern Ireland had, during that time, “completely swamped all other topics” in *NME*’s mail bag.<sup>34</sup> This, in turn, would provoke the paper to convene a special issue of “Gasbag” focused solely on the conflict,<sup>35</sup> before the paper issued its first feature article on this topic (albeit enfolded in an account of Belfast’s music scene).<sup>36</sup> Subsequent letters page debates, and feature articles, would, moreover, appear across the decade at key moments. For much of the 1980s, then, *NME* sought to address one of the most contentious issues in British politics, whilst other (more obviously political) outlets appeared to eschew it.

This endeavour to address the “Troubles” did not - significantly - go unnoticed by *NME*’s readers, some of whom praised the paper’s coverage of the conflict, noting that it had the effect of “shaming the self-styled “progressive” left (*Guardian*, *City Limits*, *New Socialist* et al ...)” in Britain “for their timidity and refusal to address ... the one “problem” in British politics that simply won’t go away”.<sup>37</sup> Despite this observation - that *NME* had confronted the conflict at a time when many left-wing publications were conspicuously quiet on the topic (and when much of the mainstream media was deeply wary of it) - the paper’s engagement with the “Troubles” has been overlooked not only in scholarly accounts of media coverage of the conflict, but also in the academic (and journalistic) literature on the British music press.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, when, in 2018, *NME* announced its closure as a print outlet (after 66 years of publication), a plethora of public eulogies appeared across the mediascape exploring the paper’s history and significance,<sup>39</sup> yet which paid scant regard to *NME*’s political commentary, despite the fact that this facet of the paper constituted one of its key characteristics in its (most) celebrated phase in the 1970s and 1980s. This article seeks to extend, then, existing accounts of the media and Northern Ireland - beyond the orthodox orbit of broadcasting and the broadsheets - by exploring the (hitherto overlooked) coverage of the conflict that emerged in the British music press, whilst expanding extant work on the music press (with its focus on “personality” critics, literary style, and chronicles of canonical “scenes”)<sup>40</sup> by excavating, and addressing, its

political commentaries. The article thus presents the first scholarly work on *NME*'s political coverage *per se*, as well as the first (journalistic or academic) account of its commentaries on the Irish conflict, unveiling the intricate - and often fraught and anxious - efforts of this non-news publication to address the most controversial question in British politics.

Drawing on original interviews with key *NME* writers (that illuminate issues and decision-making at editorial level) as well as extensive trawling of print archives, the article presents - through closely-focused content analysis - new insights into the process by which a high-profile (and non-news-based) publication strove to cover the Irish conflict. It charts the different rhetorical modes and techniques - as well as the discrete themes and standpoints - that the paper deployed in its account of the "Troubles", exploring the dilemmas that *NME* encountered in its engagement with this issue, and tracking tensions that this induced between (and *amongst*) the paper's writers and readers. The article also detects the operation of discordant codes, at the *NME*, with the paper endeavouring, on the one hand, to act as an oppositional, counter-cultural voice (by espousing partisan views), whilst seeking, on the other, to adhere to quasi-"public service" values (by appearing "balanced"). Before exploring these points, though, it is first necessary to place *NME* - as a publication - in the particular political and popular-cultural context of the time, and outline its precise political profile in this period.

### **Political NME**

The immediate context for *NME*'s political commentary in the 1980s lay in the particular political and popular-musical nexus of the late 1970s. During that period, the youth subculture of punk - and its attendant musical "scene" - had punctured the prevailing codes of Anglo-American popular music, and, in consequence, had the effect, in the words of the former *NME* writer Paolo Hewitt, of "politicising pop".<sup>41</sup> In this context, the pages of the weekly music press became, in light of the scarce amount of platforms at the time, a key space in which punk could "take place",<sup>42</sup> and through

which its “politicising” effects could percolate. Although *NME* was not the first of the British music papers to document punk,<sup>43</sup> it was, without doubt, the one in which its “politicising” process was most clearly registered. Indeed, certain musicians from that time would come to see *NME* as “the most PC [politically correct] of all the music magazines”: “Within their ranks there was a lot of almost politicians, who had a certain party line”, observed Hugh Cornwell.<sup>44</sup> Whether or not the paper displayed a perceptible “party line”, it would appoint, as editor, in 1978, “a committed Labour Party member” (Neil Spencer), and, in turn, “set itself up”, as Long explains, “as a voice of dissent, discarding the fashionable nihilism of punk or the blank-eyed decadence of its early 70s incarnation to become increasingly politicised”.<sup>45</sup>

The paper’s openly ideological orientation echoed, of course, the socio-political consciousness that continued to impel the popular-musical milieu via initiatives such as Rock Against Racism (1976-82), Two-Tone (1979-85), and Red Wedge (1985-1990).<sup>46</sup> At the same time, mainstream British politics would be marked by a progressively right-wing turn, following the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, and the attendant ascent of Thatcherism through successive election victories in 1983 and 1987.<sup>47</sup> This specific conjuncture - between an increasingly oppositional popular-music culture and a concomitantly reactionary political one - “made it quite easy”, says Neil Spencer, for *NME* “to extend music journalism into social and political commentary”.<sup>48</sup> Such coverage would, moreover, assume an expressly left-wing character. Reflecting on this point, Hewitt suggests that the radical, right-wing ethos of the Thatcher government - “and the environment and the atmosphere it created” - “really pushed us [the *NME* staff] towards a very strong, left-wing position”.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the paper openly aligned itself with the Labour Party,<sup>50</sup> most strikingly by publishing two issues - in 1985 and 1987, respectively - that featured Neil Kinnock, the (then) Labour leader, as cover “star”.<sup>51</sup> Such endorsements were underscored by the paper’s approving accounts of Labour Party conferences, and the publication of interviews with leading left-wing figures, such as Ken Livingstone, Tony Benn and E.P. Thompson.<sup>52</sup>

It is clear, then, that the particular political and popular-cultural context of the period played an imperative role in impelling *NME*'s increasingly political coverage, and openly leftist orientation.<sup>53</sup>

However, the paper's penchant for social commentary, and left-wing views, had a much longer provenance, dating back to the early 1970s when *NME* had sought to rejuvenate itself - following a period of decline - by recruiting a series of writers, such as Nick Kent, Ian MacDonald and Charles Shaar Murray, from the British "underground" press, an assemblage of "alternative" publications - such as *Oz*, *IT [International Times]*, *Friendz* and *Creem* - which enjoyed a special profile in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an oppositional, and expressly youth-cultural, print sector.<sup>54</sup>

A key aspiration of the underground press was, in the words of Mick Farren (a contributor to *IT* who later became a renowned *NME* writer), to offset the omissions of mainstream outlets, and thus "provide a forum for people who are excluded from mass media".<sup>55</sup> Significantly, its coverage of social and political issues, such as the Vietnam war, feminism and sexual liberation, was accompanied by articles on popular music, which featured *inter alia* Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and the Rolling Stones.<sup>56</sup> It is worth noting that this coverage served not only to leaven the press's social and political commentaries, but also to attract economic support by securing advertising revenue from the music industry.<sup>57</sup>

*NME*'s effort to "absorb" some of the staff, as well as the oppositional ethos, of the "underground" press in 1972,<sup>58</sup> brought about "an identity switch" at the paper,<sup>59</sup> which now offered a "broader political and cultural span".<sup>60</sup> In the process, *NME* (re)positioned itself as a quasi-counter-cultural platform,<sup>61</sup> with expressly para-musical concerns, a point epitomised in (former editor) Tony Tyler's injunction that articles in *NME* should "not just [be] about the music", but "about all of the things that the music's about", which at that time included, of course, social and political concerns.<sup>62</sup> The recruitment of "underground" contributors at *NME* would, moreover, continue across

the decade,<sup>63</sup> with the effect that *NME* sustained, as Long explains, “the ethos, style and content of the underground press well past punk, up to the end of the decade [the 1970s] and beyond”.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, at the point that Spencer became *NME* editor (in June 1978), at least six of the paper’s contributors had come from the “underground” press, including Nick Kent, Charles Shaar Murray, Mick Farren, John May, Miles, and Pennie Smith.<sup>65</sup>

Significantly, the political coverage offered in the underground press had included a considerable amount of commentary on the Irish conflict,<sup>66</sup> with key papers - such as *Frendz*, *IT*, *Ink* and *Black Dwarf* - devoting front covers, as well as feature articles, to this topic.<sup>67</sup> This coverage exhibited an overt sympathy with the experience of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, there was a clear perception, among readers, that the underground press had signalled allegiance with militant Irish republicanism. In this context, letters appeared in *IT* objecting to the underground press’s “support” for the IRA, and encouraging its contributors to distinguish between the ideology of Irish republicanism (which many readers had endorsed) and the actions of the IRA (which they openly disavowed).<sup>69</sup>

However, despite the perception that the “underground” press had, in effect, championed the IRA, many of its writers held highly ambivalent views on the conflict. Reflecting on this point, Jerome Burne, a contributor to underground papers such as *Frendz* and *IT*, relates: “The IRA was always a problematical issue. On one hand we weren’t in favour of violence, but we were obviously against the British Army. We wanted to overthrow the State, but we weren’t quite sure that we wanted a lot of bombers. That was a tricky one”.<sup>70</sup> In a similar vein, Dick Pountain - who played a leading role at *Oz* - recalls attending “these appalling all-afternoon meetings in order to make up our minds what our attitude to the provisional IRA was”,<sup>71</sup> a point echoed by another *Oz* contributor, Nigel Fountain, who recollects debates about “the right line to be taken on the issue: Was it to be support for the IRA? Support for a socialist Ireland? Critical support for the IRA? And *which* IRA?”.<sup>72</sup>

Significantly, similar quandaries would surface in the *NME* office in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Spencer, who sought, as *NME* editor, to extend the early-Seventies iteration of the paper (that had been modelled on the underground press), says that his “personal attitude to the Northern Ireland problem [in the late 1970s] was that there was no place in that dialogue for someone like me”. He goes on: “It was a mess, and where did one engage with it? Were you on the side of Stormont and British troops? Were you on the side of the IRA? No ... Neither. A pox on both their houses ... So, it was very hard to find a way to engage with that, and really, it wasn’t *our* problem. It wasn’t a thing that affected us”.<sup>73</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that *NME* had, of course, addressed issues beyond the immediate orbit of its staff, it is clear that the effects of the “Troubles” had, by the late 1970s, extended - via the IRA’s bombing campaign - into English cities, and thus the conflict had unquestionably come to “affect” the lives of its writers and readers. With this in mind, it appears that *NME* was - in spite of its overt concern with political issues - initially reluctant to address the Northern Ireland conflict. The inevitable problem with this position was, of course, that the paper’s continuing lack of engagement with the “Troubles” would become (in the context of its concomitant coverage of other political themes) increasingly conspicuous and, by extension, questionable. Moreover, in the absence of any focused account of Northern Ireland, the conflict would nevertheless come to penetrate the discourse of the music press through other narrative means, some of which were not unproblematic. Perhaps most striking, in this regard, was the practice - deployed across the British music press in the 1970s - of reporting on British bands on tour in Northern Ireland, in which the locale would clearly act as a dramatic backdrop, usually via images of the bands in Belfast, alongside observations that accentuated the conflict, with the accounts of visiting journalists invoking the presence of soldiers, armoured vehicles, and bombed-out buildings.<sup>74</sup>

Although this sort of coverage had been evident, in the British music press, since the early 1970s (and would endure into the 1980s), the most celebrated instance of this approach undoubtedly centred on the visit of The Clash to Belfast in 1977, an event that attracted widespread attention at the time, appearing on the front covers - and inside pages - of both of *NME*'s weekly competitors, *Sounds* and *Melody Maker*.<sup>75</sup> The currency of such coverage functioned, first and foremost, at the photographic level, hence the images of The Clash (that illustrated both the covers and feature articles in *Sounds* and *Melody Maker*) depicting the band members in close proximity with armed British soldiers and Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers amidst conspicuous forms of surveillance apparatus. Such images were underscored, in the accompanying reports, by semantic invocations of Northern Ireland's oppressive anomie, laying stress on "steel barricades", "barbed wire fences", and "endless devastation".<sup>76</sup>

Significantly, *NME* would seek to distance itself, at the time, from this sort of coverage. Thus, while their competitors devoted front page - and feature article - space to The Clash's Belfast trip, *NME* offered only a short news item that sought to distance itself from the spectacle via an acerbic headline: "Clash visit Belfast for picture session" (which nevertheless included an image from said trip).<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the paper would later remind its readers, in its first focused feature on Northern Ireland (in October 1980), that The Clash had "found time [on their short trip to Belfast] for some holiday snaps and a *Melody Maker* front cover".<sup>78</sup> Despite its critical response to such reportage, though, the *NME* had itself - only two weeks prior to the Clash coverage in *Sounds* and *MM* - published a similar account of another British band's (Dr. Feelgood) visit to Northern Ireland, illustrated with an image of the band behind (what the photo-caption called) a "bomb-guard in Belfast", and prefaced with a byline announcing that the accompanying interview took place "behind the Ulster barricades".<sup>79</sup>

This was not, moreover, the first time that *NME* had engaged with such tropes; indeed, the paper had arguably helped to beget the very practice of following British bands to Belfast, as evidenced by a piece in 1973 on Hawkwind in Northern Ireland. In this article, the local setting, and the effects of the conflict, are self-consciously stressed, with *NME* noting “some of the worst trouble spots”, and citing “shops, houses and bars ... blasted into ruins”, whilst observing a British soldier (“his rifle waist high”) who “looked as nervous as hell”: “It was obvious the whole city was a war zone”.<sup>80</sup>

Whether such coverage was born of a wish to acknowledge the conflict (rather than simply ignore it), or an opportunistic attempt to exploit the “Troubles” as a compelling backdrop, it is clear that this tendency would, by the late 1970s, come to be seen, at least by *NME*, as questionable. Thus, the paper withdrew from this type of coverage, even while its competitors continued to pursue it, into the mid-1980s.<sup>81</sup>

Reflecting on this point (with four decades hindsight), Spencer suggests that music-press photos of bands “posing with British troops” became, from his perspective, “problematical”.<sup>82</sup> This point is echoed by Danny Kelly, a subsequent editor of *NME* (and a staff writer in the 1980s), who observes that such coverage “didn’t say anything about what was going on, except there was a sense of danger”, and thus risked trading in “a kind of ‘danger chic’”.<sup>83</sup> Such material would, furthermore, make *NME*’s lack of overt commentary on the conflict seem (even) more questionable, as Kelly explains: “The danger is if you don’t write something serious and political, you end up using Northern Ireland as a backdrop, a dramatic backdrop to things”.<sup>84</sup> Rather than constricting accounts of the conflict to this “dramatic” capacity, then, the subject necessitated, felt Spencer, a more thoughtful approach.<sup>85</sup>

The paper's pursuance of this approach was expedited, says Spencer, by two concurrent developments: first, the arrival at *NME* of a Belfast correspondent, Gavin Martin, who brought to the paper a legitimising local voice, and, second, the formation of a Northern Irish punk "scene", which prompted coverage of the conflict as part of the bands's social context.<sup>86</sup> These concomitant shifts would precipitate the paper's first feature article on the conflict (albeit in the context of an account of Belfast's music scene), in a piece entitled "Northern Ireland: the Fantasy and the Reality", written by Martin, in October 1980.<sup>87</sup> The publication of this piece was, however, preceded by the intervention of the Derry letter-writer cited above, which in turn provoked a plethora of letters that addressed the Irish conflict. Three such letters would be published in one issue in September 1980, before the staff felt compelled - by the sheer volume of subsequent letters - to convene a dedicated "Gasbag", focused solely on the conflict, in October of that year. In conjunction with the Martin feature, the special issue of "Gasbag" served as *NME*'s first focused coverage of the conflict. Before addressing Martin's piece, then, I will explore these letters page debates. The letters surveyed here, and throughout the article, draw on a range of (exogenous and endogenous) interpretive frames through which the "Troubles" were viewed, pointing to what scholars have called "a 'meta-conflict', a conflict about what the conflict is about".<sup>88</sup> The readers invoke republican, unionist and socialist views; or claim that the conflict was sectarian; or call for the withdrawal of British troops, or argue that the "Troubles" were irrational. In addition, however, many of the letters focus on the absence of debate on the conflict, and the urgent requirement for such debate, as well as the question of media coverage.

### **1980: "Now we've got a platform ... what are we going to do about it?"**

The first pair of letters that appeared in the "Gasbag" special issue critiqued the inadequate coverage that the Irish conflict had received in Britain's media. The first letter begins, significantly, by endorsing the Derry letter-writer, and noting their own "surprise" to see such a letter in *NME*: "perhaps this is the beginning of something big?!", they speculate. The key point of the letter, though, is

to critically highlight “the way ignorant/misinformed journalists either evade any controversial involvement with the province ... or denounce the “evil” terrorists whilst knowing little or nothing about their cause”. In addition, this reader would insist that it was incumbent on *NME* not merely to intervene on this matter, but to operate as a pioneering platform: “I think it is about time you”, relayed the reader, “as the custodian of the humanitarian ideals that are so dear to all of us, took the lead and *did* something”.<sup>89</sup> The second letter, from a reader in Cork, echoed this view, observing “the ignorance of the people of Britain ... of their position in our country”, before issuing an “appeal to all British readers of *NME*”:

“Your government, through your army, is occupying part of my country. They are doing this in your name. Are you aware of this? ... People ... are being killed every day and every day because of your silence the killing will continue. Only public opinion in Britain can change the situation. Won’t you help?”

The reader concluded by stressing that “an informed public debate in Britain would get the ball rolling”, noting: “Now is the time for it to start”.<sup>90</sup> Again, then, a key part of the discourse at this point is on the perceived lack of debate, and the necessity of such exchange, and the question of where and how it might occur. The third letter (from Ormskirk, in England), drew on a different strand of contemporary commentary on the “Troubles”, which saw the conflict as essentially sectarian, and presented the “problem” as Catholics and Protestants not being able to “live together”, and thus prescribed - as a remedy to “religious war” - the erection of “integrated schools and housing estates”.<sup>91</sup>

It is, of course, unclear to what extent these letters were selected to confirm a nascent *NME* view, but it would certainly seem, from the editorial ripostes - issued by Monty Smith - that the paper broadly endorsed their sentiments. Indeed, it could be argued that the views expressed in these letters (calling for increased coverage of the conflict, and critiquing sectarianism) were sufficiently

palatable perspectives for a paper such as *NME* to publicly accommodate, and tacitly endorse. The paper's response to these letters, issued through Smith's bold-type remarks, perhaps serves as a clue to *NME*'s (then) current view. A key theme, in the retorts, is the deflection of readers' questions on to other media outlets or sites. Thus, following the first letter's call for more informed media coverage of the conflict, Smith turned the question back onto the readers: "now we've got a platform ... what are we going to do about it?"<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Smith reacts to the second letter - which resounded the reflections of the first - by redirecting the enquiry onto mainstream press and broadcast outlets, rhetorically rerouting their appeal: "please ... so-called uncensored media, when is it going to happen?"<sup>93</sup>

Although this response seemed somewhat at odds with the "underground" ethos that had informed *NME* since the early 1970s (in which "alternative" papers covered overlooked issues),<sup>94</sup> Smith did, at least, make clear that the conflict would continue to be "discussed in these pages [i.e. "Gasbag"] as long as you're prepared to voice your opinions",<sup>95</sup> even if this (once again) placed the imperative on the readers. This letters-page exchange, in any case, constituted *NME*'s first tentative foray into addressing the conflict.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in light of its reticent tone, the paper received an even larger volume of readers' letters on this topic over the next two weeks, prompting the paper to curate a dedicated issue of "Gasbag" - focused solely on the "Troubles" - in October 1980. This, in many ways, served as *NME*'s first self-conscious account of the conflict, for while it adhered to the editorial sentiments of the September "Gasbag" in placing the imperative on its readers, it was, atypically for a letters-page debate, announced via a cover-line on the paper's front page (stating simply "Northern Ireland"), and featured - again uncharacteristically for "Gasbag" - its own themed title, "The Irish no-joke", and illustration: a photograph of armed British soldiers next to young children.<sup>96</sup> It also included, against convention, an introduction and epilogue, authored by that week's "Gasbag" editor,

Charles Shaar Murray. It would not, however, offer editorial comments in response to the individual letters (the letters page was typically punctuated with pithy bold-type ripostes to each letter). Thus, the bold-type pull-out quotes that appeared in this “Gasbag” - more often associated with a feature article - were drawn from the readers’ views. Consequently, “The Irish no-joke” was a letters page that bore many of the graphic and editorial qualities of a feature article, thus elevating it - if only visually - to the status of an *authored* piece, and in turn appearing as the paper’s *own* response, rather than one generated by its readers.

At the same time, the paper’s preface stressed the value of readers’s views over editorial interventions: “we’re turning this week’s Bagspace over to your letters”, relayed Murray, “without the customary editorial refereeing”.<sup>97</sup> Thus, if *NME* had, in the September issue, summoned mainstream media to take up the task of tackling the conflict, then it was now - in light of the sheer volume of letters that the paper had received on this topic - turning to the readers to speak on the topic, suggesting that the paper’s inchoate stance on handling the “Troubles” was to harness its readers’ views. This was underscored in the page’s sole editorial comment, located in a lengthy, bold-type coda, which disavowed the very possibility of *NME* expressing a collective view: “There’s no such thing as a consensus on the subject of the British “presence” in Northern Ireland, here at *NME* or anywhere else”. Notwithstanding this contraction of the conflict to “the British ‘presence’”, Murray went on:

“Speaking as one person offering one person’s opinion - and not claiming to represent the *NME* collective - I deplore the bombings, the terror, the violence inflicted on innocent people who are on a firing line through no fault or choice of their own. But at the same time, I believe just as wholeheartedly that the solution to the Irish “problem” must be an Irish solution. What happens in Ireland should be a matter of concern to England, but interference

and occupation should not be the means by which this concern should be expressed. If this view seems contradictory, that's because it *is* contradictory".<sup>98</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the paper's readership would proceed (following this preface) to express, across eight discrete epistles, more forthright positions. One such letter (from a reader in Liverpool) critiqued the then prevalent view, promulgated by "government and popular media", that the conflict was simply sectarian, before making a not uncontroversial claim about the provenance of Ulster Unionists:

"we will get nowhere until we stop deceiving ourselves that the war in Northern Ireland is a purely sectarian one, so absolving ourselves from blame. Much as I sympathise with the unionist point of view - they have known no other home but N.I., and it *has* been a part of Britain throughout their lifetime - the fact remains that they are the descendants of an invading force, supported by an army of occupation".<sup>99</sup>

A second letter (from Edgware in London) echoed this view that the conflict should not be seen as simply sectarian, assailing the outlook of "the typical liberal Englishman" - who perceived "the problem" as "religiously prejudiced Irishmen" - and arguing for "an opening of minds to Irish problems by the British public". This reader thus reiterated the calls, in the previous letters, for wider understanding of the conflict, born of an implicit view that platforms such as *NME* could play a crucial role in this. They went on, moreover, to challenge the claim that the "troops are in Ireland to protect the Irish from themselves",<sup>100</sup> a point underscored by a large pull-out quote, extracted from the letter, declaiming "The troops are not in Ireland to protect the Irish. Anyone who thinks that is an idiot", that served to bequeath, alongside the page's only illustration - a large photo of armed British soldiers facing two young children in a confined space - a sceptical view of the British military presence. Other letters would chastise the role of religious institutions in the conflict, claiming

that the latter's "ambivalent attitude to sectarianism" had done little "to diminish the violence they pretend to deplore".<sup>101</sup>

The fact that extracts from each of these letters were selected by the paper to appear in bold-type quotes perhaps offered an insight into *NME*'s own view, with one reader problematising the presence of the British Army, whilst the other rebuked the role of the Church. Neither of these views was especially controversial at the time: there was a sizeable Troops Out Movement in Britain, which had been founded in 1972 and enjoyed some support on British university campuses.<sup>102</sup> The final letter in the special issue (sent from Dublin) takes up the theme of British ignorance, arguing that "the British people are ... 'shielded' from the truth about Northern Ireland".<sup>103</sup>

Other letters offered more conservative views. One of these (from a reader in Newtownabbey in Northern Ireland), expressed a moderate Unionist standpoint, whilst positing that readers outside of Ireland might not be "sufficiently well informed of the situation to put forward a constructive argument", and advising *NME* to "not mix politics and music".<sup>104</sup> This, then, was the obverse of the letter-writer from Derry; for rather than summoning *NME*, and the wider British public, to engage with the conflict, it counselled the paper not to comment on it.

Regardless of this appeal, *NME* continued to address the topic, with the following week's issue offering a lengthy feature article, written by Gavin Martin (entitled "Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality"), and spanning five pages. As with the previous week's letters page, this article was announced via a cover-line on the paper's front page - stating "Ulster's Alternative" - a pun on the celebrated Stiff Little Fingers' song, "Alternative Ulster" (1978), the title of which was sourced from a Belfast fanzine, founded by Martin. The fact that the latter was now a contributor to *NME* clearly equipped the paper with the confidence to extend its commentary on the conflict. Martin, who had grown up in a Protestant milieu in Bangor, Co. Down, hailed from a family with "a very

committed trade union” outlook, and was “driven”, says former *NME* writer Stuart Cosgrove, “by a sense of cross-community balance”.<sup>105</sup> Whether or not this context had a bearing on Martin’s work in *NME*, his commentaries on the conflict were suffused with broadly socialist, and expressly anti-sectarian, sentiments.

The byline of Martin’s first piece begins by observing that *NME* had “asked” him “to give [the paper] an account of rock amid the rubble”.<sup>106</sup> This, then, was the justification for *NME*’s first full article on Northern Ireland: framing “the rubble” as part of the context for “rock”. Thus, the wish to chronicle the post-punk popular music “scene” in Belfast provided *NME* with an opportunity to engage with the conflict head-on. Significantly, Martin seeks, at the outset of his piece, to distance it from coverage of The Clash in Belfast, critiquing media reports of that event,<sup>107</sup> and staging his account as a corrective to the conventional ways in which the conflict had been configured in music-press discourse. Although the article is chiefly concerned with popular music in Northern Ireland, Martin prefaces it with a reflection on “Troubles”, and it is this section that I focus on here. “For the past 11 years”, relates Martin:

“people in Northern Ireland have lived in the dark shadow of terrorist disorder. In terms of geography, history and politics it is a situation unique this side of the equator. Disregarding the rights and wrongs of the political collusions, religious confusions and military confrontations ... one thing’s for sure: the ordinary and the innocent (regardless of their mode of worship or political allegiance) are the ones who have had the hardest time of it”.<sup>108</sup>

The piece’s central point regarding Northern Ireland is what Martin calls “the acute paucity of alternatives” available to the public beyond the highly binarised political milieu (nationalism/ republicanism or unionism/loyalism). However, the article also informed readers that the region enjoyed “the worst unemployment figures, the lowest wages and the worst housing in the UK”, implying

that this might help to illuminate part of the reason why people became bound up in paramilitary violence. What Martin - and, by extension, *NME* - ultimately proffer in this piece, then, is a compelling class-based critique of the conflict, underscored with an explicit anti-sectarianism:

“What the Northern Ireland situation amounts to is a lot of young people being used as ‘pawns in the game.’ Whether that young person be in the British Army, the Provisional IRA or the UVF, chances are they come from one of the most deprived areas in the UK (N.E. England, Scotland or Belfast) and have been thrown in at the deep end of a struggle which does nothing but keep the lowlife fighting among themselves”.<sup>109</sup>

For Martin, then, “the problem” in Northern Ireland was “social, not sectarian”.<sup>110</sup>

If the prevailing view of the paper’s readers had hitherto been split between calling for British withdrawal, and seeing the conflict as (essentially) sectarian, then the first real sentiment that *NME* would express on the “Troubles” was to present the problem in class terms, through a broadly socialist frame. The left-leaning anti-sectarianism that informed the piece clearly resonated with the broader ethos of *NME*, and was thus easily accommodated in its political frame.

The article - alongside Murray’s “Gasbag” - received praise from the paper’s readership for drawing attention to the conflict. However, *NME* was also rebuked, in this period, for its lack of sustained engagement with Northern Ireland. Thus, in a letter that appeared in June 1981 (shortly after the death of hunger striker, Bobby Sands), a reader - again from Derry - praised *NME* for the “increase in the number of mentions that Northern Ireland” had received in the paper, whilst at the same time chastising it for the lack of any “serious attempt to explain/deal with/open discussion on the real situation”:

“Last November we had a Gavin Martin article [‘Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality’] which was a short round up of Belfast music and said nothing about the outside world in the north at all ... Do you really believe that The Outcasts and Rudi [two of the bands covered in Martin’s piece] are more important than H-Block ... ?”<sup>111</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that Martin’s piece was not “a short round up”, and that it did engage with “the outside world” (as outlined above), the point to note here is *NME*’s response to this letter, which laid stress on the forum-ness of the paper in addressing such issues, before suggesting - somewhat surprisingly - that if readers wished for a “serious attempt” to address the conflict, then they could peruse a bookshop. “I believe that papers ... like *NME*”, explained Ray Lowry - that week’s “Gasbag” editor - “should at the least provide a forum for discussion of the wider issues affecting the lives of their readers and those of the people whose doings they chronicle”.<sup>112</sup> However, he then proceeded to rebuff the reader’s plea for *NME* to make a more “serious attempt” to engage with the conflict, suggesting: “Bookshops are full of publications detailing the history and present conditions in N. Ireland”.<sup>113</sup>

Perhaps this was an admission, on Lowry’s part, that the music press was not commensurate to the task of covering an issue as complex (and controversial) as the Northern Ireland conflict. Whether or not this was the case, it clearly echoed Smith and Murray’s reactions (outlined above), which offset similar appeals by, first, calling on the mainstream media to do more, and, then, rallying readers to submit their views. In directing the latter towards the bookshop, *NME* again seemed engaged in an act of deflection.

Following this period of intense - if no doubt anxious - efforts to afford coverage to the “Troubles”, *NME* underwent a period of apparent withdrawal from the conflict. (Indeed, it would be more than three years before the paper offered its next substantial address, in November 1984). Significantly,

this issue - of the paper's renewed reticence on Northern Ireland - would itself provide the focus of readers' letters to *NME*. I will explore one key instance of this, before addressing the 1984 article. In March of that year, a letter from a reader (in Galway, Ireland) chastised the paper for its lack of coverage of Northern Ireland: "Whilst *NME*'s position on Thatcher, Reagan and those far off political revolutions is quite clear, the only indication of recognition of the war in the six counties, usually just in passing, is from the bigoted Tory drivel of [Julie] Burchill and [Tony] Parsons".<sup>114</sup>

That week's "Gasbag" editor, Paolo Hewitt, proffered a response that perhaps served as an insight into a prevalent *NME* view. "The situation in Northern Ireland is a complex matter", explained Hewitt: "and one that I *wouldn't comment on*".<sup>115</sup> This admission would, in turn, attract its own ripostes. The first of these (from a reader in County Mayo, Ireland) argued:

"Hewitt's reply ... summed up British attitudes to N Ireland. Paolo wouldn't comment on it, brushing it away as a complex issue ... The British media neither knows nor wants to know fuck all about N Ireland ... Make no mistake, if you support present British policy you support repression and discrimination on a sectarian basis. ... Are you awake? Do you care? You mouth liberal platitudes but I don't think any of you give a monkey's. Howsabout interviewing Gerry Adams or Donny [sic] Morrison".<sup>116</sup>

Meanwhile, another reader wondered why *NME* was reluctant to comment on the conflict when leading figures on the British left had expressed views on it: "If, as Paolo Hewitt said last month, the situation [in Northern Ireland] is "too complex" to comment on, how come Ken Livingstone and Tony Benn have such a good understanding of the subject?".<sup>117</sup> Hewitt's response to this query was marked, once again, by a defensive reticence:

“Just because *I* won’t be drawn on a subject doesn’t automatically mean that there is a ‘left wing media silence’. If Susan Williams [a pseudonym of *NME* writer, Steven Wells, who was associated with the Socialist Workers Party] or any number of *NME* writers had answered the letters that week, you’d have got the comment you seem so desperate to receive”.<sup>118</sup>

Reflecting on this point (with thirty-five years hindsight), Hewitt says: “I remember thinking, it was such an explosive situation, and I just didn’t feel that I could make any comment about it in the way that I could maybe make a comment about Thatcher’s government or the coal-mining strike ... I just always thought, ‘woah, woah, woah, I’m not wading into this’”.<sup>119</sup> Regarding the reaction that this provoked from *NME* readers, Hewitt recalls, of his mindset at the time:

“I would’ve just thought, ‘I’ve made my position clear, I’m not getting involved in this, and you trying to goad me with this isn’t going to work, cos I’m not going near this’ ... People are dying. It’s serious. It’s not, you know, ‘shall I be a vegetarian?’, you know ‘Up the Animal Liberation Front!’ .... People were dying”.<sup>120</sup>

Elaborating, retrospectively, on this reticence, Hewitt explains: “I didn’t feel like I had any right to get involved with it. I really didn’t. I didn’t have any experience of it”. In this sense, he suggests that he would have deferred, at the time, to the Northern Ireland-born writers at *NME* (such as Gavin Martin and Sean O’Hagan), who, he says, had “lived through it [the conflict]”.<sup>121</sup>

Following this period of apparent caution regarding commentary on the “Troubles”, the paper would publish, in November 1984, its first full feature article focused solely on the conflict, entitled “Bomb Culture”. Significantly, this article - which seems to have been prompted by the IRA’s bomb attack on the Thatcher Cabinet at Brighton in October 1984 - was authored by Andrew Tyler,

who had been a regular music writer at *NME* in the 1970s, before leaving the paper to report on contemporary social issues for mainstream news outlets, such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, as well as *Time Out*.<sup>122</sup> Tyler would, however, return to *NME* in the early Eighties as an occasional contributor of (non-music) articles, addressing social concerns, such as unemployment, drugs, and the resurgence of the far right.<sup>123</sup> By November 1984, then, Tyler had acquired a certain profile, at *NME*, for social and political commentary, and was seen, says Stuart Bailie (who wrote for *NME* in the late 1980s and early 1990s) as “more like a news reporter who dropped in and out of the *NME*” rather than an in-house music writer.<sup>124</sup> Deploying Tyler (rather than one of the paper’s music writers) to address the “Troubles”, then, would afford the paper’s next major article on this topic more gravitas, enabling *NME* to engage with the issue more directly. I will address this article here.

#### **1984: “Troops out? ... Who can argue?”**

Tyler’s four-page piece, which was signposted via a striking cover-line on the issue’s front-page, reading: “Gunpowder! Northern Ireland - A Suspect Device?”, appeared three weeks after the IRA’s bomb attack on the Thatcher Cabinet at Brighton’s Grand Hotel (on 12 October 1984), which took the lives of five people and injured thirty others. The attack provoked widespread anger in Britain, and prompted public calls, from figures such as Lord Denning, for the perpetrators to be “hanged for high treason”: “They are just as guilty as Guy Fawkes was 380 years ago”, said Denning after the attack.<sup>125</sup> This, then, was the immediate context for the *NME*’s emotive cover line, invoking Fawkes’ “Gunpowder plot”. Although it is difficult to ascertain the process by which the piece came about (Tyler passed away in 2017), Spencer suggests that “it was probably Andrew’s idea”, pointing to the paper’s practice, at the time, of asking writers to provide “the lead as to what [*NME*] should be doing”.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, in Tyler’s posthumously published memoir, he reflects on his mid-Eighties contributions to *NME*, noting that the paper “was receptive to substantial pieces from me that hit the right socio-political spot”, before citing - specifically - an article that “looked at Northern Ireland politics” (Tyler, 2017, p. 111), which suggests that he proposed the piece.

In any case, *NME* would explicitly link the article - via a bold-type byline - with the (then very recent) Brighton bomb, whilst querying the current consensus on the conflict: “We all know the IRA are nuts, they bomb Tory cabinets don’t they? But are they also nuts in Barnsley, Brixton, Toxteth, Moss Side ... Or is there a lesson to be learnt from life in Northern Ireland. Andrew Tyler went to Derry to find out”.<sup>127</sup> Although the piece is trailed, in the byline, as a visit to Derry, it details the author’s time in both Derry and Belfast. However, Tyler states that it was in Derry that he “spent most of [his] time for this article” - citing his “four days” in that city - and an image from Bloody Sunday (illustrating the centre-pages of the piece), highlights this locale.<sup>128</sup>

Crucially, the account is framed as an intervention against the sorts of coverage that the conflict typically received in the British media, with Tyler critiquing press and broadcast accounts. In this context, he notes that the “Troubles” are “explained to the mainland [sic] public by a particular kind of media coverage designed to spread weariness. All sections of the popular press practise it but none more efficiently than television news which offers up *the* most precise propaganda images ... These Irish, the images are saying, they are fucking crazy animals. We hold them apart”.<sup>129</sup>

In countering this, the piece - which is written from, and addressed to, a community overtly hailed as “we English” - claims that media caricatures of the IRA as “twisted perverts” and “mindless hooligans” are at odds with “the British establishment’s own view”, citing a Defence Intelligence Report that characterised the IRA leadership as “intelligent, astute and experienced”.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, the article proceeds to invite sympathy for Sinn Féin by stressing the party’s commonalities with the cosmopolitan Labour left (a constituency with which *NME* was, of course, associated): “What we rarely get on the mainland is Sinn Féin’s avowed doctrine which, aside from the siren call for 32 county autonomy, also includes ... a range of gay, feminist and community-based policies that puts them roughly in the same camp as Livingstone’s GLC”.<sup>131</sup>

Such comments had the effect of steering *NME* away from the strictly class-based, anti-sectarian stance on the conflict that had been offered in 1980, intimating - instead - at inchoate affinities with Sinn Féin, by stressing aspects of the latter's outlook that echoed with that of *NME*. Indeed, the paper, via Tyler, expressed respect for (what it called) "the sophisticated line [of socialist thought] invoked by the likes of Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison", underlining this view by accentuating Sinn Féin's leftwards shift, and claiming a concomitant shift among Loyalist groups, leading Tyler to speculate that a future class-based coalition could fracture the violence and sectarianism associated with Northern Ireland. "In tandem with Sinn Féin's leftward hike", relayed Tyler, "there are factions of the key loyalist groups associated with violence - the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force - that are also beginning to deduce a class struggle, which would make not the Catholics their enemies but the big bosses and the British establishment".<sup>132</sup> This shift pointed, said Tyler, to what he called "a two-way drift" away from sectarian politics and towards "the prospect of a Catholic-Protestant working class coalescence that has traditionally been considered 'impossible'".<sup>133</sup> If this passage returned the piece to the politics proffered by Martin, then the ensuing portions would reorient it again towards a more Republican outlook.

Whilst in Derry, Tyler is introduced, through the former Undertones guitarist, John O'Neill, to Christie Tucker, who is described as an "IRA activist" that has spent "eight years in Long Kesh"; Tucker, in turn, acquaints Tyler with Tommy Collins, who, as *NME* notes, had been engaged in "armed struggle" before being imprisoned for IRA-related activities.<sup>134</sup> They then both converse with Tyler, "on their own behalf, not for any republican organisation".<sup>135</sup> In this context, Tyler relates that the "roots of anger" for both men lay in "the civil rights era" of the late 1960s.<sup>136</sup>

Perhaps in an effort to offset orthodox commentaries on the “Troubles”, the article is not particularly critical of IRA actions, endeavouring instead to clarify (what it calls) the “announced republican strategy”, which is “not”, stresses Tyler, “to harass random Protestants” but “to hit select targets, such as the British soldiers who were killed just before and after I was in town”.<sup>137</sup> The piece also seeks to repudiate received ideas about republicans being socially conservative or sectarian, noting that neither of its republican interviewees “hold Vatican views on abortion of contraception” or “have hate for Protestants”.<sup>138</sup> Tyler does observe, however, that Tucker and Collins “continue to support the Provos’ war against the bulwarks of unionism”.<sup>139</sup>

Towards the end of the fourth - and final - page of the piece, Tyler ponders, as an (apparent) afterthought: “But what of the fears on the Protestant side”.<sup>140</sup> This question is followed by a relatively short interview with Gregory Campbell, who at the time was a Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) councillor on Derry City Council, and is described, in the piece, as the “chief political mouthpiece” of Derry Protestants.<sup>141</sup> While Tucker and Collins - who are granted a much longer interview - appear in a large photograph, the succinct section on Campbell lacks any corresponding image. In its absence, he receives an unflattering narrative profile, with *NME* emphasising that Campbell “espoused the politics of thuggery”, and noting that this “turned” Tyler’s “stomach”.<sup>142</sup> “On such a dismal note we cannot bring this piece to a close”, reflects Tyler, before wondering: “Troops Out? Who can credibly argue against it?”.<sup>143</sup>

With its uneven handling of republicans and unionists, overt support for Troops Out, and gestures of affinity towards Sinn Féin, “Bomb Culture” signalled a shift in *NME*’s stance, with the paper assuming a partisan view. This provoked consternation among sections of *NME* readers in Northern Ireland. Stuart Bailie, a music journalist from Belfast (who later wrote for *NME* [1988-1996]), felt at the time that Tyler’s piece had espoused a “very heavy”, “hardline left” point of view: “essentially the message was ‘Troops Out’ ... And I remember at the time there were intakes of breath ...

in Belfast. It was like, ‘Oh Jesus, you know, this is what they [*NME*] think’”.<sup>144</sup> Similarly, Barry McIlheney, who at the time wrote for *Melody Maker*, and had been raised in Belfast, recalls discomfort at Tyler’s piece, and *NME*’s broader treatment of the “Troubles”. Reflecting on this in 2019, McIlheney explains:

“The basic problem with the *NME*’s coverage of the war in Ireland was that it automatically adopted the prevailing and simplistic pro-Republican narrative of the day. Broadly, if you were anti-apartheid and pro-Palestine - and who in their right mind wouldn’t be? - then you were by definition pro-Republican. Ergo anti-Unionist. Which meant you were clearly setting out your stall against a million people. Among them a host of music-loving, *NME*-reading, anti-apartheid, pro-Palestine kids such as me. So when something like Andrew Tyler’s infamous ‘Bomb Culture’ piece appeared ... it was hard not to feel that your favourite magazine in the world had already made its mind up and that ‘sorry son, but you’re no longer welcome here’”.<sup>145</sup>

Certainly the piece provoked a plethora letters, a number of which were printed across two issues of *NME*. Many of these took umbrage with Tyler’s view, expressing objection to the article’s portrayal of Ulster Protestants: “‘Pity the poor misguided protestants’ oozes like festering pus from your article Mr. Tyler”, observed one reader. Others sought to rebut the piece’s endorsement of Troops Out: “‘Troops out? Who can ... argue ...?’ I can, I’m British - I want to be British”. Elsewhere, the fact that Tyler had not been raised in Northern Ireland was framed as a problem by readers.<sup>146</sup> Other missives dismissed Tyler’s wish of a socialist drift among Loyalist groups (“there will never ever be a significant movement of Protestants towards full-scale Socialism”), whilst rejecting his claim that the republican movement was non-sectarian: “Sinn Féin’s support for the ‘armed struggle’ is a campaign of genocide against the Protestant population”.<sup>147</sup>

In light of the disquiet that had been generated, for some *NME* readers, by the republican leanings of the “Bomb Culture” piece - alongside the criticism that its author was not from Northern Ireland - it seems significant that the writer that acted as editor of the letters page in which the first batch of post-“Bomb Culture” letters appeared was Sean O’Hagan. The latter had not only been raised in Northern Ireland, but had grown up in a republican milieu.<sup>148</sup> O’Hagan explains that as a youth, during the early 1970s, he was often engaged - alongside his peers - in confrontations with the police and military: “I spent many a Saturday in the early 70s”, he recalls, “throwing stones and bottles at the RUC and British Army patrols that regularly skirted the housing estates, playing cat-and-mouse with the snatch squads who hit the ground running from the backs of Saracens and Land Rovers”.<sup>149</sup>

Deploying the paper’s sole writer who, at that time, came from a republican background in Northern Ireland to deal with the readers’s responses to “Bomb Culture” perhaps served to extend the shift - signalled in that piece - in *NME*’s stance on the conflict. Strikingly, O’Hagan dealt with the criticisms levelled at Tyler by citing the sectarianism that sparked the civil rights initiative in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, arguing, amongst other things, that: “the ‘No Surrender’ mob wish for a return to a past which included discrimination against Catholics when it came to jobs, homes and the right to a separate cultural identity”. He went on: “Your ‘Ulster will always be British’ tack is about as helpful as ‘No Surrender’ - at least Tyler presented a case whilst you fall back on the kind of sloganeering that helps no one, offers nothing and should have been ditched years ago”.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, the last letter that appeared in this “Gasbag” - and which served as the final word, so to speak - espoused a republican view:

“After your much-needed (but long overdue) article about the problems of Northern Ireland, I’m sure that you’ll receive many letters from outraged readers whose main contribution will

be a knee-jerk condemnation of your truthful and sympathetic portrayal of the Republican struggle. You will probably be denounced for speaking with IRA and Sinn Féin supporters, who will be predictably described as “Religious bigots, murderers and psychopaths” ... I would therefore like to say that your article was not only serious and intelligent, but also productive; it actually gave practical suggestions (eg the Troops Out movement) rather than indulging in an orgy of hand-wringing and empty moralising. It was also well-researched and (rare for the *NME*) unpretentious”.<sup>151</sup>

Not only was this letter granted a privileged place at the end of “Gasbag”, but it also received no remark from O’Hagan, thus implying endorsement. The readership’s reaction to “Bomb Culture” would, however, continue in the next week’s paper. Significantly, the first missive to appear there came from a musician, Paul Burgess (of the Belfast punk band, Ruefrefex), who explained that - prior to the publication of “Bomb Culture” - he had been contacted by *NME* with a view to him accompanying Tyler in Belfast:

“When researching your piece for ‘Bomb Culture’, you professed a wish to spend some time in Belfast with myself as your guide. However your time in Derry overran and you returned to write the article, as I feared, comparatively ‘mono-informed’”.<sup>152</sup>

Burgess then chastised the paper’s inadequate engagement with “the Protestant working classes”, suggesting that its effort to cover the latter via “a brief drive down the Shankill Road, and a talk with some hard line Paisleyite” was - “in an article of this size and importance” - “criminal negligence”. His main objection to the piece, then, centred on “what it omits”. “Anyway Andrew”, Burgess exclaimed, “next time make the time, huh? And let them speak for themselves”.<sup>153</sup> Another let-

ter from Belfast expressed a similar view, claiming that Tyler was “risking his reputation by spouting about Ireland after a two-minute visit”, before concluding: “Why is it that the only protestant permitted to speak in the article was the most reactionary you could dig up?”.<sup>154</sup>

This was, perhaps, the first time that *NME* had been chastised for the *way* in which it had handled the conflict, for most complaints on this topic in the past had addressed the paper’s *lack* of attention to it. The Tyler piece, though - with its overt asymmetries - provoked criticism not only for its preferential view of Republicans, but also for the way it portrayed Protestants. It is perhaps worth noting, in this context, that Tyler recalled, in his memoir, that his research for the piece included a meeting with an “English soldier who’d been posted to Northern Ireland”, and who had “a compelling story to tell”.<sup>155</sup> If such an interview did indeed take place during the trip, it would not appear in the article.

Although it had taken *NME* four years - following the “Fantasy and Reality” feature - to return to Northern Ireland, the paper would come back to the topic much more quickly after the “Bomb Culture” piece. As mentioned above, a letter had appeared in *NME* in 1984 enquiring why the paper had not interviewed Gerry Adams, then President of Sinn Féin, or Danny Morrison, who at the time was Sinn Féin’s director of publicity. Significantly, in 1986, the paper would seek to speak with Adams, after contacting Morrison.<sup>156</sup> This endeavour would lead to the curation of *NME*’s special issue on Northern Ireland, which came together through rather complex (not to say contradictory) means. I will explore this issue here.

### **1986: “Perilous waters ... without a map”**

*NME*’s coverage of the conflict peaked with the publication of a special themed issue on this topic in 1986. The driving force behind this issue, which featured five distinct articles focused on Northern Ireland, seems to have been Stuart Cosgrove, who was then a leading figure at the paper through

his role as media editor.<sup>157</sup> However, following Spencer's departure as chief editor in 1985,<sup>158</sup> Cosgrove had accrued even greater power in the *NME* office, emerging as a dominant voice after the appointment of Spencer's replacement, Ian Pye, who was seen by staff as an ineffectual editor.<sup>159</sup> Indeed, though Pye was formally in charge of *NME*, Cosgrove would often act, suggests Gavin Martin - who was then a senior writer at the paper - as "the major force in deciding editorial policy".<sup>160</sup>

During this period, Cosgrove evidently felt that *NME* "should do more on Ireland", sensing, along with O'Hagan, that "this subject was being virtually ignored", not least by the contemporary British left (with which the paper was, of course, bound up), who often seemed, says Cosgrove, "reluctant to deal with Northern Ireland",<sup>161</sup> a point confirmed by the fact that Britain's leading left-wing journal, the *New Left Review*, failed to publish a discrete piece on this topic during the 1980s.<sup>162</sup>

As Cosgrove explains, there were two specific motivations for *NME* extending its coverage of the "Troubles". First, there was, he says, "a vested interest element to this for the paper" in that a number of bands then popular with *NME* readers hailed from the island of Ireland and had, in various ways, invoked the conflict, and thus some coverage of this was required to contextualise their work.<sup>163</sup> Second, Cosgrove felt, in his capacity as media editor, that it was part of his "job spec" (as he puts it) to address contemporary media issues, and "one of the biggest [such] issues around", he says, was media coverage of Northern Ireland. "The more establishment mainstream media [at that time] were rock solid scared of Ireland", says Cosgrove.<sup>164</sup> In this context, his wish for *NME* to address the conflict was informed by a broader concern with "subjects that the mainstream media seemed frightened of", with Northern Ireland becoming, during that period, the principal current-affairs issue that "spooked people".<sup>165</sup> Part of the immediate context for this - in the months leading up to *NME*'s special issue - lay in the BBC's *Real Lives* crisis, which had unfolded during the previous year.<sup>166</sup>

This crisis centred on a planned BBC television documentary on the “Troubles” entitled *Real Lives: the Edge of the Union* that (controversially) included an interview with Martin McGuinness, who at the time was, of course, thought to be IRA’s Chief of Staff. Prior to the announcement of the film, Margaret Thatcher had made a (now famous) speech, calling on media to “starve the terrorist ... of the oxygen of publicity”,<sup>167</sup> which sent a clear signal to journalists seeking to engage with the conflict. Her government would, indeed, subsequently intervene with the *Real Lives* film, leading to its withdrawal, and prompting a highly publicised BBC strike.<sup>168</sup>

The controversy had begun when the (then) British Home Secretary, Leon Brittan - who felt that an interview with McGuinness could “give succour” to Sinn Féin and the IRA - expressed his concerns to the BBC, whose Board of Governors conceded that the programme should not be broadcast in its intended form.<sup>169</sup> This, in turn, provoked a strike, in which “2,000 BBC journalists and staff staged an unprecedented walk out and NCA [news and current affairs] programming on television and radio was blacked out. The BBC World Service ... cancelled all of its news programmes for the first time in its history”.<sup>170</sup> Although the planned programme, including the McGuinness interview, would eventually be shown, the issues that the controversy raised - about the media’s capacity to offer coverage of Irish republicans, such as Sinn Féin - became the key censorship issue in Britain at that time (as evidenced by the introduction of the “broadcasting ban” in 1988).

The *Real Lives* crisis was, then, part of the immediate context for *NME*’s 1986 special issue. Planning for the issue appears to have begun with Cosgrove seeking an interview with the (then) current leadership of Sinn Féin.<sup>171</sup> The “motivation” for this was - in the words of the former *NME* writer Lucy O’Brien - to “get the voice of the IRA and Sinn Féin” in the paper, and thus afford them “a platform, at a time when they were being denied a voice”.<sup>172</sup> This suggests, then, that the inclusion of such views in the *NME* did not constitute an overt endorsement; rather it sought to ensure that

these perspectives were publicly aired. In this context, Spencer reflects that, during his editorship of *NME* (1978-85), none of the writers “held any brief for Sinn Féin”. “I can’t think of anybody ever sticking up for those people”, he relates, only conceding that there might have been “a sort of possibly misplaced sense of romanticism” towards Irish republicanism.<sup>173</sup> Cosgrove extends this point, explaining that while *NME* was “not a republican paper”, “it was perceived that republican communities ... were more attuned to the values of the *NME*”. “Of the various traditions within Northern Ireland”, he suggests, “the republican movement was closer to the *NME*”, not least because Unionist politics “tended to be further to the right”.<sup>174</sup>

In any case, Cosgrove made contact with Morrison at Sinn Féin’s office in Belfast, with a view to meeting Adams.<sup>175</sup> However, this plan would gradually switch, says Cosgrove, “for a whole range of reasons”, not least because *NME* wished, in his words, “to report from Derry” (because of its musical associations with bands such as The Undertones and That Petrol Emotion), more than Belfast.<sup>176</sup> Cosgrove’s interview would, in turn, be with Martin McGuinness, a native and resident of Derry. McGuinness was also, as Cosgrove notes, “a hugely controversial character, a hugely divisive character”, and a figure, he says, “that the British state truly hated”. In this context, “getting an interview with him wasn’t simple”, says Cosgrove: “we had to negotiate it”.<sup>177</sup> Once arranged, Cosgrove travelled to Derry, where the interview was staged in the city’s Bogside, a republican enclave. Cosgrove recounts the complex arrangements that preceded the rendezvous:

“I was taken to a small house in the Bogside ... [and] they put a kind of blindfold around me ... over my eyes ... to slightly disorientate me to where I was going, and then I was led out the back door, and up through a back stairwell of a garden, and into another house, and then round another house, and up to a third house, and then brought out to this road where a car was parked. I get up to the top and I’m put into the back of this car. By this time, the face mask has come off. And I’m sitting right behind this man, who’s in the passenger seat, and

I'm in the back seat ... The guy in the passenger seat was Martin McGuinness ... So we began the interview".<sup>178</sup>

The conversation was marked, says Cosgrove, by "a degree of caution, even nervousness on both sides". McGuinness seemed "very tense", he reflects, noting the "numerous death threats" that the latter had received at the time. Similarly, Cosgrove was, not unexpectedly, quite anxious: "Shitting it' might be the best colloquial expression", he recalls.<sup>179</sup> Consequently, the dynamics of the ensuing interview would be somewhat circumscribed. In this context, Cosgrove explains: "I wasn't going to exactly argue or threaten him or anything like that 'cos it was not that kind of environment". However, it seems that there was also a degree of compatibility between much of what McGuinness said - in terms of his political views - and what Cosgrove at the time felt. Reflecting on this (with more than three decades hindsight), Cosgrove suggests that:

"The only thing I can remember sort of disagreeing with him about [was the phrase] 'I take my politics from home, and my religion from Rome', and whilst it's a nice little kind of catchphrase, I kind of felt it let him off the hook on what I would call the less savoury elements of kind of Vatican theology at that time, issues like abortion or contraception".<sup>180</sup>

For Cosgrove, these were issues that "made you question whether as a progressive politician taking your religion from Rome is always necessarily the best thing to do". "But that was the only thing that I remember him saying that I felt was contentious", Cosgrove says. "The rest of the things were kind of fairly mainstream republican politics ... I'm a Scottish republican myself so I didn't find a lot of it kind of challenging".<sup>181</sup> To be fair to Cosgrove, though, he did refer, during the interview, to the fact that his cousin, Philip Geddes, had been killed in the IRA bombing of Harrods in London in 1983. Although McGuinness' response to this point was, he says, "respectful", Cosgrove decided - "for reasons now buried in time" - to exclude this exchange from the article.<sup>182</sup>

After the interview had concluded, Cosgrove evidently informed McGuinness of his wish for the published article to be foregrounded on the *NME* cover, suggesting that the potential for this would be assisted by a striking image that evoked the interview's themes. Recounting this point, Cosgrove explains:

“I said to Martin McGuinness, ‘Martin, one of the things that we actually need is photographs’. And I said ‘there’s a debate that we might put this on the front page’. I always knew that was going to be fairly tricky because the *NME* didn’t really like politics on the front cover, they preferred bands. And so I had this conversation with him and I said: ‘We’re looking for what might make a good photograph for the *NME*’, and he said to me, jokingly: ‘Do you not think I cut it as an *NME* front cover star?’ And I said: ‘well, no, not really’. And he said ‘what could you do?’ And I said ‘I know it may be a wee bit of a cliché, but we could take some young active service volunteers and maybe photograph them against the graffiti or the Derry walls or something like that’ ... So we chatted about that and within maybe something like ten minutes his team had assembled four young men in balaclavas who were armed. They were armed volunteers”.<sup>183</sup>

At this point, the photographer who had accompanied Cosgrove to Derry took shots of the four figures for the proposed *NME* cover, although none of these subsequently appeared in the issue, either on the front cover (which in the end featured the Irish boxer, Barry McGuigan), or in the McGuinness piece.<sup>184</sup> Instead, the interview was illustrated with a conventional photograph of McGuinness outside a republican information centre in Derry.

Before addressing the article, it is necessary to first of all note that prior to its publication, a significant change emerged in *NME*'s conceptualisation of the piece, with the paper electing to append an

additional interview - with an Ulster Unionist MP - in order to afford some ostensible balance to its McGuinness coverage.<sup>185</sup> As Cosgrove explains, this wish to conjoin the McGuinness piece with a corresponding exchange with a Unionist spokesperson “came about out of the crude kind of BBC idea of balance”, and hence was “a fudge”, in the sense of an unsatisfactory equivocation.<sup>186</sup> The paper would, then, seek to amend its initial (“underground”-informed) impetus for the McGuinness interview by re-conceiving the coverage, from an editorial perspective, within a quasi-public service framework, and with concern for “balance”.

This shift appears to have emerged from the office of the then editor, Ian Pye. Mark Sinker, a contributor to *NME* in the 1980s, suggests that Pye often “dealt with conflict” in the paper by “moving around” articles in “a bureaucratic way, so that they balanced”.<sup>187</sup> In the ensuing effort to offset the McGuinness interview by adding an exchange with a Unionist MP, Gavin Martin was dispatched to Belfast to speak with Peter Robinson, the (then) deputy leader of the DUP who at the time was seen, says Martin, as a Unionist equivalent of McGuinness. “They decided that they needed to leaven it”, relates Martin, “and put the other side of the equation”. This wish to extend coverage to (what Martin calls) “both sides of the thing” by “represent[ing] two sides of the political set up” in Northern Ireland was,<sup>188</sup> of course, entirely reasonable, particularly in light of the criticism that the paper had received, in 1984, for its asymmetric handling of the “Troubles”. The plan to append the Robinson piece was, nonetheless, problematic in two key ways. First, as Martin explains, the plan for him to conduct the interview was “a rather crass bit of typecasting”: “the nominal Protestant in the office was seconded to go over” and meet Robinson.<sup>189</sup> Second, it is clear that Martin, in marked contrast to Cosgrove (who had, of course, sought to interview McGuinness, and sympathised with at least some of his views), had no wish to speak with Robinson, and was not, as Cosgrove notes, “a fan” of the DUP.<sup>190</sup>

Moreover, while Martin recognised that part of the reasoning for the McGuinness article emerged from a concern with censorship,<sup>191</sup> he is, in retrospect, quite sceptical of the coverage. “What the hell was the *NME* doing, really, interviewing these people?”, he wonders, adding: “Perilous waters to be treading in without a map”. “What was the goal or the aim?”, asks Martin, expressing acute regret for his involvement in the piece: “It makes me sick to my stomach to think that ... we were giving propaganda space to these two poisonous men”.<sup>192</sup> Whether or not *NME* should have offered a voice to such figures, it is clear that the reason for including the Robinson interview (to contrive a sort of balance) was in the end undermined by the fact that Cosgrove’s account of McGuinness was quite sympathetic, while Martin’s portrait of Robinson was deeply hostile; thus, if “balance” was achieved, it was only via the fact that both figures appeared, rather than through the means by which they were handled or viewed.

This points to a crucial flaw in the special issue: *NME* set out, in this effort, to critique mainstream coverage of the conflict, and afford space to sidelined views (specifically those of Irish republicans). However, in the process of production, the paper was repositioned towards a (more) “public-service” approach, albeit unsatisfactorily. This goes to the heart of a key dilemma at *NME*: was it a counter-cultural platform (like the “underground” press on which it drew), or was it a “public-service” outlet, addressing issues in quasi-balanced ways. Whilst the paper expressed emphatic views - through a partisan lens - on key political themes (such as the 1984-85 miners’ strike, or Apartheid in South Africa), it could not, on the question of Northern Ireland, be unequivocal, which is, of course, not unsurprising, given the highly binarised character of the conflict, and the way that it was perceived in Britain.

This wish to appear “balanced” was rendered explicit in the paper’s layout and presentation of the McGuinness and Robinson interviews, which appeared - in the end - as a single piece, with a shared byline, on the same double-page spread, as if the interviews had been conceived and conducted at

the same time, thus bequeathing a veneer of (preplanned) editorial/ideological balance on *NME*'s part. Ironically, though, the contrived proximity of the published interviews had the effect of amplifying the prevailing predilections of the *NME* office at that time, which - whilst not overtly republican or pro-IRA - were perceptibly more disposed to the radicalism of Sinn Féin than the conservatism of the DUP.

The paper's preferences were pronounced across the McGuinness/Robinson piece. Even its byline displayed a subtle bias, chronicling that Cosgrove "met with McGuinness in the Bogside", whilst Martin "interviewed Robinson at Stormont".<sup>193</sup> This is underscored by certain graphic qualities. Each side of the double-page spread is illustrated with two images; the left, focused on McGuinness, features a photo of the famous "Free Derry" wall, as well as a middle-distance shot of McGuinness (taken by *NME*), wearing an ordinary sweater, and facing the camera, outside a drab building (with mesh windows), whose signage reads: "Republican information centre". Conversely, the Robinson piece, on the right-hand page, is illustrated with a (Press Association) close-up of a besuited, bespectacled Robinson, looking somewhat stern, and glancing off camera, alongside an image of Belfast City Hall, bedecked in a banner that reads: "Belfast Says No", and captioned with the (at the time) widely-circulated joke: "But the man from Del Monte says 'Yes!'".<sup>194</sup>

Whilst the respective photographs of McGuinness and Robinson present a clear contrast, the distinction between (and positioning of) the location shots is more striking, with the "Free Derry" wall appearing at the top left-hand side of the double-page feature (thus framing the interviews), while the "Belfast Says No" photo is placed at the bottom right-hand side, thus pictorially punctuating the piece. The geo-political binaries invoked here (Derry/Belfast, republicanism/unionism) thus commence with an image conjuring "freedom", and culminate in one connoting negation.

This visual scheme is echoed in the respective interviews. Whilst the McGuinness piece does not shy away from his association with paramilitary activism (noting that he is "alleged ... to be Chief

of Staff of the IRA”),<sup>195</sup> the article is quite sympathetic. The interview explores four key themes: the mainstream media’s coverage of the conflict (and its treatment of Sinn Féin); the legitimacy of political violence; McGuinness’ political formation; and the perceived tensions between Catholicism and socialism.

The feature begins with a critique of media accounts of Sinn Féin, referencing the *Real Lives* film, and reflecting on the restricted coverage received by the republican movement, whilst stressing *NME*’s wish to intervene against mainstream reportage. Thus, the article explains that “Whilst the Provos engage in a war with the British army, Sinn Féin struggle to promote their Republican socialist cause against an establishment media which is directly opposed to all they stand for”.<sup>196</sup> If the tone here invites sympathy, it also suggests affinities between the outlook of *NME* and that of Sinn Féin, both of whom, at the time, saw themselves as espousing a “socialist cause against an establishment media”. However, the key way in which *NME* addressed the conflict - in this special issue - was via an anti-censorship stance; rather than overtly taking sides, then, the paper set out a case for granting space to the republican view, on the grounds that it was more marginalised (or mischaracterised) in the mainstream mediascape. In this context, Cosgrove cites McGuinness, in the piece, explaining: “there is very heavy censorship of the Sinn Féin position, of the Republican position generally, and ... people haven’t had the opportunity to make a fair assessment based on the facts. The media has not given Irish Republican spokespersons the opportunity to articulate our policies, in the same way they have afforded opportunities to, for example, Ian Paisley and the Unionists”. Consequently, for McGuinness, “the Republican position is virtually unknown”.<sup>197</sup> The latter also points, in the piece, to overt censorship of Irish republicans on British media platforms, citing the apparent practice of “British newspapers and British-based television companies making programmes about Ireland without ever contacting a spokesperson for the Republican movement”. In this way, the British Government had, McGuinness claimed: “very cleverly engineered a situation where we cannot either be seen or heard through the media”.<sup>198</sup> This, suggestion (that Sinn Féin had

been subjected to *de facto* censorship) was, of course, the very basis on which *NME* had conceived and arranged the interview, though this wish was, of course, obscured in the paper's gradual switch towards "balance".

A more problematic theme than this was, of course, that of paramilitary violence. On this point, McGuinness was unequivocal: "the IRA have the right to use armed struggle to end what I believe to be an evil form of government in this part of Ireland".<sup>199</sup> At this point in the exchange, Cosgrove poses a brace of questions related to the Harrods bombing. The first seems to hail very much from Cosgrove's own point of view (in that his cousin had been killed in the bombing): "many people, including people who are sympathetic to Republican politics, see your defence of the armed struggle as part of a policy of violent actions that includes indiscriminate bombings like that which occurred at Harrods". Cosgrove appends this point with his most combative query, probing Sinn Féin's socialism: "Surely you don't justify that [bombings of retail stores] in the name of socialism?" Stating that "the bombing of Harrods was seen by almost everyone in Britain as an atrocious act", Cosgrove suggests that the attack was "of a different status than violence between the IRA and members of the British army"<sup>200</sup> At this point, McGuinness replies that "After the Harrods bombing you did have a statement from the IRA saying that this particular type of operation was not acceptable to them". Thus, while McGuinness "unambiguously defends" (as Cosgrove notes in the piece) "the killing of 'legitimate targets'", he adds that "there shouldn't be civilian bombings" (a nuance that perhaps made the Sinn Féin position on paramilitary action more palatable to *NME*).<sup>201</sup>

The article then turns attention - on a separate page, thereby extending the interview in a manner not afforded to Robinson - to its final two points: McGuinness' political formation, and the possible tensions between Catholicism and socialism. The first of these undoubtedly has the effect of rendering McGuinness more relatable to the reader, and summons sympathy for the standpoint he has reached. "What personal events led to McGuinness' politicisation?", ponders Cosgrove. In turn,

McGuinness suggests that the “significant step” was “the situation at the time of the Civil Rights campaign in 1968 when we were demanding ‘one person, one vote’ and ... the Unionist establishment were not willing to grant it”. “That led”, he relates, “to a stand-up battle between the people of this area [the Bogside] and the RUC, who would constantly invade the area, beating people in their homes”. Such events had, he recalls: “a traumatic effect on me. Out of the trauma came a realisation that what was happening was not simply a question of the right to vote, it was about the national question, and my opinion that there would never be peace in this country until that was resolved”. This realisation was underlined, he says, on 9 August 1971, the day that internment was introduced in Northern Ireland. “My life changed absolutely [on that day]”, McGuinness says: “I was just working normally, like any other person; but then my home was raided by British soldiers”.<sup>202</sup> If the British government (as well as much of the country’s mainstream media) had sought - as Petti-grew observes - to “depoliticise and de-legitimise the motivations of the republican movement by representing republicans as ‘terrorists’ and ‘criminals’”,<sup>203</sup> then this piece - in common with the Tyler feature two years earlier - offered an alternate view, ascribing reason to republicanism.

The final topic explored by *NME* in the piece is how McGuinness reconciled Catholic teachings with socialist policies. In this context, Cosgrove wondered if the historical association of Irish republicanism with both Catholicism and socialism contained “a contradiction”. At this point, McGuinness deployed the above-mentioned line - “we take our religion from Rome and our politics from home” - with which Cosgrove took most issue. Nevertheless, McGuinness did concede, in the interview, to encountering certain dilemmas in assimilating his faith and politics. “I have problems within the church with certain aspects of Catholic theology that do not square with my socialism”, he explained, pointing to the view of the Church on “homosexuals” and “divorcees”.<sup>204</sup> Such concessions (whether consciously or not) helped bequeath a view of Sinn Féin that was perhaps less unpalatable to *NME* readers.

The tone of the Robinson piece is quite different. It begins with a quote from the latter invoking his “love” for “the monarchy, the flag, the symbols of the state” (situating him in opposition to the values of *NME*), while Martin informs readers that “Robinson is so keen to prove his Britishness that he ... will fight against British law in order to stay British!” In marked contrast to the amenable and open-minded introduction that *NME* afforded McGuinness, then, Robinson is flagrantly mocked. At the same time, though, Martin is keen to castigate - in a manner which mirrored much of his commentary on the conflict (in his writing for *NME*) - both the DUP and Sinn Féin: “Robinson’s brand of politics”, he explained, “is every bit as dogmatic and dangerous as Republican extremism”.<sup>205</sup>

It seems clear at this point, then, that Cosgrove and Martin hold different views: the former had not characterised McGuinness - who, as Sinn Féin deputy, and alleged Chief of Staff of the IRA, could be viewed as an “extremist” - as remotely “dogmatic” or “dangerous”. In contrast, Martin claims that Robinson’s “fiery rhetoric and barely veiled threats” had served to exacerbate the conflict, arguing that “hypocrisy, contradiction and illogic are recurring undertones in [Robinson]’s polemic”. Martin also makes a point of stressing Robinson’s support for the Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign, an initiative that would have been starkly at odds with the values of *NME*.<sup>206</sup> In what is perhaps the most damning line in the piece, though, Martin relates that Robinson “looks the politician most likely to cross over” the “fine line between militant Unionism and paramilitary activity”.<sup>207</sup>

Thus, though McGuinness was widely assumed, at that time, to be IRA Chief of Staff, relatively little attention is afforded to this in the piece, while special reference is made, on the adjacent page, to Robinson’s paramilitary potential. If some sort of “balance” had been achieved, then, by adding the Robinson piece, it was only through simple inclusion, rather than treatment or handling. Of course, *NME* was not, at the end of the day, a “public-service” outlet, but a left-leaning, youth-cultural platform with a special debt to the “underground” press. Thus, it was unlikely to be equitable in appraising the DUP against Sinn Féin. In the process of producing the 1986 special issue, then, the pa-

per became caught in a conundrum regarding its own ethos and codes, initially viewing the coverage through an oppositional lens, before switching, once the McGuinness piece was complete, towards a sort of “public service” stance. Ironically, though, the adjacent placing of the McGuinness and Robinson interviews that this shift brought about only served to foreground *NME*’s preferences. This would, in turn, prompt multiple letters of complaint.

Significantly, Sean O’Hagan would (again) respond to the readers’ views. The first such letter (from a reader in Lossiemouth in Scotland) enquired: “When will hacks of the music press and *NME* in particular stop pontificating on “the troubles” in N. Ireland? We read article after article full of endless cliches that say and solve nothing”. Such articles “invariably adopt”, the reader claimed, “the trendy pro-Left wing (ie Republican) stance and portray any Loyalist viewpoint as the ramblings of some neo-fascist crackpot”. The reader then chastised the “hacks” who had issued commentary on the conflict for being “naively ignorant of the facts and totally unqualified to write about the problems of Ulster”.<sup>208</sup> O’Hagan’s response stressed the key aim of the special issue. “The N. Ireland articles weren’t out to ‘solve’ anything”, relayed O’Hagan, but were instead “an attempt to rupture the prevailing media silence that hangs over Britain’s longest war”. With regards to the view that *NME*’s writers were “ignorant” and “unqualified”, O’Hagan explained: “Both Gavin and myself were born and bred in Northern Ireland”.<sup>209</sup>

A similar missive (from a reader in Edinburgh) staged a short parody of the McGuinness/Robinson interviews, reducing the exchanges to a pair of highly exaggerated questions in order to highlight the paper’s bias. A comically uncritical one for McGuinness (“Well, Martin, tell us how Sinn Féin has been pursuing the struggle for a free and just Ireland ridden of British oppression?”), was followed by a menacingly sectarian one for Robinson - “You raving Ulster proddies are all the same. The sooner our boys, the Freedom Fighters in green, get you, the better!” - before the reader exclaimed, in their own voice: “And Republicanism has got bugger all to do with socialism”.<sup>210</sup> This

question of whether Sinn Féin could be considered socialist was raised in many readers' letters following the special issue. In this context, one reader (from Belfast) explained: "I am sickened to read that Martin McGuinness in any way considers himself a "socialist". His references to "our socialism" are McGuinness-speak for largely unjustified acts of murder and intimidation, part of a concerted campaign of violence". The reader then went on to include Robinson in a socialist critique of sectarianism: "people like McGuinness and Peter Robinson promote the politics of working class division along sectarian lines ... The cause of socialism in the province will be continually held back as long as it is associated with people like McGuinness".<sup>211</sup>

While Gavin Martin would, at least in retrospect, express a similar view, O'Hagan endeavoured, at the time, to advance a case for Sinn Féin's socialism. "I personally think", he replied, "the issue of self-determination for Ireland has a great deal to do with socialism and the idea of Britain dividing a country, then upholding the "Britishness" of the colonial state is, surely, the vast antithesis of socialism". For O'Hagan, then, "the *ideals*" that had been "espouse[d]" by "the republican movement" should "find favour with any socialist".<sup>212</sup> Three other letters appeared in that week's issue, sequenced after the critiques outlined above, and which praised *NME*'s coverage in the special issue, stressing that it was "refreshing to find argument and analysis from both points of view", and applauding the paper for the "time, space and group of writers" that it had "devoted" to the topic.<sup>213</sup> More letters appeared in the following weeks, including one (from Kenilworth in England) that took exception to *NME*'s practice of deploying "Gasbag" to host debates on the "Troubles": "When I pick up the *NME* it pisses me off to find a letters page devoted entirely to Northern Ireland", the reader explained.<sup>214</sup>

In the six years since 1980, then, "Gasbag" had gone from registering readers' complaints about *NME*'s lack of engagement with the conflict, to printing claims that it had granted too much space to this issue. Indeed, the paper would shortly thereafter start to withdraw from this topic, publishing

its final focused piece on the conflict in March 1987, which addressed (again) the issue of inadequate media coverage, describing Northern Ireland as “the British media’s enduring blind spot”.<sup>215</sup> This article thus returned *NME*’s engagement with the “Troubles” to the debate initiated by the reader from Derry in August 1980,<sup>216</sup> exploring a theme (the paucity of media reports) that served as a safe and uncontroversial means by which to address the conflict. Subsequent invocations of the “Troubles” were, though, restricted to *en passant* comments by outspoken writers such as Steven Wells.<sup>217</sup> Indeed, when major events related to the conflict occurred, such as the Gibraltar killings in March 1988, or the “broadcasting ban” in October 1988, they were addressed via short news items, rather than lengthy articles.<sup>218</sup> Furthermore, *NME* would turn, at this time, away from politics *per se*, following a series of personnel changes that its publisher, IPC, had forced on the paper in reaction to its front-page endorsement of Neil Kinnock in the 1987 General Election (about which IPC was “apoplectic”), and in the aftermath of a withdrawn censorship cover that saw many staff, including Cosgrove, leave *NME*.<sup>219</sup> By the late 1980s, then, the paper had exchanged what Simon Reynolds calls its “highly politicised” ethos for “a more tabloid, populist” approach.<sup>220</sup>

## Conclusion

Although *NME* strove to engage with the Irish conflict, it could not achieve consensus on it, whether among staff or readers. As Danny Kelly observes, coverage of any social conflict that is “in the nature of civil war” (such as that of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland) will necessarily attract claims that it is “biased one way or the other”. “That’s the problem of reporting what’s going on in Northern Ireland”, he explains: “whichever way your piece leaned, you were going to get criticism”.<sup>221</sup> Moreover, Kelly questions the very possibility of a popular-cultural publication, such as *NME*, engaging with what he calls “serious” politics, suggesting that while “all writing about art has to be ‘small p’ political”, when such discourse becomes “properly political, overtly political, ‘big P’ political” - particularly in the pages of the music press - it seems, in his words, “clunky”.<sup>222</sup>

Nevertheless, as the interview insights and archival evidence offered here make clear, *NME* at least sought - and often struggled - to supply coverage of the conflict at a time when many “serious” publications eschewed it. This ranged from evasion (i.e. not commenting) to redirection (encouraging readers to speak), and from criticisms of mainstream media - and expressions of anti-sectarian, class-based views – towards endorsements of “Troops Out”, and issuing of affinities with republicanism, before the paper returned to the safer terrain of media critique. Its shifting views and approaches point to an awkward tension, at the heart of *NME*, between an aspiration to act as an oppositional outlet (for example by endorsing Irish republicanism), and an obligation to appear as a public-service platform (by presenting both republican and unionist views). The fact that *NME* did not overlook the conflict, nor adhere to the simplistic coverage offered by much of the mainstream press,<sup>223</sup> is surely noteworthy. Perhaps if other media outlets had followed suit, the British public (both at the time and in the context of the recent “Brexit” crisis) might have accrued a more nuanced conception of the conflict, and Anglo-Irish relations in general.<sup>224</sup>

## References

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<sup>1</sup> This title serves as a self-conscious echo of Robert Savage’s study of the BBC and the Northern Ireland conflict. See Robert Savage, *The BBC’s “Irish Troubles”: Television, conflict and Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of such work, see Caroline Magennis, “In Derry Girls and Milkman, teenage girls dance through the Troubles”, *Prospect*, 4 March 2019; Alison Flood, “David Keenan’s Troubles novel For the Good Times wins Gordon Burn prize”, *Guardian*, 11 October 2019.

<sup>3</sup> David Keenan, “Top 10 books about the Troubles”, *Guardian*, 30 January 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Wright, “Is an Irish backstop breakthrough on the horizon”, *The Times*, 11 September 2019; Patrick Cockburn, “If the Troubles return after Brexit, it won’t just be because of the Irish border issue”, *Independent*, 31 August 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Hutton, “Thatcher ‘switches off’ when Northern Ireland comes up”, *Irish Times*, 28 December 2019.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Porter and Denis O’Hearn, “New Left Podsnappery: The British Left and Ireland”, *New Left Review*, July-August, 1995, p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> *Festival 40: What do you think of it so far?*, BBC2, 29 August 1976. Mackintosh’s comments in this broadcast were reprinted in the Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, *The British Media and Ireland. Truth: the First Casualty*, London, Information on Ireland, 1978, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>  
<sup>9</sup> David Miller, *Don’t Mention the War: Northern Ireland, Propaganda and the Media*, London, Pluto, 1994, p. 3.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, *The British Media and Ireland*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Liz Curtis, *Ireland: the Propaganda War. The Media and the "battle for hearts and minds"*, London, Pluto, 1984, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Hamilton-Tweedale, *The British press and Northern Ireland: a case study in the reporting of violent political conflict*, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1987, p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, David Butler, *The Trouble with Reporting Northern Ireland: the British State, the Broadcast Media and Nonfictional Representation of the Conflict*, Aldershot, Avebury, 1995; Curtis, *Ireland: the Propaganda War*; Miller, *Don't Mention the War*; Bill Rolston (ed.), *The Media and Northern Ireland: Covering the Troubles*, London, Palgrave, 1991; Bill Rolston and David Miller (eds.) *War and Words: the Northern Ireland Media Reader*, Belfast, Beyond the Pale, 1996; Savage, *The BBC's "Irish Troubles"*.

<sup>16</sup> Max Pettigrew, "The 'oxygen of publicity' and the suffocation of censorship: national newspaper representations of the British broadcasting ban (1988-94)", in Graham Dawson, Jo Dover and Stephen Hopkins (eds.) *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain: Impacts, Engagements, Legacies and Memories*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, p. 227. For work that focuses on broadcasting, see, for instance, Gary Edgerton, "Quelling the 'oxygen of publicity': British broadcasting and 'the Troubles' during the Thatcher years", *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1996), pp. 115-31; Lesley Henderson, David Miller and Jacqueline Reilly, *Speak No Evil: the British broadcasting ban, the media and the conflict in Ireland*, Glasgow, Glasgow University Media Group, 1990; Rita Lago, "Interviewing Sinn Féin under the new political environment: a comparative analysis of interviews with Sinn Féin on British television", *Media, Culture and Society* 20: 4 (1998), pp. 677-85; Savage, *The BBC's "Irish Troubles"*; Miller, *Don't Mention the War*; Ed Moloney, "Closing down the airwaves: the story of the broadcasting ban", in Rolston, *The Media and Northern Ireland*, pp. 8-50.

<sup>17</sup> David Miller, "The media and Northern Ireland: Censorship, information management and the broadcasting ban", in *Glasgow Media Group Reader, Volume 2: Industry, Economy, War and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Pettigrew, "The 'oxygen of publicity' and the suffocation of censorship", p. 239.

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton-Tweedale, *The British press and Northern Ireland*, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Curtis, *Ireland: the Propaganda War*; Hamilton-Tweedale, *The British press and Northern Ireland*; Pettigrew, "The 'oxygen of publicity' and the suffocation of censorship"; Greg McLaughlin and Stephen Baker, "'Every man an emperor': the British press, Bloody Sunday and the image of the British Army" in Dawson et al, *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain*, pp. 183-198.

<sup>21</sup> McLaughlin and Baker, "'Every man an emperor'", p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Glen, *Youth and Permissive Social Change in British Music Papers, 1967-1983*, London, Palgrave, 2019, p. 153; Patrick Glen, "'Sometimes Good Guys Don't Wear White': Morality in the Music Press, 1967-1983", University of Sheffield, PhD thesis, 2012, p. 23. The paper achieved a circulation, in the period under discussion, of up to 230,000 copies per week, and a readership of between one and two million people, depending on shifts in circulation (each physical copy of *NME* was browsed by up to nine people).

<sup>23</sup> Laura Snapes, "'Its soul was lost somewhere': inside the demise of *NME*", *Guardian*, 14 March 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Broaks, "Do you miss the future? Mark Fisher interviewed", *CrackMagazineNet*, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Chris Salewicz, "Carnival", *NME*, 6 May 1978, pp. 31-33; Andrew Tyler, "Return of the Anti-Nazi League", *NME*, 7 March 1981, pp. 16-18; Mick Duffy, "Life in the War Zone", *NME*, 8 August 1981, pp. 7-8; X Moore, "The Road to Blackpool Pier", *NME*, 24 October 1981, pp. 31-35; Richard McDermott, "Together We Can Stop the Bomb", *NME*, 31 October 1981,

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pp. 18- 19; Andrew Tyler, “CND fights march ban”, *NME*, 2 May 1981, p. 12; Andrew Tyler, “Turning to Green”, *NME*, 31 October 1981, pp. 24-27; Andrew Tyler, “W.O.R.K. No No My Daddy Don’t ...”, *NME*, 6 June 1981, pp. 4, 14; Ray Lowry, “The Walker Brothers”, *NME*, 23 May 1981, pp. 29, 55; Paul Du Noyer, “The Burning of Southall”, *NME*, 11 July 1981, p. 3; Ray Lowry and Chris Salewicz, “Anarchy in the UK: The Reality”, *NME*, 18 July 1981, pp. 4-6; Andrew Tyler, “Britain on the Junkheap, Part One: Britain’s Big Sleep”, *NME*, 26 February 1983, pp. 20-22, 33; Andrew Tyler, “Britain on the Junkheap, Part Two: No future in the UK”, *NME*, 5 March 1983, pp. 12-14; Andrew Tyler, “Britain on the Junkheap, Part Three: Sweet and Sour City”, *NME*, 12 March 1983, pp. 20-22.; Julie Burchill, “Silencing The Song of Freedom”, *NME*, 22 October 1983, p. 27; Andrew Tyler, “Mandela: 21 Years of Forced Silence”, *NME*, 16 July 1983, p. 8; Andrew Tyler, “Sending down the lawless”, *NME*, 15 October 1983, pp. 22-23, 26; Paolo Hewitt, “Dumbstruck and Doomed Down on Animal Farm”, *NME*, 17 December 1983, pp. 26-28; X Moore, “Lives on the Line”, *NME*, 5 January 1985, pp. 20-22, 26; X Moore, “Lives on the Line: Part 2”, *NME*, 12 January 1985, pp. 6-7, 28; Steven Wells, “Ghetto Blasts”, *NME*, 21 September 1985, p. 29; Tim Jarvis, “War of the Worlds”, *NME*, 9 November 1985 pp. 6-7; Donald McRae, “Freedom Road”, *NME*, 9 November 1985, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> For the McGuinness interview, see Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O’Hagan and Gavin Martin, “Those Petrol Emotions”, *NME*, 10 May 1986, pp. 24-5, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Neil Spencer, interview with the author, 30 April 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton-Tweedale, *The British press and Northern Ireland*, p. 120.

<sup>29</sup> Spencer, interview with the author.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Mark Sinker, interview with the author, 18 June 2019.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Charles Shaar Murray (ed.), “Gasbag: The Irish no-joke”, *NME*, 4 October 1980, pp. 62-3.

<sup>33</sup> The letter appeared in Paul Rambali (ed.), “Gasbag”, *NME*, 30 August 1980, p. 54. The articles to which the letter-writer referred included: Andy Gill, “Starlin Wars”, *NME*, 26 July 1980, p. 31; Angus MacKinnon, “Trident: Britain’s brand new passport to Armageddon”, *NME*, 9 August 1980, pp. 6-8; Vivien Goldman, “E.P. Thompson: The Man Who’d Save the World”, *NME*, 16 August 1980, pp. 27, 53; Ian MacDonald, “The *NME* Consumers’ Guide to 1984”, *NME*, 23 August 1980, pp. 29-32.

<sup>34</sup> Murray (ed.), “Gasbag: The Irish no-joke”, p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> Gavin Martin, “Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality”, *NME*, 11 October 1980, pp. 31-4; 61.

<sup>37</sup> See letter in Sean O’Hagan (ed), “Big Baad Bag”, *NME*, 31 May 1986, p. 50 (original emphasis).

<sup>38</sup> There is a significant body of scholarship on the popular-music press. See, for instance, Eamonn Forde, “From polyglottism to branding: On the decline of personality journalism in the British music press”, *Journalism*, vol. 2, iss. 1 (2001), pp. 23-43; Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, leisure, and popular music*, London, Constable, 1983, pp. 165-77; Steve Jones (ed.), *Pop Music and the Press*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2002; Dave Laing, “Anglo-American music journalism: texts and contexts”, in Andy Bennett, Barry Shank and Jason Toynbee (eds), *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 333-39; Dave Laing, “‘The World’s Best Rock Dead’: *Let It Rock 1972-75*”, *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2010), pp. 449-463; John Street, *Rebel Rock: the politics of popular music*, London, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 83-88; Jason Toynbee, “Policing Bohemia, Pinning up Grunge: The Music Press and Generic Change in British Pop and Rock”, *Popular Music*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Oct., 1993), pp. 289-300.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Snapes, “‘Its soul was lost somewhere’: inside the demise of NME”; Jack Shepherd, “NME closes print edition: Bands and journalists pay tribute”, *Independent*, 7 March

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2018; Ben Beaumont-Thomas and Laura Snapes, “The stories behind NME’s greatest covers”, *Guardian*, 9 March 2018.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Jones (ed.), *Pop Music and the Press*. A modest amount of reflection on the politics of the music press has emerged in the accounts of music journalists. See, for instance, Paul Gorman, *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press*, London, Sanctuary, 2001; Pat Long, *The History of the NME: High Times and Low Lives at the World’s Most Famous Music Magazine*, London, Portico, 2012; Mark Sinker, *A Hidden Landscape Once a Week: The Unruly Curiosity of the British Music Press from the ‘60s to the ‘80s ... by those who made it happen*, London, Strange Attractor Press, 2018. However, none of this work explores NME’s coverage of the Northern Ireland conflict.

<sup>41</sup> Paolo Hewitt, interview with the author, 13 June 2019. For an account of punk, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style*, London, Methuen, 1979; Jon Savage, *England’s Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, London, Faber, 1991.

<sup>42</sup> Neil Spencer in *Inky Fingers: the NME Story* BBC Four, 4 July 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Long, *The History of the NME*, p. 131

<sup>44</sup> *Inky Fingers*

<sup>45</sup> Long, *The History of the NME*, p. 131.

<sup>46</sup> See Daniel Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down: The Music and Politics of Rock Against Racism, 2 Tone and Red Wedge*, London, Picador, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London, Verso, 1988.

<sup>48</sup> Spencer, interview with the author.

<sup>49</sup> Hewitt, interview with the author.

<sup>50</sup> Spencer, interview with the author.

<sup>51</sup> Paolo Hewitt, “The Neil Kinnock Interview”, *NME*, 27 April 1985, pp. 12-14; Denis Campbell, “Neil’s Wild Years”, *NME* 13 June 1987, pp. 24-5.

<sup>52</sup> Tony Parsons, “The Dignity of Labour”, *NME*, 15 October 1983, p. 8; Andrew Tyler, “Dread Ken: A Capital Leader”, *NME*, 9 April 1983, pp. 16-17, 43; Nick Martin, “Jobs, peace, and other pipe dreams”, *NME*, 1 May 1982, pp. 19-20; Goldman, “E.P. Thompson”, pp. 27, 53.

<sup>53</sup> Lucy O’Brien, interview with the author, 10 June 2019; Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author, 27 May 2019; Hewitt, interview with the author.

<sup>54</sup> Long, *The History of the NME*, pp. 56-7.

<sup>55</sup> Farren cited in Long, *The History of the NME*, p. 47.

<sup>56</sup> The underground papers also engaged with issues such as South Africa (*IT*, No. 37, 9-22 August 1968), the Black Panthers (*IT*, No. 35, 12 July-25 July 1968), Rastafarians and Black Power (*IT*, No. 122, 27 January – 10 February 1972), and state surveillance (*IT*, No. 142, 17 November - 1 December 1972). For examples of its accounts of popular music, see *IT*, No. 53, 28 March-10 April 1969; *IT*, No. 82, 3 July -16 July 1970; *IT*, No. 109, 29 July -12 August 1971.

<sup>57</sup> Gorman, *In Their Own Write*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>58</sup> Nigel Fountain, *Underground: The London Alternative Press 1966-74* London, Routledge, 1988, p. 183.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Tyler, *My life as an animal: A memoir - Adventures, Music, Animal Rights*, Tonbridge, Loop Books, 2017, p. 45.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Shaar Murray cited in Sinker, *A Hidden Landscape Once a Week*, p. 144.

<sup>61</sup> John Street, *Rebel Rock: the Politics of Popular Music* London, Basil Blackwell, pp. 83-88.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Long, *The History of the NME*, p. 71.

<sup>63</sup> Over the course of the decade this included Nick Kent, Charles Shaar Murray, Mick Farren, Penny Reel, Barry Miles, John May, Joe Stevens, Pennie Smith and Barney Bubbles (Long, *The*

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*History of the NME*, pp. 65, 74-75, 123, 128; Sinkler, *A Hidden Landscape Once a Week*, pp. 170, 178).

<sup>64</sup> Long, *The History of the NME*, p. 123.

<sup>65</sup> Anonymous, "T-Zers", *NME*, 10 June 1978, p. 63. See also *NME* masthead on 10 June 1978, p. 63.

<sup>66</sup> Fountain, *Underground*, pp. 97, 134-139, 162, 167.

<sup>67</sup> For underground press articles on the Northern Ireland conflict, see, for example, A Special Correspondent, "Military Intelligence Predicts .. Civil War!", *IT*, No. 78, 24 April- 7 May 1970; pp. 1-2; Anonymous, "Ireland for the Irish - England for the pigs?" *IT*, No. 122, 27 January - 10 February 1972, pp. 12-14; Jonathon Green, "Bringing the War Back Home", *IT*, No. 123, 10 February - 24 February 1972, p. 11; George Snow and Rosemary Bignell, "George Snow's Ireland Pics", *IT*, No. 128, 20 April - 4 May 1972, pp. 26-29, 44; Kevin Mellows and George Snow, "Bloody Sunday, Bloody 1973", *IT*, No. 147, 8 February - 23 February 1973, pp. 10-13; Richard Trench, "A Nice Kid ...", *IT*, No. 154, 17 May - 31 May 1973, p. 3. The conflict also featured on the cover of many underground press papers. See, for example, *Friends*, No. 25, 8 March 1971; *Friends*, No. 28, 3 May 1971; *Frendz*, No. 18, 6 January 1972; *Frendz*, No. 21, 17 February 1972; *Ink*, No. 21, 2 November 1971; *Ink*, No. 25, 31 December 1971; *Ink*, No. 28, 11 February 1972.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, "Ireland Resists Aggression" (*Ink*, No. 28, 11 February 1972) and "Solidarity with the People of Derry" (*Friends*, No. 21, 17 February 1972). Elsewhere, *IT* published a cover featuring images of pop-art style British soldiers in riot helmets illustrated with the caption: "Bang, You're Dead!" (*IT*, No. 123, 10 February - 24 February 1972).

<sup>69</sup> One reader would inform *IT*: "I'm getting fucking sick with the way the underground press supports the IRA. Are you too damn swollen up in Revolution against the Establishment that you cannot see what a load of lying, murdering bastards the IRA Provisionals are?" ("Letters", *IT*, No. 120, 30 December 1971 - 13 January 1972, p. 14). Meanwhile, other readers would endorse "the support the underground press gives to the IRA", whilst qualifying this with criticism of "the tactics of fear, murder and repression" that they felt had been adopted by republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland (Letters, *IT*, No. 123, 10 February - 24 February 1972, p. 2).

<sup>70</sup> Jonathon Green, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961-1971* London, Pimlico, 1998, p. 362.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in Green, *Days in the Life*, p. 375.

<sup>72</sup> Fountain, *Underground*, p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> Spencer, interview with the author, original emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> For examples of this practice, see James Johnson, "The Sonic Warlords in Belfast", *NME*, 24 March 1973, p. 28; Anonymous, "Rolling out the Blarney Stone", *Record Mirror*, 3 May 1975; Angie Errigo, "Feelgoods Triumph in a Po-Go Zone", *NME*, 8 October 1977, pp. 15-6; Allan Jones, "What the El!", *Melody Maker*, 25 March 1978, p. 3; Jane Suck, "Vicarious Thrills + Pol-A-Ticks: Crossing the Irish Sea with the Adverts", *Sounds*, 18 February 1978, pp. 16-17; Colin Irwin, "The Jewel in the Crown", *Melody Maker*, 15 December 1984, pp. 24-25, 31.

<sup>75</sup> Giovanni Dadomo and Caroline Coon, "Clash in the City of the Dead", *Sounds*, 29 October 1977, pp. 25-27; Ian Birch, "Clash Lose Control ...", *Melody Maker*, 29 October 1977, pp. 30-32.

<sup>76</sup> Dadomo and Coon, "Clash in the City of the Dead", p. 27; Birch, "Clash Lose Control", p. 20.

<sup>77</sup> Anonymous, "Clash visit Belfast for picture session", *NME*, 29 October 1977, pp. 9-10.

<sup>78</sup> Martin, "Northern Ireland"

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<sup>79</sup> Errigo, “Feelgoods Triumph in a Po-Go Zone”, p. 15.

<sup>80</sup> Johnson, “The Sonic Warlords in Belfast”

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, Suck, “Vicarious Thrills + Pol-A-Ticks”; Irwin, “The Jewel in the Crown”.

<sup>82</sup> Spencer, interview with the author.

<sup>83</sup> Danny Kelly, interview with the author, 20 August 2019.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Spencer, interview with the author.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Martin, “Northern Ireland”.

<sup>88</sup> John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p. 1. For a survey of such frames, see John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1990, pp. 117-206.

<sup>89</sup> The letters appeared in Monty Smith (ed.), “Gasbag Now!”, *NME*, 20 September 1980, p. 58.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> If the mainstream media failed to provide adequate coverage of an urgent issue, then it was the task of the “underground” press (as Farren explained above) to afford space to this, rather than summoning that mainstream to do more.

<sup>95</sup> Smith (ed.), “Gasbag Now!”, p. 58.

<sup>96</sup> *NME*, 4 October 1980, pp. 1, 62-63. The photograph had previously appeared in a photo essay in the journal *Camerawork* in 1978. See Anonymous, “British troops on Irish streets”, *Camerawork* No. 9 (March 1978), p. 10. The article that introduced this photo essay addressed media coverage of Northern Ireland, noting: “The best weapon in any propaganda campaign is not biased information, but ignorance. No one gets excited about something that they do not know is happening ... Northern Ireland has been very badly reported in the British Press” (Anonymous, “British troops on Irish streets”, p. 9).

<sup>97</sup> Murray (ed.), “The Irish no-joke”, p. 62.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> See Aly Renwick, “Something in the air: the rise of the Troops Out movement”, in Dawson, et al (eds.) *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain*, pp. 111-26.

<sup>103</sup> Murray (ed.), “The Irish no-joke”, p. 62.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author; Martin, interview with the author.

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<sup>106</sup> Martin, “Northern Ireland”, p. 31

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Ray Lowry (ed.), “Miserable old bagger”, *NME*, 6 June 1981, p. 58.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Paolo Hewitt (ed.), “Gasbag”, *NME*, 10 March 1984, p. 58.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* (emphases added)

<sup>116</sup> See Penny Reel (ed.), “Gasbag”, *NME*, 7 April 1984, p. 42. Danny Morrison was at that time Sinn Féin’s publicity director.

<sup>117</sup> Paolo Hewitt (ed.), “Gasbag”, *NME*, 28 April 1984, p. 51.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

<sup>119</sup> Hewitt, interview with the author.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Tyler, *My life as an animal*, p. 195.

<sup>123</sup> See, for instance, Tyler, “CND fights march ban”; Tyler, “W.O.R.K. No No My Daddy Don’t ... ”; Tyler, “Turning to Green”; Tyler, “Mandela: 21 Years of Forced Silence”; Tyler, “Sending down the lawless”; Tyler, “Return of the Anti-Nazi League”; Tyler, “Britain on the Junkheap, Part One”.

<sup>124</sup> Stuart Bailie , interview with the author, 5 June 2019.

<sup>125</sup> See Trevor Kavanagh, “Hang the IRA bombers says big Sun poll”, *The Sun*, 19 October 1984, p. 1; Anonymous, “Denning calls for use of treason law”, *The Times*, 18 October 1984, p. 2.

<sup>126</sup> Spencer, interview with the author.

<sup>127</sup> Andrew Tyler, “Bomb Culture”, *New Musical Express*, 3 November 1984, p. 29.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. This was perhaps a reference to the Progressive Unionist Party, a left-wing initiative associated with the UVF that had emerged in the late 1970s. See J.W. McAuley and S. Hislop, ““Many Roads Forward’: Politics and Ideology within the Progressive Unionist Party”, *Etudes Irlandaises* vol. 25, no. 1, 2000, pp. 173–192.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

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- <sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>144</sup> Bailie, interview with the author.
- <sup>145</sup> Barry McIlheney, interview with the author, 26 July 2019.
- <sup>146</sup> Sean O’Hagan (ed.). “Gasbag”, *NME*, 17 November 1984, p. 62.
- <sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>148</sup> Sean O’Hagan, “Northern Ireland’s lost moment: how the peaceful protests of ’68 escalated into years of bloody conflict”, *Observer*, 22 April 2018; Sean O’Hagan, “The day I never thought would come”, *Guardian*, 6 May 2007.
- <sup>149</sup> Sean O’Hagan, “An accidental death”, *Observer*, 21 April 2002.
- <sup>150</sup> O’Hagan (ed.). “Gasbag”, 17 November 1984, p. 62.
- <sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>152</sup> Andy Gill (ed.), “Gasbag”, *NME*, 24 November 1984, p. 58.
- <sup>153</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>154</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>155</sup> Tyler, *My life as an animal*, p. 111.
- <sup>156</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author; O’Brien, interview with the author.
- <sup>157</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author; Sinker, interview with the author.
- <sup>158</sup> Neil Spencer, “Ten Years In An Open Plan Office”, *NME*, 20 July 1985, p. 3.
- <sup>159</sup> Kelly, interview with the author; Sinker, interview with the author; Gorman, *In Their Own Write*, p. 310.
- <sup>160</sup> Martin, interview with the author.
- <sup>161</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author.
- <sup>162</sup> Porter and O’Hearn, “New Left Podsnappery”, p. 131.
- <sup>163</sup> For an account of such musicians, see Sean Campbell, “Agitate, educate, organize’: Popular music, partisanship and the Northern Ireland conflict”, *Popular Music*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2020, pp. 233-56.
- <sup>164</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author.
- <sup>165</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author.
- <sup>166</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author. For an account of this context, see Savage, *The BBC’s “Irish Troubles”*, pp. 251-9.
- <sup>167</sup> Savage, *The BBC’s “Irish Troubles”*, p. 253.
- <sup>168</sup> Savage, *The BBC’s “Irish Troubles”*, pp. 251-9.
- <sup>169</sup> Savage, *The BBC’s “Irish Troubles”*, pp. 254, 256.
- <sup>170</sup> Savage, *The BBC’s “Irish Troubles”*, pp. 256-57.
- <sup>171</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author; O’Brien, interview with the author.

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- <sup>172</sup> O'Brien, interview with the author.
- <sup>173</sup> Spencer, interview with the author.
- <sup>174</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author.
- <sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*; O'Brien, interview with the author.
- <sup>176</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author.
- <sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>184</sup> It has, moreover, proved impossible to locate the photographs. Those that appear in the issue are credited to Susan Elliot. She politely declined a request to be interviewed for this article.
- <sup>185</sup> This anxiety to produce coverage that appeared balanced often permeated "Troubles" coverage, particularly in scenarios where republicans had been afforded a platform. For an account of "balance" in relation to media coverage of the conflict, see Savage, *The BBC's "Irish Troubles"*, pp. 110-51.
- <sup>186</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author.
- <sup>187</sup> Sinker, interview with the author.
- <sup>188</sup> Martin, interview with the author.
- <sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>190</sup> Cosgrove, interview with the author.
- <sup>191</sup> Martin, interview with the author; Cosgrove, interview with the author.
- <sup>192</sup> Martin, interview with the author.
- <sup>193</sup> Cosgrove, Martin and O'Hagan, "Those Petrol Emotions", pp. 24-5.
- <sup>194</sup> At the time, a popular television advert for Del Monte orange juice featured the catchphrase: "The Man from Del Monte, he says Yes!".
- <sup>195</sup> Cosgrove, Martin and O'Hagan, "Those Petrol Emotions", p. 24.
- <sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27
- <sup>203</sup> Pettigrew, "The 'oxygen of publicity' and the suffocation of censorship", p. 234.
- <sup>204</sup> Cosgrove, Martin and O'Hagan, "Those Petrol Emotions", p. 27.
- <sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- <sup>206</sup> The Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign was launched in the late 1970s by Ian Paisley, the then leader of the DUP, in an effort to prevent the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Northern Ireland.
- <sup>207</sup> Cosgrove, Martin and O'Hagan, "Those Petrol Emotions", p. 25.
- <sup>208</sup> Sean O'Hagan (ed), "Big Baad Bag", *NME*, 31 May 1986, p. 50.
- <sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> See Steven Wells (ed.), “Big Baad Bag”, *NME*, 21 June 1986, p. 54.

<sup>215</sup> Denis Campbell, “A Deafening Silence”, *NME*, 21 March 1987, p. 34.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> Steven Wells, “God Save Us from the USA”, *NME*, 11 June 1988, p. 29.

<sup>218</sup> Anonymous, “Strummer slams ‘state terrorism’”, *NME*, 21 May 1988, p. 5; Anonymous; “Pogues fall from grace with government”, *NME*, 19 Nov. 1988, p. 3.

<sup>219</sup> Long, *The History of the NME*, pp. 171-3; Cosgrove, interview with the author; O’Brien interview with the author.

<sup>220</sup> Simon Reynolds, “Return of the inkies”, *New Statesman and Society*, 31 August 1990, p. 26.

<sup>221</sup> Kelly, interview with the author.

<sup>222</sup> Kelly, interview with the author.

<sup>223</sup> For examples of this coverage, see Curtis, *Ireland: the Propaganda War*.

<sup>224</sup> Stephanie Boland, “As Brexit comes closer, British ignorance about Ireland becomes unforgivable”, *Prospect*, 27 November 2017; Megan Nolan, “I didn’t mind the English, until now”, *New York Times*, 19 October 2018, p. 35.