

ONE DAY LIFE



BOBBY SANDS

INTRODUCTION BY GERRY ADAMS MP

ONE DAY
IN
MY LIFE

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Sinn Féin President



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INTRODUCTION

GERRY ADAMS

Sinn Féin President

'I find it startling to hear myself say that I am prepared to die first rather than succumb to their oppressive torture and I know that I am not on my own, that many of my comrades hold the same.'

Such prophetic words from Bobby Sands two years before his death, written at a time when the blanket men in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh and the women POWs in Armagh Jail had already been on protest for three years. That protest, prison confrontation, and, ultimately, hunger strike, only came about because the British government consciously decided to make the prisons a battleground, to try and defeat in prison those who it couldn't defeat in the field of armed struggle.

Up until 1969 the prison population in the north of Ireland was small and could be counted in a few hundred. But that was soon to change, both in numbers and composition, as a result of the

repressive reaction of the unionist government to the peaceful Civil Rights Movement's demands for reform in local government (including for many nationalists the right to vote), in housing and for an end to the Special Powers Act.

After the British Army was reintroduced in the six counties in August 1969 it soon became clear from its actions that it was here as an instrument of unionist and British misrule. Those actions included attacking nationalists, firing gas indiscriminately, and curfewing and raiding nationalist areas for weapons which had never been used for offensive purposes but solely for defence. The IRA, in turn, re-emerged and reorganised and fought back against the British Army and the northern state.

After 1969 the prison population exploded as protesters, young nationalist demonstrators and Irish republican activists were arrested and charged with various offences, convicted and sentenced to time in prison; or were arrested without charge and interned without trial in various prisons, including Long Kesh Prison Camp.

In 1972 veteran republican Billy McKee, a sentenced prisoner in Crumlin Road Jail, led a hunger

strike demanding political status. Before there were any deaths, the British government acceded to the prisoners' demands and granted 'special category status', a face-saving expedient for what was, in reality, political status. Under this regime prisoners organised their own lives within the prison, wore their own clothes, carried out their own education and were organised within their own command structure.

Bobby Sands had been one of those young people whose family suffered sectarian harassment and who were driven from their home in Rathcoole, North Belfast, moving to the Twinbrook estate on the outskirts of West Belfast. In October 1972 Bobby was arrested and charged with possession of four handguns. While on remand he got married and in April 1973 was sentenced to five years in jail, which is where I first met him. I had been interned in June 1973 but was charged with attempting to escape and was sentenced to two terms of imprisonment. When internment ended in 1975, I was moved from the internees' cages to Cage 11, where Bobby was serving his time.

Roimhe seo, bhí Róibeard i gCás 17 agus seo mar a bhfuair sé an grá a bhí aige don Ghaeilge. Dódh

Campa na Ceis Fada i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 1974 agus ina dhiaidh seo chríochnaigh sé suas sa bhothán Gaeltachta i gCás 11. Bhí an-tsuim aige sa teanga, le sean-Phroinsias Mac Airt – go ndeana Dia trócaire ar a ainm – agus Coireall Mac Curtáin ó Luimneach mar mhúinteoirí aige. Bhain sé ard chaighdeán amach measartha gasta agus fuair sé Fáinne óir roimh deireadh 1975.

B'as an Trá Ghearr cuid mhór dá chairde ach bhí Bobby ábalta meascadh go furasta le gach duine sa chás. Bhí sé go maith ar an ghiotár agus bhí ceol aige agus bhí sé láidir agus díograsach mar pheileadóir i lár na pairce. Chuir muid aithne ar a chéile le linn na ndíospóireachtaí agus na tógraí oideachais a bhí idir láimhe againn i gCás 11. Chomh maith leis sin bhain an bheirt againn úsaid as an bhothán staidéara go mion minic, bhí mise ag dul don scríobhnoireacht agus bhí seisean ag cleachtadh ar an ghiotár, nó ag teagasc agus ag foghlaim na Gaeilge san áit ciúin suaimhneach sin, ar shiúl ón ruaille buaille agus tormán sna gnáth bothsáin.

Before this, Bobby was in Cage 17 and it was here that he developed a strong love for the Irish language. In October 1974, after the burning of the

camp, Bobby was moved to Cage 11 and moved into the Gaeltacht hut. He was an avid Gaelgeoir, and was taught by the late Proinsias MacAirt and then by Coireall Mac Curtain from Limerick. He became fluent and attained gold fáinne level within a short space of time.

Bobby's close associates were Short Strand men, but he mixed easily with everyone in the cage. He was a decent singer and guitarist and a robust and enthusiastic soccer footballer. He and I got to know each other better through the political discussions and educational projects which were organised in Cage 11. The two of us also used the study hut a lot - me for writing, he for practising his guitar or for studying Irish as it was possible to get quiet time there, away from the hustle, bustle and noise of the huts.

I have often said that Bobby Sands was a very ordinary person. He would not stand out in a crowd nor push himself forward. Yet, like some special ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances Bobby was to go on to do extraordinary things. I remember him as an earnest yet good-humoured and good-natured young man; an

obviously committed republican with a willingness to learn, to educate and to be part of building our struggle to achieve its objectives. He used his time in prison so that on his release he would be able to make a greater and more meaningful contribution to the struggle. I remember well the time, those weeks, just before Bobby's release in 1976, about ten months before I myself got out. We used to 'boowl' (dander) round the exercise yard together, discussing the struggle, its history, the situation on the outside, the lay of the land, the state of things, with Bobby quizzing me about my own views. Though we were to write to each other throughout the first hunger strike and for some time into his own hunger strike, the next time I was to see Bobby was in his coffin in the living room of his parents' home in Twinbrook, five years later.

Three years after introducing special category status, the British government decided to phase it out as part of a new offensive against republicans. It launched a three-pronged security strategy.

'Ulsterisation' of the Crown Forces involved increasing the size of the RUC and UDR and placing them in the front-line of the war against the IRA, and

reducing the strength of the British Army. The advantages were obvious to its British strategists. Lowering the casualty rate of British soldiers would help thwart the possible development of a popular 'troops out' movement in Britain, and an increase in 'local' deaths would help project the image that the conflict was internal, with Britain acting the peace-maker.

'Normalisation' involved purportedly handing over the primacy in 'security' decisions to the RUC, depicting the conflict as a 'law and order' issue, one of gangsterism waged by common criminals who were controlled by cunning Godfathers.

'Criminalisation' was the policy of arbitrarily treating anyone sentenced after 1 March 1976 for a politically motivated offence as a criminal, an individual, subject to prison discipline and an onerous regime. Prisoners were expected to wear a criminal uniform and obey all orders. In 1975 Long Kesh Prison Camp had been extended and divided by a wall, behind which new developments, the H-Blocks, were built.

The policy was riven with contradictions. Clearly, the prisoners were special. They would not have been

in prison but for the conflict. They were arrested under special laws and held for interrogation in special centres for up to seven days without access to lawyers. In order to operate this system Britain had to derogate from the European Convention on Human Rights. The prisoners were charged with 'scheduled offences' - described as politically motivated offences - under the Prevention of Terrorism Act or the Emergency Provisions Act. They appeared before special one-judge, non-jury, Diplock Courts, which used special rules of evidence, shifting the burden of proof onto the accused, and were usually convicted on the basis of signed statements alone. This conveyor belt system which could put an opponent of the state away for life encouraged the RUC to make arrests, to torture and to ill-treat prisoners. Thousands of these cases have been documented by, among others, Amnesty International and the European Commission on Human Rights.

After all this process, when the prisoners reached the H-Blocks they were suddenly deemed to be not special and were expected to bow to prison warders, most of whom had unionist sympathies or were British ex-servicemen. The late Kieran Nugent was