

Speech by Roger Cole, Chair of the Peace & Neutrality Alliance at the Eirigi Saoire Eire Conference 7/5/2011

Irish National Democracy V Imperialism

I would like to thank Eirigi for the invitation to speak at this conference.

The Peace & Neutrality Alliance was established in 1996. Its objective is to establish a United Democratic Irish Republic with its own independent foreign policy, with positive neutrality as its key component, which should be pursued primarily through a reformed United Nations.

PANA is part of a deeply rooted historical tradition. In 1790 Theobald Wolfe Tone wrote his first political pamphlet entitled "The Spanish War", in which he advocated that Ireland should remain neutral when the British and Spanish Empires were preparing for war. Tone went on to advocate equal rights for Catholics and Protestants and the establishment of a United Independent Democratic Irish Republic. Thus for over 220 years the struggle for Irish Independence, Irish Democracy and Irish Neutrality have been intertwined. It is a tradition that was continued by the Young Irelanders, Fenians and socialists.

As part of that tradition for example, James Connolly in 1914 established a broad based alliance, the Irish Neutrality League against Irish involvement in the Imperialist 1st World War. Connolly was elected President and other members of the committee included Arthur Griffith, Countess Markievicz, Major John McBride and William O'Brien.

In the treaty negotiations that established this state, its right to remain neutral in the event of war was agreed, and it remained neutral in the 2nd World War and outside NATO and the WEU.

Yet while the tradition of Irish Independence, democracy and neutrality are deeply rooted in Irish history, so is the tradition of Irish support for Imperialism.

In 1798 when British Imperialism crushed the Irish Republicans by killing 30,000 members of the United Army, it did so with the support of the Irishmen in the North Cork Militia and Orange Order.

Throughout the 19th century over 30% of the British Army were Irish. Many of Ireland's political leaders supported the imperial wars of the British Empire. Daniel O'Connell supported its war on the Chinese Empire to force it to buy British heroin in the name of liberal economics, Isaac Butt supported the Crimean War. Redmond encouraged 180,000 Irishmen to volunteer to die for the British Union in the 1914-18 War.

Thus both the traditions of Irish Independence, democracy and neutrality on one side and Imperialism on the other are deeply rooted in our history

The 1916 Rising and the subsequent struggle for national independence in the early 20th century broke the overwhelming power of imperialism in most of Ireland, except in the six counties where British Imperialism remained and still remains the dominant ideology.

It was not until the emergence of the European Economic Community, now called the European Union, that an opportunity arose for an emerging neo-Redmondite ruling elite in the 26 county state to destroy the traditions Irish Independence, democracy and neutrality and restore imperialism as the dominate ideology throughout all of Ireland.

The EU is dominated by ex major imperial states such as Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Portugal and Spain. The political elites of these countries, having lost their Empires in the anti-colonialists struggles of the last century, seek by combining, to restore their power by creating a European Empire dominated by militarism and neo-liberal economics. By allying itself to the American Empire via the EU/US/NATO axis, the EU elite seek to restore the global domination they enjoyed in the previous 500 years. Their decision to wage war on Libya is only the latest step in that process, with the objective of overthrowing the current regime, re-establishing military bases and privatising the oil. An indication, in just one of those states, Britain, of how powerful the imperial

tradition remains, of their 650 MP's all but 15 voted in favour of the war on Libya. The Nordic EU Battlegroup which includes Irish soldiers is on standby until the end of June and is the military unit that will lead the "humanitarian" invasion and conquest.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fail support Ireland's integration into the EU/US/NATO axis and by allowing over 2 million US troops use Shannon airport on their way to the Afghan and Iraqi wars, by having Irish troops serve in the Afghan War, and by endorsing a succession of treaties that slice by slice, transferred power away from the Irish people to the EU, including the commitment to an EU Common Foreign, Security and Defence Policy and by integrating the Irish Army into the EU Battle Groups.

The Labour Party initially opposed the EU but has for a long time supported the transfer of power from the Irish people to the EU. However, the Leader of the Party declared the Lisbon Treaty was "dead" after the results of the first referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, but was persuaded to change his mind. This does show an element of disillusionment in the party leadership with the trajectory of the EU.

In fact, the Labour Party has also retained a degree of opposition to imperialism by opposing Ireland involvement in the Iraq war. This opposition was made part of the programme for government in which the Labour Party Leader and now Minister for Foreign Affairs when he stated at the party conference in response to a question of clarification, that the use of Shannon Airport by US troops would be terminated. We shall see soon enough whether this will happen or not. However, the fact that he felt the need to state it shows that the party retains a degree of anti-imperialist values. In fact 40% of those elected recently to the Dail are from parties and individuals that opposed the Iraq war.

Other parties, like the DUP remain loyal to the concept of British sovereignty even when it is absolutely clear that the British ruling elite itself, no longer does. This contradiction could in time, allow for a potential transformation in the allegiance of those that now see themselves as loyal to Britain. Certainly, the real centre of global imperialism is the EU/US/NATO axis rather than British, and opposition to the EU is shared by unionist's as well Irish anti-

imperialists. It allows, at the very least, for a shared area of dialogue that might lead to a broader ideological alliance. The success of the SNP could also have a major impact on the viability of the continuation of the British State and its rule over the 6 counties. In fact as the crisis of capitalism deepens, and the SNP demand for independence grows, this could give rise to an English based nationalism that would happily agree to accept an independent Scotland and have no problem with the termination of the union with Northern Ireland as well. In such a context, a United Ireland could become an actual option for those who are now British unionists in Ireland when not only does British sovereignty no longer actually exist but neither does Britain itself.

Desmond Greaves, the progressive radical activist and historian of Connolly, put the case in the 1960's that a key part of the process of achieving a United Ireland was a long period of a reformed Northern Ireland where unionists and Republicans learnt to trust each other, which would facilitate the establishment of a United Ireland. However, while this case is valid enough, the key to understanding the issue of achieving a United Ireland is to understand that Northern Ireland is not just part of the British State, but that it is part of the NATO as well. This means that the neo-Redmondite political elite supported the Good Friday Agreement because they saw it as part of a process of ensuring all Ireland participation into the EU/US/NATO axis even if it did lead to a United Ireland. Republicans saw it as part of a process towards the establishment of a United Ireland founded on the traditions of neutrality, independence and democracy. The real political divide therefore, is not whether one is in favour of a United Ireland or not, but whether this United Ireland is just a minor region of a European Empire, or whether it is an Independent democratic Republic.

PANA has opposed the US/EU/NATO axis since our foundation. By building a broad democratic alliance that includes Pax Christi, the Irish Missionary Union, the Communist Party of Ireland and Eirigi, to name but a few, PANA is seeking to build a broad anti-imperialist alliance.

Central to that objective is the concept that sovereign power does not lie with the national executive of PANA, or any other group. Sovereign power resides with the people, and they express that power through the ballot box in referendums and elections. As yet, it

is clear that they have not been convinced to support our objective. PANA therefore has focused on fighting referendums and endorsing candidates that agree with our anti-imperialist values and will continue to do so.

The same concept applies to other struggles in other countries. It is democratic mass movements in the Arab countries rather than the terror tactics of Al Kaida, that will defeat imperialism.

PANA was the only broad based alliance that fought the Amsterdam Treaty when 38% of the people voted no, and it played a major role in winning the first Nice referendum. The Campaign Against the EU Constitution, of which Eirigi was a part, and which PANA helped to build, won the first Lisbon referendum, defeating the political elite and their corporate media. It was a major victory for the anti-imperial alliance in Ireland.

The elites response was to force the Irish people to vote again on exactly the same treaty, making sure that the second time round, they spend €millions and abolished the Forum on Europe which had encouraged democratic debate. The media largely excluded the political forces in favour of Irish democracy, neutrality and independence especially PANA with its focus on opposing the militarism of the emerging EU Empire. It showed that when the interests of the ruling elite are challenged, they will use all their money and power to win. It was class struggle with a vengeance and they won.

The nature of their victory is shown recently when in the same week a survey showed that 20% of the Irish people every month have a disposable income of €70, the CEO of AIB, walks away with €3 million in his back pocket. It is shown when the Bank of Ireland Asset Management Report of 2007 that stated 40% of the wealth in Ireland is owned by 5% of the population. While a wealth tax would raise €2 billion, the Irish ruling elite would rather cut the wages of the people and sell off national assets to their rich friends.

Now this same Irish political/media elite, having impoverishment of the own people and supported the US/EU/NATO imperial wars led by the UK and the US, are inviting Mrs Windsor, Queen of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, one of the richest people in the world and titular head of the British Empire and its Army, to

visit Ireland, as well as the current American Emperor, President Obama. These visits are the crowning glory of their commitment to Imperialism.

The elite however, have one slight problem. The people living in Ireland, the people living in Europe, the people living in the United States of America, do not share their enthusiasm for imperialism. They do not want massive poverty at home and permanent war abroad. What they want is jobs at home and no war abroad.

In Ireland, PANA commissioned Lansdowne Marketing Research Ltd. to carry out a survey on the decision of the Irish political elite to allow the use Shannon Airport by US troops on their way to and from their wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2007 which showed 58% wished to terminate that use. The latest polls in the US show that 72% of US citizens want their troops withdrawn from Afghanistan and Iraq, and 56% of the British people want their troops to be withdrawn by the end of the year.

Despite these figures that show decisive majorities of the people in Ireland, Britain and the US and indeed in most other European countries are against these wars, the political elite and virtually 100% of the corporate media enthusiastically support them.

The fact is, the vast majority of Irish political journalists and corporate media commentators are little more than intellectual mercenaries for imperialism. Unfortunately for them however, the people are now increasingly using alternate methods of communications, from web sites, U tube to Facebook to discover the truth. By combining those new forms of communications with those that are tried and tested, such as door to door canvassing, leafleting and public meeting such as this conference, the forces in favour of Irish independence, democracy and neutrality are continuing to fight back against the imperialists. The elite are losing their control over ideas and the spread of ideas.

Then there is the greatest bank robbery in Irish history, where the bankers robbed the Irish people, has undermined the power of the elite over people. In the election the Fianna Fail Party, which for decades was the main exponent of this dominate neo-liberal militarist ideology was smashed.

True, it was replaced by a Fine Gael/Labour Coalition that has continued that ideology, but it would be a mistake to believe that what the people were rejecting was just the party and not the ideology. As the crisis of imperialism deepens, and the government continues with more cuts, and the sale of the people's assets, as well as supporting more wars, then support for them will also crumble.

Morgan Kelly, an independent economist at the end of a major article (IT 7/5/2011) on the economic crisis in which he states that the policies being pursued by Fine Gael/Labour Government will lead to national bankruptcy and the destruction in support for Fine Gael and Labour.

Kelly makes that case that with the Irish state on track to owe a quarter of a trillion euro by 2014 as a consequence of the crisis brought about by the Irish political elites total commitment to their neo-liberal militarist ideology. According to Mr. Kelly the Irish government debt is between €220-250 billion, more than €120,000 per worker and that the State should reject the EU/IMI deal and cut government borrowing to zero, a solution which would also be a disaster.

The debate on the economy between the different sections of the ruling elite however allows room in which other more radical alternatives can gain traction. Since the capitalist crisis is not just Irish but global, then the solution can only be global. Irish progressive forces, on their own, cannot win. We can do so only when the capitalist centre, the USA, collapses.

The US, which is the heart of the EU/US/NATO axis is now in irreversible decline. In the 1950's it were responsible for over 50% of global trade but only 20% now. US national debt as a percentage of its GDP is 97%, and its budget deficit as a percentage of its GDP is 10.9%.

Last year the SIPRI Report showed that the total global spend on military activity was \$1.6 trillion and US expenditure was virtually 50% of that figure. However the report only covers expenditure by the US Dept. of Defence. It does not include the costs of Homeland Security, its nuclear weapons programme, its payment to the elites of its vassal states like Egypt and Israel, its veteran programme, its CIA and other Special Forces costs or the national debt repayment for defence expenditure estimated to be \$200 billion a year. The total annual military cost of the US Empire is \$1.2 trillion.

The absolute reality is that the US Empire is in irreversible decline. It just does not have the financial resources or taxable income to pay \$1.2 trillion per annum for its upkeep. By printing dollars and by imposing massive cuts in the wages, working conditions and social welfare benefits of the people of the US, its imperial elite might be able to maintain the Empire for a bit longer, but its destruction is inevitable. There is even a strong and growing anti-imperialist movement within the USA itself.

The wave of victories of democratic and anti-imperial forces throughout South America, in particular the capacity of Cuba to withstand the 50 year war by the US has been decisive. The defeat of the US vassal state Georgia by Russia and growing economic power of China have all weakened the US/EU/NATO axis. The democratic transformations in the Arab world have even undermined its control of the Arab world. It is even having difficulty conquering a small and militarily weak country like Libya.

So let us be clear. The defeat of the US/EU/NATO axis of imperialism is absolutely inevitable. Since it is this axis that has sustained the partition of our county and gained the loyalty of the Irish elite, its disintegration will allow the opportunity for Ireland's anti-imperialist forces to finally win. It will allow for the opportunity to establish a United Independent Democratic Republic with its own independent foreign policy

But there is no guarantee that the axis will be replaced by political forces inspired by anti-imperialism, democracy and social justice.

The growth of the Tea Party in the US, or the French National Front in Europe, shows that other political forces can gain the support of a population, alienated from the Social Democratic and Christian Democratic forces that for decades have committed themselves to imperialism.

Therefore it is the job of PANA and others not just to build the anti-imperialist movement in Ireland but to link up with other similar movements throughout the world. While Ireland unfree will never be at peace, neither will it be at peace as long as imperialism dominates the world.

In five years time, PANA will be celebrating its 20th anniversary. Twenty years of struggle against imperialism that will have been worth every second. But PANA does not want just to pass the torch on in 1916. It wants to see imperialism defeated. It wants to see a United Democratic Irish Republic with its own independent foreign policy, with positive neutrality as its key component, and where its values are shared with other countries, in a United Nations worthy of that title.