

Brendan O'Leary
of the London School
of Economics
talks to
Pat Byrne
about Northern Ireland
today



Photograph by Steve Bishop

Brendan O'Leary:
*"Sometimes people get
uneasy having me living
their country ..."*

Don't blame the bigots

Brendan O'Leary is a man who could have made a great politician if he had not become a lecturer in Political Science at the London School of Economics. He is the kind of man who could contribute immensely to the peace process, to the exploratory talks and to any negotiations which might follow.

He has ideas on the North of Ireland which, if implemented, could revolutionize the whole way of thinking of Protestants and Catholics in the Six Counties, as well as the way of thinking of the British Government and the Government of the Republic on the future of the island. He has co-authored a book called *'Understanding Northern Ireland'*, which if read and heeded could well influence the decisions of those who come to the negotiating table. O'Leary is a man ahead of the pack, a man with a contribution crying out to be made as Ireland stands at the crossroads of history.

I met him in his small study at the London School of Economics. He was surrounded by books, most of which dealt with history or politics or both. And he was adding to the collection himself. When he started to speak about the North it was with such authority and conviction that I had to adjust my mental processes to the fact that I was in the presence of a pundit, not many of which species still survive in this era of instant information courtesy of satellite TV. His book, he tells me,

attempts to explain the Northern Ireland conflict and tell why it lasted so long. He gives a new slant on the whole thing, claiming that the British and Irish states created the conditions that made it difficult for the people of the North to live together in peace. "It's not so much British imperialism as political institutions in which rights are not protected," he says, assigning the blame. He sees that the boundaries of the Irish state were drawn up at the expense of Irish unity. He sees also that Northern Ireland was never treated as an equal by the British. "So we think there are external causes to the conflict."

He goes on to say that he does not see the problem as at all based on rival religious beliefs. "Our argument is that both communities are equally religious. Although we are both non-believers, we don't blame religion for the conflict."

I took O'Leary and co-author John McGarry ten years to write the book. In the meantime the ceasefires changed the picture, bringing hope that the hostilities have at last come to a permanent end. "We were very pleased about the ceasefires. The reason why the ceasefires have happened is because the two governments have a better opportunity of resolving the conflict than for the past twenty-five years."

Brendan O'Leary is a man well equipped to analyse the befuddling

intricacies of the Northern Ireland situation with a cold eye that is not swayed by prejudice. For he is a cosmopolitan figure, whose life has been lived in several countries which tasted Hitler con-
Like: Born in Cork city, the eldest son of Denis O'Leary, a geoscientist, and his wife Marjory, he set sail with his parents for Nigeria at the tender age of nine months. There his father worked for the Federal Government in the northern city of Kaduna. He later worked with the United Nations in the Sudan, Uganda and India.

his PhD at the London School of Economics, his subject being Oriental Despotism. "I deliberately didn't want to do an Irish subject for my PhD. I didn't want to be stereotyped. Many people are accused of only studying their own people - or their own traditions. It's enriching for an academic to study other things outside his own homeland."

He is present position is Reader in Political Science at the London School of Economics. He lectures on Ethnic Conflict. Indeed, he has had a great

"Northern nationalists should not ask for and should be willing to give more than they would be willing to give unionists in a future united Ireland."

track record like that! O'Leary has also had some experience of the Northern Ireland conflict. He had relatives in the civil rights movement and some of his school friends were killed in the Troubles. His cosmopolitan background has helped him to be objective in his assessment of the situation in the North. "Invariably, people who have had a wider experience tend to be contemptuous of their background. Indeed, I went through that as a young man, but as we get older we are able to see from our

During his sojourn in Nigeria, Brendan's parents decided to send him to school in Northern Ireland, as his mother's sister lived there. He attended two Protestant primary schools, in Cloughy, County Down and in Carrickfergus, County Antrim. But for his secondary education he was sent to Garton Tower, a Catholic grammar school in County Antrim. It was there that he met co-author John McGarry from Belfast. They struck up a friendship which has yielded fruit.

Brendan went to Oxford, where he obtained a first class honours degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics in 1981. He then came to do

experience of the world outside Ireland why people remain in conflict. "The causes of the conflict in the North have nothing to do with the quality of the people, but everything to do with the nature of the institutions in which they are involved. Both John and I have had experience of countries which have successfully managed difficulties, and we have had experience of places that didn't manage them. A lot of our work is focused on what worked best, to enable people to manage their difficulties. And that experience from our broader

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"We hope who have strong different views Northern Ireland. I think they are not far from Brendan O'Leary's solution Northern Ireland lies in preserving titles of both giving each a guaranteed status which will be whether Northern remains with becomes part Ireland. "Northern should not a should not get than they working to give un future united Ireland. There must be based on a nation. People likely to fight identities are At the same agrees that the sharing of ins outlined in the Document. Ireland is both Irish, and politio must r Whether it r UK or become Republic, the the monoth protected. "I don't be are the cause lem," he insist eties, all eth have their big become chosec They flourish have commu feel under th Remove th you remove th (Explaining Ireland is p Blackwell at

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