

A LIFETIME'S WORK: FIGHTING AND PRAYING FOR A FAIRER ULSTER



MEETING: Fr Sean with Democrat Brendan Boyle

EXCLUSIVE
BY RICHARD SULLIVAN

FR Sean McManus is the man who put Northern Ireland on the map in America.

As head of Washington-based lobby group the Irish National Caucus, which he founded in 1974, he continues to fight the fight over sectarianism and justice – British governments have been and gone, Fr Sean is still here.

He famously championed the MacBride Principles which called on US companies investing in Northern Ireland to operate a fair employment practice. It made him a hate figure for unionists and a constant prick in the side of the British.

An unashamed republican, the Fermanagh-born Redemptorist priest bristles at being described as an ‘agitator’.

“I’m no agitator.” [he said] when he spoke to the *Sunday World* from his office on Capitol Hill. “But when a man puts his hand to the plough, there’s no turning back.”

His home parish of Kinauley on the Fermanagh/Cavan border is partitioned, straddling a frontier which Fr Sean believes symbolises the oppression of a people.

ARRESTED

Arrested as a young man following his participation in a civil rights protest in Fermanagh, his life path was preordained. His burning sense of injustice remains undiminished, if a little softer.

“There would be something terribly wrong if, at 73, there has been no change in my thinking.”

“But I guess what makes me tick is that sense of justice, not just on the British/Irish question but in many other parts of the world. Without justice there is no love and without justice we cannot live together.”

“Obviously there are differing opinions about what justice is. Sadly we are all victims of their [Britain’s] history, they spread their Empire with the beautiful King James Bible in one hand and a sword in the other.”

“It’s hard to appreciate the Bible when a foot is on your neck. You have a choice, ignore or respond, in Ireland we responded.”

His response was to take Ireland’s fight to the corridors of power in Washington DC. Britain’s ‘special relationship’ meant the Irish question was off the agenda across the pond. Congressional hearings on Northern Ireland were banned.

“We had to knock on a lot of doors in Congress and that was a real problem, America wasn’t aware that the British were doing a lot of bad things in Ireland. It took a long time for them to wake up to what was going on.”

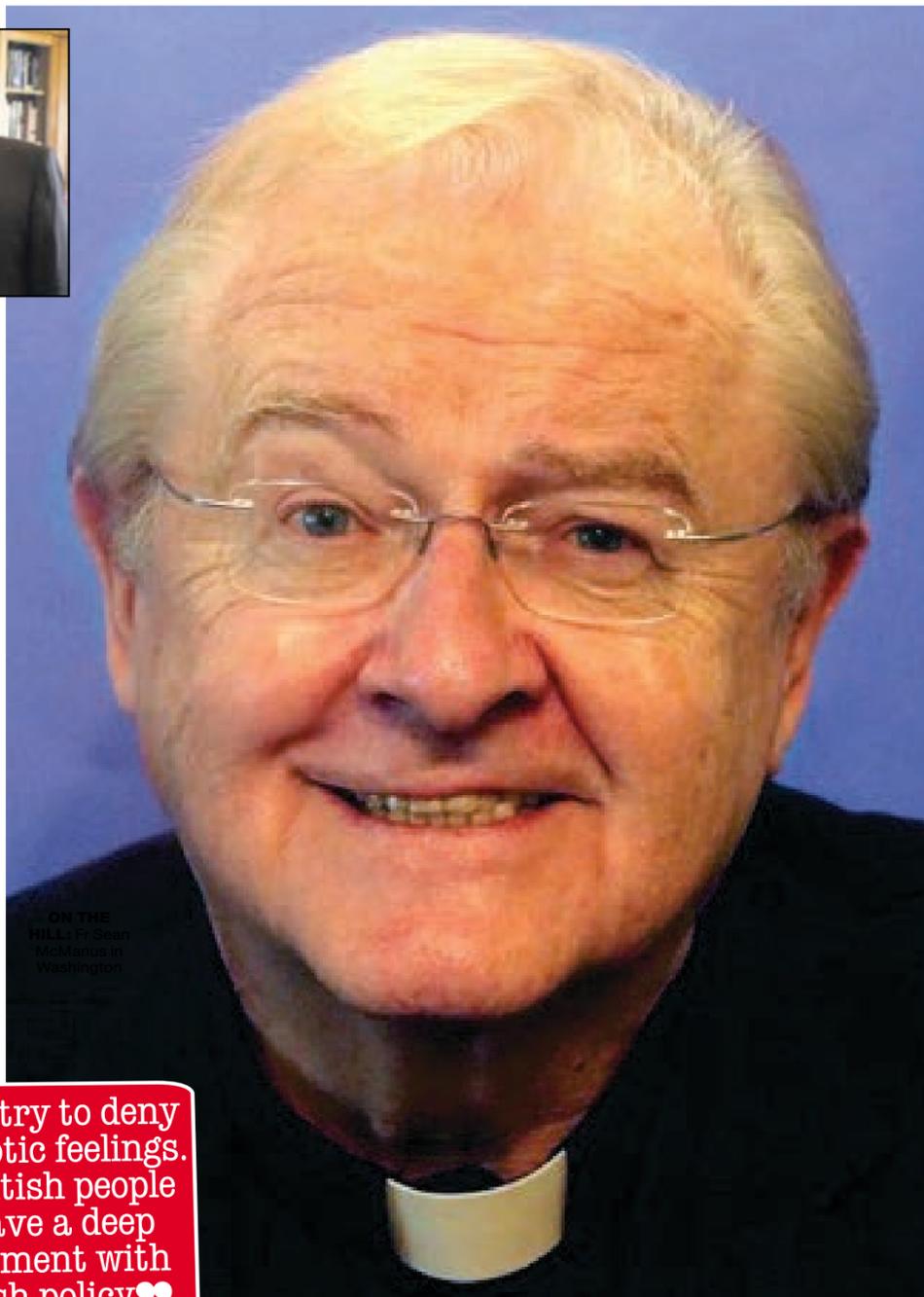
Congressional hearings on Northern Ireland were banned until 1995 – now there’s one every year.

“Ironically it took the intervention of a Jewish congressman Ben Gilman and the then Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich to change all that.”

“The great Irish-American Tip O’Neill had supported the ban up until then.” It was the year of Bill Clinton’s historic visit to Belfast which signalled the countdown to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement three years later.

“The hearings have become so routine that people don’t even notice them and thank God for it, because it shows how much progress has been made.”

“There’s not the strong interest in the



ON THE HILLS: Fr Sean McManus in Washington

“I don’t try to deny my patriotic feelings. I love British people but I have a deep disagreement with their Irish policy”

The Fermanagh priest and lobbyist who has taken his battle over sectarianism to the corridors of power in the US

North that there used to be, but that progress I spoke about was simultaneous to America finally addressing the question.”

For the first time activists and campaigners travelled to Washington to lobby US politicians, among them was Raymond McCord whose son was murdered by the UVF in 1997.

He was the first Protestant activist to have addressed a Congressional hearing. The two men have formed, what many would regard as an unlikely friendship – the hardman working-class

unionist from Rathcoole and the unapologetic republican priest from the Fermanagh border.

PROGRESS

“I don’t try to deny my patriotic feelings, they are deep-rooted, but I have no interest in party politics, north or south, my interest is in justice and making genuine progress.”

“And that is why my work with McCord means so much to me, he is about real resolution, people coming together to

work for justice and justice for all.” This year’s hearing in March will be a review of the Good Friday Agreement 20 years on. Fr Sean admits to mixed feelings.

“When I go home to Fermanagh people say to me nothing has changed – look, a million things have changed and there is so much to be positive about. Perhaps the pace of change has not been what we would have wanted and that feeds into people’s feelings of a lack of progress.”

“I am annoyed and deeply sad that there has not been more progress. All that is needed is for unionist and nationalist to move ahead on the Good Friday Agreement, it’s puzzling to me that hasn’t happened.”

nothing but respect and friendliness.” At 73 he shows no sign of slowing down and admits there is much work to be done, particularly in dealing with Northern Ireland’s past and the thorny question of collusion. But he insists the impression he is a hater of all things British is wrong.

“I lived in England for 11 years, I loved the English people but I have a profound and deep disagreement with their Irish policy.”

“It was nice to be able to say ‘God Bless you Tony Blair’ – he was the first Prime

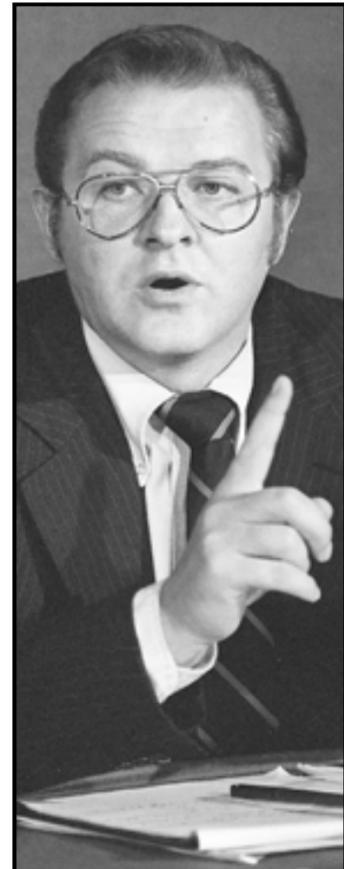
Minister to show genuine empathy and openness. Unfortunately he blotted his copy book in Iraq.”

CAMPAIGNING

The campaigning priest will be back in Kinauley in August for a celebration to mark the 50th anniversary of his ordination. He might even find time to indulge in his passion for fishing, but dreams for his homeland will never be far from his mind.

“It’s a beautiful concept, don’t you think?”

FR SEAN'S AMERICAN STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE



MAKING A POINT: Fr Sean McManus speaking at an event in Belfast in 1979



MEETING OF MINDS: Fr Sean McManus outside with White House in Washington with campaigner Raymond McCord who lost his son in a brutal attack and, right, the Irish National Caucus website



CAMPAIGNING: Fr McManus with the late Ian Paisley

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