

# The 1970 Springboks tour and local politics in Limerick

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by Brian Hanley

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**D**uring January, 1970, the South African rugby team, the Springboks, visited Ireland, having completed a two-month tour of Britain which saw them play England, Wales and Scotland, as well as games against several club sides. The tour of Britain had seen substantial public disorder and widespread Anti-Apartheid protest. Under the leadership of South African-born Peter Hain, the chairman of the Stop the Tour committee and a prominent Young Liberal, protesters had attempted to disrupt the Springbok's progress at every opportunity. The all-white 'Boks' were seen as a potent symbol of Apartheid and their tour as part of an effort by the South African government to present a positive image of itself globally. During December, 1969, alone, there were 98 arrests when the Springboks played in Aberdeen, 69 during their visit to Manchester, 26 at Murrayfield and more serious disturbances in which several policemen were injured during their game against England at Twickenham.<sup>1</sup>

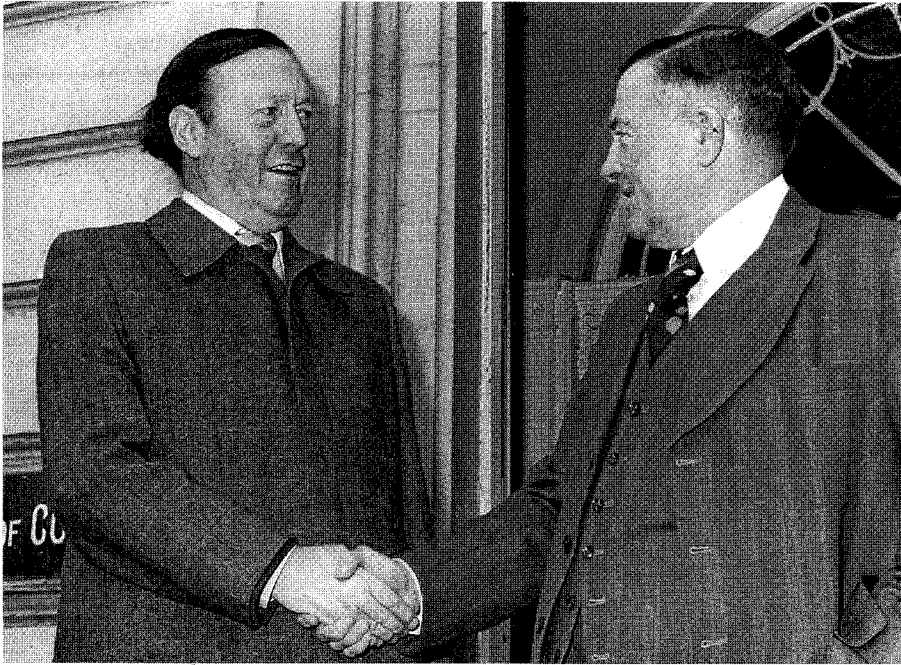
It was also expected that the South African visit to Ireland would be the cause of some protest. A visit to Northern Ireland and a game against Ulster at Ravenhill had already been cancelled on the advice of the RUC, leading the *Natal Mercury* to comment that because of the recent violence in the north, the 'battlefield was already booked.'<sup>2</sup> But the Springboks were still due to play two games in the Republic, against Ireland at Lansdowne Road on Saturday the 10th of January and against Munster at Thomond Park the following Wednesday. During December, opposition to the visit began to build up momentum, with the Anti-Apartheid movement winning support from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and the Labour Party in their call for protest.<sup>3</sup> President Eamon de Valera also made it known that he was declining an invitation from the Irish Rugby Football Association (IRFU) to attend the Lansdowne game.<sup>4</sup> It was not in fact the first time South African rugby teams had visited Ireland: they had been here in 1951, 1960 and 1965. But while there had been a small protest march in Dublin and indeed a picket at Thomond Park during the 1965 visit, the opposition in 1970 was bound to be substantially bigger.<sup>5</sup> Relative to the rest of Europe, the Irish left may have seemed marginal, but it had been

growing in confidence during the late 1960s and from the Labour Party leadership to Sinn Fein, all sections of it saw opposition to the Apartheid Regime as a point of principle. Furthermore the left had become increasingly visible in street politics, within movements such as the Dublin Housing Action Campaign, so that clashes at protests were commonplace on Dublin's streets by 1969. The eruption of violence in the north after August 1969 and the attendant protest in the south also contributed to a mood of radicalism and uncertainty. In Limerick during December young MP Bernadette Devlin had spoken to up two thousand people and caused some controversy by her forthright condemnation of southern Irish society as well as of Unionist misrule in the north. As a result there was some suggestion that the protests in Ireland could even outstrip those in Britain in terms of militancy. An attempt was made to set fire to the press box at Lansdowne Road in late December and rumours of IRA threats circulated.<sup>6</sup> In Limerick, the local branch of the Irish Revolutionary Youth Movement had called for protests against the match, though the attendance of just eight people at their rally in Bedford Row was not evidence of much mass support. However, the local Anti-Apartheid group, whose spokesman Jim Kemmy was chairman of the St. Mary's branch of the Labour Party, promised to organize more broad based opposition. In Dublin, Michael Mullen, general secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, called on the union's membership to refuse to cater to the touring South Africans and it seemed for a while as if the team would be unable to find transport or hotel accommodation in Dublin. Trade unions in RTE discussed taking action to prevent the game being shown on television. Eventually a non-union hotel in Bray, the Royal Starlight, was booked by the IRFU for the visitors and non-union transport found. The Labour Party's vocal opposition to the tour and the threatened use of union muscle to back it up produced the first round of controversy, with many objecting to the use of union power to disrupt a sporting visit.<sup>7</sup>

The debate that unfolded revealed a wide divergence in opinions, both about

South Africa, for which there was more than a little sympathy, some of it related to the historical relationship between Irish nationalists and the Boers, about sport, which large numbers felt should be non-political, and particularly about attitudes to the left. The June 1969 general election had seen Fianna Fail returned to government after a campaign that had seen the party, particularly prominent ministers Neil Blaney and Charles Haughey, liberally use the term 'communist' to describe their opponents in the Labour Party. Haughey had claimed that Labour favoured 'extreme socialism' and a 'materialistic concept of life', while Blaney denounced the 'pseudo-intellectual Marxists, Maoists, Trotskyites and the like who have emerged like carrion birds to pick the flesh of the Irish people.' Blaney also warned that Labour wanted to nationalize the banks so that it could get its 'hands on your money.' Minister Sean MacEntee claimed that the Labour Party stood for 'Lenin, Stalin' and the 'red flames of burning homesteads in Meath.'<sup>8</sup> Though most people would have been hard pressed to explain the difference between a Trotskyite, Maoist or a Stalinist, the 'red scare' and use of the word 'communist' as a term of abuse was part of Irish political discourse in 1969.

At the same time Labour had optimistically declared that the 'Seventies would be Socialist', ruled out coalition unequivocally and unveiled its newest intellectual recruits, including Justin Keating and Conor Cruise O'Brien, to the electorate.<sup>9</sup> Discussion on the relative merits of socialism versus capitalism continued during the debate on the Springbok's visit and coloured perceptions of it for many people, as most of those who opposed it were broadly on the left. One correspondent to the Irish Times complained of the 'loathsome hypocrisy' of the 'non-elected bureaucrats' of the trade unions who were threatening industrial action to disrupt the tour. This use of this 'industrial blackmail', complained Michael McDowell of Upper Leeson Street, Dublin, revealed the 'embryonic tyranny' of the left.<sup>10</sup> These were sentiments wholeheartedly endorsed by the *Limerick Leader*. It complained that members of the Limerick Trades Council had been 'sipping cocktails' with representatives of unions from the Eastern Bloc at a reception during 1969 and there had not been a



Conor Cruise-O'Brien shaking hands with Stephen Coughlan outside the Chamber of Commerce building, Limerick

word of protest about it. While the *Leader* accepted that the Apartheid system was 'undefensible' so was communism, and the trade unions that were calling for a boycott of the Springboks were not to the fore in campaigning against that ideology. The so-called 'ban the Boks' campaign was in danger of 'careering out of control' warned the *Leader*, claiming that Anti-Apartheid was 'a perfect cause for any rebel without one.' It asked instead that 'fair play' and a 'Limerick welcome' be extended to the Springboks. One *Leader* columnist went so far as to suggest that 'Benito Mussolini and his system,' for all its faults, was more preferable than Stalin and his.<sup>11</sup> The skepticism about the boycott campaign was shared by local Labour TD and Mayor of Limerick, Steven Coughlan. During December, he warned that while he would not personally meet the Springboks, he feared that 'revolutionary communist groups' would use the visit as an excuse to come to Limerick to stir up trouble. He offered the opinion that some of his colleagues in the Labour Party had 'gone haywire' with their concern with international politics and these obsessions had 'lost us 40 deposits' at the general election.<sup>12</sup> Coughlan was strongly of the view that Labour's championing of socialism had been a disaster and that further dalliances in that direction would see the parliamentary party 'going to the Dail in a mini-bus.' In contrast Coughlan, a former Clann na Poblachta member (and 1930s IRA volunteer) who had been a Labour TD since 1961 had nearly topped the poll in 1969, coming in second, well ahead of Fianna Fail's Des O'Malley. When his Labour colleague, Barry Desmond, had told an Anti-Apartheid meeting in Limerick that the party would back their protests, Coughlan reacted angrily, exclaiming that it was 'a damned cheek for this jumped up overnight politician to come to Limerick to tell us

how to act.' His stance won praise from the *Limerick Leader*, who compared Coughlan favourably with the 'extremists' in his party. As the date of the tour approached the tempo of debate increased. Taoiseach Jack Lynch made it known that he would not be present at Lansdowne Road. Members of the Ulster Unionist party threatened to hold a counter picket at the game to protest at what they described as the real Apartheid in Irish sport, the GAA's ban on 'foreign games', while the Ulster Volunteer Force also threatened to take action in Dublin if the Springboks were interfered with. Meanwhile the ICTU's plans for a boycott were subject to some revision when workers at the South African De Beer's company, employing 400 ITGWU members in Shannon, inquired if this boycott was to be extended to their company. The ITGWU made clear that this course of action was not being considered, which some noted as rather selective opposition to Apartheid.

On the 7th of January 1970, what the *Irish Times* called the 'siege of the Springboks' began when the team arrived at Dublin Airport. There were scuffles inside and outside the terminal as protesters attempted to block their exit, but eventually the 27 South African players, 11 journalists and 3 officials were ferried by bus to the Starlight Hotel in Bray. Protest followed them there as the Post Office Officials Association cut off telephone contact to the hotel and the local Sinn Fein organization, led by Seamus Costello, mounted a constant picket outside. Later Gardai arrested a man carrying an improvised explosive device near the hotel. In the days prior to the match, the South Africans were brought sightseeing around Dublin and despite opposition from those in the party, such as Garret FitzGerald, Fine Gael TDs, Paddy Donegan and Hugh Byrne, invited the team to lunch in Dail Eireann.<sup>13</sup>

On Saturday 10th, there was a major Garda presence at Lansdowne Road for the game itself. Coincidentally, the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis was taking place in Ballsbridge and large numbers of the delegates were expected to swell the crowds of protesters. This was the Ard Fheis at which the party split into Official and Provisional factions and in later years Gerry Adams has described his participation in the Anti-Apartheid protest.<sup>14</sup> About 6,000 people marched from Dublin's Parnell Square to Lansdowne Road, including Bernadette Devlin, Noel Browne, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Kadar Asmal, nationalist MP Ivan Cooper, former Irish rugby international AR Foster and labour leaders, Donal Nevin, Michael Mullen and Frank Cluskey. Though the protesters arrived as crowds of fans were heading for the ground, there were only minor scuffles. One rugby fan who told protesters to 'go home and marry a nigger' and some surrounded South African fans had to be rescued by Gardai, but around 30,000 attended the game, which the *Irish Times* considered was 'well below normal' for a major international touring team. The game ended in a draw, 8-8, after Ireland snatched a score in injury time. However, there was more serious trouble after the game, with Garda baton charges on pickets outside an IRFU reception at the Shelbourne Hotel.<sup>15</sup>

Attention soon turned to what was likely to happen at the Wednesday match in Limerick. An unnamed Limerick rugby official expressed the fear that there could be serious trouble in the town, as the nature of Limerick rugby support, 'dockers and bank clerks, like in Swansea or Cardiff, made them more likely to respond to protest aggressively. The *Irish Times* too suggested that the local reaction in Limerick, 'a city unique in Ireland, where rugby cuts across all social barriers', would be very different to that of Dublin.<sup>16</sup>

The *Limerick Leader* also predicted widespread disorder, with reports that thousands of outsiders, many of them extreme left-wingers, were to descend on Limerick intent on trouble. 400 Gardai were to be on duty for the game and five senior and four junior rugby clubs provided stewards at Thomond Park itself, while barbed wire had been placed on the walls surrounding the ground. The *Limerick Leader* editorial gave its blessing to a tough approach, considering that since 'dangerous thugs' had been in evidence at Lansdowne Road, the Gardai were entitled to defend themselves however they saw fit; 'we are sick of the modern kid glove method of toleration and we are fed up of the fanatics featured on RTE.'<sup>17</sup> That among those protesting about the tour was Garryowen hooker and local councillor, Joseph Quinn, was virtually ignored. It was taken for granted that only outsiders would be interested in opposing the South African visit to Limerick. The *Leader* also urged trade unionists in the city to make up their own minds about the issue and not be influenced by unrepresentative agitators. In the event

Limerick Trades Council decided narrowly by just eight votes to six to support an Anti-Apartheid march, which was to set off before the game from Pery Square.

When the Springboks arrived by train to Colbert Station, they received what the *Leader* described as a 'heart warming reception.' 200 people greeted the team with banners and flags and there was an official greeting party of officials from Bohemians, Young Munster, Shannon and Crescent. Less than 20 people, including Jim Kemmy, took part in an Anti-Apartheid picket and the Springbok players derisively blew kisses at the protesters as their bus took them to the Shannon Shamrock hotel. Later that night, there was a banquet for the team at Bunratty Castle and the Springbok's manager, Connie Bornann, thanked Limerick for giving them 'one of the best welcomes of the tour.' Bornann also described the protest at Colbert station as the 'weakest' he had seen, while the *Limerick Leader* suggested that 'not one of the demonstrators ever kicked a ball in their lives.'<sup>18</sup> Over the next few days, the South Africans trained and did some sightseeing, while the city prepared for the game itself and for a 'siege of Limerick 1970 style', according to the *Limerick Leader*. On the night before the game a rather surreal scene took place outside the Shannon Shamrock. Despite 'rain and near gale force wind', about 25 supporters of a group called the National Movement marched from the city to the hotel and handed in a letter of welcome to the Springbok team. Wearing Celtic cross armbands and carrying placards reading 'Boks yes, Reds no', 'We support White Christian South Africa' and 'Red Thugs get out', the groups spokesman, John Buckley, exchanged insults with a small group of Anti-Apartheid pickets, while South African players took photographs. Buckley made several attempts to set fire to a Maoist magazine, though heavy rain foiled this plan.<sup>19</sup> In the days leading up to the game, posters had been placed around the city and workplaces leafleted by the National Movement calling on people to welcome the Springboks in order to show their opposition to communism in Limerick.

On Wednesday, 10,000 attended the match itself, the biggest attendance ever to watch a rugby game in the province, according to the *Irish Times*. Munster were beaten 25-9 in what was considered a 'poor' game with the locals 'outclassed' by the bigger, fitter and more experienced' Boks. Munster missed their captain, Tom Kiernan, who had played for Ireland on the Saturday, but was injured in the Dublin game. During a drab performance, one supporter was heard to exclaim that 'even the damn protest is more exciting than this.' Only about 350 people, of whom only 30 were thought to be local, including three Jesuit priests, took part in the Anti-Apartheid protest. The protest march was led by the Reverend Marnie Cunningham, capped seven times for Ireland at rugby (and scorer of a famous try against Wales in 1956), who was greeted warmly by



Jim Kemmy canvassing in Garryowen  
(Limerick Museum)

some of his former teammates, such as Noel Murphy, who were attending the game.<sup>20</sup> There was little trouble at the ground, although an egg thrown by a Munster supporter at the protesters hit a Garda. Later that evening, however, Gardai baton charged some demonstrators in O'Connell Street, with Anti-Apartheid protesters claiming Gardai had overreacted to some minor scuffles. The *Limerick Leader* was pleased to report that the workers of Limerick had 'defied' their union leaderships and gone to the game. Indeed, there had almost been a walkout at the Ranks flourmill in support of the Springboks, and only the intervention of a union official had stopped it.

The South Africans were equally impressed, with Connie Bornann describing Limerick as certainly the 'nicest' place they had visited, where the 'intense rugby atmosphere was like a balm on our nerves' after Dublin and Bray. The team's Captain, Dawie Jacobus de Villiers, in an interview in the *Limerick Leader* entitled 'Why I like Limerick', described their time there as the 'happiest part of the tour' and hoped that 'this city is more representative of Irish opinion than Dublin.' In fact, tensions which had been brought to the surface during the visit were becoming apparent even before the 'strong, silent types', as the *Leader* dubbed the South Africans, left

Shannon Airport.<sup>21</sup> In the aftermath of the visit, there was some unease among the Labour Party nationally that Stevie Coughlan had flouted the party's opposition to the tour and attacked prominent members of his party in public. Jim Kemmy's St. Mary's branch moved a motion censuring him which was heavily defeated at the East Limerick Constituency Council by 58 votes to 4.<sup>22</sup> The *Limerick Leader* noted that radicals in the Labour Party were moving against Coughlan and gave him its support, stressing that 'Alderman Coughlan must not be hindered by extremists who would hoist the red flag over Limerick if they had their way.' The paper noted the influence of a Dublin-based clique in the party that sought to overturn the wishes of the Limerick organization.<sup>23</sup>

But soon the paper had discovered an issue that both it and Coughlan would turn into a local crusade. During the trouble after the Springboks game, a priest had claimed that a group of Maoists had physically threatened him and stated that they intended to destroy Limerick's Arch-Confraternity. The *Limerick Chronicle* then claimed that there were at least 200 Maoists in Limerick. In fact the Maoists in question, the Irish Revolutionary Youth Movement, consisted of 5 or 6 former students, led by a young Drogheda man called Arthur Allen, who had taken jobs in factories in Limerick and Shannon and distributed their magazines and leaflets around pubs and in O'Connell Street at the weekends. They had also opened a small bookshop, Progress Books, in St. Mary's parish, which sold material from China, including Mao's Little Red Book and displayed portraits of Chairman Mao himself.<sup>24</sup> In the atmosphere of the time, exacerbated by the tension caused by the Springboks visit, rumours circulated of efforts by the Maoists to recruit schoolchildren and distribute anti-religious material. The *Limerick Leader* editorial on January 26 made clear that the 'sooner they (the Maoists) are driven out of Limerick the better for the good of the community...we call on everyone and particularly the clergy and the trade unions to rise up and crush the menace that is threatening the youth of this city...they must be crushed in Limerick and run out of our city without delay.'<sup>25</sup> Coughlan made clear that he supported this suggestion, arguing that 'as Mayor of Limerick I wish to alert the citizens to the dangers of the insidious propaganda being distributed by left wing agents of a foreign power.' He then sent a long letter to publicans in the city asking them to prevent the sale of radical literature on their premises, implying that those who did not do so would be seen as sympathetic to the various communist groups he alleged were visiting Limerick's pubs in search of recruits. He toured Limerick's secondary schools giving lectures to students on what he called the 'Red Menace' and asked that schools expel pupils who displayed communist tendencies.<sup>26</sup> Coughlan suggested that a

particular pupil at the Crescent was a communist and demanded his expulsion, but a threatened strike by students led to the school authorities rejecting Coughlan's appeals. He also called for a teacher, Tony Pratscke, who was actually a member of the Labour Party, to be sacked. At masses in the Augustinian Church, priests called for the removal of the Maoists from the city. The stories circulating about Maoist recruitment in schools and particularly their threats to the Catholic Church led to a number of attacks on the shop. Its windows were smashed on several occasions, shots were fired into the shop during March and there was an attempted firebomb attack on the premises. The irony, of course, was that prior to the *Limerick Leader* editorial and Coughlan's speeches, the vast majority of people in Limerick had never heard of the Irish Revolutionary Youth Movement. The Maoists were in fact the smallest and most marginal group on the Irish left, the product of the splintering a group called the Internationalists, founded at Trinity College Dublin in 1966. The Internationalists had gained fleeting notoriety with a protest at the visit of the King and Queen of Belgium to Trinity in 1968. Dismissing the pro-Moscow Communist Party of Ireland as 'revisionists', the Internationalists had never gained more than a handful of adherents, but had diligently tried to spread their message outside schools and factories, in Cork and Limerick as well as Dublin. However, despite forming an Anti-Cheap Labour League in Limerick, their arcane language and tendency to relate Chinese government propaganda to the Irish political scene guaranteed that they would remain tiny.<sup>27</sup>

In Limerick, however, a potent blend of fear of radical influence on school children, of real or imagined attacks on the Catholic Church and suspicion of outsiders produced a bizarre political alliance. The National Movement, the group which had marched to the Shannon Shamrock to welcome the Springboks, campaigned for Stevie Coughlan on the streets, proclaiming 'he stood by you, now stand by him' while collecting petitions to close the Maoist bookshop. Coughlan met the National Movement's John Buckley, a 23-year-old window dresser at Cannocks department store, and praised his group's efforts. When the National Movement presented their anti-Maoist petition to Limerick Corporation, a vote of thanks was proposed to them by two Labour councillors.<sup>28</sup> The rather startling fact about this was that the National Movement was an openly Neo-Nazi organization that praised Adolph Hitler in its magazine, *The Nation*, which it sold openly on O'Connell Street, and distributed material produced by the American Nazi party and the Ku Klux Klan while it collected petitions against the Maoists. The Celtic Cross armbands worn on the night of their march to the Shannon Shamrock were in fact a neo-Nazi symbol used by several European Fascist groups. The main base

of the Movement was in Limerick, though it also had members in Dublin, though probably no more than 50 nationwide. Its honorary chairman was Commandant J. Brennan Whitmore, an 84-year-old veteran of the 1916 Rising, who had become obsessed with the idea of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy during the 1920s and dedicated his life to opposing it. The Movement's announcement that it was to seek young members to its Christian Nationalist Youth Movement by selling a new magazine, *Young Guard*, outside schools was not commented on by either Coughlan or the *Limerick Leader*, though the alleged influence of the Maoists among teenagers had been cause for the campaign to drive them from Limerick.<sup>29</sup> The physical attacks on the Maoists were dismissed by the *Leader* as a 'red riddle', with the suggestion that the Maoists had smashed their own windows to create publicity.<sup>30</sup> This was too much for Jim Kemmy, who demanded that the Labour Party leadership raise these issues with Coughlan at a national level.

Matters came to a head when the national press, particularly the current affairs *Nusight* magazine, edited by Vincent Browne, reported on the aftermath of the Springboks visit to Limerick. The rather over the top articles, one entitled 'Fascism in Limerick,' compared Coughlan to the American right wing leader, George Wallace, and suggested that his campaign could be the beginning of a populist fascist movement in Ireland, led by right wing Labour TDs and staffed by the activists of the National Movement. The article drew attention to a number of historical incidents in the city, notably the 1904 anti-Jewish boycott and attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses during the 1950s, to claim that Limerick had a unique right-wing tradition. Closer to the truth about Coughlan, though, was the description of him as 'violently parochial - almost a Limerick Home Ruler.'<sup>31</sup> This national attention simply produced greater reaction from Coughlan. At a Limerick Credit Union meeting in early April, Coughlan proceeded to inform his audience that he was proud that the Limerick people, including he claimed, his own parents, had in 'a most courageous way declared war on the Jews of Collooney Street' on what he called 'the Jewish extortionists' who had been bleeding the working people of Limerick dry 70 years before.<sup>32</sup> There was briefly outrage nationally, though the *Limerick Leader* felt Coughlan was again being victimized by the Dublin media and the scandal died down relatively quickly. (Fianna Fail TD, Ben Briscoe, was among those who defended Coughlan against charges of anti-Semitism).<sup>33</sup> In reality Coughlan's family were probably not involved in the 1904 events at all and his own knowledge of them was not based on any personal experience. He probably had been reminded of the events in the first place by the *Nusight* article and moved to defend Limerick's reputation by justifying the boycott. But at a meeting of the Labour Party Administrative Council,

trade union leader, Matt Merrigan, moved a motion to expel Coughlan from the party, citing his defence of the anti-Jewish boycott. However, the motion was defeated by 16 votes to 10, the Labour leadership surmising that it needed all the TDs it could get. In protest, Merrigan and Jim Kemmy resigned from the administrative council, with Kemmy eventually taking about 40 supporters out of the party in Limerick altogether.<sup>34</sup> In early 1972, Kemmy formed the Limerick Socialist Organization, which formed the basis for his winning a council and eventually a Dail seat and his Democratic Socialist Party. Coughlan himself remained a Labour TD until 1977, though internal rivalries within the local Labour Party prevented him from handing on his Dail seat to his son and namesake. Undoubtedly two men of such divergent political views and strong personalities, like Kemmy and Coughlan, would have parted company at some stage, but it was the visit of a South African rugby team that provided the impetus for their split.

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