

Bernie Sanders: He's Not Just a Kid from Brooklyn

It has come as a surprise not only to Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party but to the whole country, that thinks of him as a single idea presidential candidate, that Senator Bernie Sanders has an unparalleled mastery of foreign affairs, and that he has never met a political dictator he didn't like. Truth will out.

Let's start with Brooklyn, New York. In the late 1950s Bernie lost the election to become class president of James Madison High School. However, his influence, immense understanding of international affairs, and personal magnetism was such that the student who beat him soon accepted Bernie's main platform of raising money for Korean orphans.

From Brooklyn we go to Israel. In 1963 Bernie spent several months in Kibbutz Sha'ar Ha'amakim near Haifa, as a guest of the far left Hashomer Hatzair (Young Guard) youth movement. The movement took the Soviet Union as its model and for a time had Noam Chomsky as another guest. We all know Bernie as a self-described "democrat socialist," though not as the neo-Marxist of the Kibbutz. In recent years he has been virtually silent about Israel and his only priceless counsel is to stop "the endless war in the Middle East."

Though since 1963 and particularly in the present presidential campaign he has been concerned with other matters, primarily Wall Street, inequality, free colleges, and prisons, Bernie never lost his appetite for foreign policy nor his opinions delivered to the leaders of the world in a far leftist ideological fashion.

In April 1981 Bernie became Mayor of the City of Burlington, Vermont, and immediately made his views known to those world

leaders, though he was distracted from time to time by minor problems like garbage collection, crime, school funding, and getting a minor league baseball team for Burlington. In the same year, he wrote letters to the leaders of the Soviet Union, the chairman of the Communist party in China, the Prime Minister Britain, and the President of France on the urgency of military disarmament. He had a "romantic honeymoon" in the Soviet Union in 1988, and visited Cuba, but was unable to meet Fidel Castro whom he wanted to advise, the following year.

Particularly interesting is Bernie's glee at the revolution in Nicaragua. In July 1985 he visited the country, largely at the expense of the government, to join the anniversary celebration of the revolution: he was the only American official there. He met Daniel Ortega, leader of the Sandinista National Liberation Front and president of Nicaragua, and hailed the "heroic revolution" in the country.

Ortega, trained in guerilla warfare in Cuba, called himself a Marxist-Leninist, with a program that appealed to Bernie, of nationalization, land reform, and redistribution of wealth. He told Bernie that capitalism was in its death throes, and that there was a real possibility that the US was about to enter a Vietnam-type civil war in Central America.

Bernie may not have known that Ortega also defended the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, and praised the Islamic State of Iran: "the revolutions of Iran and Nicaragua are almost twin revolutions." Interestingly in view of Bernie's political identification, Ortega, like Bernie, now proclaims himself a "democratic socialist."

For his part, Bernie informed the people in Nicaragua, as he also did in a letter to President Ronald Reagan that the U.S. was sabotaging the Nicaraguan economy on behalf of American large corporations. At that time did not specifically mention "Wall Street."

Burlington for Bernie became the center of the political universe. He invited the wife of French President Francois Mitterand to visit his universe, a "struggling socialist municipal government" and speak on any subject. The invitation was probably lost in the mail because she never appeared.

One of those who did come to Burlington was Bernadette Devlin, later McAliskey, the fiery mini-skirted activist who was elected to the House of Commons at age 21 in 1969. She literally made her mark in the Chamber of the British Parliament by punching the Conservative Government Home Secretary Reginald Maudling. He had said the British paratroopers had fired in self-defense when they killed at least 14 unarmed civilians in Dublin on Bloody Sunday, January 30, 1972.

A few days later, on February 2, 1972 a mob in Dublin responded to the massacre by burning the British Embassy. Bernie might be flattered that Devlin always called herself and wanted to be addressed as "Bernard," and members of the Democratic Party might equally be proud that one of the people who admired and was influenced by her while he was at Oxford was a young student named Bill Clinton.

Within a month of his becoming mayor Bernie on July 15, 1981, together with an Alderman of Burlington, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on a subject on which apparently he had vast expertise. He told the Prime Minister that the two writers were deeply disturbed by her government's unwillingness to stop the abuse, humiliation and degrading treatment of the Irish prisoners on hunger strike in Northern Ireland.

Bernie asked Thatcher to end her "intransigent" policy towards the prisoners before the reputation of the English people for fair play and simple decency was further damaged in the eyes of the people of Vermont and the United States.

No doubt Prime Minister Thatcher who had taken office in May 1979 appreciated the letter and its point of view, but there is no record of a reply to Bernie. In spite of his great knowledge of the issue, Bernie could not have known that on July 15, 1979 the very date of his letter, Thatcher had invited the International Committee of Red Cross to investigate prison conditions in Northern Ireland. Nor could Bernie have known, as the Irish solicitor and former IRA member Kieran Conway make clear in his book *Southside Provisional* published thirty years later, that Irish prisoners had access to books by or on revolutionaries such as the Irish activist Bobby Seale, Frantz Fanon, Mao, Che Guevara, Stalin and Lenin.

Bernie was indeed barely aware of the context of the problem, one of politics not crime. Bobby Sands, a popular member of the Provisional IRA, had begun a hunger strike in March 1981 in Maze Prison in Dublin. He threatened to fast to death unless the prisoners got concessions regarding their living conditions. These concerned wearing their own clothes and not wearing prison uniforms, not doing prison work, free association with other prisoners, and organizing educational pursuits. Sands insisted on regaining the status of political prisoners, a status that had been ended in 1976 by the preceding Labour Government, largely because the Provisional IRA had assassinated the British Ambassador, Christopher Biggs, in Dublin on July 21, 1976. Prime Minister Thatcher refused this political status, arguing that "Crime is crime is crime; it is not political." She was soon to be preoccupied with the Falklands War.

Sands at age 27 died after a 66 day hunger strike on May 5, 1981 and nine others died in the same fashion. Curiously, he had been elected a member of the House of Commons a month after he began the hunger strike.

Bernie was not deterred. On November 2, 1983 he wrote a letter, "To whom it may concern" strongly recommending that

the case of another hunger striker Nicky Kelly who had been imprisoned for armed robbery in Dublin be reopened so that justice could be served. Kelly was in fact released on humanitarian grounds in 1984 and pardoned in 1992.

Bernie has said little on the Arab-Israeli conflict except to call for a two state solution. He did not know that in his early years the issue was one of the few problems on which the IRA was divided, and in the 1970s, though not now, a pro-Israeli point of view prevailed.

With his vast international experience and influence on world leaders Bernie might help this former Irish position to be sustained, especially by the Teachers Union of Ireland and the students of the Irish National Union of Students that called for a boycott of Israel and supported the campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions against the State of Israel. Now there's a task for a nice 74-year old boy from Brooklyn.