

FINDING TROUBLE IN THE U.S.

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"I'm a 55-year-old granny with a gammy leg after years of to'ins and fro'ins, and I'm here on a cheap holiday in New York, sourced on the Internet by my daughter," Bernadette Devlin McAliskey was saying yesterday.

"We were going for our luggage. We were in Chicago. The cheap flight takes you to New York that way. We didn't have to go through immigration, they pass you through in Dublin now. The loudspeaker calls out 'McAliskey.' We go up to your man and say yes, and we're immediately surrounded by three men and a woman. They grab the passports out of our hands. One of the men says to me, 'We've a fax from our agents in Dublin. It says you're a potential or real threat to the United States.'"

She told them to look at the name on the passport, which says Bernadette Devlin McAliskey.

"I've been coming back and forth to this country for 30 years," she told them.

"You've evaded us before, but you're not going to do it now," one of the immigration people, the oldest one, said.

"Look at the passport. Read the name. I was a member of Parliament."

"What year?"

"Nineteen sixty nine."

"That made you 21 years old," one of them said. "Come on." He motioned toward an office.

She was 21 then, and she was famous all over the world, but fame comes and goes in a minute and here were four people who not only never heard of her, but were detaining her.

She remembered yesterday that she said, "This is crazy."

The older agent said, "If you tell me one more time that this is crazy, I'll put handcuffs on you and throw you into a cell."

"All right, I won't say one more time that this is crazy. But it is crazy," she said.

Then Bernadette Devlin, who for so many years showed Catholics in Northern Ireland how to breathe and be as unafraid as she was, and by doing so placed the first jobs they ever had into their lives, this small woman with music for a voice who thrilled so many Irish in New York, wound up in an office, where she was fingerprinted and photographed.

Humiliate them. Then frighten them. "I'm going to throw you in prison," the older man said.

He tried the wrong party. "You can't do that," she said. "I have rights. I have the right to free movement. I have human rights. I have the right to be protected under the Constitution of the United States."

The daughter overheard one of them say, "After 9/11, nobody has any rights."

It was common mouthing and behavior from a government that daily shears people of their rights.

"This must be the way they treat every Mrs. McAliskey," she was saying yesterday. "That was the most disturbing."

Under John Ashcroft, a prayer breakfast man who probably prays against people, the Justice Department doesn't believe in the Bill of Rights. Ashcroft is useless in a big Justice Department case against such as Enron. How could he be? Even he says he accepted big donations from them.

But he can sweep the rights of individuals out of the room, and do it while humming prayer songs.

In one week in this city, an anti-war demonstration was blocked by the mayor and police commissioner, and now Bernadette Devlin is deported. That one comes from Washington. She is cleared easily by American agents in Dublin who knew she was in order. Suddenly, they are ordered to send a fax to Chicago to block her. Somebody in Washington, with the mind of a rodent, has to order that.

This has to be all about her making a speech against the war someplace and the British put in a complaint to our authorities.

At the Chicago airport, they asked Bernadette if she ever had been arrested. Yes, in Northern Ireland. Had she been in prison? Yes, for six months. "I told them I was convicted of an offense for civil rights demonstrating 20 years ago."

Her daughter, Deirdre, remembers one of them saying, "See, that makes her ineligible to be in the country. She knew that. She snuck past the people in Dublin."

Bernadette said yesterday, "I told them that it has to be two years in jail before you're ineligible to enter the United States. I was in for six months. That put me in bracket A of 211. My ineligibility was lifted. I've been going and coming to this country for 30 years now. Go look me up on the computer."

One of them whispered to her, "Don't make my boss mad. He shot at Russians here."

"I was going to tell them that I was shot in Northern Ireland, but now I was afraid that he would be upset and start shooting at me. Who knew what they would do? They were in a panic. Totally irrational. They had a fax that said I was a potential or real threat to America. I'm sitting there, an old nuclear warhead."

She started in again about them looking up her file in the computer. "It's there," she said. "They have a profile of me." Finally, the older agent went into another room. Minutes passed. When he came out he was different. "She's telling the truth," he told the others.

Then he said to her, "You're Bernadette Devlin."

"Yes, I am."

"Then you're right. It is crazy. I can't do anything about it. This fax says you can't enter the country. I've got to send you back."

She was seething with contempt. Amazingly, they let the daughter, Deirdre, go off to New York, so she could tell everybody what had happened. The agents hadn't looked at the luggage; Deirdre picked hers up and was gone.

Bernadette was escorted to the Aer Lingus flight back to Dublin. She had arrived at 5:20 p.m. Now, at 7:30 p.m. on Friday night, all this beauty was being deported.

She was found yesterday at her home in Coalisland, Northern Ireland.