

Towards a Politics of Democratic Renewal

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Despite claims about the 'modernity' of the 'Celtic Tiger', the Republic remains a bureaucratic and highly centralised society, characterised by petty patronage, corruption and jobbery in local politics, and gross inequalities of power, wealth and privilege. The main reason for this state of affairs is the failure of progressive politics to devise an alternative with mass popular appeal. Attempts were made to do this in various ways by the Republican Congress in the 1930s, by Clann na Poblachta in the 1940s, and by the united republican movement in the 1960s.

The common feature of all these attempts was the effort to construct a republican, socially radical alternative to the left of Fianna Fáil, but which would in the short to medium term press Fianna Fáil into adopting more progressive policies on the national question and on the economy. The situation in the country still requires the construction of such a radical alternative politics but the environment in which it would operate has become more complex than before.

For most of the period of partition, the political scene in Ireland was characterised by the dominance of Fianna Fáil in the South and the Unionist Party in the North. There is general agreement that that era has ended for good, and that the two large, catch-all parties will no longer dominate the political scene. Already, both parts of the country have had a taste of the new dispensation. This involves coalition governments in the South, and institutionalised power sharing in the North. It is assumed that this will be the pattern of government for the island for the foreseeable future, if the Good Friday Agreement institutions can be put together again.

The conventional wisdom is that in this era of 'Celtic Tiger' prosperity and 'consensus', it will prove impossible to develop any realistic challenge or alternative to the dominant agenda. The conventional wisdom may yet prove wrong.

It is by no means certain that the Good Friday institutions can be put together again. The institutions were predicated on an accommodation between nationalism and unionism. That accommodation does not exist.

No one can predict what the long-term consequences of failure to reinstate the Northern political institutions could be.

In the South the basis of social 'partnership' is threatened by the obvious failures to solve problems of gross inequality, poverty, social exclusion and quality of life, compounded by unease and disquiet about the continuing erosion of national independence, and by continuing revelations about the specifically Irish dynamics of corruption in business, political and civil society.

Historically, Fianna Fáil was able to dominate politics in the twenty-six counties, because it was able to continually reinvent itself as the representative of the aspirations of a broad cross-class social bloc. It did this by developing a series of programmes, which seemed to put coherence on the world and also seemed to address the needs of a constituency, ranging from the working class to the industrial, capitalist class. It also operated a system of clientelism, which helped to dampen down the obvious conflict of interest which existed between sections of its supporters. As a consequence, it was able to develop an unmatched organisation which mobilised its supporters to usually devastating electoral effect.

This political universe of Fianna Fáil has altered dramatically over the past twenty years, but not as dramatically as that of unionism. Civil rights effectively challenged the coherence of unionism. While the veto on constitutional change remained until the Good Friday Agreement, the veto on civil rights reform was undermined by the civil rights movement in the 1960s and then later destroyed by the advance of nationalism. The main obstacle to the full implementation of a programme of democratic change in the North is now to be found in London rather than in Belfast. But this does not mean that unionism has fully accepted the change in its influence. Stripped down to bare essentials, the essence of unionism remains sectarian top doggery. 'Civic' unionism can never become a majority strand within unionism. However, given the right set of circumstances, it might become part of a new civic democratic majority politics for the North. It was in the hope that such a politics is possible that republicans and nationalists negotiated and threw their weight behind the Good Friday Agreement.

The starting points for any consideration of the possibility of the development of a radical alternative politics on the island must be the nearly 40 per cent of Southern voters who defied the Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Progressive Democrat and Labour Party political establishments and voted against the Amsterdam Treaty. Despite the claims of revisionism, the defence of democracy, independence and sovereignty raised by the Amsterdam Treaty was seen as being central to the future progressive development of the country.

The lack of any serious debate among the main political parties about

Maastricht, Amsterdam and, latterly, membership of the so-called Partnership for Peace revealed that much of what passes for political controversy is simply a smokescreen to hide the reality that nothing really fundamental divides the major parties in the South. For example, the most important single cause of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy is that in the years 1993-1999 the Republic followed an independent currency policy. The resulting floating currency exchange rate has made Irish exports and home production highly competitive in relation to Ireland's trading partners, so boosting economic growth. In 1999 the main Dáil parties agreed to abolish the independent Irish currency, in principle, forever, and with it any possibility of an Irish interest rate and exchange rate policy, by replacing the punt with the euro from 2002. The European Central Bank in Frankfurt will determine Ireland's interest rate, credit and exchange rate henceforth, in Germany and France's interests not ours.

Brussels has also signalled its intent to remove key elements of the one remaining state economic power, taxation, from the national to the European Union (EU) level. As a result, this country's ability to determine fundamental economic policy is effectively ended. A similar process is at work in relation to defence and foreign policy. An essential element of a people's ability to determine their own affairs, is the ability to determine their own independent defence and foreign policy. Article 29 of the Constitution commits the country to the principles of peace and friendly cooperation amongst nations, founded on international justice and morality. Traditionally, this has meant a policy of neutrality. Essentially, neutrality means non-membership of military alliances. In the Amsterdam Treaty, there is a commitment 'to the framing of a common defence policy. ... which might lead to a common defence, should the European Council so decide'.

The country's neutrality was further seriously undermined by the decision of the government to join up to the NATO led Partnership for Peace. Despite the claims to the contrary, membership of that organisation signalled a turn towards a role as one of the satellites of NATO. So far, the actual consequences of membership have been minimal but undoubtedly, over time, membership will mean increased military expenditure, higher taxes and more purchases of military equipment from the arms industries of NATO and the European Union.

During the period leading up to Ireland's accession to the Partnership for Peace, elements of the Labour 'Left' tried to position themselves just slightly outside the mainstream Dáil consensus by counterposing common EU defence to membership of the NATO-led organisation. As a consequence of this opportunism the Labour 'Left' is now tied into supporting what has been described as 'the foundations for a European Defence Union'. Last December the EU agreed to establish a military

force of 60,000 by 2003, based on the Amsterdam Treaty. The purpose of this force is not to defend the EU states against attack, but to intervene in, and attack, if necessary, states outside the EU.

Irish 'neutrality' now means an unwillingness to come to the aid of other EU states, in the unlikely event of one or all of them being attacked, but a willingness to support an attack on another, usually weaker, non-EU state.

It is ironic that at a time when the Dáil parties are urging the republican movement to 'decommission', they are signing up to measures which include the virtual integration of the European Union and the nuclear-armed Western European Union, and also the development of a pronounced military dimension to the European Union with the objective of military intervention in the affairs of other states. The next EU Treaty is now being drawn up, and will, amongst other things, reduce Ireland's voting weight on the EU Council of Ministers. It is already being called the 'Treaty of Nice' and will go around next year for ratification. The government clearly wants to avoid a referendum on it.

Another irony, which is not lost on nationalist opinion in the North, is that when it suited the major Dáil parties, they described the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement as an exercise in 'self-determination'. They warned that no one in nationalist Ireland could ignore such a clear statement of the will of the people. At that time, it suited an anti-republican rhetoric to treat the referendum in that way because it was claimed that the republican position on decommissioning was contrary to the will of the people.

There has been no such talk since the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland unilaterally suspended the Northern Ireland Executive. Mr Ahern expressed 'concern' at the action, and said that any 'significant extension' of the suspension 'could make the situation more difficult'. Up to then, progress had been made to create a political dispensation for Northern Ireland based on consent and the protection of the civil, individual and cultural rights of all citizens. Many problems remained to be resolved, but this required the willingness of the pro-Agreement political parties to work together, on the basis of accommodation, equality and mutual reliance.

This raises the nature of the agreement entered into on Good Friday. For any agreement to come about, there has to be an acceptance by the parties that agreement is better than any alternatives around.

Once the republican movement adopted the political, as opposed to the armed struggle, road towards a united Ireland, it was inevitable that some sort of transitional stage towards its long-term objective would have to be constructed. The Hume/Adams talks and the republican peace strategy followed on logically from this turning point. Implicit in the approach was recognition that in order to go forward it is sometimes necessary to take a

few steps back. The logic of international events, such as the ending of the Cold War, as well as developments within Britain and Ireland, made republicans realise that some form of united Ireland was on the cards in the longer term. The question for them was whether the political establishments in London and Dublin could bring this about while continuing to exclude and marginalise them. They rightly determined to prevent this happening.

The unionists lacked a similar optimism about the long term. The core of the unionist case is that the unionist bloc constitutes a political and cultural majority in the area of Northern Ireland, and that therefore the area can only be governed in accordance with their aspirations and traditions. Any recognition of nationalist traditions or aspirations has only been grudgingly conceded. Unionism refuses to recognise the legitimacy of these aspirations and traditions, holding them to be essentially irrational in nature. The fear is that there may come a time when the unionist bloc no longer constitutes a majority. Various fall-back positions have been contemplated. The most logical one is the total integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom. That would represent the clearest guarantee of the union. The problem with this option is that no British government is prepared to adopt it. Other options are even less certain.

The siege mentality of unionism is often commented on. That is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. As a strength, it gives backbone to unionist resistance to attempts to foist unwelcome measures on it. But as a weakness it is particularly dangerous. It makes it impossible for unionism to really compromise with nationalism, much less with republicanism.

Republicans and nationalists were prepared to recognise and accept *de facto* that a united Ireland was not an immediate possibility, as long as there was equality between nationalism and unionism in the short term. Unionism was only prepared to allow nationalist and republican participation in the governing of Northern Ireland if they accepted *de jure* the 'Britishness' of the area's major institutions. In addition they saw the 'consent' principle only in terms of a weapon to prevent a united Ireland. They do not see it as a necessary principle to give democratic legitimacy to power-sharing institutions.

The situation in the North will continue to be stalemated until London makes a reality of the consent principle in a programme of democratic reform, based on the Good Friday Agreement and designed to carry it forward. The British government is the sovereign authority for Northern Ireland and it continues to have a special and distinct responsibility to ensure that political progress resumes. The best way that the British government can ensure this is to implement, without delay, those parts of the Agreement relating to equality rights, policing, justice and socio-

economic policy. This will strengthen the position of the pro-Agreement forces in Northern Ireland and must be done in cooperation with the Dublin government, and in consultation with pro-Agreement majority opinion in Northern Ireland.

This would mean that the British government recognises that the majority pro-agreement forces in Northern Ireland represent a distinct and developing force. London can let these forces wither and decline, as the support for Trimble unionism crumbles away, or it can take all the necessary steps to strengthen and support them. The issue of decommissioning is at the cross-over between the old Northern politics and the new. David Trimble's approach is classic old-style Northern politics. Essentially he is telling republicans that they must dance to his tune on the question of arms. The Good Friday Agreement placed the issue in a wider, and more realistic, context of partnership government between nationalism and unionism. The question is which position will the British government ultimately back.

The measures outlined below are ones the British government might adopt to support the pro-Agreement majority. They do not represent some new programme, but are in fact measures which have been left outstanding for decades. The failure of successive British governments to introduce them in the past has contributed to the present malaise. Measures that must be introduced include legislation at Westminster to protect equality and cultural rights in Northern Ireland. This legislation would be in addition to measures already introduced as part of the Good Friday Agreement, and together with them would constitute a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

The idea of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland first saw the light of day in the late 1960s. The Civil Rights Association, the British Trades Union Congress, elements of the Northern Trade Union Movement and many political parties favoured the measure. It always had cross community support. Yet British government after British government failed to introduce such a measure. As a result, they wasted many opportunities to provide for peaceful democratic advance in the North. The Bill of Rights should explicitly guarantee individual and community equality before the law, affirmative action to end discrimination and inequality, and equality of treatment of nationalist and unionist traditions and culture.

The policing and justice system in Northern Ireland was inevitably tarnished by the years of conflict, civil unrest and the attacks on civil liberties. Police reform, if it is to mean anything, has to address what measures are required to ensure that policing is properly representative of the community it serves, in terms of religion, political belief, gender, class and race, and properly accountable to the society it operates within. The Patten recommendations go some way along this road, but the British

government has still to prove that it is fully committed to the changes in the policing function which are necessary to create a police service that is recruited from across the community, is unarmed to reflect the new political and security realities, and is committed to putting in place an effective independent system for dealing with complaints against it.

The bottom line for many people in Northern Ireland is a recognition that if policing is to function in harmony with new political structures a new organisation is necessary. The use of plastic bullets should be banned as part of the British government's contribution to the peace process because they have killed 14 people, including seven children, and severely injured hundreds of others. The right to a full and fair defence is a basic tenet of any legal system, yet charges of intimidation against civil liberties and defence lawyers continue to receive scant attention. The question of responsibility for the deaths of Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson has still to be properly investigated. Members of the Northern Ireland judiciary have never been as alert as they might have been, in preventing and challenging the erosion of human rights protections within the criminal justice system, and this is illustrated by the legacy of outstanding cases where a miscarriage of justice has been alleged.

The government, as part of its reform of the criminal justice system, should:

- abolish the Diplock Court system
- repeal all emergency legislation
- introduce audio and/or video recordings of all interrogations
- comply with international standards in relation to allowing access to legal representation
- restore the right to silence.

These are measures which have been demanded since the early 1970s. Reform of the judiciary should be carried out in tandem with the reform of the police. Among the issues of concern to civil liberties groups are questions of selection and training of the judiciary.

The government made a commitment in the Good Friday Agreement to new regional development and economic development strategies for Northern Ireland. Affirmative action measures should form the core of new thinking towards disadvantaged areas and the socially excluded. The trade unions rightly demand that the British government should pursue a policy of affirmative action towards the unemployed and long-term unemployed. The trade unions also demand financial support for employers willing to agree affirmative action in their recruitment of the long-term unemployed, the setting of targets within public contracts for the recruitment of the long-term unemployed, the provision of affordable childcare and a tax allowance for childcare costs, as well as other, more focused, measures to target social need.

These measures form the basis of a programme to renew the Good Friday process. The political battle within the North is no longer just about the differences between nationalism and unionism: it is also about creating a politics which can transcend these differences. It is only in the context of such a politics that the issues of decommissioning can be resolved. Decommissioning will only take place within a framework of overall democratic transformation. The issue will remain stalled as long as democratic advance remains problematic and conditional.

Any discussion about the possibility of a radical alternative politics in Ireland must start with an examination of Sinn Féin. Can Sinn Féin gain further support in the North, and make a breakthrough in the South? It is possible that in the next 26-County general election Sinn Féin will make the same sort of gains which it made in the local elections last year. At the very least, it should have several more TDs elected. It is very clear that Sinn Féin has not maximised its electoral potential in the North or in the South. But Sinn Féin's problem is that it carries too much baggage to be able to build up a mass based political alternative to the present political set-up by itself.

In the light of where it has come from, the Sinn Féin view of politics sees developments in the North as the core issue for national democracy in this country. This means that everything is subordinated to making political progress there. This is sometimes worked for at the expense of equally important national democratic issues in other parts of the island. Recent illustrations of this have been the party's failure to mount an effective opposition to Ireland's involvement with the euro-currency, the militarisation of the European Union, and membership of the Partnership for Peace.

Clearly, Sinn Féin must be at the centre of any new radical politics in the South and North. The party's key position has been hard earned. But its reluctance to give a lead on a number of key national democratic issues, particularly relating to the South, points to the necessity of developing organisational forms beyond Sinn Féin. Even within the North, if the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are re-established, Sinn Féin will have to work out a strategy to cope with a situation whereby it will be both a party of government and also a party of opposition. In both the North and the South, there will be strenuous attempts made to co-opt Sinn Féin into the political consensus, while the Sinn Féin hope would be that it will be in a position to influence a minority government in the South.

No other radical party, in either the North or the South, comes anywhere near Sinn Féin in terms of size of organisation or in electoral support. There will be a temptation for many radicals to join the party on the basis that it represents the only show in town. This is understandable and is, in many ways, inevitable. However it is also important that enough radicals

maintain a degree of independence, and work towards the development of campaigns on issues such as the erosion of national independence and neutrality. These issues transcend the traditional divisions of left and right and campaigns around them should not place themselves into a left or right straitjacket.

The coming period will see further erosion of democracy, sovereignty and national independence. For the first time, this country will become a net contributor to the European Union, as opposed to being a net beneficiary. It is highly unlikely that the 'Celtic Tiger' will go anywhere near tackling the gross inequalities in Irish society or ending poverty. Sections of the workforce who have lost out in the 'social partnership' framework will become increasingly restless at their situation. Jobs will come into the country, and jobs will go out, in our 'revolving door economy'. The revelations about corruption will continue to undermine the legitimacy of the institutions of the state and the consensus political process generally. If there is a downturn in the US economy, this country, which in many ways is merely an offshore adjunct, will suffer and unemployment could become a major issue again.

In that situation people will start to demand an alternative. The alternative might come from a racist and fundamentalist right, or from a national democratic political formation which offers a real alternative.

Such a formation would unite democrats, republicans, socialists and greens around a programme of defence of national independence, independence from military power blocs, economic and social equity, and democracy at all levels of society. In relation to the economy, it would advocate that general economic policy should be directed and guided by the state in the context of democratic planning. It could allow for members of political parties to be involved in its work, while at the same time remaining in their own political parties. It must also be open to both individual and group membership.

Usually discussions about this type of political formation centre on the need for a 'forum' where various strands of radical opinion can come together and exchange views. Any new formation must have both an educational – and a campaigning – function. It must have a democratic structure. But it would not be a new political party. It must be attached to no political party.

Realistically, such an organisation will not emerge overnight. Nevertheless, serious thought should be given to it now. Certain essential national democratic principles or themes should govern its prospective remit: principles of sovereignty, national unity and reconciliation, opposition to neo-liberalism, independence from military and political power blocs, economic, social and educational equity, emphasis on democratic values, popular participation in decision-making at central and

local level, opposition to overly centralised bureaucracy, strengthening of local democracy, opposition to sexism and racism, and affirmative action against discrimination and marginalisation.

Such a formation would not be restricted to a narrow vision of politics, but would also seek to unite scientists, technologists, artists, writers and *Gaeilgeoiri*, in support of a progressive, secular, national, democratic culture free from any taint of sectarian domination. The danger with single-issue campaigns is that they usually lack the coherence necessary to take them beyond a certain stage. This is because they usually lack a clear ideology to guide them. When they reach that stage, they usually fade away. Developments over the next number of years, in areas of democracy, national unity and independence, will require a clear ideology and campaigning commitment if progressive politics is to make an impact in this country. These developments will be resisted, but unless enough people see that there is a realistic alternative, the resistance will end in yet another 'glorious' failure. The time is long past for making a start to building that alternative. The question is who is going to take the first tentative step?

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