

SIX

WHITHER IRISH POLITICS AFTER THE REFERENDUM?

"All is changed, changed utterly...?"

Synopsis of paper by Dr Paul Bew,
Professor of Modern Irish History,
Queen's University, Belfast

Page 121

Response by Fergus Finlay,
Writer and Political Commentator;
formerly Special Advisor to Dick Spring,
Leader of the Labour Party

Page 123

Summary of discussion by Paddy Gillan,
Editor of *Times Change* and Member of
Democratic Left

Page 127

Six: Whither Irish Politics after the Referendum?

Synopsis of Paper by Dr Paul Bew

As I look around me I see many old friends who are, as I am, the class of '68, or thereabouts: the great epoch of student radicalism. As the century comes to a close the class of '68 is forced to confront many ironies. Things have not worked out quite as we expected or hoped. Indisputably this is so with respect to the socialist project.

Yet in Ireland there is an exceptional irony. If there is one belief that then united many of us in this room it was the belief that Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution which laid claim to Northern Ireland were an obstacle to progress. We believed broadly in a trade-off – equality in the North between Catholic and Protestant and a new relationship between North and South, in exchange for an end to Irish territorial expansionism. Often such a deal has seemed an impossibility. How often were we told that any change to Articles 2 and 3 would plunge the Republic into instability?

But since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, we have seen it come to pass. However, the politicians who were the final agents of change – these we could hardly have predicted! Not the somewhat older and fatter generation of the '68 radical: rather, politicians like Bertie Ahern and David Trimble. Amazing... now we know how the German and Italian revolutionaries of 1848 felt when they saw their project taken over by Bismarck and Cavour.

The temptation then is to assert the irrelevance of the Left to all this. Yet I do not believe that we should. In the first place, I genuinely believe that the Agreement would not have happened had it not been for the example given by the Democratic Left, both in the North and South. In the North, the evolution of the Official republican movement proved to unionists that a political movement could step away from physical force republicanism. It proved also that it could accept electoral defeats with good grace along the road.

This is why David Trimble's first official action as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party was the decision to welcome Proinsias De Rossa to Glengall Street. This action paved the way for Trimble's 'People can change' speech, his first speech as First Minister, delivered to Gerry Adams and his colleagues.

More generally the Democratic Left has been at the forefront of pushing a pluralist and democratic analysis of the Northern question in the North - often with great difficulty, at times when public opinion in Dublin was inflamed with nationalist passion. When the Democratic Left finally entered government, unionists could feel that at the highest level Irish government policy was being formed by politicians who respected their democratic rights; at a tricky moment, the publication of the Framework Document and its aftermath, this was absolutely essential.

Today David Trimble speaks explicitly of a 'pluralist parliament for a pluralist people' (thus relegating the old Protestant parliament to the garbage bin of history) and this owes something to the role played by the Democratic Left which never lost sight of the possibility of a modernised unionism at a time when much of Dublin opinion was obsessed with a notion of the incorrigibly reactionary and supremacist nature of unionism. You could almost say that Democratic Left helped to make Unionism 'salon-friendly' in the South, which was no mean achievement!

This weekend we meet at the start of the Drumcree crisis. I am deeply concerned about it: the fledgling Agreement is under major threat. In particular, many unionists believe that David Trimble should threaten to resign as First Minister in order to secure from Tony Blair the passage of the Orangemen down Garvaghy Road. This he will not do, and in my opinion he is quite right not to do so.

But as old '68-ers there is an irony here. Did I not march to Burntollet in '69, with others in this room, asserting my right to go through areas where the locals were opposed because of the purity of my intentions, just like the Portadown Orangemen of today? It is an uncomfortable thought, but worth putting on the record lest this talk hits too smug and self-congratulatory a note.

In this new epoch, there are difficult choices facing the Left in Dublin and Belfast. I would not presume to make direct suggestions to people in Dublin. But I do feel that it is worth recalling at this juncture the role played by a small group in Irish politics. The Democratic Left has been promoting themes of tolerance and compromise on the national question of this island. Of course, there were other politicians - notably John Bruton, and today, it has to be said, Bertie Ahern, who have played the more obvious role. But the role of people in Democratic Left in thinking the unthinkable - which has now become the convention - should not be forgotten and it must be hoped that such a capacity will be retained in any new arrangement.

Response to Dr Paul Bew's paper by Fergus Finlay

I was fascinated by what Paul had to say, and by how revealing it all was. I was struck particularly by one phrase he used, when he said that one of the advantages of the Good Friday Agreement was that it has helped to make Unionists "salon-friendly" in the South.

One of the tactical and strategic weaknesses that Unionism has always had, in my view, has been this desire to be "salon-friendly". It's the classic weakness of anyone who believes in the over-riding importance of public relations. PR is supposed to be used to sell a message, and not to substitute for a message.

We are talking in the shadow of the Drumcree week-end. Drumcree has become a microcosm of everything that is misunderstood about Unionism throughout the rest of these islands. Unionists see it as being about religious and civil liberty - the rest of us see it as being about triumphalism, sectarianism and bigotry. For most people on these islands - even those of us who see the attitude of the residents as being just as churlish and counter-productive - the slogan "no talk, no walk" makes some kind of sense.

And yet, in one way, of all the ideologies that have surrounded the conflict on this island, Unionism is the least threatening. The essence of Unionism is its opposition to Irish unity, and its desire to be left alone. A loyalist once told me that it was unreasonable for me to expect him to give up his Britishness, simply that I could feel more Irish - and I couldn't disagree with him. I certainly wouldn't be willing to give up my Irishness in order to help him feel more British.

Unionism doesn't want more territory. It doesn't want to interfere in the way we run our affairs. It doesn't even, any more, want to control the territory it has itself, in the way that it used to. It suffers the same indignities as the rest of us do "on the mainland": David Trimble is just as likely to be referred to as 'Paddy' in the back of a London cab as I am, and he's certainly not seen as more British than me by the British.

So why do we find ourselves so out of sympathy with them? It seems to me that there are a number of reasons for incomprehension. First is the Unionist refusal to communicate. It can be seen graphically in their fear of talking to residents associations about the marching season - the fear that communication itself demonstrates weakness; the determination to win at all costs, the "zero sum" mentality that ensures that every concession, even a concession of style, is a loss and a betrayal.

The second difficulty they have is that they simply don't know, most of the time, what it is they want to communicate. They know what they are against, but they don't know what they are for. They have never, in any meaningful way, taken a political initiative to try to address the conflict, preferring always to react - usually negatively - to the initiatives of others. The fear of betrayal is the strongest characteristic of Unionism, and the surest sign of their complete lack of self-confidence in the message of Unionism.

The third difficulty they face is that they are hopelessly divided. I can remember reading, years ago, frequent references in the media to "the Unionist monolith". For many years now, Unionism has been its own worst enemy, when it comes to any possibility of presenting a coherent message. In the last couple of years particularly, it has become commonplace for any Unionist leader to be heckled more by other Unionists than by anyone else. And if there is one hate figure above all others among the Orangemen of Drumcree, that man is David Trimble. How long ago was it that he marched down the Garvaghy Road hand-in-hand with Ian Paisley?

But David Trimble is clearly different. I can still remember feeling how unwise he was, at the start of the Referendum campaign, to announce that he was looking for a 70% majority. Why set the bar so high?

But he was right to do it. He knew from the start that his real battle was to persuade his own people - others would have to look after the Catholic vote. So he set the barrier high, and he cleared it in a single bound. In one stroke, he has done what no previous Unionist leader has ever managed. He has contributed to a rapprochement with his neighbours - and he has brought his own people with him while he did it.

There's an old joke that goes "what do you give a northsider with a gun?" Respect is the answer. And what do you give a Unionist leader who has fought for a mandate for peace and closer co-operation on this island, and has persuaded his people to give it to him. The same answer - respect.

I know enough of the senior people in the Ulster Unionist Party to be able to testify that David Trimble did not start his leadership surrounded by friends. It would have been easy enough to predict that once he started down the difficult road of making peace with his enemies, he would find himself entirely alone.

And if either John Taylor or Ken McGuinness had abandoned him, as Geoffrey Donaldson did, their parting would have been far more damaging - perhaps fatal. And it certainly would have been done in a more direct way.

If John Taylor or Ken McGuinness had decided that the Ides of March was at hand, the knives would have gone straight in, brutally but directly and honestly.

But they stood by him, and succeed in outweighing the six MPs who opposed the Agreement. The fact that Trimble was able to bind Taylor and McGuinness to him, despite real and deep personal enmity, is something that political analysts should consider seriously in any assessment of how he handled the campaign.

And more. He has never had a vote, as I understand it, at his Party Executive. In the middle of the negotiations, he got carte blanche from an overwhelming majority of the Party Council. Throughout the referendum campaign, while MPs were bleating from the sidelines, constituency associations and local councils were all coming on side. His confidence in the outcome was clearly rooted in a better understanding of the current mindset of his Party than his opponents had.

Either I was wrong in my initial assessment of him, or the occasion made the man. It doesn't really matter. In the last month we have seen the emergence of a politician at the height of his powers, who should never be underestimated again. We've always known he had ambition and ego - necessary qualities in any politician who wants to leave a mark. Now we know he has judgement.

We'll find out, in the difficult months that lie ahead - Assembly elections, Government formation, North/South bodies, decommissioning - whether he has the other two essential qualities - stamina and an ability to listen. If he has them, respect will have to change to admiration. And it will happen not because David Trimble has any interest in being "salon- friendly", but because he has an agenda, and because he's focused on it.

The working out of that agenda will revolutionise Irish politics. It's the best chance we have to get the gun out of politics for ever - and much more than that. It's also the best chance we have to end sectarianism on this island, and to begin to develop a politics that is truly based on economic and social issues. Even the establishment of North/South bodies - based as they are on principles of mutual interest and practical benefit - can only work if triumphalism is replaced by economic advantage. Politicians will be working together - grudgingly at first - on issues that they never dreamed they would find common ground about. A Minister for Industrial development in Northern Ireland, irrespective of religious background, is going to have exactly the same outlook as his/her colleague in the Republic.

The other exciting possibility, from my perspective, is the possibility of a strong emerging left, no longer having to carry the responsibility of holding the ring between civil war parties, but able at last to concentrate on its own agenda. The Labour Party, the Democratic Left Party, large elements of the SDLP, and the PUP and UDP, share many of the strands of a common vision. Get beyond the politics of religion, and who knows where those strands can lead.

Summary of Discussion

by Paddy Gillan

Initiating the responses to Paul Bew and Fergus Finlay, Dr John McManus of Democratic Left argued that perhaps it was not the business of socialists and radicals to sort out nationalism and unionism. Some 95% of people in Republic had voted to accept Northern unionists. The Good Friday Agreement marked a 'full stop' to nationalism. And the Provos had come to accept that equality was the issue.

In his view, the people of Northern Ireland had become sovereign. Those of our tradition should celebrate the rebirth of republicanism. Northern Ireland people should feel that they had as much opportunity to advance in metropolitan centre.

The Agreement would, be believed, to have a profound effect on politics in Republic. There was now no reason for division of major parties. There was in fact an opportunity for the Left to create a formation which would offer a home to progressives of all hues so that the Left can have major influences in the next Dáil.

Other speakers were keen for the future of the Left to be discussed fully. What should future direction be? The culture of community -influence of localism have long historical roots. How could the left negotiate with/mobilise it?

Another speaker was also very concerned about the future of the left. A majority of the left in Britain and Ireland were, for example, opposed to unions. He was hopeful that the Belfast Agreement would create better conditions for the possible realignment of the left.

This should be more inclusive than Democratic Left/Labour. There is a need for more reflection and thought on the matter.

Another speaker warned that there was a need for caution about 'post-nationalism'. There was in fact evidence of a growing resurgence of nationalism among the business class. A siege mentality created reaction among unionists - Burntolllet and marches through unionist/loyalist areas.

There was a danger of religious cantons in Northern Ireland. The Agreement is an accommodation of tribalism. The Civic Forum could facilitate popular participation.

There is a need for East/West dialogue between the Irish and British Left. Education and business should be basis of left focus.

One speaker felt that the Unionists had failed to recognize the importance of a 95% vote, or the fact that 60,000 people had marched after Canary Wharf while only 600 attended the Irish National Congress Drumcree protests.

Orangemen in Dublin/Wicklow were in his view afraid to march. People on the left shouldn't dismiss the depth of religious conviction among others.

Democratic Party Leader Proinsias De Rossa said that he had some reservations about the Agreement institutionalising sectarianism. Nevertheless, it was the only hope we had – the thought also that Sinn Féin still had a long road to travel. There was not just a time difference but a very large ideological gap. He felt that we must challenge the idea of Sinn Féin being the guardians of equality agenda; there is a need to recover the equality project for the left – we can't let them demean equality the way they demeaned republicanism.

The following were among the many other points that were made.

One person said that caution about the so-called end of nationalism was justified.

In relation to Democratic Left and Labour another speaker said that there should be a concentration on values – a mere marriage of convenience would be a disservice to Irish people.

Commenting on aspects of the discussion, Dr. Paul Bew argued that public opinion in the Republic favored a stable settlement. The mainstream parties understood the significance of the Agreement. The majority of Catholics and Protestants supported the Agreement but the project faces threats.

Fergus Finlay said he particularly agreed with the warnings about post-nationalism. There had been evidence of racism in last election and there was now a danger of nationalism combined with xenophobia.

Concluding the discussion, Dr. John McManus said that 19th century nationalism was at last reaching its end; the Agreement was the conclusion. Thus the process on the left must start now.

TIMES CHANGE

POSTSCRIPT by ROSHEEN CALLENDER

Times Change... and so do people! At the time of the first 'Coffee Circles' in early 1998, few people in Democratic Left were thinking of making any dramatic change in our *modus operandi*, our way of operating, our organisational framework. By the end of the year, most of us were not only convinced of the need for such change, but had decided on the form it should take, having ascertained that most people in the Labour Party were similarly convinced and enthusiastic about the prospect of our two organisations uniting so as to give socialism in Ireland a stronger voice in the 21st century.

The 'Coffee Circles' were, essentially, about what we wanted 'new-century socialism' to look like and how we envisaged the Irish political landscape in the years ahead. They were not, of course, what led us directly to the idea of unification with Labour, although that process began during the same period, with a May Day speech by Proinsias De Rossa to which Ruairi Quinn responded promptly and positively. What was striking about the 'Coffee Circles' was their openness and open-endedness: their openness about discussion, even of cherished fundamentals and sacred cows; their open-endedness about where such discussions might lead. The fact that they were very much 'open house, open season' debates did in some sense open people's minds to many new possibilities.

One measure of the change that took place during those six months, was that in January 1998, at the first Coffee Circle, the main speaker, Economics Professor David Jacobson, was arguing the case for an independent socialist party to the left of social democracy and the Labour Party – a view shared by the overwhelming majority of people at the meeting (and in Democratic Left as a whole). In July, at the last Coffee Circle, which was after the Good Friday Agreement and after the discussions about the possible unification of Labour and Democratic Left had begun, Fergus Finlay described the prospect of such unification as "The most exciting development in Irish politics for a very long time" – and hardly anyone disagreed!

In my view, what changed during 1998 was the perception by people on the Left of what was essential, and what was inessential, for us to carry into the new century and the new millennium. What was seen to be essential were the values and the vision, of both democratic socialism and social democracy – the desire and determination to build a better, fairer and more inclusive society, in which everyone has not only the opportunity to participate fully, but the means to avail of that opportunity. What was seen as inessential was the preservation of two separate organisational frameworks for the advancement of these visions and values, if both could be accommodated in a single, broader one. It seemed, by then, that there was considerable overlap between social democracy and democratic socialism and that left unity, encompassing whatever differences remained, was at last possible.

The achievement of organisational unity – or more precisely, the agreement to integrate the two organisations, since the process of doing so is still ongoing – is only a first step. The next is to change and modernise the organisation, in line with the changing needs of its members and supporters. Hopefully the process of integration will stimulate this at all levels of the organisation. But the process of organisational reform must go hand-in-hand with that of political and policy renewal and re-evaluation. The policies needed to advance the values of social democracy and democratic socialism in the 21st century will clearly be new and somewhat different to those of the 20th century, because our lives have been changing and will continue to do so – our working lives, our family lives, our social and political lives.

That is why we need to keep discussing fundamental issues, like what exactly are we trying to change, and why, and how? That is why many of us who organised and enjoyed the 'Coffee Circle' discussions and made some fairly radical changes in our own political/organisational lives during 1998, feel the need for similar ongoing political debate during 1999, alongside the other pressing political business of elections and parliamentary activity.

Hopefully the next series of 'Coffee Circle' debates will start this autumn under the *Times Change* banner and I wish the organisers every success in this important task.

Rosheen Callender, Editor

Member of Democratic Left, March 1992 to January 1999

Member of the Labour Party General Council
and Policy Development Commission.

Title: The Coffee Circle Papers: Paper 6

Organisation: Democratic Left

Date: 1998

Downloaded from the Irish Left Archive.

Visit www.leftarchive.ie

The Irish Left Archive is provided as a non-commercial historical resource, open to all, and has reproduced this document as an accessible digital reference. Copyright remains with its original authors. If used on other sites, we would appreciate a link back and reference to the Irish Left Archive, in addition to the original creators. For re-publication, commercial, or other uses, please contact the original owners. If documents provided to the Irish Left Archive have been created for or added to other online archives, please inform us so sources can be credited.