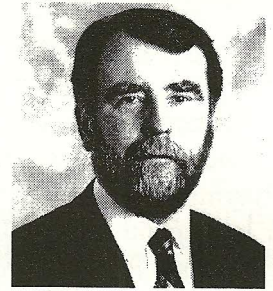


# "Does Ireland need a "New Labour"?"



Extracts from an address by Dr. Pat Upton, T.D.  
to the Tom Johnson Summer School,  
Dunmore East, Co. Waterford June 27, 1998

**The question posed at the Tom Johnson Summer School in Dunmore East this year was**

**"Does Ireland Need a New Labour"?**

**Undoubtedly, the answer is, yes. The Labour Party must modernise and change to survive.**

Society and the electorate have changed. Old assumptions, beliefs and behavioural patterns have been replaced. People's expectations have radically altered.

The Labour Party must reflect these changes to progress. We must ensure that our founding principles continue to be relevant. I believe that Labour's core values, namely the preservation of a civilised society should remain the key basis on which we develop policy. The aspiration of an enabling state offering a pathway out of poverty continues to be an essential ingredient of such a civilised society.

It is how we apply these principles that must change. Our policies must accurately reflect modern realities and expectations. We cannot stick to old dogmas and thereby surrender ground to the New Right. The Labour Party in Ireland must be prepared to embrace change in society to ensure that our principles become reality.

**When Labour gets out of touch with reality it allows its enemies and the enemies of a decent society to grow. There is an obligation on Labour to remain strong and relevant to fight the growth of fascism and its attendant chaos.**

## **NEW REALITIES**

Change for any political Party needs to be based on a recognition of reality. The new public have a diminished attachment to political parties. There is an increasing number of floating voters.

**The public have, to a large degree, stopped behaving as citizens and now behave as consumers**

This change in behaviour does not occur in the abstract. It is determined to a large degree by the new philosophies that characterise the modern world. Education and technology have increased individualism. People have gained new and enhanced rights and assets. For the majority, higher standards of education and living have increased their ability to make decisions for themselves.

For the minority who have not seen their standards of living and education rise, the opposite is true. They have become more disenfranchised and more excluded. They are falling further behind as standards rise elsewhere in society.

## **NEW SOCIETY**

The Labour Party has an important role in remodelling a new version of Irish society. First, we must ensure that the state enables those who are increasingly falling behind to regain a foothold in society. We must also ensure that the new rights and assets that have been gained are matched by concurrent obligations and responsibilities.

**In this regard, Labour must be at the forefront in asserting that we, all of us, are the state.**

It has to assert that while we all contribute to the state, we are also beneficiaries. In practical terms Labour needs to define where the individual's rights end and responsibilities begin. It is not tenable to continue the illusion that one can have rights without responsibilities.

## **NEW POLICIES**

The Party badly needs new programmes and new policies that are relevant, attractive, capable of being implemented and which are constantly updated. It needs to begin to think in terms of a new synthesis of the market and the state, the public and private sectors, the individual and the collective.

The party needs to avoid crude appeals to sectional interests as these only appeal to minorities. The public needs more than a continuous exposure to scandals.

## **BETTER SERVICES**

New Labour should restate the case for a moral and political responsibility to provide for services and welfare. New ways must be found of delivering these services more effectively. An end to dependency and an end to paying people not to work is a pre-requisite for a new political order.

**People must be given the opportunity to bridge the gap between where they are and what they can become. "A hand-up and not a hand-out."**

The quality of the services provided by the agencies such as the local authority, the health board and the VEC is hugely important to the lives of the constituency which Labour traditionally considered a key part of its support. An improvement in the quality and the efficiency with which these services are delivered should be a major part of any Labour programme. It is important that key policy makers understand the significance of the quality of these services to the lives of the recipients.

Those who live in middle class estates are not dependent on the local authority to maintain their houses or to control antisocial neighbours. They have an element of choice in the quality of the health service that is not available to those who are dependent on medical cards. If they are dissatisfied with the standard of education provided for their children they have the resources to supplement their education by means of grinds or to change their school.

The problems of social exclusion, truancy, difficult children, the provision of diversions away from crime and drugs for those who are at risk are all areas which need an innovative approach. There is need to control the vested interests in finance and in business and an enduring need to control the lobbies.

**"Belling the media cat" will be a task for a brave politician of the future.**

The media now has a huge influence in determining the formation of opinion.

## **POLITICAL DISILLUSION**

**("You are all the same")**

There is a belief that there is no longer any difference between the parties. This is shown by the frequency with which Governments have changed since the 1973 election. At the doors they tell us "you are all the same" and to an extent this

is true. All parties are now capable of coalescing with each other. Even Fianna Fail and Fine Gael have coalesced at local authority level. In Dublin the Lord Mayor and two of the three County Council Chairs have been elected by means of a FF/FG pacts. Political promiscuity has become the norm and it has become acceptable to the political establishment.

The public believes that all politicians are the same and will enter government together if the figures make it possible, irrespective of ideology. There is a terrible and inexorable logic to this perception. There is no point in voting at all if all parties behave the same in Government. The outcome of the election is irrelevant.

How are the public to react in these circumstances? In the view of the political scientist Peter Mair there are three options.

1. Don't vote, or as the poet William Butler Yeats expressed it, "drink your beer and stay at home - let the neighbours vote".
2. Forget policy, (there are no real differences) vote on a whim, a local issue, personality or a minority concern.
3. Vote at random.

**More voters seem to be taking these options. Hence the lower polls, the increasing support for single issue candidates and the increase in the number of floating voters.**

## **NEW POLITICS**

We need a New Labour to lead the attack on the way we conduct politics in this country. Windy rhetoric cuts little ice. Opposition for the sake of opposition, polarised arguments and daily adversarialism are no longer credible. Glib certainties are not compatible with the changing world. It is important to deliver what is promised. That is what consumers expect. That is what they experience in other aspects of life be it with the travel agent or with the supermarket.

**There is a growing feeling that there exists a political class in a world of its own. This perception gives rise to support for "anti-parties" of the extreme right or extreme left. Diversity in the centre of politics is declining.**

Modern Labour would address many of the present Dail practices which are irrelevant. The order of business ritual is more appropriate to the

Middle Ages than to a modern parliament. The whips system appears to have been designed by a control freak. It prevents any original or different opinion being expressed. Dail voting procedures are out-dated. The process of politicians inarticulately reading speeches written by others is hardly designed to improve the public's credibility. Making about-turns, while pretending not to, undermines the public's respect for the political process.

There is a need to segregate local from national politics. A clear divide should be established between these two important but very different dimensions of politics. The present amalgam is not tenable. To achieve a divide between national and local politics it is essential that those who engage in national politics are prevented from engaging in local politics while it is equally important that those who opt for local politics are prevented from engaging in national politics.

### **LABOUR IN GOVERNMENT**

At the start of this article there is an assertion that Labour must be a strong and relevant party to preserve and enhance a civilised society. In this context Labour needs to review its experiences of being part of government.

Labour were part of Government for six periods since the foundation of the state.

**After each period the party lost seats or votes and in most cases both.**

There was only one occasion when Labour's share of the vote increased following a period of government. This was at the end of the 1948-51 inter party government. The increase of 0.1% was at the margins and it was accompanied by a loss of 3 seats, a decline from 19 seats to 16 seats. In the remaining 5 elections following Labour's participation in government the party's share of the vote declined.

In the new phase of Irish politics which the political scientists say commenced with the 1973-77 the electorate have become increasingly disillusioned with Labour's participation in Government. The figures speak for themselves. At the end of the 1973-77 government the Labour Party lost 15.3% of its share of the vote, or its market, in business terminology. In the short government between June 1981 and February 1982 a period of just 8 months the party lost 8% of its share of the vote.

In 1987 the party lost 32% of its vote. At the end of the 1992-97 government the party lost 46% of its vote and 48% of its Dail seats. There is a clear lesson from this experience.

**Participation in Government is not good for Labour. It seems extremely foolish to repeat the process of entering government without a clear analysis of what went wrong.**

It seems even more foolish to enter Government without the establishment of safeguards to prevent a recurrence of what happened.

**It is incumbent on those who advocate a return to government by the Labour party to demonstrate that such a course of action will not have the same damaging results.**

### **LACK OF ANALYSIS**

To-date no coherent analysis of what went wrong arising from participation in government has been conducted. Why did the support Labour won in 1992 decline so rapidly? In the election of 1992 the Labour Party obtained 19.3% of the popular vote. This segment of the public voted for Labour for change. 96% of Labour's programme for Government was implemented. Yet Labour lost nearly half its share of the vote and half its seats in the Dail at the next election.

It is now widely agreed that part of the public's concept of change was that Fianna Fail as led by Albert Reynolds should be removed from power by Labour. The fact that Labour restored Fianna Fail, led by Albert Reynolds is now seen as an important reason for the huge decline in the party's vote.

Why did so few within the Party notice that the decline was taking place? Why was there no concerted response to the clear signals of impending disaster? These are important questions.

**The reasons they were not addressed need careful investigation in an environment that does not seek to ascribe blame or to threaten anyone.**

### **NEW GOALS**

It is important that Labour learns from past experiences, sets itself electoral goals and is clear about what is needed to achieve those goals.

**Over the recent past the party has declared that it sought the objective of becoming the**

## **second largest party in the state and to have a Labour leader as Taoiseach.**

To be reasonably sure of realising these goals Labour would need to obtain at least 25% of the vote with present voting patterns pertaining.

A goal of 20% or more of the vote represents a huge challenge when seen in the context of Labour's electoral performance historically. In the 25 general elections since 1923 the party averaged 11.4%. In the last general election the party achieved 10.4% and its best ever performance of 19.3% was achieved in 1992.

## **It is essential that we understand the dimensions of the challenge we are setting ourselves.**

Given the extent of recent reverses following participation in Government it is likely that Labour will never attain these modest goals if the party enters Government whenever the opportunity arises.

Indeed, there is a danger that in the event of uninterrupted participation in Government in the present political climate the party would continue to lose support and in time become irrelevant.

## **NEW LEFT**

An analysis of the voting patterns in the last election makes it quite clear that a retreat into old left wing policies will not provide the basis for a significant increase in support.

## **In the 1997 general election the left vote other than Labour's vote amounted to just 3.76% of the total.**

Most voters see themselves as centrist or centre/right on the political spectrum. When voters were asked on June 6 1997 to rate themselves on a left/right scale of 1 to 10, Labour voters assessed themselves as 5.0, FF- 6.7, FG- 6.2, PD- 6.5, DL- 4.8 and the Greens- 5.0

Thus there is little attraction for voters in a retreat into old left politics. However this does not rule out the huge potential to develop new left/centre policies which would be attractive to the general public.

## **The recent experiences of Government for the Labour Party have been painful and destructive of the party's support.**

The setbacks of the 1982-87 and the 1992-97 government make it clear that in the present phase of politics government is bad for Labour.

## **NEW DEBATE**

Over the past 50 years one of the most important issues within the Labour Party was the question of coalition. Prior to 1980 when the negative effects of government on Labour was in relative terms small, the question was hugely important and very divisive. When the effects of Government on Labour is hugely negative a debate does not exist. It is time to re-open the debate in a constructive and open-minded manner.

It is now beyond doubt that those who wish to advocate participation in Government for Labour have a case to answer. For those advocates it is incumbent on them to demonstrate that participation will be in the interest of the party.

## **When a corporate organisation loses as much as 50% of its share of the market it is more or less inevitable that a course of action which has been shown to generate such a result is not repeated.**

It is imperative that before Labour participates in Government again it does so only to achieve clearly defined goals which are feasible and relevant to the concerns of the public. It is essential that participation in Government should take place after the party has demonstrated its ability to cope adequately with the likely adverse affects of Government on the party.

## **NEW OPPOSITION**

Government is not an end in itself. Labour must carefully plan and prepare for Government. It is important to realise that positions adopted in opposition which propel the party into power frequently become a millstone around the neck of a new Government.

The present tendency for the opposition to "play to the gallery", screaming for blood, as a tactic of gaining power, grotesquely underestimates the intelligence of the Irish public. The *volte-face* on attaining Government immediately offends those who were taken in by the histrionics. They take their revenge at the next election.

## **Can Labour break this cycle. Can the party state its case to the Irish public without descending into empty rhetoric and infantile point-scoring.**

Can Labour be brave enough to abandon this tired old politics? Can Labour be different again?

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