

Still worth it after all these years? Part 1



MICHAEL D. HIGGINS INTERVIEWED

Gralton: A lot of people see the Labour Party Conference in October as a crunch conference for the Party. Do you agree?

I see it as one of the most important conferences in that its decision on electoral strategy will define the role of the Party in this crucial period of Irish history: There is an unprecedented crisis for the Irish economy, there's a crisis in education, a crisis confronting women, a crisis from the impact of new technology. There is also an entirely new audience which the big parties aren't catering for, so it's crucial that the Labour Party establish itself as a party of the left.

There are twenty-five or thirty resolutions submitted to Conference on Coalition. They put forward a number of different positions, from those which will have no truck with supporting any government to stating a willingness for coalition with Fine Gael. But the majority of the motions submitted are against Coalition. And it's not a re-run of the old arguments at Cork. Parts of the country have changed their mind since then.

Before, people assumed that there was a need to follow the deputy from the constituency. That just isn't so now. Branches and Constituency Councils are making up their minds for themselves. The system where a deputy could bring in a busload of supporters is breaking down. And also, it's not a simple question of Dublin being anti-coalition and the rural areas pro-coalition.

Gralton: How is your own mind make up on electoral strategy?

I believe that for the immediate years ahead, the need is to identify the Labour Party by establishing socialist policies on the economy, on women, on education and so on. In order to do that, and to take our place as the leader of the left, we need to be independent, and the Labour Party therefore should stay out of any cabinet for the immediate years ahead. We would be in a different situation if the major parties had broken up, or the Labour Party had increased its strength and had thirty or forty seats. However, under the Party Constitution we can discuss the

issue every three years, so we would not be lying our hands for ever.

If we hold the balance of power, then on the basis of our socialist programme we can negotiate with the major parties, and at the next election we can face the electorate and tell them whether our demands had been met. The important thing is that the Labour Party must build up its socialist programme, a programme of transforming society, introducing a participatory society, changing the character of the institutions. We can do no work on this programme if we're constantly having to defend our record as a minor participant in the government. The vote was close at Cork and at the Gaity Conference. I think those of us who are against coalition are now going into Conference with a better chance than ever before.

Gralton: What happens if you don't win?

Well, it locks us up from making any progress for another three years. I don't think the Party can afford that. It won't be disastrous; it won't be the end of the Labour Party. Though I respect the other

groups on the Left, I think that the first step forward is for the Labour Party to begin attracting new members, to build up its finances, to develop its socialist policies. A decision in favour of coalition would delay all that, it would make a position within the Labour Party very difficult and I'm afraid it would drive many people away from the Party.

Gralton: Into the arms of the Workers' Party.

No, I don't think so. I think they would find the Workers' Party very unattractive. Its political programme is rather simplistic and narrow. Some opportunity for recruitment might be opened up for them with Labour committed to Coalition, but not to any great extent.

Gralton: You spoke of the Labour Party leading the left.

Yes, we mustn't have the left-wing parties devouring each other. We must have a reconstituted left. It's not just a question of political parties coming together, I think we have to involve groups like the Land League, like women's organisations which are outside of the Labour Party, in some form of unity. It needs to be a much broader and more outward looking exercise than the Left Alternative was.

We have also got to recruit a new population to the Labour Party, building up on our affiliations from the trade union movement. We should not be trying to blow every tendency out of the water. I see a coming together first in mind, then in tactics, and only finally in structure. But Labour has a leading role to play in this process.

Gralton: What is your attitude to people coming together to oppose the Pro-Life Amendment?

I believe the overwhelming majority of the Labour Conference will oppose the Amendment. If you analyse the forces demanding the Amendment, it's a departure-point for taking us along a very reactionary road. Exploitation in the economic sense is not the full picture of capitalist domination, although some people like the Workers' Party seem to ignore everything else. You have got to look at repression between the sexes. That's why I agreed to be a sponsor of the Anti-amendment Campaign. It's a very important issue.

Gralton: What do you feel about the relationship of the trade unions to the Labour Party?

The trade unions have historic relations with labour parties. It's a potential that the Labour Party hasn't used very well, but it could do immense things. The unions which want to see the Labour Party as an independent party are the unions which participate most in Labour Party affairs. They have been convinced



of the arguments against coalition; it's not something that they are attempting to impose on the Labour Party.

Gralton: Do you see the Labour Party having a connection with the trade unions' own struggles? Should the Party support trade unionists when they take to the streets?

I think that there's a realisation that the notions of consensus on the economy which would co-opt the unions are falling apart. With the rise in unemployment and the fall in real wages, the idea of National Wage Agreements is fading away. The inflexibility of the Agreements created difficulties. Those who were putting forward general claims felt trapped in the structure. Trade unionists seeking better living conditions should be supported.

Yes, Labour should support protests and street marches. It's not the function of the Labour Party to defend the antiquated methods of debate in the Dáil. I believe strongly in democracy, but the existing parliamentary structure isn't the limit of that. If you look at England during the Falklands/Malvinas affair, parliamentary socialism caved in, it was intimidated by the jingoistic going-on in Parliament: they ended up welcoming the

victory of the British Navy.

Gralton: Speaking of Britain, there are moves in the British Labour Party to expel the Militant. Are you concerned about the activities of the Irish Militant?

No, I'm not concerned. Many people believe I'm a member or supporter of the Militant, but I'm neither. I accept that people have a right to work for different positions within the Labour Party. I don't believe in the expulsion or proscription of tendencies. I'd want to deal with them by argument. From the things I've read about the British Militant, I don't agree with the tactics they seem to have used in some constituencies.

People in different countries are asking what form of socialism will be appropriate in the twentieth century and the twenty-first century. We must have the courage to go beyond existing models. I met Trotskyists recently who said you couldn't have a socialist revolution in Nicaragua because there was no revolutionary socialist party — and I heard the same argument from an official in Russia. Socialism is a philosophy and a theory of action that must be put into effect in different historical circum-



Derek Speirs (Report)

stances. We've no right to put a limit on the forms of socialism. I'm not a vague ethical socialist, now. We have to win the economy, that's of crucial importance. But there are other things like taking action on disarmament, on ecology.

Many people will make a contribution to socialist thought after Marx, Lenin and Trotsky. The world didn't stop on one day in Mexico. I'm not speaking of course about diluting socialism, I'm not talking of some vague form of social democracy. We have to take account of the circumstances, the phenomena in any particular place. In Ireland we're operating within the European context. We're a small open economy dominated by foreign capital. We're undeveloped within that context rather than in a Third World context.

Gratlon: There is a strand of thought which argues that Ireland should withdraw to a more protectionist framework and that this would bring closer the achievement of socialism.

I can't in practical terms suggest protectionism as the answer. We have to acknowledge our relationships and set about a socialist transformation of them. We certainly would be faced with technical problems with regard to the international financial institutions. Look at Mitterand's France where they've had to take action against the financial institutions. And we've seen Michael Manley overturned by the covert actions of international institutions in Jamaica. Isolation is just romantic and daft. We have to go for a broader vision, not move inwards. My own perspective is international.

Gratlon: Where do you stand on the neutrality issue?

ON neutrality, the Labour Party stand'

has been very good. Fine Gael have not taken a good stand although they mouth clichés about it. Fianna Fáil seem to make it conditional on the question of reunification. The Labour Party have drawn the distinction between active and passive neutrality, we're in favour of active neutrality; we should have more participation in the non-aligned conferences, we should support them at the United Nations, we should be more explicit about the erosion of Irish neutrality, the talk of common defence pacts, the use of Irish waters for reconnaissance and intelligence by both the United States and the USSR — they've been placing anti-submarine devices on the bed of the Irish Sea. I've raised the question with diplomats from the Soviet Union about the danger to us from the placing of missiles in Northern Ireland, and they wouldn't explicitly say that the South was excluded from the lists of their targets.

It's interesting that in 1948 Seán MacBride, who now is one of the foremost campaigners for neutrality, took the attitude that Ireland was not unconditionally neutral, only as long as it was divided. Fianna Fáil would be willing to play neutrality as a card now, if they could get something in exchange on Partition.

Gratlon: Returning to the coming Conference, there seem to be moves within the Party to dilute the Administrative Council. Would this mean less democratic control?

I think the existing arrangement is better than the proposals that have been put forward. Making the A.C. subservient to the Parliamentary Party would be an erosion of democracy within the Party. At present, 12 members of the A.C., out of 36, are members of the

Parliamentary Party; there are 8 representatives of the Parliamentary Party, then there's the Chairman and Treasurer and two more.

We should work to eliminate the divisions between the Parliamentary Party and the rest of the movement by other means. For example, there's not enough service to deputies by the policy committee, the deputies are left on their own resources.

Gratlon: Looking at the track record of the left in the Labour Party, isn't the principled left becoming smaller and smaller?

Not at all. There's been fresh blood coming in, and former members have been coming back. The folding-up of the SLP removes one of the obstacles to people coming back; they were people of undoubted principle but their leaving of the Labour Party was a bad tactic. We're now on the brink of a majority position in the Labour Party; with them in, and others, we'd be much more sure.

Gratlon: What about the members of the Labour Party who have become converts to the anti-coalition position as a tactic rather than as a matter of socialist principles?

I would hope that they would come to be convinced by the socialist arguments. If we surround them then they may become contaminated (to use John Kelly's phrase) and evolve further.

Gratlon: If the anti-coalition line wins, will there be deputies quitting the party?

I don't really think so. Those are just rumours.

Gratlon: What if the Right ignores the decision of Conference?

The important thing is to retain the power of the Administrative Council. Its decision between the last two Dáils shows that it can restrain the Parliamentary Party. A disciplined party would be one that obeyed its Conference.

Gratlon: Finally, what if the Left lose at Conference? Would this make you think of giving up on the party?

I know some people say that we are going to be defeated. It may happen. In that case, I personally wouldn't give up but perhaps change my own arena. If I found myself out of the Dáil or local politics, I would hope to have an analytical role, to make TV programmes, to write, to work in the educational system. I don't accept that you have to blow the Labour Party out of the water. If it evolved into something like the SDP in Britain and thus became an obstruction to the advance of socialism, only then would it be appropriate for socialists to go elsewhere.

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