

# SOCIALIST LABOUR PARTY

## PARTY



## The Party's Over

by DERMOT BOUCHER,  
formerly of the National Executive of the SLP.

On the 12th June, quietly and with little ceremony, the Socialist Labour Party voted itself out of existence. Five years earlier, almost to the day, the Independent Labour campaign had scored a major electoral success, returning Dr. Noel Browne to Dáil Éireann, and the following November over 300 delegates gathered in Liberty Hall to launch the new party on a rising tide of optimism and expectation. What, if any, were the Party's achievements, and, more to the point, where did it go wrong?

In retrospect its most remarkable achievement lay in surviving for so long. From the outset the SLP was fatally flawed. In the first place there was no consensus as to what the Party was supposed to be: a slightly more honest and democratic version of the Labour Party? An Irish version of the Socialist Workers Party? The revolutionary Party? An election machine for Noel Browne (or other aspiring public representatives)? A socialist debating society? Worthy objectives perhaps, but hardly reconcilable within a single organisation.

Obviously, too, despite the drama surrounding the expulsion of Matt Merrigan and Noel Browne from the Labour Party, the SLP failed to attract a

majority of Labour Left-wingers. Those remaining behind included the "militant" (which had campaigned for Coalition Labour candidates against Browne and Merrigan), the "soft" Left personified by Michael D. Higgins, and even some of the former Liaison of the Left members, notably Ald. Pat Carroll. The consequence of this disastrous split was that whereas the Left Opposition within the Labour Party was effectively destroyed, the new party lacked sufficient experienced organisers to establish itself on a truly national basis.

Again, the new party created immense difficulties for itself by adopting a remarkably liberal Constitution, a reaction against the restrictive rules and practices of the Labour Party. Revolutionary groups, or "tendencies" were positively encouraged to set up shop, and four duly obliged. These varied from the Socialist Workers Tendency, which had a genuine commitment to building the Party, albeit in their own image and likeness, to the League for a Workers Republic, which merely used the Party for arguing that the SLP should not exist. While never quite descending to the Babel-like conditions of the ill-fated Socialist Labour Alliance in the early Seventies, the SLP soon found itself deeply divided, not so much over policies

(with the obvious exception of the National Question, the Party programme was agreed almost unanimously) as over tactics, activities, and work priorities. Something of a cultural divide opened up between the ex-Labour members and the tendency supporters. At times this bordered on mutual incomprehension.

Ironically, the SLP's first major setback, from which it never really recovered, arose through circumstances which actually united almost all sections of the Party. Outside of Noel Browne's constituency of Artane, SLP members refused to become involved in the familiar, degrading, but for would-be public representatives, essential practice of clientelism. The electoral consequences of such virtue were predictable. Its worth recalling that at the '77 General Election, prior to the formation of the SLP, Matt Merrigan actually polled 300 votes more than Prionnias De Rossa. However, Merrigan, a busy trade union official, had neither the time nor the inclination to engage in the soul-destroying clinic work that is expected in a working class area such as Finglas; and so a potential SLP Dáil seat was tamely surrendered to the dogged Workers' Party representatives.

In the 1979 Local Elections, despite public and private disagreements, the SLP polled a creditable enough 10,000

first preferences actually outpolling SFWP in Dublin City and County apart from the Inner City wards. However, not a single SLP candidate was elected. In the key area of Artane the SLP won 18% of the vote, but a combination of inept campaigning and personality disputes robbed the Party of an apparently certain seat by the slender margin of 200 votes. Elsewhere the Party's performance varied from modest to frankly disastrous. Lacking any serious national party profile, or local personal work base, several dozen SLP hopefuls literally sank without trace. Many were never heard from again.

Meanwhile, the troublesome tendencies departed one by one, with varying degrees of encouragement. When the largest and last, the SWM, left during the 1980 Conference (a parting of the ways marked by 'considerable mutual regret'), the Party's fortunes appeared to undergo a distinct improvement. This, however, proved to be a false dawn. The biggest crisis was yet to come. Inevitably, perhaps, it centered around the Party's best-known member, and only TD, Dr. Noel Browne.

From the outset, Browne's attitude towards the SLP had been ambivalent. True, he agreed to serve as "parliamentary spokesperson", he appeared at numerous public meetings around the country, and his office in Leinster house became a second HQ for the Party. Yet all the time he kept his distances from the mainstream of the SLP, rarely if ever attending Executive or Standing Committee meetings, and in no sense accepting a Party "Whip". Knowing his legendary unwillingness or inability to work within structured organisations, the Leadership were happy enough to grant him this semi-detached relationship with the Party; but the younger generation of members were shocked and disappointed with the performance.

His public repudiation of the SLP policy on H-Blocks provoked a half-hearted attempt at expulsion at the 1979 Party Conference. While this move was easily headed off by the leadership, Browne's response was prompt and decisive; he immediately announced his resignation as Parliamentary Spokesperson, citing "Conference remarks made by Matt Merrigan apparently sympathetic to the Provos. In reality this was a mere pretext (he subsequently admitted privately that he had not disagreed with the remarks, merely that they had been made in public, and, indeed, his own simultaneous comments on a Feach programme might well have provoked a similar outcry had they not been made in the happy anonymity of the First National Language). The truth was that the canny



Knowing Noel Browne's legendary inability to work within a structured organisation, the leadership were happy to grant him a semi-detached relationship with the Party; but the younger generation of members were shocked and disappointed with the performance.

old political stager had begun to distance himself publicly from an unruly and disrespectful party organisation.

Approaching elections, like imminent elections, tend to concentrate the minds of the principal participants. Noel Browne is an exception to this, as to every other rule: he tends to suffer endless bouts of anxiety and indecision. Some months before the 1981 General Election he presented the SLP with an ultimatum: stand down at least 5 of the 7 prospective Party candidates or else he would not contest under the SLP banner. Browne's argument was that as the SLP had no hope of winning seats elsewhere, or even of doing well, they ought to concentrate most of their resources on his constituency. The Executive view was that a Party that placed all its hopes on a 66-year-old man with a serious heart condition, had no real future. When Browne refused to give an undertaking that he would definitely stand even if guaranteed exclusive support, the Executive decided to call his bluff — and

for once got away with it. Both sides of the argument were ultimately to be proved correct. Although ignoring the Party campaign, and refusing even to appear on their political broadcasts, Browne contested as an official SLP candidate, and was duly re-elected, though his share of the poll in a changed constituency fell back sharply from 18% to 12%. Demoralised by this controversy, and ill-prepared, the other 6 SLP candidates could only attract 2,000 votes between them.

Thereafter it was downhill all the way. Browne declined to serve as parliamentary spokesperson in the new Dáil, and finally severed his residual links some months later when the Party criticised his stand on the school entry age controversy (characteristically, he claimed at the time that he had left the SLP two years earlier in protest against Matt Merrigan's stance on the National Question: the reality was that when attending the SLP Annual Conference as a delegate 6 months earlier he had actually voted for Merrigan's policy on the National Question). His enthusiastic endorsement of Garret FitzGerald, and his unwavering support for the Coalition, culminating in his Dáil vote for the Bruton Budget alienated most of his residual supporters. When the Coalition fell, precipitating a general election, Browne found himself unable either to raise an adequate personal organisation, or obtain a nomination from the Labour Party.

Meanwhile, deprived of the prestige of a Dáil deputy, and with its credibility undermined, the SLP drifted aimlessly. Having opted out of the February 1982 election for practical reasons, the Party decided on a last ditch effort in the Dublin West By-election. With the IRSP, Provos and CPI all opting out, and the Labour Party in disarray, the initial prospects appeared favourable, particularly as the candidate, Matt Merrigan, had previously contested part of the constituency. However, the campaign was to demonstrate that the SLP lacked the organisational resources, political base, enthusiasm and work record, to compete seriously with the three main candidates; and apart from a belated intervention by the Peoples Democracy, few of Merrigan's many admirers on the Left turned out to help. The result was, frankly, a humiliation.

And so, to coin a phrase, the SLP sank slowly in Dublin West, an idea whose time had past. It campaigned on a variety of issues such as divorce, nuclear power, housing, contraception; and national wage agreements, but, lacking resources and unity of purpose, such interventions tended to be fragmented and ineffective. It produced a bewildering range of policy documents, ranging from Agriculture to Public Transport, and from Women to Worker Control. The forthcoming Pro-



(Above) The first Annual Conference of the SLP. (Below) Matt Merrigan on anti-Planina Fajl picket 1979.



life" referendum recalls to mind that, four years ago, the SLP was the first Irish political party to demand the decriminalisation of abortion, and that the present developments were forecast at an SLP-sponsored public meeting to coincide with the Pope's visit to Ireland. Sadly, these policy documents, the most comprehensive since Labour's exercises in the late Sixties, remain largely unread, not least by SLP members.

Given the manifest and growing hostility between various leading figures on the Irish Left, the prospects for the SLP's final initiatives (more accurately perhaps those of Matt Merrigan), of attempting to promote Left "unity" through the newly-established "Socialist Forum", and of influencing the Labour Party through the affiliated trade unions, do not appear particularly bright.

Given the relative success of various Left-wing off-shoots from European social democratic parties, why did the SLP fail to make the grade? Most of the explanation must now be apparent — lack of resources and imagination,

personality disputes, the electoral system, the divisive activities of some tendencies, the personality of Noel Browne, and; not least the fact that the Workers Party had already established itself as a credible alternative to Labour. However, two other crucial factors require comment. The leadership of the SLP (apart from Noel Browne) were always prepared to agree to differ on the National Question, on which there was a broad range of opinions, allowing individuals to do and say more or less what they pleased in a personal capacity. While this practice may have been acceptable in an internal pressure group such as the Liaison of the Left, it was wholly inappropriate to a serious political party, not least in that it precluded concerted party interventions on the subject. Furthermore, the Party's official policy document was at best ambivalent, and, frequently amended, it ultimately became incomprehensible. Not surprisingly, the Party rank and file, not to say the general public, were soon alienated by this state of affairs.

Ultimately, however, the failure of the SLP must be considered a reflection on the Irish Left as a whole. In most European countries the Left commands the support of between 35% and 55% of the electorate; in Ireland the Left's ideologically based support, as distinct from the clientelist support of Left-wing public representatives is at most 5%, and probably a great deal less. When, as in Ireland, the "mother" social democratic party is pitifully weak and in decline, its Left offspring must inevitably be a sickly child. One obvious lesson from Dublin West, and indeed from previous elections, was that the SLP was always regarded as being an integral part of the Labour "family". Far from benefitting from Labour's decline, as the SDP has profited from the crisis in the British Labour Party, the SLP, insofar as it was noticed at all, was associated in the public mind with Labour's internal troubles and general disarray.

Significantly, it now seems likely that few ex-SLP members will seek to join another political party, preferring to join the growing ranks of the organisationally unattached. This will reinforce that phenomenon of recent years whereby activists prefer to involve themselves in single issue campaigns and *ad hoc* organisations, rather than submit to the tedium and discipline of a political party. Given the continuing failure of the Irish Left to create any sort of credible political alternative, is it any wonder that the working class prefers to place its trust in parties of the Right, even at a time of economic crisis and deepening recession?

*Gratlon welcomes further conclusions on this issue in the same fraternal spirit.*

**Title:** The Party's Over - Socialist Labour Party

**Author:** Dermot Boucher

**Date:** 1982

Downloaded from the Irish Left Archive.

Visit [www.leftarchive.ie](http://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.*