

# “THE MAYNOOTH MODEL”



BUILDING A NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
THE LABOUR PARTY AND THE COMMUNITIES  
WE LIVE IN

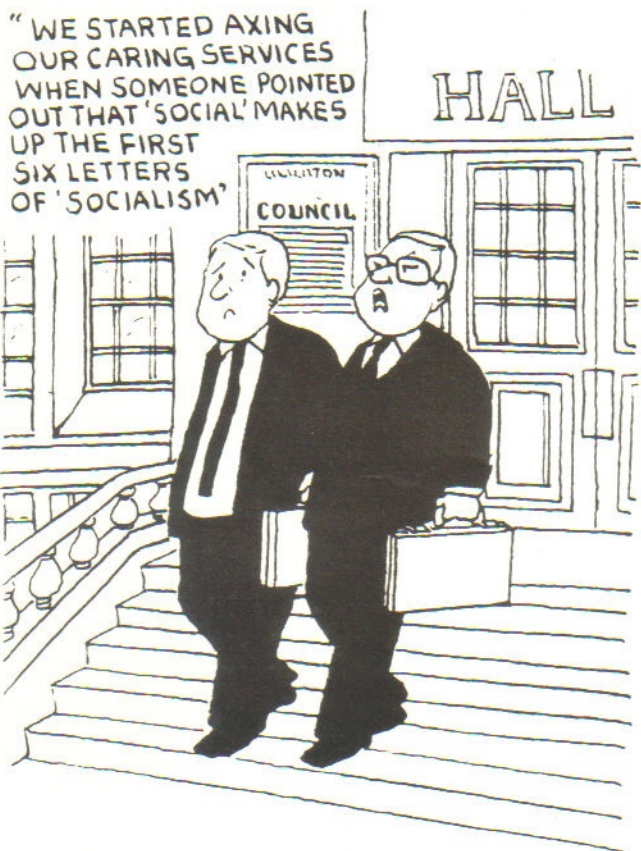
# 1. THE MAYNOOTH BRANCH

Maynooth is like any other town in Ireland. Situated under the shadow of Maynooth College, it is the home of a Fine Gael T.D. who received 57% of the vote in the town in the 1979 local election. Even though Kildare had consistently elected a Labour T.D., Labour support in Maynooth was always small. Emmet Stagg, who was a councillor since 1978 and operated a monthly clinic for the previous five years, received only 28 votes (2% of the town vote) in 1979. With Branch membership at five, it was hardly the stuff of political and electoral success.

By 1985 Labour support had risen to over 700 votes or 42% making it the largest Party in the town. Branch membership rose to over 50 members. Labour controlled the Maynooth Community Council. Most importantly, it became the major force in local politics.

It didn't happen overnight. It occurred through planning, local involvement, socialist policies and consistent work on the ground, day in and day out for years. It also involved major co-operation on a daily basis between the Branch members and the local public representative.

"WE STARTED AXING OUR CARING SERVICES WHEN SOMEONE POINTED OUT THAT 'SOCIAL' MAKES UP THE FIRST SIX LETTERS OF 'SOCIALISM'"



*Campaigning on local services is an essential part of Labour's community strategy.*

Maynooth is not unique. If it can be done there, it can be done in Clonmel, Cobh, Thurles, Lucan, Finglas, Ballincollig, Waterford — anywhere where Party members are willing to work hard and campaign for socialism. That it is already happening in other Branches throughout the Party is a sign that a new relationship between Labour and the communities we live in is emerging.

## 2. BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

With only five members and 2% of the vote, the Branch members set out a plan of attack. Deciding to meet on a more regular basis, they examined all aspects of organisational development, working broadly on three aims:

- (i) All activities were to revolve around the local representative/candidate to build electoral and political support;
- (ii) the Branch would be first in on all issues affecting the area;
- (iii) to initiate events in the community by direct Branch action.

The key areas that were examined were:

- (1) Community Participation.
- (2) Propaganda.
- (3) Political Profile.
- (4) Advice Service.
- (5) Recruitment.

Planning cannot be overemphasised. The Branch prepared an Annual Action Plan, naming specific objectives that were to be achieved by the end of the year. At every Branch meeting there was a progress report from those in charge of specific areas (e.g. public relations, residents association liaison, etc.). This progress was matched against the Annual Action Plan. Branch meetings became working meetings. Report backs, information on new community developments and planning future action took precedence on the agenda.

## 3. RECRUITMENT

Starting from only five members, the Branch set about recruiting more members.

First, the Branch targetted key people with a progressive record in community, single issue and trade union activities. Once identifying them, a meeting was set up between the representative or a Branch officer and the potential member, to explain the Labour Party, socialism and the activities of the Branch (usually in an informal setting over a pint or coffee).

Secondly, estates where membership was weak were targeted for recruitment. Intensive leafletting followed by a canvass by the local representative was used to identify potential members. This was followed up by invitations to join the Branch.

Thirdly, invitations to join the Party appeared on all Party literature. With the impact the Branch was beginning to make locally, individuals began to know who the local Labour Party people were and how to join it.

Fourthly, as the Branch became more active, people saw the Party meant business. To join the Party in Maynooth meant involvement in activity. This was used as an incentive to join (people won't join a talking shop).

Recruitment was integrated into all activities. When the councillor went canvassing to build up the profile of the Party or to advertise the advice centre, this was an opportunity to recruit. Similarly, with public meetings and social events. Any opportunity to inform people about the Party was taken and the question was always put: 'Will you join us?'

By 1986 Branch membership increased ten-fold, to over 50 members, drawn from all strata — working class and professional, young and old, men and women, parents and single persons, employed and unemployed. This ensured that the Branch was representative of the society in the town.

## 4. WORKING IN THE NEIGHBOURHOODS

In the first instance, it was important to ensure an identification between Party members and their own neighbourhoods. Party members were assigned the street/estate/area in which they lived (the rule of thumb was two members to 200/300 houses, depending on the area). Within this assigned area Party members were exclusively responsible for basic Party work:

- leafletting;
- door-to-door work (e.g. Labour Party petition against local charges)
- canvassing at elections.

This ensured that people recognised the local Party members in the neighbourhood. Further, Party members were encouraged to join local community organisations (see Section six). An important aspect of this strategy was to gather and convey information to the Branch and local representative about particular local issues (before they came to the attention of other political parties).

Of course not everybody is involved in their local areas. The same principle applies to people active in their local trade union branch, workplace, community and single



*Spreading Labour's Socialist Message.*

issue groups. Being identified with the Party, giving an example of what socialists are about, and gathering information about issues as they arise (e.g. a local dispute, need for community facility, etc.) is what members should be doing wherever they are active.

## 5. SPREADING THE WORD

Maynooth pursued a four prong public relations strategy to increase its profile in the town.

First, the Branch identified the propaganda outlets in Maynooth. Traditionally it concentrated on the local 'Leinster Leader'. However, the Branch discovered that with the rapid growth in the town due to the spread of Dublin's population, the local provincial paper sold few copies among the new population of Maynooth which comprised 70% of the town. While the significance of the paper was downplayed, the Branch PRO upgraded the quality of press releases, typing them neatly on Party headed paper and written with the assistance of practicing journalists. If editors receive articles that need little polishing, they stand a better chance of being published (while enhancing the 'professional' image of the groups submitting such material).

Further, the Branch contributed regularly to the local Community newsletter that was published by a community group. The Branch sent in 'Notes' on Branch activities and local problems the branch and local representative was acting on. Because of its emphasis on local news, the branch expanded its profile through this outlet.

- (a) 'Labour Notes' were published each month containing Branch information and local problems being dealt with by the local representative.
- (b) Wherever Branch members exerted influence within residents/tenants associations and community groups, notes were submitted from these commenting favourably on the Labour representative.
- (c) Single issue groups initiated by Branch members such as DAG, Residents Against Local Charges, etc., regularly issued reports which again favoured the Labour policy.

The next stage of publicity development was the publication of a branch magazine, in order to directly communicate Labour's programme and activities to the public. The branch started 'The Maynooth Labour News'. The publication was comprised of:

- Articles from the local representative, trade unionists, prominent single issue activists and Labour T.D.s were published on national issues, to outline the Branch's socialist platform.

The Maynooth Labour News was distributed free to all houses in Maynooth and contained advertising from local shops to pay for the cost of publishing. In time it grew to the present Kildare Labour News, a quarterly publication, now published in seven editions (e.g. Athy, Cellbridge, Kildare, Clane, etc.).

Thirdly, heavy use was made of 'circulars' dealing primarily with local concerns (traffic, housing, sewerage,

etc.). The standard circular would include a covering letter from the representative with a copy of the statement/reply from the County Manager, Engineer, etc. These circulars would be distributed around an estate, a street or even a few houses where residents were affected. This showed that the Party was on top of all the issues which affected people, no matter how minor.

Fourthly, the Branch produced leaflets on general subjects for distribution. These leaflets included issues such as local service charges, unemployment, women's rights, taxation on the wealthy, etc. These leaflets put forward strong socialist arguments, distinguishing them from the apolitical, 'aren't we nice people literature' distributed by other parties.

This public relations strategy — exploiting local outlets, the Maynooth Labour News, circulars, and issue leaflets — ensured that people in Maynooth were in no doubt about where Labour stood on all national and local issues, and what the Party was doing on their behalf.

## 6. INTO THE COMMUNITY

Initially, the Branch made a list of all local organisations: residents/tenants associations, community groups, trade union branches, special interest groups, sporting and cultural groups, etc. Seventy such organisations were identified. By first targeting activists in these groups for recruitment, the Branch began to establish individual links. Party members were encouraged to participate in such groups, running for committee offices, etc. The Labour representative wrote to all groups informing them of Labour's advice service and also advising them of his availability to attend meetings to assist them. In this way, the Party developed a comprehensive network of contacts into as many local groups as possible.

Next, the Branch made a list of areas where no community groups existed. For instance, where there was no residents/tenants association in existence an informal meeting was set up with two or three locals from the area. This meeting would take place with the Labour representative and at least one of the three residents/tenants would be a Labour supporter. The outcome of the meeting would be the formation of a residents/tenants association. A leaflet, signed by the three locals, was drawn up advertising an inaugural meeting to be chaired by the Labour representative. This ensured the Party was first in with this group and also showed its concern with local problems in the area.

Instead of crudely taking all the officerships, Party members supported non-Party members into office (thus ensuring the exclusion of other political parties) and played supportive roles in the group. The officer functions normally taken by Branch members would be the Secretary and/or the PRO as both positions can be



Recruitment leaflets used in Maynooth.

used, through the handling of correspondence and publicity, to the Party's advantage.

The list of local groups a Branch can help form are endless, depending on the community's needs and the interest and experience of the Branch (e.g. Community Councils, campaigns for Town Commission status, unemployment groups, anti-closure campaigns, etc.).

The Branch created further links with local groups:

- the representative made himself available to assist all local groups whether it be information on grants, practical organisational assistance, etc.;
- the Branch gave information about local groups in their circulars and publications. For instance, if a residents association had been campaigning for improved road amenities, the Branch didn't take full credit for it (even though the Labour representative may have been instrumental). Instead, it gave equal credit to the work of the residents association involved;
- whenever a community group was having a fundraiser or a social, the Branch donated a raffle prize (a trophy,

bottle of whiskey, etc.). This would always be announced at the function in the name of the Labour representative (whose profile the Branch was trying hard to build).

What follows are three successful examples of community involvement by direct Branch action.

### **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION I: THE MAYNOOTH COMMUNITY COUNCIL**

After a long period of participating in existing residents associations and setting up new ones the Branch initiated the 'Maynooth Community Council'. The Branch circulated invitations to representatives of all community groups to a meeting with a view to establishing a non-statutory Community Council. Representatives of over 50 groups attended and from that meeting an ad hoc committee was formed with a brief to hold elections to form a Community Council.

The Maynooth Branch contested these elections on a Labour Party slate. Leading Fianna Fail and Fine Gael candidates hid behind 'Independent' labels. The past work of the Party was rewarded when Labour won a majority of the seats on the Community Council. The Council, though it has no statutory revenue-raising powers, employs over 30 young people on various social employment and teamwork schemes to help the community. It has taken over the job of running the Community newsletter and runs a community week every summer. This popular, democratic initiative taken by the Branch has earned enormous support for the Party, making it a leading force within the community.

### **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION II: THE CHARITY WALK**

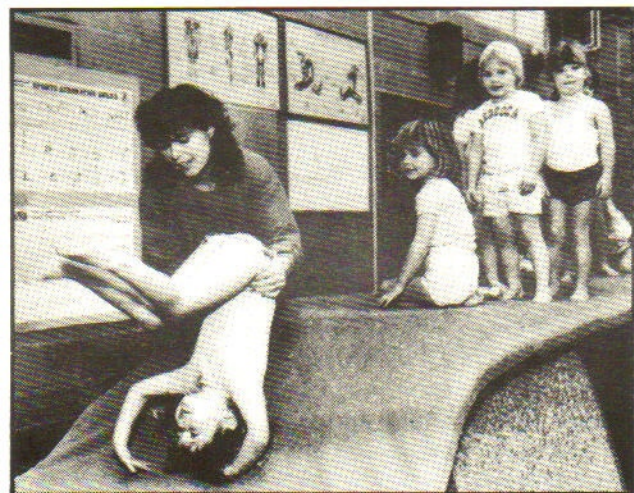
A Charity Walk was set up, with Party members collecting sponsorships for those who participated in the walk. The proceeds were publicly announced to go to the Maynooth Old Folks Committee. This had a number of effects:

- it showed the Party using its resources to help people who were disadvantaged in the community;
- at each stage the maximum amount of publicity was achieved through seeking sponsorships, the event itself (held on a Sunday through the main street and led by a local band), a social for the old folks following the walk and then, a function where the proceeds were formally handed over to the old folks committee.

There is a lesson here for socialists. Why doesn't the Party assist worthy causes, whether it is for disadvantaged groups, a child needing expensive medical treatment, etc., rather than let banks and businesses take public



*Labour putting people to work through the Maynooth Community Council.*



*Intervening in the community to assist people here and now is part of building a socialist future.*

credit on these issues. There are a number of areas that the Party can positively assist in:

- raising money for local strike funds;
- helping workers raise co-operative share capital to take over a closed factory;
- raise money for community facilities or resources for special groups.

It won't detract from the Party's own fund-raising efforts. People will recognise the Party as providing real assistance to people. And when we come around for financial support they will be more than willing to reciprocate.

### **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION III: THE ANTI-CHARGES CAMPAIGN**

When Kildare County Council established local service charges on water and refuse collection, this provided the Branch an opportunity to mobilise people around concrete political goals.

The Branch set up the 'Maynooth Residents Against the Charges', inviting all residents to an initial meeting to set up a Co-ordinating Committee. The Committee reflected a broad base within the community with solid but not overbearing Labour representation. On the initiative of Party members, the Committee set up meetings in different estates, organised a door-to-door petition, issued circulars and press statements, and in co-operation with trade unionists, ensured that if the Council cut off people's water for non-payment, they were re-connected within the day.

The Branch ran a parallel campaign, not undermining the role of the Committee, but ensuring that the Party identified with the issue. The Branch issued statements

and leaflets, while its representative took a high-profiled role — putting down motions at the County Council, speaking at residents meetings and assisting with practical campaigning advice. The Branch went door-to-door with waiver forms. This ensured that people entitled to exemptions from the charges (e.g. unemployed, old age pensioners, etc.) availed of the waiver forms.

Labour's position was thus put forward on three fronts: through the residents campaign with Party members involvement, through the Branch's own campaign and through the high profile of the representative. The campaign was highly successful: 75% of Maynooth residents refused to pay the charges.

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There are any number of broad based campaigns and alliances that Party Branches can work in and initiate. If there are unemployed in the area — the Branch should get an unemployment group off the ground. A single parents organisation can mobilise people suffering from discrimination and poverty. In corporation/council estates where there are no tenants associations, Party members should be starting up such groups. Whether it is long term or ad hoc campaigns (e.g. anti-extradition, referenda, a Land Tax campaign), that's where Labour should be.

## **7. ADVICE CENTRES**

The representative established a weekly advice centre in the town. The advice centre not only helps people obtain their rightful entitlements but has wider public relations value.



*Using every opportunity to assist people in everyday problems.*

Cases at the advice centre are treated in the following manner:

- a formal letter is sent to the appropriate agency (e.g. Health Officer, County Manager, Housing Officer, etc.) detailing the problem and requesting action;
- when an acknowledgement is returned, this is sent, along with a letter from the representative promising to stay with the case;
- when a response arrives a copy is sent again to the individual, whether positive or negative.

At all stages the individual is kept informed. Even if the case (e.g. a medical card applicant) is turned down, the individual will respect the representative for keeping them informed and making the effort.

Some cases affect more than just the person requesting help (e.g. sewage problems in an area, bad road). When acknowledgements and responses come a copy of the response is circulated to the area, houses or estate affected (with the name of the individual tippexed out). The same principle of keeping people in the area informed throughout all the stages of the case is applied. In all cases the advice centre is mentioned.

Many cases come from local community groups. Again, the representative keeps the group informed at all stages (even accompanying them for an official interview regarding a grant). Wherever the representative comes into direct contact with people, she/he establishes opportunities to assist people in their everyday problems.

The Maynooth Branch takes its advice centre to people's doorstep. Every year the Branch circulates, in appropriate areas, fuel voucher and free footwear

information leaflets. The number of people who do not avail of their entitlements can be quite high. Again, the advice service is mentioned for people requiring assistance. (As a consequence the take up rate in Maynooth increased significantly.)

The advice centre both assists people and, just as importantly, is seen to assist. The Branch always advertises its advice centre in its literature. And when the representative is actually conducting the centre, a sign is put outside on the street advertising the fact that the advice centre is open (that's why an advice centre should be held in a central location).

## 8. THE WORK OF THE CANDIDATE

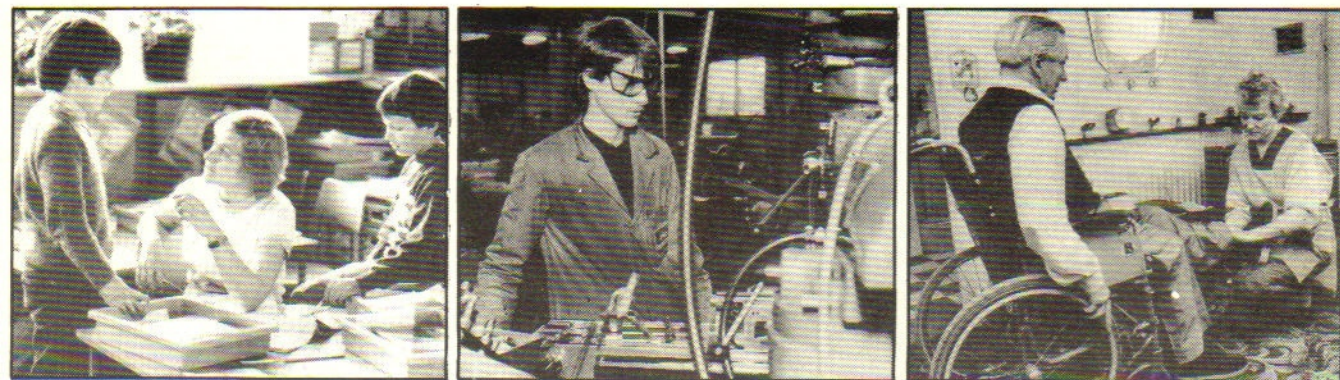
Electing a socialist is the final step in winning people over to socialism. The first step is the actions we take at the national and local level, alongside our socialist programme. Therefore, the Labour candidate (representative or T.D.) must be actively involved in all Party activities at local level. If there is a door-to-door collection, petition drive, advice service, community campaign, direct political action, the candidate must be working alongside the Branch members.

In Maynooth, the Branch and the representative have a close working relationship. The representative holds a weekly advice centre in the town, devotes two full weeks a year in the town canvassing door-to-door, assists in flag days, goes door-to-door with petitions, attends community group meetings, etc.

One cannot function without the other. The Branch is not put in mothballs between elections. Nor does the organisation ignore the practical needs of the representative. Only through partnership between the representative and the Branch can the Party function to its fullest (not that there aren't the usual Labour rows in the Maynooth Branch — but when these occur, achieving consensus is the only way of achieving harmony, bringing everyone on board in the decisions).

## 9. LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Recently, the Branch formed a Youth Section. The Youth Section has begun to mobilise young people in the town — talking to young workers about the benefits of trade union organisation, setting up 'video' shows for young people who can't afford cinema prices, sponsoring local gigs and discos. Campaigns regarding youth facilities are being planned — not just making demands, but going out in the community to raise money and do it themselves (and so put pressure on public agencies to assist).



*Where socialists belong – organising people to  
organise themselves on an alternative socialist programme.*

Further, the Branch is in the process of establishing a womens section, which would directly involve itself in local women's issues (e.g. services, health and self-help education facilities, low pay and discrimination) as well as organise its own structures to accommodate women (so much of the Party's structures — meetings, venues, activities — exclude women).

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What has been outlined is not unique to the Maynooth Branch. Many other Party Branches are involved in similar activities. There is nothing magical about turning a 2% result into a 42% one. The principles we have outlined are applicable everywhere, though the examples might be different. All it takes is planning, hard and consistent work and, most importantly, a belief that our politics, a radical socialist politics, can win the support of working men and women throughout Ireland.

Let us be clear: our socialist politics is not about people consuming our press statements, leaflets and public meetings like a better brand of soap. It is not about offering people some far-off better future. It is about intervening today in their lives — whether in the community, the workplace, the schools and hospitals — struggling with them to resolve their everyday problems. It is about getting people to participate in organising against their own oppression and for their own freedom. In this way, people will join with us to create a socialist future, every step of the way.

Whether it is a country village, a large town, a rural hinterland or a sprawling urban suburb, that is where socialists belong, working within the community, campaigning on a socialist programme, organising people to organise themselves in collective democratic activity. After all the rhetoric, the exhortations, the wishing it were so, there is only one thing left to do. And that is to go out and do it.





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