

A stereotyped picture

'On the outside looking in', (*Making Sense* 20), is a timely, although mis-leading, and at times highly inaccurate, contribution to the debate on the future of the Workers' Party. Mis-leading and inaccurate because it conforms so well to the stereotyped picture of the party painted in the columns of *Magill* and *Sunday Tribune* — that of a secretive communist organisation with a hidden agenda.

Timely because it raises a critical and fundamental aspect of the debate which has so far been largely mis-interpreted. Paddy Woodworth asserts, absolutely correctly, that the WP must 'once and for all recognise where it has come from'. Like many others, Paddy Woodworth in his article fails to answer this point correctly. It is highly pejorative to view the WP as an integral component of the international communist movement, pledged to an unquestioning acceptance of a Soviet model and forms of organisation. In 1989 the communist world movement collapsed so therefore the WP must accept all the implications and consequences of that, so the argument goes. That is not the history of the WP, and failure to recognise this only distorts the terms and parameters of our present necessary debate.

The WP has a different and unique history from that of the orthodox communist movement. It is one that is deeply rooted in Ireland's revolutionary republican tradition. The WP today is the product, the creation, of our own years of struggle here in Ireland. Ideologically it draws upon the secular democratic republican tradition. More recently, in the mid 60's, the leadership of the IRA underwent a far reaching reappraisal of its role in Irish society, an appraisal that took account of the transformations in Irish society and of events in the wider world. This led to the decision by the IRA to create a party of the working class in Ireland which would be active among, and have the support of, working people. Events like the sectarian upheavals in

'The Workers' Party has a different and unique history from that of the orthodox communist movement.'
JOHN LOWRY responds to Paddy Woodworth.

Northern Ireland in 1969, the introduction of internment, the sectarian campaign of the Provisionals and attempts to lead the party into sectarian confrontation, complicated, and for a period delayed, the achievement of this objective.

International links were, of course, forged during this period. As Paddy Woodworth himself states, in world terms our sympathies and solidarity lay with those like the Vietnamese NLF struggling against the greatest military aggressor in the world; the ANC fighting the racist regime in South Africa; and those countries which spoke out against the arms race and the threat of nuclear war. Is this unreasonable?

It was not until 1983, in fact, that the WP established formal relations with any eastern bloc party — the CPSU. Far from the suggestion that we sought to replace the Communist Party of Ireland either at home or abroad, the independence of our party internationally was a primary principle for us. Therefore I think it is wrong to state that a Soviet model was grafted onto the party. Our ideological direction was clearly mapped out as a result of our own appraisal of Irish society and international affairs. Equally the forms of organisation which we adopted were shaped to meet the particular needs of the party in the specific circumstances in which we found ourselves.

Here it is worth noting that the building of a modern democratic party of the working class was not a simple or smooth transition from a narrow nationalist organisation to a modern

political party, and attempts were made to thwart and frustrate this goal. Some, like Seamus Costello, actively sought to divert the party from this course and organised within the party in a totally undemocratic way. Other individuals harboured personal ambitions which they sought to advance in a totally opportunistic fashion, behaving as if the party was their personal property and without regard to the decisions and wishes of the members. It was in this environment that democratic centralism was accepted by the members of the party as the best means of securing their rights and wishes within the party. That the WP exists in the form that it does today is proof that this structure has worked and served the party well. Nor is it something that has outlived its usefulness. Paddy Woodworth correctly refers to the attempts by a section within the party only last year to impose social democracy upon us. As in the past it was the mechanism of democratic centralism which checked this anti-democratic manoeuvre. And democratic centralism does not simply mean a device to check dissent or suppress differing views. The spirit of democratic centralism demands the fullest and broadest inner party discussion and debate, throughout the party from branch to centre. Passing down decisions from, above is not democratic centralism.

It is unacceptable, therefore, that Paddy Woodworth seeks to reduce the historical role of democratic centralism within the party to a question of a 'feish for discipline' or 'cult of authoritarianism' à la paramilitarism. The entire history of the party has been one of rejection of such ideas in all their shapes and forms. It ought to be remembered that this process, the creation of the WP, was neither painless nor spontaneous. It was built by the efforts of many people in the face of attack from many quarters — from the British State, the ultra left, the Provos and loyalist paramilitaries.



Loyalist and nationalist demonstrators clash in Derry in 1969

Only the determined resolve of the party leadership ensured we would not be deflected from our goal and diverted into a sectarian cul de sac. All the more reason why Paddy Woodworth's picture of a 'Soviet model' of authoritarian leaders be decisively rebutted.

There is a world of difference between crude centralism and strong leadership. Which is why I find Paddy Woodworth's comments about WP condemnations of the Provos completely distasteful. Describing our condemnations as 'coming on like choirboys and choirgirls when the dogs in the street know the WP's history' is exactly the retort with which we have become so familiar from sections of the so-called Irish left and FF, who can barely hide their ambivalence towards the Provos. People who believe that the WP have deserted the fold but perhaps can be returned to the national consensus. Hence the references to the WP past — Yes what the Provos have done is bad but don't be too hard on them, sure you were the same yourselves — the line goes. What a shame such views have found their way onto the pages of *Making Sense*.

There are two points to be made. Firstly, it should not have to be stated but Paddy Woodworth implies it, the WP never had nor has any intention of hiding or denying its past. Even if we had tried we were never allowed to forget by *Today Tonight*, *Sunday*

Tribune etc.). Secondly, it has only been the consistent and unflinching WP condemnations of the Provos which have exposed the true nature of the beast when all around us others were attempting to make excuses for them. Just look at the so-called progressives who got into bed with them during the hunger strikes of 1980/81.

Anyone who attended the recent Northern Ireland conference of the WP in Belfast and who witnessed the attendance at that conference, drawn from a wide cross section of public and political life, will know the inaccuracy of Paddy Woodworth's comments about our past being a hindrance to our progress. The democratic credentials of the WP are well established.

In his conclusion Paddy Woodworth asks 'What sort of party has allowed itself to become so dependent on inspiration from elsewhere?'. This attitude, which permeates his entire article, is entirely the wrong starting point and totally inaccurate. It smacks of the claims which have been peddled for years by Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael that socialism is an ideology alien to Catholic-Nationalist Ireland. The idea that the WP is some kind of foreign importation into Ireland with no roots here is both misleading and insulting to the many hundreds of party comrades who struggled at great personal cost to build what we have today. It was not

built to satisfy a blind allegiance to the Soviet Union. The caricature of anti-democratic conservative leaders is equally insulting. It was probably these very same people (whom Paddy Woodworth prefers not to name) who have been the dynamic for change in the WP. Since the mid-60s the party has undergone a transformation from a narrow nationalist organisation to a modern democratic socialist party representing the interests of the working class in Dáil Éireann. To whom should we ascribe the credit for this achievement? If anyone doubts that we have not been a party of change we should read again one of the best and most lucid presidential addresses of recent years, that of Tomás Mac Giolla upon his retirement as party President.

The idea that we are a communist party in the Soviet mould is a mistaken one which I believe has gained too much credibility within our current debate. That is why I have responded to this one point alone in Paddy's article. I do not wish to give the impression that all is well and we need worry no more. I do not believe that for one moment. I am confident that, having come through so much change ourselves, we have nothing to fear from change or debate. As in the past, the party members will ultimately decide the nature and extent of that change.

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