

THE PROINSIAS DE ROSSA INTERVIEW

Can you tell us something of the success of the Workers' Party in Finglas?

It mainly happened as a result of the political campaigns we have been involved in. The main one was the housing campaign, protesting at the bad housing conditions in Finglas South. The base of our strength is still in South Finglas. We are also distributing our paper, the *Irish People*, and of course we have the Advice Centres. We started an ad-hoc Advice Centre in 1973, and opened an office in the Main Street in Finglas in 1975. Our approach to Advice Centres is different to that of other parties. We offer advice and assistance and make it clear to people that we are not in the business of getting them favours to which they are not normally entitled. If the problem involved more than one person we would organise a campaign about it. That is basically how the Housing campaign started. As for getting elected, we knew it would take years of effort. Most people, including myself, were reluctant to put themselves forward. But I had run in the Local Elections in 1967 so I suppose you could say that I was cajoled into running in 1977.

What is the Finglas "Jobs for All" campaign?

About two years ago we conducted a survey on unemployment in Finglas. We found that about 50% of young people between the ages of 15 and 25 were unemployed; there was a high rate of unemployment amongst women, young and old, and quite a high proportion of people were getting no benefit or allowance whatsoever. The Hope Survey last year produced similar results. We produced a pamphlet called "A New Deal for Finglas" based on our survey. Initially we concentrated on the young people, but following attacks on women's place in the labour force we decided to broaden it out. We had an inaugural meeting two months ago.

Is the Party growing in Finglas?

Yes, but it is not a mushroom growth in the sense of having hundreds of people joining and perhaps leaving again. The growth is mainly made up of people in their 20s, who more often than not are married and have come face-to-face with the realities of life. We also have a very active women's group in the area and a youth group. Then there is a constituency association which is made up of people who are not in a position to join the party, but give financial support and lend a hand during our campaigns, such as the Anti- Amendment campaign.

What is the connection between the work you do in the constituency and your role in the Dáil?

I suppose it is a two way process. The work in the constituency derives to some extent from the events and issues which come up in the Dáil. And what I do in the Dáil derives to some extent from the information I get from Advice Centre work. When we get an issue locally, we analyse it and present the socialist perspective on it in the Dáil. For example, in the recent adjournment debate we decided in the Party that I would speak on unemployment, raising the problems we learned from the survey — people with low skills, youth unemployment and so on. And I also attacked the notion that high wages create unemployment, you know, the shit that if a man looks for more money he is doing his son out of a job.

You have earned a reputation for raising hard political issues in the Dáil, such as divorce, El Salvador, the Amendment and so on. What is the political feedback from your constituents on these issues?

There is a problem that with only myself and Tomas MacGiolla in the Dáil, we not only have to represent our own areas but also the Workers' Party view on all the major issues as they arise. We made it clear during the election campaigns that we were not putting ourselves forward as better "constituency doctors" than the Labour Party or Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, rather we were giving political leadership. This is our main priority and we do the constituency work as best we can. Now some people are happy with that, others are not, but by and large the reaction is positive. People are happy to have someone represent them who is not concerned only with the flood at the end of the road, but with wider issues as well.

In an earlier interview in GRALTON, Tony Gregory said that all five socialist TDs were at fault in not getting together as a bloc during the previous Government. However, he laid most blame at the door of the Workers' Party TDs, accusing them of "trying to preserve their political purity". How do you react to that?

Well, on a practical level things were developing so rapidly that there just wasn't time to sit down and work out a proper strategy. But on a political level neither Tony Gregory nor Jim Kemmy had a political party backing them at that time. I'm not so sure that Tony has a clear political idea of how socialism can be achieved in Ireland. It is not good enough to put a label on yourself saying "I'm a socialist", and speak in socialist terms and just plod along in the same rut that radical politics has been in for forty years. What the Workers' Party is about is trying to build a party which will take power in the country and for that reason we would have a different

approach to cooperating with other groups, whatever they may be. So in that sense, if that is what he interprets as 'purity' I suppose it's true.

The Party has been criticised by sections of the Left for running its own separate campaigns at various times. For example on the Anti- Amendment issue, and setting up "Jobs for All" when there is already the Trades Council initiative and the Finglas Unemployment Action Group operating in Finglas. Is it the strategy of building the Party that causes this?

Well, the Party has attracted criticism from various sections of the Left for its political and also its economic positions. And that is fair enough because we would criticise them. But I think that it is reasonable to run campaigns as the Workers' Party because we consider that we are seriously setting about to build a mass working class party. We are looking to get people to join us on the basis of a clearly thought out political and economic position. We are not looking to get people to join Jim Kemmy's party or the IRSP or whatever.

In a recent newspaper article the term "revolutionary party" was used to describe the Workers' Party. What for you is the essence of a revolutionary party?

Basically it derives from our objective of establishing a



"the place to be is in parliament!"

socialist democratic republic and it's not possible to do that through a social democratic party like the Labour Party. In defining revolution as the transformation of society — that is where the term "revolutionary" comes from — we are looking to transfer power from the capitalist class to the working class. The Labour Party, taking the other significant group on the Left, have no ambitions, as far as we can see from their declared positions, to transfer power from one class to the other. They are looking for a cooperation or a partnership between the classes rather than a transfer of power.

Is there not a contradiction between building a

revolutionary party and using the methods of the capitalist parties, such as Advice Centres and Parliamentary procedures?

It would be the position of most people on the Left that you can't transfer power without the support of the people you want to transfer power to, namely the working class. It seems reasonable to me to use the tools that are available to us in a democratic, be it a bourgeois democratic, society to win that support. The primary thing is to win working class support for a worked out political position by presenting a marxist analysis to them. And you do that, not by lecturing the people, but by taking the position as it is, pointing out what could be and pointing out the contradictions in the system.

It is not good enough to just contest elections and get into the Dáil. I think we have done it fairly effectively in Dublin North West, for example organising on the family planning issue while highlighting the difference between private and public medicine. We started our own Anti- Amendment campaign because we saw the argument between a secular state and a theocratic state as a political issue. We campaign in the area on these issues, raising consciousness and winning support just for the sake of making a point, but we are articulating a position already understood by our supporters in the constituency and for which we have support.

But is there not a danger of placing too much emphasis on the Parliament?

I think that first of all the Left in Ireland have to accept that we are living in a democratic society with, by and large, no restrictions on how you organise. The parliament is regarded by the people, including the working class, as being the body which runs the country. So the place to be is in parliament. Certainly, from my own experience, the Party's standing in the working class has gained considerably since we entered the Dáil — as much from the fact that we are actually in the Dáil, as from what we may have done or said. And we are attracting new members. So I don't see it as a danger, though there are dangers in it. I think that the accession of the Party to the Dáil has, to some degree anyhow, built the opposition to the Amendment, and in particular contributed to the PAYE campaign.

Assuming that you have politically conscious working class support, do you see socialism coming about simply and smoothly when the Workers' Party achieves a majority in the Dáil? Or do you think that power could only transfer through a major political crisis as predicted by Marx?

It would be nice to think that in five or ten years time power would transfer if the Workers' Party gained a majority. But while we would have general support from the working class, sections of the class might oppose parts of our programme. It is likely that we would have problems with the higher section of the Civil Service. It may be that the Left would come to power in an alliance of a number of parties. So I would expect that there would be a crisis of some kind. The point I'm making is that I can't forecast what way power will transfer but I think from what we know now that parliament will be a key

element in that transfer.

In a recent interview there was mention of a membership target of 40,000 members, from a current membership of 3,000. Now the Party is well known for its discipline and centralism. Do you think that the Party will have to change its structure or to relax its criteria for taking in new members, if it is to grow to this size?

Well, to start with there was no mention of a time scale in that target. Clearly we could not politicize 40,000 people in 12 months. But I would not see difficulties, largely because we recently revised our structures at a special delegate conference earlier this year. We now have a Central Executive Council which has been restructured to have representation from a much broader area of the country, North and South. We have Regional Councils, then Constituency Councils and then the Branches. But also have the Executive Political Committee, the Executive Management Committee and various other committees such as Education, Housing and so forth.

We have revised our constitution, putting into written form what has developed in practice over the years. For example, the Ard Fheis is the supreme decision making body; in between the Central Executive Council is the political decision making body, and when that is not meeting it is the Executive Political Committee which fulfills the role — but only making decisions within the confines of policy already decided at the Ard Fheis. So we have made provision for the development and the growth of the Party in such a way that nobody will feel that they are being left out. The basic unit is the Branch and decisions really start from there.

The question of discipline is a one of commitment to the objectives of the Party, the structure and the centralism of the Party and also the criteria for work. People who apply to join the Party are introduced to the Party through a number of talks on party policy and organisation so that people coming into the party are aware of its aims and of the demands that will be made on their time. They then go through a six month probationary period during which they get involved in activities. After this they become card-carrying members and can vote at Branch meetings. The probationary period and the introductory talks have actually been there since the year dot. We have kept the old structure in as far as they were relevant, added new structures according to our activities and formalised the whole by adding a top structure which is relevant to what is happening on the ground.

Can you tell us about your own political development?

I joined Fianna Éirinn when I was 12 in 1952. At 17 I joined Sinn Féin and was involved in the campaign to elect Tom Mitchell, a Crumlin Road prisoner. They started locking up everyone and I spent 20 months in the 'Joy and the Curragh on internment. I was politically very naive and like most people, then and even now, I was a nationalist. I suppose school had a lot to do with it. I went to an all Irish school in Marlboro St. where we were told that Ireland would not be free until the British left the North.

The Border Campaign fizzled out in 1962 leaving the party at a low ebb. Some re-thinking was going on and

this was particularly boosted by the 1966 celebrations of 1916. Books and pamphlets appeared on James Connolly and everyone started wearing the Connolly badge. The Party began to turn to socialist ideas. I'm not saying that I was involved in this thinking, if anything I had a lot to catch up on, but I was pleased with the developments.

Having absorbed the traditional nationalist ideas when you were growing up, did you not find it difficult, on a personal level, to accept the Party's position of opposing the proroguing of Stormont in 1973?

Yes, I don't deny that obviously on a personal level it was difficult to accept this position. But if you sit down and work out the way forward in a difficult political situation, and that presents you with difficult choices which mean dumping some dearly held prejudices, prejudices you were reared with, well you just have to do it. But I can understand the difficulty for young people in West Belfast in understanding our position.

The young people in West Belfast are on the receiving end of violence from the RUC . . .

Yes, but what do you want? The policing of West Belfast by the Provos and the INLA who are, when analysed, fascist-type organisations? Or do you seek a police force which is politically independent? We have a policy, developed as far back as 1975, of demanding the demilitarisation of the RUC. So we, in fact, give only qualified support to the RUC, with demands that they be reformed, de-militarised, have a complaints procedure etc.

To-day the Party is supporting Prior's Assembly. Can you explain that?

We believe that the working class need to be able to organise on the issues that are most important to them. I don't think that union with the South is important for the nationalists, or that union with Britain is important for the unionist workers except in an intellectual way or when they feel their traditions and culture under threat. There are different traditions in the North because Protestants and Catholics grow up attending different schools, different churches, hearing different stories at home. But we feel that most people mainly want the opportunity to live a full, normal life. So we are trying to create a political level of activity where working class people on both sides can think primarily of the interests of their own class. And in trying to achieve that you have to ensure that there are structures which will allow this kind of political development. So if you don't have a local assembly of some kind you don't have a platform for political expression.

The Party has a policy of demanding a 32 county socialist republic and yet at the same time Tomas MacGiolla's speech at this year's Ard Fheis seemed to imply support for a separate workers state in the North should one emerge. Is this not a contradiction?

The actual term we use is a unitary state. That is the long term objective. If it is necessary at some point, in order to gain the support of the workers in the North, to allow for

a separate state run by the workers in the North in their own interests, then we would support that. I don't see it as a contradiction. It may not be the full shilling, so to speak. But we can never predict how things are going to work out, there are so many forces involved. We have to allow for interim situations. Very few people will see the need for separate states on the island if both are workers' states, and in that case I've no doubt that a unitary state would come about.

In your own speech at Bodinstown this year you spent some time on the neutrality and nuclear arms issues. Do you think that opposition campaigns in a small country like Ireland can have any effect on the big powers?

Yes, because there are a number of connections. For instance, many of the influential people in the States are Irish-Americans. Then there is the connection via the Catholic Church. The Americans were obviously upset by the El Salvador motion in the Dáil. They were sufficiently concerned to have sent George Bush over to



explain their policy. Mind you I am very unhappy with the weak position taken by both FitzGerald and Barry on the issue of Cruise and Pershing missiles in Britain — arguing that it is none of our business. It is, and that is why it is essential to have grass-roots pressure groups like Irish CND to indicate that while the Government might be saying one thing, the people are not happy with this threatening situation.

You were involved in the "Arms are for Linking" demonstration. Do you think that the USSR needs to be persuaded to disarm its nuclear force?

I think that we have to accept that the USSR has no vested interest in maintaining the deployment of nuclear weapons. My understanding of the situation is that economically they would be better off, better able to develop their own economy, if they didn't have to allocate large resources to nuclear weapons. On the other hand, in the USA there is a vast military-industrial complex which depends on the continual development and production of these weapons. Apart from that the

USSR has made a number of significant gestures in recent times, such as their promise not to be the first to use nuclear weapons, and they also offered any country which declares itself a "nuclear-free-zone" a guarantee that they would not be attacked by the USSR. Neither the USA nor NATO have responded to these moves in any positive way. We would like the Irish Government to take a more independent line, for example declaring the 26 County State a "nuclear-free-zone" and perhaps also investigating how we could fit in with the non-aligned countries.

Looking to the future, do you expect further election successes for the Workers' Party?

It is always risky to put figures on things but I would expect us to end up with at least 4 or 5 seats on Dublin Corporation in the next local elections, depending on the issues at the time. I expect that we will pick up seats in the County as well. I know that we will pick up additional seats on Cork County Council and Corporation. We

The 1982 Ard Fheis Top Table

expect to win in Galway and to gain more seats in Waterford.

As for campaigns, we think the divorce issue will develop an impetus of its own after the Amendment campaign is out of the way. We will continue with the "Jobs for All" campaign and will probably get involved on the water charges issue. I think an issue which will come to the fore is the old question of who controls our resources. The oil find in Waterford will raise that question. Finally, an important issue will be the defence of the state-sector. Despite what Frank Cluskey has said, I get a clear impression from this Government that the state-sector is for the chop. All these issues are there, whichever one comes to the fore will depend on circumstances at any given time.

I've seen, at meetings around the country, a very positive response to the Party — people are recognising that, for the first time, there is a party that is politically different, that is not offering the same tired old clichés, that is not only talking about its politics but is campaigning in support of them.

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