

"Dialogue" or double standards? ^{by} John Hume SDLP

How a section of the British Left views Ireland

*Tribune 12 December
1986?*

This time twenty years ago it would have been difficult to find people in British political life who would or could speak about affairs in Northern Ireland. One of the first successes of the Civil Rights Campaign was that the "Speakers Convention", which precluded any discussion at Westminster of Northern Ireland affairs, was lifted in 1968. This meant that at last some awareness of the problems in Northern Ireland developed among representatives in Britain and some responsibility for them was acknowledged. It was this shift which in turn led to many administrative and political changes.

This is a paradox which confounds unionists and which is not always recognised by non-unionists. The key to creating real change in Ireland is activating the British dimension to the British-Irish problem in a positive way. That was understood by the Civil Rights Movement and is also understood by non-unionists who welcome the Anglo-Irish Agreement. We also understand that violence and force have served only to create reactionary policies on the part of the British.

We in Northern Ireland have now become accustomed to hearing various strands of British opinion voice their feelings about matters in Ireland and between Britain and Ireland. Whatever the content of these contributions I welcome them all as indicating an acceptance that the issue is actually a British-Irish one.

Naturally there are many opinions expressed with which I cannot agree - indeed many of them specifically take issue with the SDLP's approach. There are however two sections of British opinion on Ireland which at times I find hard to take.

One of them is that section of the Tory Party very much on the Right who loudly proclaim their unionism and insist that a "security solution" is achievable. The other is that section of opinion, labelled as being Labour's "far left", which seems to be hypnotised by the idea of an anti-imperialist mass liberation movement in Ireland and has taken to promoting Provisional Sinn Fein.

It is probably their attitude rather than the content of their opinions which I really object to. They both patronise the Irish. They both know what is good for us. One seems to think we need to be told how to run Ireland. The other thinks we need to be told how to free Ireland. Each is concerned with the view of one section of Irish opinion.

On many occasions I have argued against the Tories I have referred to. On this occasion I want to take a look at the other group. As an elected representative in Ireland and as a democratic socialist I deeply resent much in their approach.

'Law and Order'

Just as the Right think that only the unionists matter this group seems to think only the Provisionals matter. They host and promote Sinn Fein representatives at meetings and receptions, they bill themselves and Sinn Fein as champions against oppression (the rest of us are collaborators and dupes, apparently) and they claim to be helping to promote the socialist alternative in Ireland.

I have learned that there is little point arguing the reality of relations in Ireland and between Britain and Ireland with these people. But I would have thought that given their own expressed views on issues in Britain, simple logic or consistency would lead them to very different conclusions about their relationships in Irish politics.

For instance they approach the Tory Government's law and order approach as draconian. They underline that many of the problems of crime are symptoms of depression and deprivation. Yet the group they support in Ireland believe that punishment beatings, knee-cappings and executions are the answer to crime.

Will Ken Livinstone say that people suspected of thieving in London should have concrete blocks dropped on their hands ?

Will he say that unemployed people accused of anti-social behaviour should be beaten all over with hurleys and baseball bats ?

Will he say that a nineteen year old Londoner, living in poor housing conditions, with no job, without even an employed relative, should be shot dead in the back on the stairs of the high rise block of flats in which he lived because of alleged "criminal activities" ?

I do not think so. It is hardly the socialist alternative. Perhaps these people are emulating their counterparts on the Right in that they support law-and-order measures in Ireland which they would never counterance at home.

Wanting Repression

Before anyone says "What about...?" I will say that people are entirely correct to work to expose repression, supergrasses, strip-searches, ill-treatment etc. My party does so on the basis of human and civil rights. There can be no other principled or honest basis for doing so. The Provisionals, however, condemn Diplock courts but run their own kangaroo courts with no known system of legal representation or appeal. The "hearing" would be called an interrogation in other circumstances. Apart from the sort of punishments outlined above, people have been banished from their own home town or even the country altogether. These infringements of the rights of ordinary Irish people merit the opposition of British socialists just as state practices do.

Those who want to take up the "repression issue" in Britain should be aware that the Provisionals actually want repression. One only has to recall the IRA's comment in the Provisionals' newspaper after the Brighton bomb that had it killed most of the British cabinet "We believe that such a devastating blow, in the short term, would have led to widespread repression and major reprisals.....such repression could have included internment etc...."

It is quite clear that the so-called "principled leadership" opposing repression actually seek it to advance their own ends. I hope I am not going to be told by people claiming to be socialists that repression for Irish political ends is okay but not for British. Those who are under the impression that the Provisionals are the "protectors" of the Catholic people should note that the Provisionals have killed more Catholics than have the RUC, UDR and British Army put together.

Many of those with whom I am taking issue have been identified in British local government with effective, radical initiatives in a range of social areas. I am not just referring to the GLC. My party admire many of these policies. I am puzzled, however, to know why these same people promote a group in Ireland who oppose such developments and who are happy to work to destroy economic activity.

I read a document from the GLC, "More Than Bricks and Mortar", which identified a strategy for the economic regeneration of run-down areas of London. Yet many of the British champions of this strategy seem to support a campaign which seeks to reduce economic facilities in Northern Ireland to less than bricks and mortar.

Nobody need be in any doubt that the IRA campaigns have cost us jobs. This is particularly so in those nationalist areas which have suffered most in the bombings. It is no comfort to an unemployed person to know that there are other factors in creating unemployment as well. People are caught between the neutron-bomb economics of monetarism and the terror-bomb tactics of the Provisionals. One destroys a workforce but leaves the workplace standing: the other destroys the workplace and leaves the workforce standing - on the dole. One uses unemployment as a tool of economic policy, the other as a tool of political strategy. British socialists seriously concerned about unemployment in Northern Ireland, particularly amongst nationalists, should address both factors.

Jobs

It is of course true that Ken Livingstone condemned IRA bombs in London when he got the "Bastards" headline! In October 1981 he said after the Oxford Street bombs -

'There can be no genuine debate while they act like this, for every death on our streets means that British troops will remain in Ireland that much longer...No-one has ever been able to bully Londoners with bombs.'

When he said that they would not achieve their goals by bombing was he referring only to Britain? Are bombs in Ireland more acceptable than bombs in London?

Of course it is not only bombs which have taken jobs and lives. In my own constituency a couple of weeks ago a 22 year old protestant electrician was shot dead while waiting to collect his father from work. The IRA and Sinn Fein insist that he was a "legitimate target". Sinn Fein councillors refused to mark a minute's silence at a council meeting (the lad's father is a council employee) and warned in the council chamber that there would be more such deaths.

Mervyn Bell's "crime" was that he was alleged to have done some electrical work at a UDR facility. His murder highlights the fact that the Provisionals' idea of a "legitimate target" is widening all the time. For over a year now they have threatened all workers who work in any capacity in the building or civilian operation of police stations or army barracks. They are denying the right of work to people (unemployment in Northern Ireland is officially 23%). The Provisionals claim to be socialists but give working-class people the choice between death or dole. Mervyn Bell's work threatened no one, his murder threatens us all.

This intimidation campaign betrays the fascism of the Provisionals. The fact that they have to use threats betrays their lack of popular support. That they can unilaterally decide to execute people for doing a job should give people an idea of the type of Ireland they want. Remember that Danny Morrison's statement on "armalite in one hand, ballot paper in the other" referred to "taking power", not to British withdrawal or Irish unity. People now see a lot more clearly how they would use that power.

Their treatment of those who differ from them is no different to that of any right-wing dictator whom the British left would denounce. Yet sections of the British left are helping them and allowing them to hide behind a veneer of socialism. While they have been very loud in the "Right to Work" campaign in Britain, they seem to consent to the "kill-a-worker" campaign in Ireland.

' Social Policy '

I have seen documents by sections of the British left which eulogise Sinn Fein's great stand on housing problems, education, the health service etc. When, with the Socialist Group's support in the European Parliament, I won a £65 million package of EEC assistance for housing in West Belfast, Sinn Fein condemned me. They said that it was "bribery" aimed at weening people away from "republicanism". That means that good housing threatens "republicanism". A strange republicanism and a strange housing policy. It is similar to the old Stormont days when "good housing for Catholics threatens unionism" was the line. It seems that the Provisionals seek depression as much as repression.

They have shot teachers in the classroom, murdered school bus drivers in front of children, shot somebody dead in a university exam hall, killed people by bomb on a campus and hit schools with ill-aimed rockets. Is that why some people in Britain believe that we should listen to the Provisionals' pronouncements on education cuts ?

Similarly with the Health Service they have shot people in hospitals and frustrated ambulance journeys - yet they are portrayed by British sympathisers as champions of the Health Service. This is of course quite apart from the irony of claiming concern for health while at the same time endorsing a campaign of murder, maiming and beating.

Sinn Fein's suddenly discovered concern about social and economic problems has more to do with exploiting these issues than solving them.

Racism ?

Those in Britain who seek to promote Sinn Fein often claim there is a clear distinction between them and the IRA. A Sinn Fein vice-President, when defending the murder of young Mervyn Bell, said that 40% of the nationalist people have voted for the IRA struggle. He saw no distinction between support for Sinn Fein and approval of the murder of a young working man and threats to the entire working community. I do not see why anybody on the British left should see a distinction either.

Visiting last year's Labour Party conference, I came across some of the people I am writing about here. I concurred fully with concerns they

expressed about employment, housing, health and social services, and law and order. But then I realised that they only wanted these things for the British people.

They are happy to see different standards prevail in Ireland. That comes too close to racism for me.

They dismiss the views of unionists and the overwhelming majority of nationalists in Ireland. The Provisionals are the way forward for Ireland, they tell us, even though the Irish people have rejected them (the Provisionals receive 10 - 11% of electoral support in the north and 3 - 4% in the south). That seems to be a form of leftist imperialism.

Facing Reality

Of course they accuse the SDLP of gradualism, reformism, even "collaboration". We make no apologies for the fact that like ~~Jim~~ Larkin we see our challenge and our strategy as the job of continually narrowing the gap between what is and what ought to be. We do not believe that housing can wait for the victory of the so-called "armed struggle". We do not believe you can unite a people by dismembering them. Our socialism is working for a real Irish Unity, not waiting for an impossible one.

In our approach we are not "collaborating" but facing reality. Would these people say that because Labour Councils seek to create employment under monetarism that they are "collaborating" with the Tories? Would they say that because GLEB helped small enterprises to develop that they had sold out to free market economics? I would doubt it. Our method of seeking change and mitigating hardship in a situation not of our own choosing is essentially similar. We have of course always addressed the underlying political problem and sought a framework that actually encompasses all dimensions of the problem.

I do not ask everybody on the British left to find this exciting. It would help if they acknowledged that it is an honest approach argued validly. All we ask of them is an end to the double standards and a commitment to support in Ireland every right which they work to defend in Britain. I cannot believe that equality, consistency or realism are too much to ask from any socialist.

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