

Lessons from the demise of Democratic Left and its aftermath

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This is an edited version of a presentation made to Conference: Local Resistance, Global Crisis: Developing communities of solidarity and left politics for the 21st century, NUI Maynooth, June 13, 2014

The views expressed in this presentation are entirely personal and have no connection with the author's academic affiliation to NUI Maynooth.

As part of the process of discussing the prospects for a new left party in Ireland, it might be useful to consider the experience and fate of the Workers Party (Ireland's first significant left wing party) and its offshoot, Democratic Left.

The Workers Party originated in the split which occurred in the original Sinn Féin party in the early 1970s between one group - which became known as Official Sinn Féin - which sought to direct Sinn Féin towards a socialist political programme and those - Provisional Sinn Féin - who wished to maintain the organisation's focus on achieving political unification of the island of Ireland. During the 1970s Official Sinn Féin developed (with the accompanying publication of a range of pamphlets) a leftwing analysis of Irish society and the Irish economy, and became involved in campaigns on social and economic issues at both national (resources, housing) and local (provision of community facilities, access to services) level.

In the late 1970s Official Sinn Féin changed its name to Sinn Féin The Workers Party, and then, in the early 1980s, dropped the Sinn Féin part of the title. The party was expanding quite rapidly at the time, mainly through the recruitment of young, well-educated professionals, many of whom quickly came to prominence, such as Pat Rabbitte, Eamonn Gilmore, Liz McManus and Pat McCartan. At the same time, there were also others who had survived the split with Provisional Sinn Féin or who came directly from working class backgrounds, such as Proinsias de Rossa, Tomás Mac Giolla, Paddy Gallagher, Joe Sherlock, Kathleen Lynch and Catherine Murphy.

Many of the new cadre of professional intellectuals had little or no base in local communities or disadvantaged groups and were more oriented to political debate and electoral politics. There was early success in this respect - in the 1989 general election seven Workers Party TDs were elected while on the same day, Proinsias de Rossa was elected to the European Parliament, topping the poll in the Dublin constituency.

In 1992 there was a split in the Workers Party leading to the formation of Democratic Left. This was partly motivated by a desire to get free from lingering groups associated with violence and criminality within the Workers Party. A second motivation was to create a new image given the Workers Party's strong associations with the Soviet Union which had fallen apart in the preceding three years. However, somewhat presciently, Des O'Hagan, a member of the party's central council who opposed the formation of Democratic Left wrote in the *Irish Times* that its membership was composed of "middle class liberals rather than socialists...Their natural home is with the Progressive Democrats, Fine Gael or Labour" (quoted in Hanley & Millar, 2009, 583).

By then the campaigning element which had been a strong feature of the early Workers Party was seriously on the wane and continued to decline following the formation of Democratic Left whose organisation was strongly focused on its high-profile public representatives.

In the 1992 general election Democratic Left returned three TDs, to which two more were added in by-elections in 1994. In that year, Democratic Left agreed to participate in government as part of the "rainbow coalition" with Fine Gael and Labour. Of their five TDs, one - Proinsias de Rossa - became Minister for Social Welfare while three others (Pat Rabbitte, Eamon Gilmore and Liz McManus) became ministers of state.

While this government did achieve some significant social reforms, including the introduction of divorce, with hindsight there were some hints in this period which indicated the direction in which Democratic Left was going. One of these was the introduction by Proinsias de Rossa of measures to crack down on those illegally claiming social welfare payments. However, there were no simultaneous measures to crack down on tax evasion which was a much greater drain on the government's resources. Indeed, in his speech to the 1989 Workers Party annual conference, De Rossa had called for the penalisation of "dole spongers as well as tax dodgers". Six years later, while the dole spongers were being made the targets of public odium, there was no mention of the tax dodgers.

Following the 1997 general election, which was won by Fianna Fáil, the wheels were immediately put in motion to merge Democratic Left into the Labour Party and this was put into effect the following year. At the special Democratic Left conference to sanction the merger, Des Geraghty, a leading party figure, told delegates that "we don't want a 'New Labour', a wishy-washy thing in which we will have to walk away from our working-class roots" (quoted in Hanley & Millar, 2009, 595). This statement was rather ironic, given subsequent developments.

It is probably a fair reflection of the calibre of people in the Labour Party that former Democratic Left personnel quickly came to occupy the main positions within the party. Proinsias de Rossa became President and the next two leaders after Ruairí Quinn (who replaced Dick Spring in 1997) were Pat Rabbitte and Eamon Gilmore. However, any hopes that the infusion of Democratic Left personnel might nudge the Labour Party even slightly leftwards were quickly dispelled.

After the 2011 election, the Labour Party had a historic opportunity to force Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael into an unprecedented governing coalition of conservative parties which in turn would have given both Labour and other leftwing groupings enormous scope for political expansion. However, the Labour Party would have had to wait three or more further years to reap these political benefits, by which time the ageing ex-Democratic Left TDs and their Labour counterparts such as Ruairí Quinn and Brendan Howlin would probably have been deemed to be too old to take up ministerial posts. It is arguable that this was one of the key considerations involved in Labour's disastrous (for themselves) decision to enter into government with FG.

One of the more distinctive features of the public utterances of Labour ministers (including those who were formerly in Democratic Left) since assuming office is the complete absence of even a semblance of leftwing or even social democratic influences in these utterances.

Even in the aftermath of Labour's recent electoral implosion, Pat Rabbitte was arguing that they had to support the government cuts in order to retrieve the economy from "existential" crisis. Yet, in his column in the *Irish Times* on May 28 (2014), Vincent Browne presented a long list of agencies and programmes which should have been dear to Labour hearts but which were subjected to much deeper cuts than government spending in general over the last three years. The government had choices in terms of where the deepest cuts fell and consistently chose the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in Irish society.

In his address to the 1988 Workers Party annual conference which elected him party president, Proinsias de Rossa called upon Dick Spring (leader of the Labour Party) to "sit down and talk about how we can defend the working class of this island". In the same speech, he said the Workers Party had to confront "reaction...on the streets, in the factories, at the dole queues, in the colleges, in the universities, in the media...wherever we are presented with the opportunity to deal deadly blows at the vicious criminal immorality of capitalism" (quoted in Hanley & Millar, 2009, 487).

And in his speech at the launch of Democratic Left in 1992, Proinsias de Rossa said social democracy had "degenerated into mere electoralism, [had] lost any resolve to be part of a wider strategy for the transformation of society and has settled for dull marginalism".

He further argued: "There is urgent need for an active democratic socialist party with a strong presence in parliament . . . We must seek to provide the alternative of a dynamic and vibrant left , which would connect into the concerns of people about the need for reform of politics, accountability of politicians, environment, peace, jobs, education . . . Ours will be a politics of empowerment, participation, analysis, and not just an electoral machine" (quoted in Browne, 2014, 16)

There has been an almost total disconnect between these aspirations and subsequent developments. The question is, how could people who expressed such trenchant views at that time abandon them completely just a few years later? Part of the answer possibly derives from the way people who are elected to Dáil Éireann become enveloped in an inward-looking cocoon or buddies club and become increasingly detached from the outside world. Becoming government ministers greatly reinforces this process while adding on personal, social and financial perks.

However, ultimately, for people to abandon so completely views which they previously articulated strongly, it must mean that those views were never firmly held in the first place. Perhaps, therefore, Gene Kerrigan was correct when, in his Sunday Independent column on May 25 (2014) he described Eamon Gilmore as "the bumptious master of artificial anger, the smug connoisseur of contrived sincerity".

So what is the alternative? What of the "new" Sinn Féin? Will they simply follow the same course? To quote from Vincent Browne's *Irish Times* column of May 28 (2014):

"The issue is: has anything *really* changed? It hardly matters whether Labour is finished if Sinn Féin fills the vacuum and does the same – i.e. collaborates with Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil, or does it on its own, in retaining or perhaps consolidating a society of a wealthy elite, a compliant middle class and a sea of misery, humiliation and stress for the rest."

For any new Left party to avoid this fate, it must be based on activists rooted in local communities and in organised groups of the disadvantaged. Furthermore, such communities and groups must themselves be self-empowered, so that those who are put forward to represent these groups remain not just answerable to them, but deeply engaged in their campaigning activities. Creating such organisational structures, however, is both a challenging and long-term prospect.

References

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