

## Constructive debate

As an outsider myself who has supported the Workers' Party for a long time, I found Paddy Woodworth's 'On the outside looking in' (*Making Sense* 20) reflected my own limited experience in several ways. It also raised issues which I know members in Dublin have discussed in private for years. John Lowry's response in the current issue had nothing to do with these matters. It was a re-statement of exactly what Paddy Woodworth was complaining about, the single acceptable viewpoint which decrees all others invalid.

Invalid, or in Mr Lowry's words 'misleading, and at times, highly inaccurate,' as *Magill*, *Today Tonight* and the *Sunday Tribune* have been in the past. But Mr Woodworth is none of these, he is a former member with ten years' experience on the inside. He stated at the outset that his comment was personal, didn't claim to be comprehensive, and was a critique which didn't take into account many positive developments, but was intended to raise questions which seemed important.

Individuals don't have inaccurate and misleading experiences and opinions, they have real and significant ones. You can argue that they are not representative of general experience, you can present other evidence to add perspective, you can dispute the logic of their conclusions, but you certainly can't declare personal comment null and void.

From what I have observed, party members have in the past confined themselves to private criticism, not because they were cowed and obedient servants to tyrants at the top — though this is what hostile opponents like to suggest — but because by and large they endorsed the view that public dog-fights were of dubious value. In the period of reappraisal which is now underway, it's accepted that criticism is better aired than buried, and that it is essential to full democratic participation.

It's also accepted, I think, that no one can claim with credibility that the party has managed itself perfectly, either in implementing the model of democratic centralism Mr Lowry describes, evolving from a paramilitary history or progressing toward broad non-sectarian support in the North.

Supportive outsiders who are willing to give honest and reflective opinions have an important part to play in the reappraisal process, precisely because they have a perspective party members cannot have and need to know about.

# letters

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*Making Sense* has done a lot to open up constructive debate. Some of what is going to get said will sting sensitive ears. But an angry roar of denial is not an argument, and has no place on this agenda.

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## 'My party, right or wrong?'

I would like to make a few points in response to John Lowry's reply to my article 'On the outside, looking in'. I am grateful to the author for taking the time and trouble to respond in such detail, and I am glad that John Lowry found the article timely. However, I believe that he fails to sustain his contention that the experience I referred to, and the conclusions I tried to draw from it, are both 'misleading and at times highly inaccurate.'

I never imagined that my contribution was without errors, either of fact or judgement. The identification of such errors, and the setting out of grounds for disagreement, are the tools which carry any debate to a higher level. I had looked forward to seeing them exercised. Unfortunately, I feel that most of what John Lowry says, and the way he says it, illustrate only too well the very points I was making. His article exemplifies the attitude of some — though by no means all — WP members to any independent critique of the organisation's history, structure or policies. His dogged, almost reflexive defence of a deeply entrenched position might be summed up by rewriting an old jingoistic formula: 'My Party, right or wrong.'

I do realise that the tone of my article was provocative in, I trust, the positive sense of attempting to stimulate a debate.

I am also well aware of the enormous personal cost which has been paid for WP membership, particularly in the North of Ireland. I can well appreciate that the phrases I used about the discrepancy between the WP's history and its condemnation of the Provos will have offended some people whose personal courage and political commitment I greatly respect.

I cannot, however, withdraw these phrases: the purpose of using them was to indicate that, outside the rather closed circles of party militancy, such sentiments are often expressed by people who hold no brief whatsoever for the terrorism espoused by Sinn Féin and the IRA, and who agree with the essence of the WP condemnations of the 'armed struggle.'

The point I was making is that the *tone* of many of these condemnations is actually counter-productive: the self-righteous zeal of the converted, however sincere, is a major turn-off to the general public. I may, of course, be wrong, but this perception of the WP may be a factor in its showing in elections in the North. I am delighted to hear that the WP's recent Northern conference drew an attendance from 'a wide section of public and political life'. But then I remember that I have heard that sort of line for 15 years. Until I see it minimally reflected in voting patterns in the North, I reserve the right to suspect that the line is a form of wish-fulfillment, understandable in the circumstances perhaps, but myopic nonetheless.

Incidentally, it is in response to this Northern section of John Lowry's article that I feel I have a right to take offence myself. The suggestion that I might be among those 'who can barely hide their ambivalence towards the Provos' is a charge that has been made against me in this magazine before. On that occasion I had raised my head above the parapet to argue that 'anti-nationalism' provided an inadequate, misleading and ultimately dangerous analysis of the Northern situation. The knee-jerk reaction that every non-unionist critic of the WP's Northern policy is a crypto-Provo is a poor substitute for constructive debate, however comforting it may be. There really is something terminally wrong if that cannot be recognised.

The main substance of John Lowry's argument, however, lies elsewhere and, at the risk of trespassing on your reader's patience, must also be answered. '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,' writes John Lowry. Pejorative it may be, John, though I hardly believe you would have admitted as much at a party meeting in, say, 1984. But the point is not, I am afraid, as inaccurate as you appear to believe.

'In 1989 the communist world movement collapsed, so therefore the WP must accept all the implications and consequences of that,' John Lowry continues, summarising part of my argument correctly. Then he counters:

'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...deeply rooted in Ireland's revolutionary republican tradition... it was not until 1983, in fact, that the WP established formal relations with any eastern bloc party, the CPSU.'

To take the last point first, the late date was hardly for want of trying. I can recall a series of panegyric accounts of paradise in each of the 'socialist' countries in the party press as far back as 1975. Maybe it was different in Belfast, John, but it was practically impossible to draw attention to any shortcomings in the Soviet

system within the Dublin party from thereon in, even though the person responsible for those articles soon left for the Communist Party.

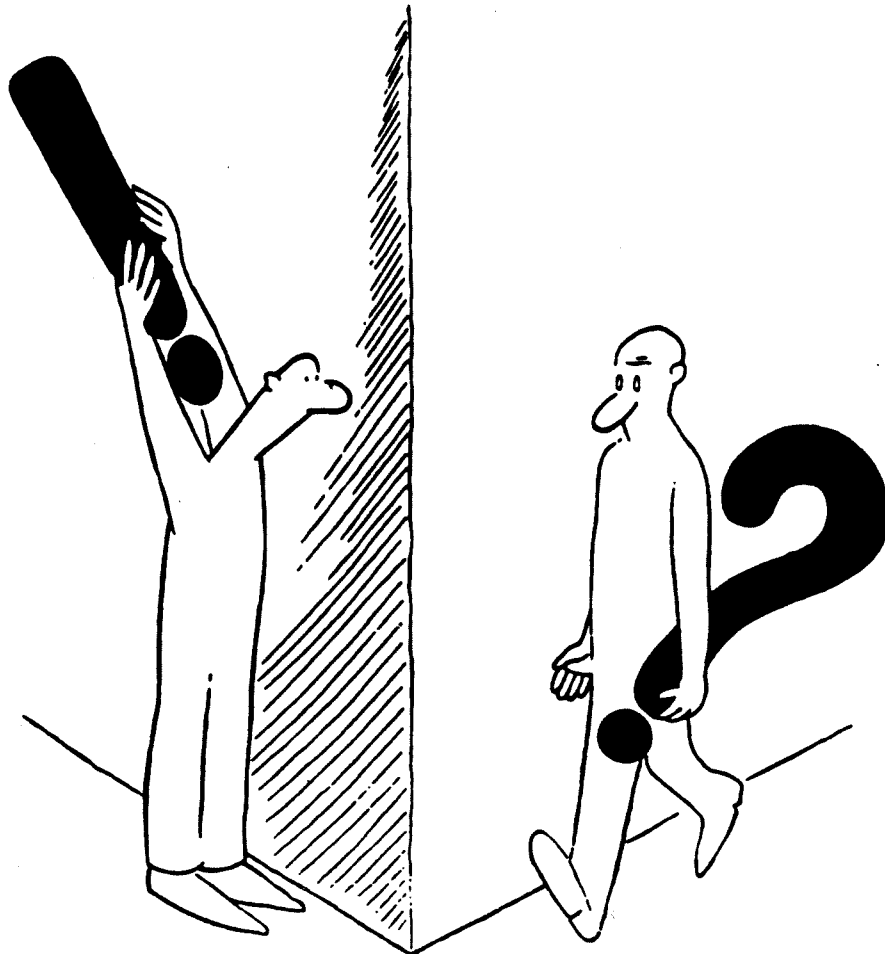
Furthermore, it was one of my own central points that the WP's history was different to that of orthodox Western European communist parties — and precisely that it was rooted in the conspiratorial revolutionary republican tradition. 'The WP is in an even more difficult position than most Western European communist parties,' I wrote, '*because the Soviet model was neither publicly embraced nor properly debated internally by the party.*'

The relationship between the collapse of that model and the rising tide of debate within the WP must be clearly visible to every reader of *Making*

*Sense*. The continuing unwillingness of some WP members to publicly recognise the historical relationship between the Soviet model, while simultaneously clinging to that model's central feature, democratic centralism, is all too clearly demonstrated by John Lowry himself.

On a positive note, the fact that the WP is prepared to publish articles as critical as mine is a sure indication that the transformation to a truly democratic structure is not cosmetic. I cannot think of another party with such an open attitude, and that must augur well for the future.

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