

On the outside, looking in

WHEN you leave a party, it begins to look different. You cease to have a vested interest in the correctness of its policies, however much, if the parting has been amicable, you might still hope that the organisation would prosper. Of course, if the parting has not been amicable, you would have a vested interest in proving its policies *incorrect*. Some readers will think that there is at least an element of that feeling in what follows. I cannot prove them wrong; I can only say that I have not been stirred to write this piece out of any spirit of rancour that I am aware of. On the contrary, the goodwill I have always felt for the WP since I left it has, if anything, increased with the changes which have taken place over the last few years.

As I say, things look different when you leave a party, and more so with the passing of time. Away from the hurly burly of party activism, certain things seem to become clearer. Just sometimes the hurler on the ditch may see things the players have missed. Whether that is true in this case is obviously for the reader to judge. The game has got a lot more open and exciting in recent months, and that has finally prompted me, rather reluctantly, to throw in my tuppence-worth. What follows makes no claim to be comprehensive. It takes no account of the many positive things which have made the WP increasingly attractive to an increasing — but still very limited — number of people over the last decade. It simply tries to raise questions which seem important to an outside observer, and which don't seem to get answered. It is a purely personal view. I am grateful to *Making Sense* for giving me the opportunity of expressing such a critique of the WP here.

To put the personal in perspective briefly: Five years ago I left the Workers' Party (amicably, I think) after some 10 years membership. I left largely for personal reasons, and certainly not as a result of any specific disagreement. In fact, I used to think wryly that I agreed with more aspects of party policy when I left than I had agreed with when I joined.

But I was aware of a certain weariness with the often unstated constraints which severely limited debate within the party. I know that this weariness was shared by others who left or drifted away at the time, and I suspected that it was shared by many who remained active party members. The torrent of debate which

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PADDY WOODWORTH
offers a critique of the Workers' Party today.

has been surging through the party in the last year, reflected in, but evidently not limited to, this magazine, certainly suggests that a lot of people have been champing at the bit for a long time.

Reading through the contributions made recently in this magazine, fresh perspectives are obviously being opened up on many aspects of politics, in articles of a range and depth which would have been unthinkable — let's face it, simply heretical — in any WP publication not too many months ago. Among these articles I include, of course, Eoghan Harris' characteristically incisive and entertaining declaration that he comes to bury Stalin, not to praise him, delivered with a zeal which might make even Mark Anthony blush.

Of course, a lot of people thought that Eoghan Harris had set about burying socialism when he master-minded that quintessentially Stalinist instrument, the *Irish Industrial Revolution* in 1977. But those of us then in the party who shared this anxiety were told that all the *IIR*'s critics were Trots, Provo-Trots, or, God save the mark, *social democrats*, so we ignored their warnings. Some of us did wonder, though, how almost every aspect of party policy could be reversed without debate at the diktat of an unelected 'industrial' faction, who sounded like Stalinists but behaved more like members of the Trotskyist Militant Tendency.

We wondered, but we generally kept our mouths shut. At the most we voiced our doubts privately to party leaders, who might privately confess to sharing many of our concerns, but would assure us that the party remained in sound hands, that the new 'industrial strategy' was, after all, a strategy and not a principle. Above all, they would remind us that unity of the party was paramount, and that any open dissension about the contents of the *IIR* could only benefit our common enemies.

Unity was always the great silencer on the pistol held in the fist of the Stalinist Left. It was the demand for unity which led Bukharin, and a multitude of lesser known Bolshevik revolutionaries, to confess to the most absurd crimes and put their own heads into the hangman's noose. It seems almost incredible that people who were not lacking in courage, intelligence and integrity could be bullied so easily, but it perhaps becomes more understandable when one recalls the internal dynamics of the Workers' Party. No dramatic sanctions were applied to dissident members of the WP in the early 1980s, but I can clearly remember motions in favour of 'Eurocommunism' (not so different to the principles of perestroika) being withdrawn from consideration before Ard Fheiseanna, not because they were wrong, but because they might be 'divisive'.

Today, it seems, all that has changed. All sacred cows are up for slaughter, and the blood lust unleashed is remarkable. Looking at the situation now from the perspective of an outsider, I think it is important to ask why this should be so. The answer may seem blindingly simple, but it seems to me that its implications are rather more complex than has been acknowledged to date.

I think the answer runs like this: debate, and debate to the point of a public display of disunity, is now possible in the WP because, and only because, the Soviet model of socialism is in deep, if not terminal, crisis. (There are other contributory factors, such as the emergence of a new generation of TDs as an independent-minded grouping, but I think this is subsidiary and, indeed, in many ways also attributable to the new atmosphere created by the Soviet crisis).

The impact of the Soviet crisis on the party has been so immense, precisely because the party had tied itself so closely to the Soviet model in the past. In this respect, the WP is in an even more difficult position than most Western European communist parties, because the Soviet model was neither publicly embraced nor properly debated internally by the party. Instead, like the decisions regarding the Official IRA in an earlier period, the Soviet model was part of a semi-hidden but absolutely central agenda for the party.

The fact that the WP can now openly debate that model is directly due to the fact that that model has

collapsed. (I know I am repeating myself; I simply don't think this point can be made too often). If even a relatively benign form of Stalinism still ruled in Moscow, it is almost certain that the current movement to clarify the relationship between socialism and democracy within the party would not be taking place now. Earlier attempts to stimulate such a debate were stifled, in faithful Stalinist fashion, by the very comrades who a year ago were in such a rush to impose what they call 'social democracy' on the party — from the top, of course.

If the WP is to retain and expand the limited public credibility it has gained over the last few years, it seems to me that it must, once and for all, recognise where it has come from.

The Soviet model was grafted onto the party during the period when a great deal of nationalist dead wood was in the process of being pruned, leaving the party (then Sinn Féin) without much more than a fig leaf of ideological covering. One must wonder why the Soviet branch took so well to the Sinn Féin tree, and one must also wonder why it was considered necessary to cover this new branch with all sorts of camouflage.

To answer the second question first, the then leadership seems to have assumed, probably correctly, that the 'communist' tag would blight the new growth at birth, under the harsh ideological conditions long prevailing in this country. Some members of the leadership explicitly rationalised this manoeuvre — a rationalisation intended for internal consumption only, of course — as a means of capturing and expanding the Communist Party's territory, without the historical burden of its name. However understandable the desire for camouflage was, it had poisonous repercussions: if the party could hardly admit to itself what it was then becoming, it was bound to look confusing (at least) or devious (at worst) to the general public.

To go back to the first question: why was the Soviet model so appealing? The major reason was obviously that 'Actually Existing Socialism' did appear to deliver the goods. We can now see that the evidence was deeply flawed, but it did seem that health services, education, employment, and so on, were more democratically distributed in the East than in the West. In the era of Nixon and the Vietnam war, it was also possible to argue that, whatever its faults, the Soviet Union was humanity's last line of defence against an increasingly vicious American imperialism.

There was, however, a second source of appeal, and one which is much less

easy to acknowledge: the Soviet system, though it had long since abandoned the full-scale state terrorism of Stalin's lifetime, remained authoritarian. The leaders of the Official IRA were courageously dumping their guns, but most of them could not dump the attitudes with which they had held them. The cult of authoritarianism, the fetish for discipline, which are a necessary component of paramilitary organisations, was a psychological armoury which many were reluctant to relinquish.

'Democratic centralism', an organisational *tactic* developed for an illegal Bolshevik party in a highly repressive Tsarist empire, was grafted at birth as a sacred *principle* onto the newly formed (well, at least newly baptised) Workers' Party, despite the fact that it was operating legally in a parliamentary democracy. This form of structure appealed to people accustomed to a command structure in a paramilitary organisation, and deeply distrustful of democratic challenges to their authority. (This point is not original: Roy Johnston, among others, courageously made it when it was far less profitable or popular to do so. But it has never as far as I know, come up for discussion in a publication associated with the WP).

To make this point again is not to launch an attack on these leaders, whose courage and willingness to make radical readjustments of vision were in many ways unique and admirable in Irish politics. (Nor is it to say that authoritarianism is unique to the Hard Left: the internal structure of Fianna Fáil makes democratic centralism positively open by comparison). Those of us who were not leaders were not compelled to remain within (or join) the party, and all those who, like the writer of this article, accepted the party's discipline and structures over a number of years, bear equal responsibility for their shortcomings with the leadership. *Mea maxima culpa*: I, you, she, he — we were all to blame.

The purpose of making this point now, from outside the party but within its publications, is to suggest something that is obvious from an external standpoint, but apparently invisible to many within it. The Workers' Party has a very serious credibility problem. There are many people out there who agree with most WP policies, but do not vote WP because the party is perceived as being dishonest with itself.

The botched transition from paramilitarism to anti-terrorism is a clear case in point. The more WP representatives with well-known paramilitary pasts protested about Provo terrorism, without

acknowledging the route they had travelled themselves, the more people were turned off.

It is one thing to say 'we did this, we were wrong, we won't do it anymore and we don't think the Provos should either'. People can understand that and respect it. It is another thing altogether to come on like a bunch of choirboys and choirgirls when the dogs in the street know the WP's history. (Hopefully, it is now possible to accept that all of the WP's links with the Official IRA are entirely severed.) That pisses the hell out of most people, and they're right. Nobody expects rectitude from Fianna Fáil, because they don't really promise it. The WP does, and if it's not delivered, the 'breath of fresh air' can turn stale very fast.

It is probably too late now, and hopefully irrelevant anyway, to set the record straight on the Official IRA. But now a new, and almost equally painful, transition is in progress, from Stalinism to Something Else. As I mentioned earlier, most European parties from the Stalinist tradition will have an easier ride than the WP because:

1. They have, in most cases (not including some of your bizarre allies in the European Parliament, admittedly) been debating the relationship between democracy and socialism for decades, both publicly and internally;
2. More crucially, they are not faced with the problem of never having admitted they were Stalinist/pro-Soviet in the first place.

The very realisation that the current level of debate is only possible because of events in another country points to the need for a radical reassessment of the WP's view of itself. What sort of party has allowed itself to become so dependent on inspiration from elsewhere? The collapse of the Soviet model offers both a threat and an opportunity, and can lead either to disintegration or growth.

If the Eoghan Harris document, with its sudden, brutal imposition of change from the top down, and its multiple manifestations of highly selective historical amnesia, were indicative of the method and style of perestroika within the WP, the commonsense of the general public about the party would be justified: Stalinist yesterday, 'Social Democratic' today, but conspiratorial and authoritarian always. Unless the current reassessment takes place in full and open recognition of the mistakes of the past, the smell of a 'hidden agenda' will cling fatally to the WP. To the many people who wish the WP well, and see it as an actual and potential voice for the voiceless in Ireland, but cannot quite bring themselves to trust it, that would be a great pity.