

## WP's democratic credentials

I READ Paddy Woodworth's article in *Making Sense* No. 20 with interest. I accept that it was offered as a view from an essentially sympathetic former member of The Workers' Party, and for that reason alone I think it deserves attention. I still, however, find myself in disagreement with the central thesis on which that view is based, viz. that the energetic and wide-ranging debate under way in the Party at present would not be taking place if it were not for the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, because that model was central to the politics and practice of the Party.

The debate, in my view, is first and foremost a product of the development of the party itself, and it has been under way for some time. The growth of the party, its increasing influence, the expansion of our public representation and particularly our entry into the national, and subsequently the European, parliaments have created new challenges and new opportunities for us. They have also raised the expectations people have of us and forced us to spell out what we stand for in language that people understand, which has helped to clarify our politics for ourselves as well.

Developments in Eastern Europe have certainly been an important factor in the debate, and I don't wish to underestimate the additional impetus they have given it. But they are not, I think, in any sense the primary trigger. Indeed, I suspect it is a source of surprise to some commentators that the Eastern European situation has not convulsed the Workers' Party to a much greater extent. But we have never been a passive reflector of political events elsewhere. We have done our own thinking and made our own contribution to the development of modern political ideas.

Update, modernise, take account of new conditions and phenomena: certainly we must do all these things. But there has been no headlong dash to jettison the values underpinning the party. They have, in fact, stood up remarkably well to the critical scrutiny of recent years.

Our policy across a range of issues — health, social services, women, legal reform etc. — retains its validity. Our economic policy has, with some

### TRIONA DOONEY takes issue with Paddy Woodworth's critique of the Workers' Party.

justification, been criticised for being overly state-oriented. But even there the dominant role of public enterprise was stressed not because this might sound nice in Moscow but because of the historic failure of the Irish private sector to develop a viable economy, and the fact that the engine of industrial development in the Irish Republic was in fact the commercial state company. Those facts haven't gone away. The Telesis Report wasn't exactly an apologia for marxist economics but it did support our analysis of the weaknesses of the Irish economy and industrial strategy. In passing, it may be worth recalling that much of the criticism of the *Irish Industrial Revolution* was precisely because it broke with left orthodoxy on economic matters.

I think that Paddy's view may be overly Dublin-centred, stemming from a particular phase when certain personalities in the region stifled political debate through an unacceptable level of intellectual bullying. Paddy is critical of the failure of the WP leadership at that time to act more decisively in curbing such behaviour, and of the fact that any public show of disunity was discouraged. I think in fact the ordinary members of the party dealt with this very effectively, consistently refusing to elect certain people to leadership positions in the party and being quite selective in accepting the political propositions they put forward. And while public disunity may not have surfaced, that did not mean that the debate wasn't raging within the party.

Organisations have different needs at different times. In the aftermath of two traumatic splits and in fear of a third, it does not seem unreasonable to me that unity should have been the priority, though that obviously carried a certain cost. And while the party is now much stronger and more confident and better able to accommodate

vigorous and public debate, I think the solidarity and unity of purpose which carried us through more difficult times should not be discarded lightly.

Finally, I must take issue with Paddy's reference to the 'botched transition' from paramilitarism to anti-terrorism. The Republican movement transformed itself from the primarily physical force nationalist movement it had become by the end of the fifties into the modern, dynamic socialist party it is today. That would have been a significant achievement for any organisation in normal times. To hold fast to that objective and carry through the transition through the sectarian conflagration that engulfed Northern Ireland at the end of the sixties was in my view a quite remarkable achievement. Great credit is due to our Northern members who were at the cutting edge of that process. It was not done easily, or without making mistakes, but it *was* done and I think it is something we should be proud of. And Paddy does indeed pay tribute to the courage and integrity of those who led that difficult process.

But Paddy seems to suggest that the Workers' Party's historical roots in a paramilitary organisation in some way invalidate its critique of Provisionalism. I think the opposite is the case. The strength of our critique of the Provisionals and our understanding of the threat they pose to the survival of democracy in Northern Ireland, derives in large measure from our own knowledge of what these people really are about and the deeply reactionary character not only of their methods, (which most people abhor), but of their objectives (about which a surprising number of people are complacent).

The Workers' Party has had to work hard to establish its democratic and anti-sectarian credentials. We haven't done this by denying our history but by questioning it and by discarding those aspects of our historical baggage which would hold us back. I can remember Tomás Mac Giolla saying (I quote from memory): 'Talk is cheap. But the right to talk is hard earned. The Workers' Party has earned that right.' Our right to talk has been accepted in that toughest of markets, the loyalist housing estate at election time. That's not a bad test.