

THE SUPPRESSION OF LABOUR PARTY POLITICS IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND ITS CONSEQUENCES



NORTHERN IRELAND CLP

INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland CLP campaigns for the right to run Labour Party candidates in Northern Ireland for two main reasons.

First, it has been and still is a 'rights' issue. Decades after the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association marched and campaigned for '*one person one vote*' and '*British rights for British citizens*' we were still in the situation where people living in the north were refused the right to join the Labour Party, the party which regularly formed their government at Westminster.

In addition, the party refused to run Labour Party candidates in Northern Ireland constituencies. Labour Party politics was comprehensively suppressed.

We won the right to party membership in 2003 and our CLP was set up in 2008. However, Labour Party electoral politics are still rigidly suppressed. There will be no Labour Party candidates in the series of forthcoming elections – local council, European, Westminster and Stormont Assembly.

Despite *Refounding Labour's* cry that there must be '*no no-go areas for Labour*', Northern Ireland's eighteen constituencies remain a '*no-go area for Labour*'. People living in Northern Ireland are denied the right to vote for a Labour Government.

When you are denied the right to vote for the party that will set your taxes, you are disenfranchised and discriminated against. And this discrimination is deliberately carried out by the Labour Party, the party of equality.

Second, and more importantly, the suppression of Labour Party electoral politics in Northern Ireland fuels sectarian communal politics and threatens the peace. As we have been seeing recently, when the normal framework for anti-sectarian politics in the state is deliberately suppressed by the party, the dynamics of the resulting political vacuum positively encourage people to gravitate to the politics of communal identity, with its associated sectarianism.

At the same time, progressive politics focussing on the equality agenda for women, ethnic minorities, and the disadvantaged are side-lined.

It is the politics of communal identity that has historically driven Northern Ireland's troubles.

‘HONEST BROKERING’ SECTARIANISM 1969

Following a series of disturbances over civil rights during the summer of 1969, culminating in a loyalist invasion of Bombay Street, the Stormont Government effectively lost control of Northern Ireland. In the crisis situation that August, many additional troops were deployed to the province by the then Labour Government, initially to protect Catholic areas.

However, the Labour Government’s response to the crisis was that, although they were now in effective control, they didn’t want to take responsibility for Northern Ireland.

Tony Benn’s Diaries 1968-72 make clear the stance of the leading figures in the Labour Government at the time, Harold Wilson, Jim Callaghan and Denis Healey. The Labour Government refused to assume the responsibility which went with their being ‘*effectively in control*’ (pp. 197-8). In the leaders’ repeatedly expressed view, the Unionist Prime Minister at Stormont, James Chichester-Clarke, had to be made ‘*to carry the can*’, while Labour ‘*avoided responsibility*’.

Then, in 1970, the Labour Party refused a request that it should organise electorally in Northern Ireland.

Labour Party organisation and representation would have provided the ideal vehicle for the resolution of Catholic grievances which were felt acutely at the time. Through the civil rights movement and in society generally, Catholics were gravitating towards participation in the state.

Labour should have acted as the only suitable vehicle for cross-community reconciliation, building on the almost 100,000 votes the provincial Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) polled in 1970. But the opportunity was turned down.

Instead, rather than accept its responsibility, Labour was determined to prop up the discredited Unionist administration that had been in power for 50 years. It insisted that, with certain minor reforms (power sharing was ruled out), the majority Protestant unionist community would continue to rule over the minority Catholic community in the highly unsuitable devolved structures that had been imposed by Westminster in 1921.

Catholics and civil rights campaigners (and the NILP) were abandoned by the Labour Party. They were placed in what they experienced as a permanent communal ghetto, under what they considered to be intolerable Protestant Unionist majority rule, and from which Labour would afford them no escape.

And so the Provisional IRA was left unopposed by Labour in West Belfast and elsewhere. It was able to get its anti-partitionist military campaign off the ground in 1970, against the grain of developments within the northern Catholic community at the time.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Given the flags and parade protesters, the dissidents and other paramilitaries, together with very high youth unemployment and welfare cuts, the political situation is again fragile. We are experiencing the increasing sectarian polarisation of our politics within the framework of the various peace agreements following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The Stormont Executive is failing to deliver the non-sectarian future that many hoped would result from the peace.

We have always supported the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent St Andrews and Hillsborough Agreements. We campaigned for the Agreement in the referendum in 1998. However, we always made the critical reservation that we considered the Agreements to enshrine sectarian structures and that this was bound to generate future problems.

We have consistently argued that to make the Agreements work and build a peaceful and common future in Northern Ireland, we need Labour Party electoral politics. As in the past, only the Labour Party can take on and break down the sectarian structures, perhaps working together with the Irish Labour Party. The party prefers to wash its hands of this responsibility.

Following a recent consultation by the Labour Party NEC, we have been informed the party continues to refuse to contest elections in Northern Ireland. Cross-community Labour Party electoral representation continues to be suppressed. No Labour Party candidates will be allowed to stand.

We are told by the party leader that the party wants to be an '*honest broker*' in Northern Ireland. It has adopted its default position.

Following the Good Friday Agreement, northern Catholics have once again demonstrated that, for the foreseeable future they want to participate fully in the state. But as in 1969-70, Labour is driving northern politics into and confining it in, a communal cage. No wonder the situation is fragile. This is not 1969, but the dangers are there and the need for a radical change of approach is urgent.

The party is shirking responsibility for what it knows needs to be done in Northern Ireland. As the Labour Party seeking state power to govern the whole of the United Kingdom at Westminster, it is its moral duty to develop Labour Party politics in Northern Ireland, with a focus on social and economic issues.

The Labour Party must shift the political focus onto issues such as youth unemployment, educational underachievement, the need for a Living Wage, health service reform, human trafficking and abortion rights. This is a necessary part of the struggle to preserve the peace and build a common future for all, free from sectarianism.

The people of Northern Ireland have their arms tied behind their backs in fighting sectarianism when Labour Party politics are deliberately suppressed. There is no political voice highlighting the issues that matter to ordinary households. They feel abandoned.

Worse than that, suppressing Labour politics positively fuels sectarian politics and threatens the forward development of the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement towards a common future.

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In September 2003, after legal action, the Labour Party conceded that, in denying people living in Northern Ireland membership of the Party, they were discriminating against them on grounds of race (the people of Northern Ireland are defined in law as an ethnic group).

In May 2007, after further legal action again based on discrimination law, the Labour Party agreed to establish a fully constituted constituency organisation in Northern Ireland. This would be treated and funded in the same way as a CLP. However, it would not have the right to run candidates.

Northern Ireland CLP was constituted in May 2008 with Labour Party rules. It has since grown to between 300-350 members, despite being severely inhibited and frustrated in its development. Who would want to join a political party that extols the fact that it won't run candidates and fight elections and that refuses to represent the needs of ordinary families?

We have full rights as members and as a CLP within the Party in relation to Annual Conference and Labour Party Committees. Northern Ireland CLP has a representative on the National Policy Forum.

However, we are not allowed to stand candidates in any election: Westminster, European, Stormont Assembly, or local council. We believe this is again discriminatory, as we are the only CLP not allowed to run candidates.

This means Labour Party members and everyone else in Northern Ireland will be denied the right to vote for candidates of the Labour Party that will hopefully form our 'One Nation' Labour Government at Westminster and set all our taxes after the general election in 2015. We are effectively disenfranchised.

Northern Ireland CLP is very active. We have helped to canvass in many constituencies in England and Scotland during Westminster, Euro and Scottish Parliament elections. We attend Party Conferences and Special Conferences. We are neutral on the border and support the Good Friday Agreement. We are leading the Living Wage campaign in Northern Ireland. We are active in Young Labour and in the Labour Women's Network. We are holding a Northern Ireland Labour Women's Conference with high profile speakers. We participate in candidate training and in webinars. We have close trade union links and support. We work closely with the Cooperative Party. We are setting up a local Labour LGBT Group. We respond to public consultations. But we can't vote Labour.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Following the publication of the Labour Party discussion document **Refounding Labour**, which asked for comments from party members, Northern Ireland CLP made a submission which outlined our case for standing in elections in Northern Ireland.

Despite the insistence in **Refounding Labour** that there should be "*no 'no-go areas' for Labour*", the NEC turned down our request that the Party should register as a political party in Northern Ireland and declare its intention to be an electoral force in Northern Ireland.

The NEC did not address our positive case for building a common future based on Labour values. We need the Labour Party to shift the political focus on to social and economic issues, and to raise female and ethnic minority participation in politics. The fact that the people of Northern Ireland are denied these progressive policies, opportunities and support does not seem to be a concern of the NEC, as it washes its hands of any responsibility in this matter.

Contrary to repeated statements of general principle by the Party, Northern Ireland remains a '*no-go area for Labour*'.

HONEST BROKERING SECTARIANISM 2014

The Labour Party leader, in response to a question at Party Conference 2012 said: *'the most important thing a British government can be is an honest broker. It is very hard to be an honest broker if you are also an electoral participant....I think being part of the electoral, sort of, competition, I don't think is a great prescription for being the honest broker that we need'*.

That seems to us to be the expression of an undemocratic, 1950s style, colonial governor mind-set, completely disconnected from the society it is aspiring to govern.

In the late 1960s, to get itself off the hook, Labour relied on the discredited sectarian Ulster Unionist Party. Today, it is very difficult to see how an alliance with the SDLP, a party rooted only in one section of the community, is compatible with being an *'honest broker'*. This is widely perceived to be a sectarian stance.

Meanwhile, northern Catholics are again being excluded from political development through Labour representation at the highest levels of Government. All they are now being offered is a choice between the SDLP and the new style pro-equality Sinn Féin. Both options are political dead-ends and both will end in disillusion or worse, with the dissidents in the wings.

The Protestant working class, forced by the Labour Party into communal identity only politics, is reacting by adopting more extreme postures on flags and parades and paramilitary display. Some have the Good Friday Agreement in their sights. Where statesmanship is required from the party to avoid the mistakes of the past, that statesmanship is severely lacking.

The party must accept its responsibility to build cross-community politics and a peaceful common future based on Labour values.

We need the Labour Party to compete electorally with and defeat sectarian communal politics on all sides, not *'broker'* them. The party enters into democratic electoral competition with sectarianism and racism in Glasgow and Liverpool and everywhere else across the country. It is the party of equality.

By refusing to take on sectarianism in Northern Ireland it both fuels and encourages it.

WHAT NEXT?

Northern Ireland CLP is launching a petition in pursuit of our right to run Labour Party candidates. We hope Labour parliamentarians and others will lend us their support for a common future based on Labour values.



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