

# The Democractic Programme and the First Dáil



a paper delivered to The Irish Labour History Society, May, 2009

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The First Dáil, convened on 21 January 1919, is the subject of three myths, which have become received wisdom:

- That the Labour Party, in an act of political cowardice, withdrew from the 1918 General Election as a result of pressure from Sinn Féin;
- That by way of a sop to Labour, the Dáil adopted a democratic programme which weakly reflected the principles and philosophy of the party, and
- That as a direct consequence of its refusal to contest the 1918 general election, the Labour Party suffered permanent electoral damage and condemned itself to being a minor political player.

Yet, simultaneously, the First Dáil is now mainly remembered for the “Democratic Programme” which was drafted by the Labour Party and quickly attained iconic status that has grown stronger over time. There is an obvious paradox here, which needs to be resolved. There are three points to make in setting the record straight.

First of all, the history of the period has been written by historians with little or no understanding of the Labour movement and even less sympathy for its policies and leading personalities. Secondly, much of that history is pure propaganda. Thirdly, little of it indicates any understanding of political processes then in play, especially the interaction of the leading personalities in the independence movement.

Suffice it to say that each of the three propositions are false and in no way supported by the facts when examined in the light of contemporary records.

That said, the key to understanding the Democratic Programme lies in the period between the Rising and the General Election in December 1918. More importantly, it lies in understanding the role of three individuals occupying central positions in the Labour Party, namely: William O'Brien, Thomas Johnson and Cathal O'Shannon.

As for the period itself, it was one of the most tumultuous in history – in which events moved at astonishing speed. The dominant reality throughout those two years was the First World War, in particular the mass slaughter on the Western Front which was draining each belligerent of its manpower.

This was no less true of Britain with the result that, contrary to established constitutional practice, conscription had been introduced, even to the point where married men up to the age of 50 were forcibly enlisted.

Conscription had not, however, been applied to Ireland for fear of mass opposition, but by January 1918 the manpower situation had become so desperate that the High Command insisted on conscription being extended to Ireland and the British Government assented.

The threat of conscription then became the dominant feature of Irish political life and mass resistance was organised at the national

level by an ad hoc Committee convened by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Laurence O'Toole. "The Mansion House Committee," as it was soon called, consisted of the old Nationalist Party, the new political force of Sinn Féin and the Labour Movement represented by the Trade Union Congress.

## William O'Brien

The key figure in the Committee was William O'Brien, the acting General Secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. Of Tipperary stock, a tailor, crippled from birth and a bibliophile, O'Brien was an organiser of genius.

In modern parlance, he was a natural networker who quite literally knew everybody who mattered and who had the indispensable knack of being in the right place at the right time.

O'Brien had been a member of the Irish Republican Socialist Party and an ally of Connolly. He had gone to view Liberty Hall on the Sunday after the Rising in the company of Roddy Connolly, son of James Connolly (who had fought in the GPO but had been sent home by his father, thereby avoiding capture). By an extraordinary accident of history, O'Brien now entered the heart of the Independence movement.

First, he was arrested despite playing no part in the Rising (in contrast to Roddy Connolly who was sent home by the British Army on grounds of age). He was then forced to spend some days in detention, during which time he became intimately acquainted with De Valera – they shared blankets when forced to sleep on the floor of Richmond Barracks – two men could hardly get to know each other better.

Next, he was imprisoned, and on being incarcerated in Frongoch with the main bulk of the prisoners arrested after the Rising, he was put into the same hut as Michael Collins. As a result of this, he became an intimate friend, sharing, as he said, many long hours of conversation together.

In addition, he came to know all of the leading members of the Volunteers, the IRB and Sinn Féin. Frongoch was, after all, the *university* of the Independence movement. His network of friendships included Arthur Griffith, whom he admired, and Cathal Brugha, who was so central later to the proceedings of the First Dáil.

At the human level, these friendships explain why the Labour movement was to be represented two years later on the Mansion House Committee.

The seminal importance of the committee is that it was the first ever mobilisation of separatist forces on a national scale, and was the foundation on which the struggle for independence was to be based – and the Labour Movement was at its heart.

This was largely due to William O'Brien. For it was not only out of regard for the sacrifice of Connolly and role of the Citizen Army in the Rising, or respect for the growing strength of the trade union movement (which, under O'Brien, had exploded into a mass organisation), that the Labour movement had been invited to participate – it was also due in large measure to O'Brien's extraordinary range of contacts across the independence movement.

Because of these close personal relationships and shared values, it was inevitable that on points of dispute within the Committee, the Labour members would side with Sinn Féin against the Nationalists. Indeed, O'Brien took over the running of the committee with the connivance of Sinn Féin and not only got O'Shannon, his close personal ally, co-opted as a member but, more importantly, arranged for Tom Johnson to become its paid organiser.

At this point Johnson, an English man, a salesman based in Belfast and a prominent trade unionist, had become a national hero. Due to his publicly opposing conscription in Belfast, he had been dismissed by his English employers. In

addition, he was a proven organiser and, equally importantly, a gifted pen in drafting political declarations, statements and manifestos, then a critical feature of the political process.

## Anti-Conscription Strike

As a result of O'Brien's manoeuvrings, the Labour movement led, directed and managed the anti-conscription campaign, the highpoint of which was a special conference convened by the Trade Union Congress.

Fifteen hundred delegates gathered in the Mansion House and, having dedicated themselves to defeat conscription by every means at their disposal, decided to use the one weapon that maximised their strength; they called a general strike, the first of its kind in Ireland.

Held only four days later, the strike was a total success. With the exception of Belfast, nothing moved. Faced with this massive demonstration of opposition to its plans, the British government capitulated after two days and withdrew the legislation from the House of Commons.

O'Brien then turned his attention to organising the Labour Party, which at that point only existed on paper, and began preparations for an upcoming, long overdue General Election. Due to the war, none had been held for six years, Britain being ruled by a grand coalition of Liberals and Conservatives (the British Labour Party being then a political outsider).

Notwithstanding the particular difficulties of organising an election during a war, the British government felt it could no longer prolong the life of the parliament and decided to hold a general election.

It was for this "wartime" election that O'Brien readied the Labour Party. At its Annual Conference held in early August 1918, the delegates decided that the Labour Party would contest the general election as an independent party, based on a socialist platform.

O'Brien, with the collusion of O'Shannon, now arranged for Johnson to become the full time organiser of the Labour Party and so Johnson moved seamlessly from the Mansion House Committee into the heart of the infant Labour Party.

At this point, he had become a full time paid political organiser and his first job was to prepare a manifesto on which to fight the election. Published on 14 September, it said that Labour would stand for a "Workers' Republic" and would contest the election as an independent party. The Trades Councils, the basic organisational unit of Labour movement, were asked to nominate candidates.

The manifesto also said the Labour representatives, if elected, would not attend Westminster because of the threat of conscription. But it did admit the possibility of a change in this stance should circumstances demand. The party never specified that its elected representatives would attend a parliament in Dublin, as was stated Sinn Féin policy. A conscious ambiguity was maintained in an attempt to retain the unity of a movement that, uniquely, embraced both the unionist and nationalist traditions on an all-island basis.

By way of maintaining momentum in its preparations for the election, the National Executive decided to hold a special delegate conference on the 1st and 2nd December. This served the purpose of adopting a new constitution for the hybrid organisation consisting of the Trade Union Congress and the Labour Party. These carefully orchestrated plans, however, were to be upset by history.

## A peacetime General Election

By mid October, the German army had collapsed at a speed that was as stunning as it was unexpected. By the end of the month, its High Command had been dismissed, a new government installed and the Kaiser deposed.

The new government immediately sued for peace and an armistice was fixed for the 11th of November.

Suddenly the prospect of a Peace Conference became the dominant political reality throughout the world, including Ireland. Inspired by President Wilson, it was destined to settle the fate of nations for generations to come. Ireland's right to self determination would be pressed there, and common sense dictated that the greater the majority in favour of independence at the impending general election, the stronger the case for Irish independence would be at the Peace Conference.

By an extraordinary twist of fortune, the long-awaited British general election would now take place in peacetime, immediately prior to the Peace Conference. In short, the general election would be a plebiscite on Ireland's future.

The election, however, would be fought in single seat constituencies and the dictates of political logic were crystal clear: those in favour of independence would have to band behind a single candidate in each constituency.

Discussions had actually been taking place between Sinn Féin and the Labour Party from the previous September as to who would contest what constituency. So great was the fervour for independence, however, that Labour's negotiating position was progressively weakened by the refusal of Trade Councils throughout the country to put up candidates against Sinn Féin. In the end, the negotiations had narrowed down to four constituencies in Dublin City, for one of which Larkin had been nominated, although in jail in the United States.

In the light of the armistice and the imminence of the Peace Conference, O'Brien took matters into his own hands. As he recorded in his reminiscences, he unilaterally decided that a split vote between Labour and Sinn Féin could allow the Nationalist Party to win seats in a number of places. As this could be interpreted

as a vote against full independence, it had to be prevented at all costs.

Accordingly, O'Brien decided to urge the Congress executive not to put forward candidates and that Labour should decide to withdraw from the election in order to give Sinn Féin a free run in each constituency. After a lot of politicking, he put the matter before the Congress Executive on the morning of the first of November, the day the Special Conference was to open. The Executive agreed to his proposition with just two members dissenting, of whom O'Shannon was one.

When the Special Conference met in the afternoon, Johnson moved the adoption of a statement from the Executive that recommended the withdrawal of Labour candidates in the hope that the democratic demand for self-government would obtain the freest chance of expression at the poles.

## Sacrifice

At this important crisis of the history of Ireland, the statement said that Labour would be prepared to sacrifice "Party" in the interest of the nation. It would also demonstrate to the peoples of all nations as emphatically as peaceful means would allow, that when other small nations of Europe were asserting their freedom, Ireland also demanded all the rights of a free nation.

The Conference reacted with profound enthusiasm to this line of reasoning and the statement of the National Executive was adopted by 96 votes to 23. It is quite clear from the way events unfolded that this was no act of supine capitulation to political opponents, but a conscious decision to subordinate the party interest to the national interest.

The decision could not have been more timely. It allowed Sinn Féin to mobilise immediately and to nominate candidates in all constituencies for what was to be one of the shortest election campaigns in history.

Polling took place on 14th December and seventy-six constituencies returned Sinn Féin members. The Nationalist Party was reduced to a mere six, of whom four were elected in Northern Ireland. The results were declared on 28th December and Sinn Féin called a meeting of its elected representatives for the 7th January. They, in turn, formally decided to summon all Irish MPs to a meeting in Dublin on 21st January for the purpose of establishing Dáil Éireann.

This, then, is the political background to the drafting and adoption of the Democratic Programme.

Clearly, the convening of the Dáil required a high degree of organisation and the Sinn Féin executive appointed a special committee for that purpose. It undertook this task with a great sense of theatrical flair by renting and decorating the Round Room of the Mansion House in a manner befitting a Parliament. But the greatest thought was put into the Order of Business. This was conceived as a series of decisions, which progressively reinforced each other, and allowed for four documents to be presented to the Assembly, each being formally moved and read by two of its members.

The first document lay down an embryonic constitution for the new Irish State and set out standing orders for the new assembly.

The second was a "Declaration of Independence," in which the Dáil declared that, as the elected representatives of the Irish people, they ratified the establishment of the Irish Republic.

Taken in conjunction, these two documents can rightly be described as the Constitutional Foundation of the new state.

The third was a message to the nations of the world seeking recognition for Ireland as an Independent Nation. Its purpose could be said to be political and diplomatic.

The final document was a democratic programme setting out the political principles and moral philosophy on which the new state was to be founded.

## Democratic Programme

The Organising Committee arranged for the first three documents to be drafted by Sinn Féin members and supporters, but they immediately turned to O'Brien for the drafting of the Democratic Programme. He in turn entrusted this task to Johnson, who was to be assisted by himself and by O'Shannon.

Johnson understood that his task was not to lay down a socialist programme for the new state, but one to which the majority of the Sinn Féin members could subscribe and which the Labour Movement could, in turn, support. He knew the political purpose for which the Democratic Programme was intended.

His draft began with a reference to the 1916 Proclamation regarding the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland. In the second paragraph, he used an excerpt from *The Sovereign People* by Pádraig Pearse for the purpose of declaring that the Nation's sovereignty extended to all its material possessions. The third paragraph placed limitations on the right to private property by subordinating it to the interest of the common good.

Johnson's draft was submitted to the Organising Committee, which in turn gave it to Sean T. Ó Ceallaigh, later President of Ireland. He slightly re-worded the opening paragraph, but deleted some of Pearse's words from the second paragraph to the effect that "No private right to property is good against the public right of the Nation" and substituted, "All right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare". In short, the wording was changed, but not the intent.

In the third paragraph, however, Ó Ceallaigh deleted all of Pearse's words and, instead,

introduced the French republican principles of "Liberty Equality and Justice."

So, despite what some historians alleged, the principle deletion was not of Labour Party policy, but rather the principles put forward by Pearse in his last major pamphlet, dated 31 March 1916.

*The Sovereign People* is a long philosophical essay on the nature of freedom in which Pearse explored the moral principles underlying democracy and the purpose to which society should be organised. These were heavily influenced by American writings on "Happiness and Prosperity" and, it would seem, the utilitarian philosophy of the nineteenth century.

He also treated the issue of class and stated that, "No class in the nation is entitled to privileges beyond any other class except with the consent of the Nation." From Ó Ceallaigh's editing, it would appear that he was not so much opposed to this reasoning, but rather was concerned with asserting broad philosophical principles common to both the American and French Constitutions.

The fourth paragraph of Johnson's draft dealt with the duty of citizens to give allegiance and service to the country. This was unaltered except for phraseology of no great consequence.

The fifth paragraph dealt with the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing of citizens, particularly children. Here Johnson was plainly drawing on Pearse's philosophy as an educationalist. Ó Ceallaigh deleted two sentences from the draft relating to the education of the young and the significance of the health and happiness of citizens.

He then, however, inserted a paragraph which strengthened the programme and shifted it decisively in the direction of Labour thinking whereby the Republic was committed, in very strong language, to abolishing the poor law system and substituting a native scheme for the care of the aged and infirm which would also

safeguard the health of the people and ensure their well being.

The next paragraph dealt with economic development and Ó Ceallaigh intervened to delete a statement that it was the duty of the Nation to organise productive Labour. He went on to delete the next paragraph in its entirety, which asserted that where wealth is wrongly used, the nation could resume possession without compensation.

The succeeding paragraph continued the emphasis on economic development and Ó Ceallaigh inserted a range of pragmatic measures relating to industrial development and the promotion of exports. This also reflected an understandable preoccupation with preventing the export of food until the needs of the Irish people had been satisfied.

Up to this point, it could be said that there was no significant difference between Johnson's draft and Ó Ceallaigh's edited version. The next paragraph, however, as drafted by Johnson, was deleted in its entirety by Ó Ceallaigh and could be said to represent the one significant difference in ideology.

Johnson had written that: "It shall be the purpose of the government to encourage the organisation of people into Trade Unions and Co-operative Societies with a view to the control and administration of industries by the workers 'engaged in the industry'". This phraseology was typical of Johnson and was to be repeated in Labour Party manifestos throughout the twenties and thirties, but it was unacceptable to Ó Ceallaigh and disappeared.

The following paragraph in the Johnson draft was left unamended, however, and served as an important statement of the new state's social orientation. It said that: "it shall devolve upon the National Government to seek the cooperation of Governments of other Nations in determining a standard of social and industrial legislation with a view to general improvement

in the conditions under which the working classes live and labour".

The purpose of this paragraph is clear. It was intended to appeal to the Socialist International Conference that was to be held the following month in Berne. In fact, the Labour and Sinn Féin leaderships met on at least three occasions after the meeting of the First Dáil to plan the presentation of Ireland's case before the International. The importance of these meetings can be gauged from the fact that Collins was present at all three.

## International Recognition for Ireland

Johnson and O'Shannon travelled to Berne and secured international recognition for Ireland following the presentation of the Democratic Programme to the delegates, together with the most comprehensive memorandum on the history of the working class in Ireland and the struggle for Irish Independence up to that point.

This memorandum is itself an important historical document, which regrettably, has received too little attention, even from Labour historians.

Johnson's draft concluded with a paragraph stating that the Republic would aim at the elimination of the exploiting class in society. Ó Ceallaigh decided that this should be eliminated in its entirety.

It is not known whether Ó Ceallaigh consulted O'Brien, Johnson and O'Shannon on his version of the Democratic Programme before it was presented to the Dáil, but Johnson's reaction to the reading of the Programme is instructive and utterly convincing. He had been formally invited to the session, along with O'Brien and O'Shannon, and also Johnson's wife.

As he was to record many times in his life, and as his wife, Marie, testified, Johnson wept tears of joy as the Democratic Programme was formally presented and adopted by the Dáil. In



fact, O'Shannon recorded that he had to physically restrain Johnson from leaping to his feet and applauding the action of the Dáil.

This spontaneous reaction by Johnson belies the allegation that the Democratic Programme was a cynical device to buy off Labour in a General Election, or an even more cynical ploy to secure the support of the Socialist International. For its part, the Labour Party adopted the Democratic Programme as an integral part of its own political programme and was proud to present itself as its main author. It remained at the centre of Labour thinking for the next two decades.

When viewed in the context of the three documents that preceded it, the adoption of the Democratic Programme can be seen as a founding or constitutional document setting out the political and moral philosophy of the new state. It was not intended to be a manifesto or programme for action but rather a set of principles that is common to most national constitutions. In that sense, it should be seen as aspirational and directive. It can be taken that O'Brien and Johnson understood it in that sense and it is the yardstick by which it should be judged.

In retrospect, it seems astonishing that Sinn Féin should have turned to the Labour Movement in order to draft the social and economic principles on which the new state was to be founded. But at the time, it made complete sense. Sinn Féin recognised that they did not have the expertise to draft a text commensurate with the solemnity of the occasion so they entrusted Labour with this task because O'Brien had won their trust over the previous three years and because Johnson had repeatedly proven himself the master penman of political proclamations. It was the perfect marriage and put Labour right at the heart of the preparations that brought the First Dáil into being and with it, Irish independence.

The Democratic Programme has rightly become an iconic document and, indeed, the one by which the First Dáil is now almost exclusively remembered. Its enduring attraction is a tribute to the Labour leadership of the day and testimony to the central role they played in forging Irish history at the point where the old order of suppression and servitude was transformed into a new era of freedom and democracy.

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