

The Ulster of Tomorrow

Address to
a meeting of
The Campaign
for Democracy in
Ulster, Blackpool
29 September
1976

Brendan Halligan TD

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to a Meeting of the
The Campaign for Democracy in Ulster at
the British Labour Party Annual Conference,
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Introduction

I am truly honoured by your invitation to speak here this evening on the theme "The Ulster of Tomorrow". Previous speakers from my party who have participated in your meetings include Brendan Corish, our party leader and Conor Cruise O'Brien, our spokesman on Northern Ireland. It is clear from this that we hold the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU) in high regard and consider its role within the British Labour Party as significant in terms of informing the British Labour Movement about Northern Ireland.

I can recall the CDU meeting in Brighton in 1969, which drew a huge audience from the conference delegates, and which helped greatly in presenting the facts accurately about the events of August of that year and in fashioning the response of the British Labour Party to the very complex and rapidly changing problem of Northern Ireland.

It did much to put the issue of Northern Ireland on the agenda of your party and from which it had been absent for too long.

Today's meeting re-enforces the tradition of the CDU - that of facing the realities and difficulties of the actual political situation in Northern Ireland and of attempting to identify means of defending and strengthening democracy in that part of our island.

The theme of today's meeting could not be more apposite, given the widespread disenchantment and disillusion which has followed the breakdown of the Convention and the more recent collapse of the Unionist/SDLP dialogue. Despair sometimes gives birth to desperate and dangerous solutions.

Democratic politicians can never succumb to despair and can never, if they are to be true to their democratic commitment, abandon the attempt to establish rationality as the basis for social arrangements, even when faced with the most intransigent and obdurate irrationality.

That is why the theme and the setting of your meetings are so important. We must not give in to despair. We must begin again the task of building democracy in Northern Ireland. And we must think about tomorrow despite the setbacks of yesterday.

I recognise there is a temptation to grow weary of Northern Ireland, to cry out 'a plague on both your houses', and to wish it did not exist. I know there is a great temptation to go for simplistic solutions, like full-scale war or a complete pull out.

But if we accept that simplistic solutions, like a freeze on wages and salaries or massive cuts in public expenditure are no answer to complex economic problems, then we should also be willing to accept that simplistic political solutions are no real answer to the problem of Northern Ireland. We should reject them, categorically.

So we must continue our search for rational solutions and we must renew our enthusiasm for experiment and innovation, no matter how difficult our present circumstances and no matter how daunting our joint future may appear to us this evening and here at your Conference.

Democracy

In searching for solutions we must return again and again to the central starting point of all our policy. In essence, that there are two distinct communities in Northern Ireland and if there is to be local democracy, then it can only be on the basis of inter-communal consent.

Our common objective must be to seek ways of fostering that consent and of protecting it whenever it does emerge from time to time.

Democracy, as we know, rests on consent; in particular the consent of the minority to be ruled by the majority.

It also rests on restraint. The majority restrains itself from abusing the minority.

But underlying these two requirements is the belief that the roles of the majority and the minority are interchangeable and capable of being reversed in elections. Relationships are temporary.

This creates the wider context for the respect for the rule of law, which is the very bedrock of democracy. There is usually a further reality that makes democracy work: the community is generally homogenous.

But in Northern Ireland the relationship of majority to minority is permanent. The community is not homogenous. There has been no consent from the minority and there has been no restraint on the part of the majority in dealing with the minority.

In these circumstances, the immediate aim must be to develop consent so that the institutions of power rest on mass popular support.

But we will not get consent when one community is permitted to dominate the other, as successive British Governments allowed under the old Stormont regime. And you will not get consent if you permit both communities to savage each other through violence and terror.

Thankfully, British Governments have in recent years sought to prevent inter-communal savagery from happening. The Government was, therefore, correct in proroguing Stormont, attempting to institute a power-sharing administration and leaving it to the two local communities to work out the basis of devolved government in Northern Ireland.

And the Labour Government was particularly correct when it lay down the principle that domination of one community by the other was not acceptable in a democratic society.

Furthermore, the British Government has been right in saying that democracy in Northern Ireland

must be based on inter-communal consent. The difficulty is how to achieve it.

Consent

You will only get consent when both communities are prepared to accept the legitimacy of each other's aspirations. You will only get consent when they each admit publicly that neither can achieve fully achieve the aspirations to which it is committed.

This means that consent must emerge from a process in which each community modifies its perception of the other and also modifies its own aspirations; in two words, tolerance and compromise.

But you will have recognised that these two characteristics are at the heart of the democratic system and may say that, really, a statement about the need for tolerance and compromise is not such a startling conclusion after all and that it is superfluous.

I would agree, were it not for the fact that many of us, wittingly or unwittingly, encourage the opposite. It does not help the creation of consent if you parley directly with the men of violence from either community or indirectly through their representatives.

You may believe at the time that you can persuade or trick them into abandoning violence but experience has shown that they will rest from violence only for so long as they believe this helps them achieve their ends. As soon as they realise otherwise, they will resume their campaigns of terror on some pretext or another.

Talking to the men of violence is talking to men who believe not in consent, but in coercion, not in tolerance but in hate, not in compromise but in intransigence. And while you are talking to them you are reinforcing their self-esteem, adding to their stature within their own community and conferring on them an unintended but very public legitimacy.

If you undermine the democratic politicians in this way then you undermine democracy itself and there will be no prospect of consent. Surely nobody should realise that more than we ourselves, practitioners in the process of democratic politics.

Dealing with the paramilitaries of one community heightens the fear and tension in the other and provides their paramilitaries with justification, as they would claim, for their very existence.

Far from eliminating tension, dealing directly with paramilitaries only magnifies it. In the "Ulster of Yesterday" the paramilitaries have too often been brought into the conference room. Hopefully the "Ulster of Tomorrow" will be based on the proposition that democracy cannot come out of the barrel of the gun whether it be a Catholic or a Protestant gun.

Hopefully, the process of creating consent will rest on the recognition that the greatest danger to the democratic politician is the paramilitary.

The biggest enemy of the SDLP, their most deadly enemy, comes from their own community, the Provisional IRA. The greatest expressions of enmity and hatred emanating from the Provisional IRA are directed against the SDLP, whom they rightly regard as the biggest obstacle to their success.

Any policy which appears, for whatever reason, to put the democratic politician in a subsidiary role to the terrorist prevents the emergence of democracy instead of facilitating it.

And let us be honest and admit that in the "Ulster of Yesterday" this has happened, against all the best advice that we in my party had to offer on tactics and strategy.

Future Policy

Future policy must be based unequivocally on the principle that terrorist organisations can

only be defeated by their own community and within their own community. The police and army can only play an ancillary role, never a decisive one, although the misuse of the police or the army can strengthen popular support for the paramilitaries and revive terrorism where it has expired.

We should never forget Mao's dictum that the guerrilla is the fish in the ocean - and can only be exposed when the ocean dries up - so policy should be based on the fundamental principle that the terrorist must at all times be denied any indication that he will succeed or any hope that he will be accepted as a spokesman for his community.

Nothing must be done that will antagonise his community, denigrate the democratically chosen leadership, or alienate the communal allegiance to that leadership.

In the "Ulster of Tomorrow" your government should borrow from the psychology that has proven so successful in dealing with siege situations.

The newest method of bringing sieges to a bloodless ending is to establish beyond any doubt, right from the beginning, in the mind of those conducting the siege that there is no hope of escape, no hope of a deal and no hope of a getaway.

The two communities in Northern Ireland are now putting the paramilitaries under siege. The Peace Movement is the clearest indication that the two oceans are drying up. The British Government must reinforce this process by eschewing any suggestion that they will even consider dealing with the paramilitaries in the future.

The new Secretary of State is reported as saying that the word 'never' should never be a part of a politician's repertoire. I believe that this is one occasion when it should be employed, an occasion when your Government should state it will never again treat with men

of violence and that it will only negotiate with the democratically elected representatives of both communities.

The biggest threat to the successful culmination of this strategy - and it can be successful, despite the appearance of temporary stalemate on the political front - is the "Troops Out Movement".

Nothing is more calculated to resuscitate the Provisional IRA (and through them the Protestant paramilitaries) than the belief that irrespective of the protestations of your Prime Minister, there exists a widespread desire within your party to have done with Northern Ireland.

The very objective of the IRA is "Troops Out" and if they find support for this objective, no matter how small or inconsequential you may consider it, they will delude themselves into believing it represents the tip of a huge iceberg of English determination to abandon Northern Ireland and to pull out its army.

This invites Provisional IRA terror on the basis that one last push can cause so much revulsion amongst the British public that it will erode your Government's determination to soldier on (if you will pardon the pun).

Irrespective of the motives which led to its formation, or which now sustains it, the "Troops Out Movement" is, objectively speaking, the best justification Provisional IRA strategists can cite for their policy of terror, particularly the use of terror on the British mainland itself.

It is also undoing, to some extent, the psychological damage that the Women's Peace Movement has done to the paramilitaries, particularly the Provisional IRA.

This "Troops Out Movement", no matter how sincerely motivated its leadership might be, is in terms of its immediate impact, objectively working against peace and the defeat of paramilitaries.

Viewed from its long-term objective, the “Troops Out Movement” is the ultimate in political nihilism, the final collapse of all hope. It is an unconditional surrender to despair. It is the mirror image of those policies of total military victory trumpeted by the Tory right wing.

I hope to see British troops out of Northern Ireland, but as a consequence of peace, not as a precondition of peace.

If the troops were withdrawn now it would lead to a Lebanon-like situation. Surely, the moral of the Lebanon is that far from ridding a region of violence, creeping anarchy in one country sucks in neighbouring states and enlarges rather than diminishes their military involvement.

The “Troops Out” call is more than a counsel of despair and a recipe for anarchy in Northern Ireland; it is also an unwanted and unwarranted intrusion into the politics of my country. Let me be clear. It is an intrusion that we resent and that we reject.

The call for the withdrawal of troops is usually associated with claims that the only solution to the present turmoil is a united socialist Ireland.

Apart from the fact that such an Ireland would be born in bloodshed far greater than anything previously experienced this century, there is no indication, however much I may regret it, that the Irish people want a socialist Ireland, any more than the British people want a socialist Britain.

It would be impertinent of my party to prescribe the abolition of your monarchy and the creation of a British Socialist Republic as the solution for your economic ills, and you would not hesitate to tell us so. It would indeed be impertinent and no outside power or party, however well intentioned, would dare trespass on your domestic policies in this way.

We do not like trespassers any more than you do.

Irish Labour Party

I want to emphasise that the Irish Labour Party has rejected, by overwhelming majorities, conference resolutions calling for the equivalent of “Troops Out”, or smacking of any support for the Provisional IRA or seeking the establishment of armed militia under trade union control.

We have long ago rejected the rhetoric that has inspired some of the resolutions on Northern Ireland appearing on your Conference agenda.

We are firmly committed to the immediate policy of peace emerging from a power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland and to the unequivocal support of democratic politicians there, especially the SDLP, with whom we have the warmest and closest of relationships.

We are determined to resist the politics of despair and recourse to the politics of idiocy. We believe that the “Ulster of Tomorrow” can be based on rationality, tolerance and compromise and that peace can be achieved through the mass action of both communities.

There is one tangible innovation which could accelerate this process and hasten the re-emergence of a power-sharing executive. It is this: reform the police structure so that the police operate as a community police force, responsible to the local communities and thereby capable of winning their support and co-operation.

At the end of the day, the fish can only be deprived of its ocean if it is denied popular support and made subject to the law. This raises the unsolved question of the relationship between the RUC and the Catholic community.

There is no point in denying the present difficulties. The SDLP has put forward imaginative proposals on police reform. They should be seriously considered, adopted, and implemented.

The reform of the RUC so that the police in Northern Ireland have the full and open support of the Catholic community would be the single most important contribution to peace and reconciliation for half a century. It would hold out the prospect that the "Ulster of Tomorrow" would not be the "Ulster of Today".

Conclusion

We have all made mistakes. Perhaps the biggest mistake is that we do not listen to each other. For example, your Conference has never heard the voice of the SDLP although it has heard the voice of the SPD. Nor have you heard ours.

We should listen more to each other. We should never desert our comrades in the democratic socialist movement. And as democratic socialists, we should recall that our primary concern is ordinary people – ordinary working men and women – and their children.

As I prepared this address, I read the Belfast inquest on a six year old girl murdered by gunmen in her home despite the desperate attempts of her father to save her and her two year old brother. "Daddy, Daddy", she said "I'm hurt, I'm hurt". She was, and she is dead.

Too many daddies have died, too many widows have been created, too many children have been orphaned and too many have been killed.

We want an end to all this horror in the "Ulster of Tomorrow." But that end will only come about on the basis of consent, tolerance and compromise throughout both communities. It will only come on the basis of democracy itself.

– END –

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