

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SOCIALISM



by Brendan Halligan, MEP

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Preface

The Labour Party is under threat of electoral extinction.

Over the last thirteen years the party's share of the vote has been almost halved, its socialism diluted, its ability to develop policies destroyed and its membership decimated.

The main cause of Labour's decline has been its permanent commitment to coalition with Fine Gael. Arguably, it is the only reason.

Like many others I did not always think so. But I do now. The socialism of the Labour Party and its commitment to coalition are inextricably bound up with each other. In present circumstances they are mutually exclusive and the argument that coalition is purely an electoral tactic and essentially has nothing to do with socialism has been proven disastrously wrong by the experience of the past decade and a half.

The above analysis is not yet shared by a majority of the Labour Party, as the two Conferences in 1982 proved. The pamphlet, which is based on my contribution to the Dublin Regional Council symposium on the future of the party (June 1983), is intended to reinforce those party members who are opposed to continuing coalition and to persuade its erstwhile supporters to change their minds.

Time is running out for the Labour Party as the vehicle for democratic socialism in Ireland. The argument about coalition is literally about the existence of the Labour Party itself.

1. The Retreat from Socialism

"The Seventies will be Socialist" were the opening words of Brendan Corish's speech to the 1967 Labour Party Conference. The problem with that memorable phrase is that people remember it and it is now thrown back in our faces to emphasise the extent of our failures since then. The opening sentence of the "New Republic" speech was never intended to be taken literally, although there were many who did.

Rather, it enshrined a conviction that, sometime in the future, Labour would come into its own and Irish politics, stunted and misshapen, would be transformed into a normal European confrontation between right and left. That was Labour's objective in the sixties and that is what was meant by claiming the seventies would be socialist.

The speeches of Corish, particularly the lesser known 1969 Conference speech, repeat and reiterate this strategy with a simplicity and intensity which we have forgotten today and constitute the

essence of what the Labour Party was about in the sixties. The most important point about the strategy is that it preceded the outburst of policy making in 1968, unmatched or unrivalled before or since. Indeed, it determined the content of the policies because they were designed for a party standing alone rather than for one trimming its position in preparation for an electoral alliance.

But today, no Party Leader could proclaim the future to be socialist, no matter how distant the time horizon. The disappearance of a vision in which Labour plays a key role in rearranging Irish political forces is a psychological reality which we all instinctively recognise. It is the true measure of our decline, more accurate than any statistical analyses of our electoral fortunes since then.

The belief in the inevitable progress of socialism which was held passionately by party members in the sixties has died for most of them. Instead, Labour's role has been reduced to that of being the antidote to the nauseating conservatism of the two nationalist parties, of providing an opposition, even from inside Government, on liberal issues such as divorce, contraception and abortion, while preventing the King from Kinsealy from inflicting too much damage on democracy by keeping him in periodic opposition.

Labour is no longer the harbinger of a new social order. It is an indispensable component of the status quo.

2. The Extent of Labour's collapse

The existence of the Labour Party is now under threat because a party which has lost belief in itself cannot hope to generate belief amongst the voters.

The result is chastening.

Labour's strength, as currently reflected in the opinion polls, stands at a point higher only than the votes recorded in the two calamitous elections of 1932 and 1933. In 1957 a national vote

of 9% was regarded by the Party as a disastrous rout to which it reacted by vowing never again to go into coalition. In 1982 a national vote of 9% was hailed by the Party as a triumph and a justification for returning to coalition.

Opinion polls indicate our share of the vote has sunk to 8% and the prospect of local elections next year are contemplated with horror, not least by Labour Councillors themselves.

But the full scale of Labour's collapse since 1969 is still not generally realised because it has been obscured by the disproportionate relationship between seats and votes recorded in successive elections.

Labour's vote has dropped absolutely at a time when the electorate is actually growing. Although seats have only fallen from 18 to 16 since 1969, the number of Labour votes has dropped from 224,000 to 158,000.

In percentage terms, Labour's share has collapsed from 17% to 9%. But with that 9% of the vote we won 9% of the seats in 1982. However, in today's Dáil with a 17% share of the vote Labour would have 28 Deputies instead of 16. That difference is the real scale on which to measure Labour's contracting note.

3. Things can only get worse

But, is argued by those presently guiding the destinies of the party, this fall in votes has been arrested. The decline has been stopped. Things will get better, and Labour will be rewarded by a resurgence in its fortunes and an increase in its vote.

They present this as a good argument for continuing on in Government. But is it true? The answer to that question lies at the heart of this debate. I believe claims of anticipated progress are false because of the following cogent arguments:

Since 1973 there has been a world economic depression equal in duration and intensity to

that of the Great Depression. But, the Keynesian system of economic management which operated so efficiently during and after the war is no longer on offer to capitalist economies. Neither does modern capitalism have a theoretical model from which it can fashion policy instruments to keep inflation down and employment up. On the contrary, modern capitalism only has a model for keeping inflation down by putting unemployment up.

If present policies persist then any prediction of an arrest in the upward trend of world unemployment must be viewed with total scepticism. Any forecast of a fall in global unemployment over the medium term must be dismissed as propaganda. In Ireland's case this problem is accentuated because, for more than a decade, our population has been growing at a rate which can only be understood in terms of a third world country and the expansion in our labour force will not ease off over the remainder of this decade.

So, even if the world economy were to expand at a rate reminiscent of the sixties, Ireland would still be left with an unemployment problem incapable of solution on the basis of unchanged policies, such as are being pursued by the present coalition government.

Remember that the outgoing Fianna Fáil Government predicted that unemployment would rise to 250,000 by 1987. Recall that the Taoiseach has admitted the possibility of a figure close to 200,000 by the year end. Conclude, therefore, that by the next election unemployment will be somewhere between 225,000 and 250,000. An increase in Labour's popular support is unlikely in these circumstances.

It is even more unlikely because of the state of the Exchequer finances. It is quite immaterial that this was caused by the 1977 Fianna Fáil election Manifesto and the budgetary policy pursued by that Government up to 1981. What is material to our future electoral fortunes is that the present coalition has committed itself to

eliminating a current budget deficit of one billion pounds in 1982 prices.

This can only be achieved by raising taxes to that amount (the equivalent of increasing income tax by another 60%), or by cutbacks in current expenditure (the equivalent of the entire health service), or by some horrendous combination of both.

It is obvious the Labour Party cannot avoid the political odium which will preside over the dismantling of the social services it did so much to create. This dismal prospect is unavoidable.

But there is even more bad news ahead. The real budgetary task is to reduce the Total Exchequer Borrowing Requirement substantially so involving cutbacks in capital, as well as in current, expenditure. These cuts are evidently going to be substantial. The Semi-State Sector is being prepared for dismemberment. The Butchers of Barretstown have not finished yet. And by the time they have completed their cutbacks in the social services and the state sector, they will have earned life membership of the Thatcher/Reagan Club.

It will be some record to defend in 1987. It will not win votes. It will lose them.

In summary, it can be argued that the present coalition government is confronted by three major problems, each demanding answers inimical to Labour's philosophy or for which there are no answers at all, except unemployment.

These are:

1. The world depression, which will prevent any recovery in employment.
2. Our population growth, for which there are no workable conventional policy responses except more unemployment.
3. The exchequer crisis, which will decimate the social services and state sector.

Taken together, they confound those who argue that all we need are two tough years followed by two good ones in which the foundations of victory can be laid.

From brief analysis of objective political and economic facts it is my conclusion that this coalition will cause Labour support to fall even further and that the answer to the question, "how can we achieve socialism in Ireland", certainly does not lie in continuing coalition with Fine Gael.

4. The Consequences of Coalition

But, perhaps it can be argued, the present coalition situation is unique and, while this coalition may be bad for Labour, it can still remain true that, in general, coalition is a legitimate strategy on which to build a socialist party in Ireland.

So, let's ask, what have been the consequences of coalition for Labour? What conclusions can we draw from actual experience and do they support the thesis that coalition could be the way to build up Labour and so achieve socialism eventually?

The first conclusion is self evident. The Labour Party loses votes. It loses them for a variety of reasons, not least the impact which coalition has on absorption in which the smaller of the parties is slowly submerged into the larger. This arises from the nature of the Irish governmental process which is highly secretive and centralised, as well as being quite insensitive to criticism.

Normally speaking, backbenchers have no input into Government policy. Budgetary policy, for example, is determined by the Cabinet in conclave not by a process of consultation with the constituent parliamentary parties. Still less does the Administrative Council have any influence on what happens in Government. This is due to the secretive nature of the governmental process.

The process of absorption is further reinforced by the centralised nature of our Government's working methods. Due to the

principle of collective cabinet responsibility the first loyalty of Ministers is to the Cabinet and not to the Parliamentary Party of the Administrative Council or Annual Conference or even the branches which nominated them as Labour Party candidates.

All this results in a process of alienation which is heightened as Ministers progressively come under the influence of their civil service. A two party coalition is in effect a tripartite arrangement with the Civil Service playing the dominating role.

The Labour Party never realised the role and power of the civil service before going into Government. It has not had the courage since then to evaluate its experience in Government.

As an attempt to indicate the dangers involved, in 1976 I said that the Secretary of the Department for Finance had more power than the backbenchers of the two Government parties put together, with their National Executives and Annual Conferences thrown in for good measure. For this public admission of a private reality I was threatened with censure by one minister on grounds of disloyalty.

But I repeat it again. Coalition is not a romantic twosome but a three handed reel danced to the air of the civil service.

I am not denying that individual Ministers enjoy a certain latitude which can be exploited to good effect on occasions. But the concept of the Civil Service as a slumbering giant without a mind of its own simply awaiting the arrival of an intelligent Minister who will then direct and command it into action has been a most insidious misrepresentation of political reality.

In the day to day business of running the state apparatus the upper hand will always be with the full time permanent professionals. Occasionally there will be rogue ministers and even rogue Taoiseachs but they can be ground down and absorbed, with time and patience. Civil Servants have both, in abundance.

The overall result is that Ministers become detached from their political roots, from loyalties to the Government which are at least as strong as those to their own party and, finally follow Government policy in preference to the Party's policy.

For a small ideological party such as Labour, this is a political quicksand. As time passes its ideological passion is slowly, imperceptibly, drained away. By contrast Governmental cohesion becomes stronger. Inevitably, demands for back bench loyalty become more strident and the measures taken against dissidents, stricter and stricter.

This leads to a cleavage between the party professionals (the Ministers) and the ideological activities. The disaffected in some cases leave to form or join other parties. Many activists drift out of politics altogether. Only the very exceptional remain.

At the same time, the public become conscious of a gap between ministerial rhetoric and governmental activity. This gap between rhetoric and reality leads to loss of support because Labour begins to lose its identity as a separate party with its own unique message. The proof of that is self evident from successive election results.

The loss of identity has other serious repercussions. The impetus to develop independent policy positions for the party slowly peters out, and for two reasons.

Firstly, there is an anxiety on the part of the Ministers not to embarrass their Government partners. For example when the AC produced an admirable set of taxation and other proposals before the 1982 budget the Tánaiste decided it had to be kept secret.

The party was to be kept in the dark about a vital policy communication from its national executive to the Cabinet expressing Labour Party Policy. And so was the public. When it was leaked there was a hunt for the traitor.

Secondly, the passion which inspires people to engage in policy formulation becomes dulled by coalition and, in the end, virtually disappears. We are now living off the stock of accumulated policy built up between 1967 and 1974 and renewed, although with diminished vigour, between '77 and '81. We are at a dead end. Faced with the greatest economic crisis of our time we have nothing new to say as a socialist party.

So, the consequences of coalition they could be expressed succinctly as follows:

1. Labour loses votes
2. Labour loses its socialist identity
3. Labour ceases to develop socialist policies

There is a fourth consequence which I want to treat separately because of its importance, a sinister importance. Michael D. Higgins once said that the difficulty with coalition is that Labour doesn't know how to end it.

In fact as things stand, there is no way out of coalition. Effectively we are in a permanent coalition position and are seen to be by the public. The independent posture of '77 to '81 and in the recent election campaign were, in reality, tactics to ensure maximum party unity so as to win seats which can then be put to good use in the Dáil Chamber by voting in another coalition.

It is even worse when we are actually in coalition. When an election is declared Labour does not revert to an independent position and fight a campaign distinct from Fine Gael. Instead we fight as an integral part of an ongoing electoral alliance, as in '77 and '82.

On the latter occasion the Administrative Council of the day had actually decided upon a delicately balanced formulation which preserved the party's independent electoral position while protecting the self esteem of those who had served in Cabinet. But this was not good enough for the Party Leader as Tánaiste. Within one hour of the close of the AC meeting he unilaterally reversed

the decision of the AC at a Press Conference and committed Labour to fighting the election on a joint platform with Fine Gael. In this he was aided and abetted by Cabinet Ministers, some of the Parliamentary Party, as well by Officers and members of the AC.

There was nothing strange about this as he had been engaged in a process of transforming Labour's theoretical independence into a permanent electoral alliance with Fine Gael. To that end, the Head Office had been deliberately run down, the very building was to be sold and the party's central administration was to be hidden away in two back rooms near the palatial Fine Gael Headquarters.

He had involved the Parliamentary Party in joint meetings with the AC on matters which were strictly the province of the AC and proposals were contemplated to extend the role of the Parliamentary Party in decision making. A Minister publicly complained he had no vote as of right at the AC and plans were launched to exclude from the AC some people with traditional speaking rights simply because they were opposed to the regime.

In order to keep Labour in permanent alliance with Fine Gael, the party constitution was being subverted. Many of those who acquiesced in that process, who stood idly by, to coin a phrase, still occupy senior positions in the party. Repentance, if there has been any, has been in silence.

The truth is that Labour does not have an electoral strategy in which we sometimes decide to go into coalition and sometimes don't. Whenever Coalition is an option it is grasped. Negotiations and Special Conferences have confirmed something which is a foregone conclusion on the basis of election results.

Because coalition is effectively a permanent arrangement it has produced a fifth consequence of the most serious moment for Labour. Permanent coalition has slowly opened up a gap on the left of Irish politics. The role played by Labour in the sixties, that of being an aggressive

working class party working in close alliance with the trade unions and of being the champion of underprivileged minorities, has been taken over by the Workers' Party.

Analysis of the opinion polls show how dangerous this development is for Labour. The Workers' Party vote is predominately urban working class under the age of 30. It has a voter profile with long run potential, rather like our profile in 1969. On the other hand, the Labour vote is progressively becoming older and more rural. This must be viewed in the context of a population which is becoming increasingly younger and more urbanised

The end consequences for Labour are not too difficult to predict if current policies remain unchanged. Labour will sink while the Workers' Party will rise, almost in direct proportion to Labour's decline.

5. What is to be done?

What is to be done in order to save the Labour Party from extinction? Or, what is to be done to achieve socialism in Ireland, for both are the one question.

It seems to me, and this is purely a personal opinion and not that of any group or tendency within the Party, that the answer comes in a three-phased strategy.

The Short Term

In the short term the aim must be to end the present coalition government by a conscious decision of the party as a whole. There remains the possibility, however remote, that either the four Cabinet Ministers or the Parliamentary Party, will voluntarily end the Government on some issue of principle.

In 1973/77 it nearly came to that on two occasions, but I think it would be unwise to entertain this possibility as a working hypothesis.

Another theoretical possibility is that the Government could be defeated in the Dáil and

so collapse as in 1982. This would be a disastrous development as the pressure to loyally defend its record and its Ministers in the subsequent election would be intolerable. And we would be defending the indefensible.

In order to save the Labour Party for socialism there remains only one course of action, no matter how arduous or dangerous, and it is both. A National Conference of the Party must decide by majority vote to withdraw from Government and, further, to commit Labour to a position of independence within the Dáil irrespective of the outcome of future general elections.

This requires, in the first instance, a majority on some future Administrative Council so that a Special Conference can be summoned. It then requires a majority of the delegates to endorse a resolution withdrawing Labour from Government. Over the short term, therefore, the objectives could not be clearer.

The Medium Term

The medium term strategy would commence as soon as such a decision is taken and would last for the normal lifetime of a Dáil. The dangers here are obvious enough.

First of all the reaction of the media is easily predicted. Labour would be slated for abandoning its responsibilities and the anti-Haughey faction in the press (including those who describe themselves as socialists) would be outraged. Fine preferences would melt away like snow in the sun, as they did in 1969.

In the ensuing election the left leaning electorate would be unlikely to be positive about Labour as many would be dubious, rightly so, of Labour's sincerity. The inevitable losses of Fine Gael preferences would be difficult to compensate with additional Labour firsts.

The outcome of the election, obviously, would lead either to a majority Fianna Fáil Government, although this will in future prove a difficult achievement under the new Boundaries

Commission, or else to a minority Fianna Fáil Government.

Should the latter happen then great tactical skill would be required to guard Labour's new found independence while maintaining the Government in office in the face of repeated Fine Gael attempts to bring it down and the occasional ambush from the Workers' Party to test our resolution and determination. It would not be easy, particularly, in the face of continuing budgetary problems, but it just about lies within the limits of possibility.

During the medium term the party would be going through a period of recuperation in which the resumption of policy formation and the rejuvenation of the organisation would be the overriding objectives. The focus of policy formation would have to be a coherent policy on employment. We are strong on the need for planning, good at thinking up new institutions (like the National Development Corporation and the Youth Employment Agency), clear about the need to nationalize some parts of the economy, but weak on the need for efficiency, competitiveness, innovation and adaptation and on the means to achieve them.

On the interrelationships between pay, taxation and jobs we have nothing that is credible. Yet this is precisely the nub of the economic problem, which not even the trade unions have addressed.

Additionally, we would need to think creatively about new forms of ownership and management which are appropriate for the twenty-first century. We need to go beyond the concept of nationalisation which is a legitimate way to control some elements of the economy, but not all of it.

Nationalisation needs to be supplemented by other forms of economic organisation such as co-operatives, self managed enterprises and privately owned companies, in order to guarantee political freedom in what would otherwise be a vast state bureaucracy.

A willingness to experiment with new socialist ideas enjoins us to go beyond current versions of socialism, many of which are based on a narrow sectarian interpretation of Marx.

Marx, in some ways, was the least doctrinaire of Marxists. He was characterised by a willingness to be inventive and the wisdom not to be too specific when it came to practical programmes. We should honour him by concentrating scientifically on the world we live in.

We live in Ireland, not the UK or any region of it. Our history and culture are totally different to that of the adjoining island.

Our two economies are at opposite poles in terms of development. Irish socialism faces problems which are unique to this island: the fact that we never went through the industrial revolution as did the rest of Europe; the consequent lack of an overall working class consciousness; the competing force of a narrow nationalism which has dominated the loyalties of ordinary people; the pervasive influence of a conservative church; the unresolved question of the North.

These are the issues for which we must have answers, not regional versions of policies for a decaying industrial power in the twilight years of an old empire.

Providing those answers would be the most daunting task of the medium term phase. But if we react in an innovative and imaginative way to the problem of the 1980s, then the credentials of Labour's an exciting place to be in politically will be re-established.

The strategy over the medium term is thus to halt Labour's decline in its vote by progressively disassociating it from Fine Gael, developing policies which restore Labour's role as a socialist party, thereby changing its image so that it attracts young people in and, on the basis of this influx, to rebuild the grass roots organisation.

If that were successfully done over a three to four year period then the longer term strategy

would commence with the ending of the Dáil, preferably as a result of Labour deciding to do so on the basis of a policy issue. The Party would then face its second General Election as an independent socialist party.

The Long Term

In fighting this second General Election as an independent party (assuming that the Dáil has lasted a normal life span), the Party would have a double advantage. Firstly, its record in the outgoing Dáil would have laid to rest suspicions that Labour was not serious about its socialist independence. Secondly, the policy formation exercise would have helped to sharpen Labour's separate identity in offering a socialist alternative.

This alternative would be on offer in a situation where the existing economic system would be seen to be a failure bigger even than today's.

On the assumption that emigration will not emerge again to any significant extent, then the long term will be characterised by unemployment levels way beyond anything we have experienced. For example, anybody made redundant over the age of forty will have virtually no chance of re-employment. Some young people will reach their mid-twenties without ever having worked.

Furthermore, social problems will intensify because the social services will not expand in real terms; benefits may actually decline. The public sector and the semi-state bodies will be run down so reducing job prospects while accentuating inequalities in housing, educational access and the health services.

Given this as a scenario, the long term strategy is to make Labour the focal point around which democratic opposition to the system can be organised. The various protest movements, whether they be the unemployed or the homeless, will need a political home and we would provide it for them.

Similarly, we would consciously set out to capture the liberal vote which was enticed away from us by Garret FitzGerald, but which may, even now, be on its way back.

But above all the aim over this period would be to capture the youth vote. There are two reasons for this. First of all the huge increase in the vote under 30 years makes it electorally imperative and, secondly, this is the segment of the population that will be most affected by the failure of modern capitalism.

Our policies must be primarily tailored to meet their needs and their ambitions. If we must sacrifice some traditional support in doing so, then let us do so willingly. We just shake off the constraints of middle aged politics and become the party of young people.

Equally important over the long term would be the design of policies – socialist policies – appealing to our strong sense of national identity. The Achilles heal of Irish society is that we have attempted to develop our economy on the basis of a dependent capitalism. It has not worked. It has not reduced unemployment. But it has reduced national control over our own destiny and diminished our sovereignty. Dependent capitalism has also helped destroy our sense of self-respect and initiative.

Socialism, with its emphasis on the role of the state as the embodiment of the people, is the answer to the dependent capitalist model. It fits in easily with the search for a separate identity, which, I believe, will grow stronger in Europe over the next quarter century.

There is a growing and welcome reaction against big business, multi-national corporations and super-power politics. There is renewed interest in regional cultures and languages. There is a revulsion against gigantism and a belief that small is beautiful. The profit motive is being replaced as the central ethic in western societies by an emphasis on leisure and self development.

There is therefore a vast potential for new socialist ideas, practices and institutions because

socialism alone can provide the philosophy to create a democratic society using advanced technology but fostering and protecting the rights of self expression and personal development.

We are at the beginnings of an era which could be entitled the “end of alienation”. I have no doubt that this is the great philosophic search of our time; the end of alienation, the creation of community. Socialism was designed as a response to these deepest impulses in human beings. It is now ready to offer the answers demanded by the new century.

6. The Future can be ours

A Labour Party fired by this vision would clearly win back the support of many left-wing people, such as Kemmy’s Democratic Socialists. It would have nothing to fear from the Workers’ Party, indeed that party would have no legitimate reason for existing and many of its members would undoubtedly recognise it to be so. It would wither away.

The Labour Party, fired by this vision, would not be tempted into any re-arranged marriage with Fine Gael. If that realisation were to grip Fine Gael then it could force them to re-assess their relationship with Fianna Fail. Since they are both now committed to Irish solutions for Irish problems, the differences between them can be resolved. This would become more evident with the passage of time.

Therefore, the task over the long term for the party is to secure the re-arrangement of Irish politics along conventional European lines on a right left confrontation.

If this is done then a class based politics would replace the sterile non politics with which this country is cursed and with which its future is condemned. Class based politics create the potential for a socialist Ireland. In any other Ireland progress towards socialism is impossible.

This must be our long term strategy. If we adopt it then it will provide us simultaneously

with a programme of policy formation and a plan of re-organisation. It would also give us a vision. It would renew our hope and inspire us to attempt the seemingly impossible.

Socialists are visionaries. Socialists need a vision of the future. They need to be challenged by what seems impossible. As the great socialist, George Bernard Shaw, once wrote: "I dream of things that never were and ask, why not?" Let us dream too and then let us get to work.

Socialism can be established in Ireland if we but will it enough.



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