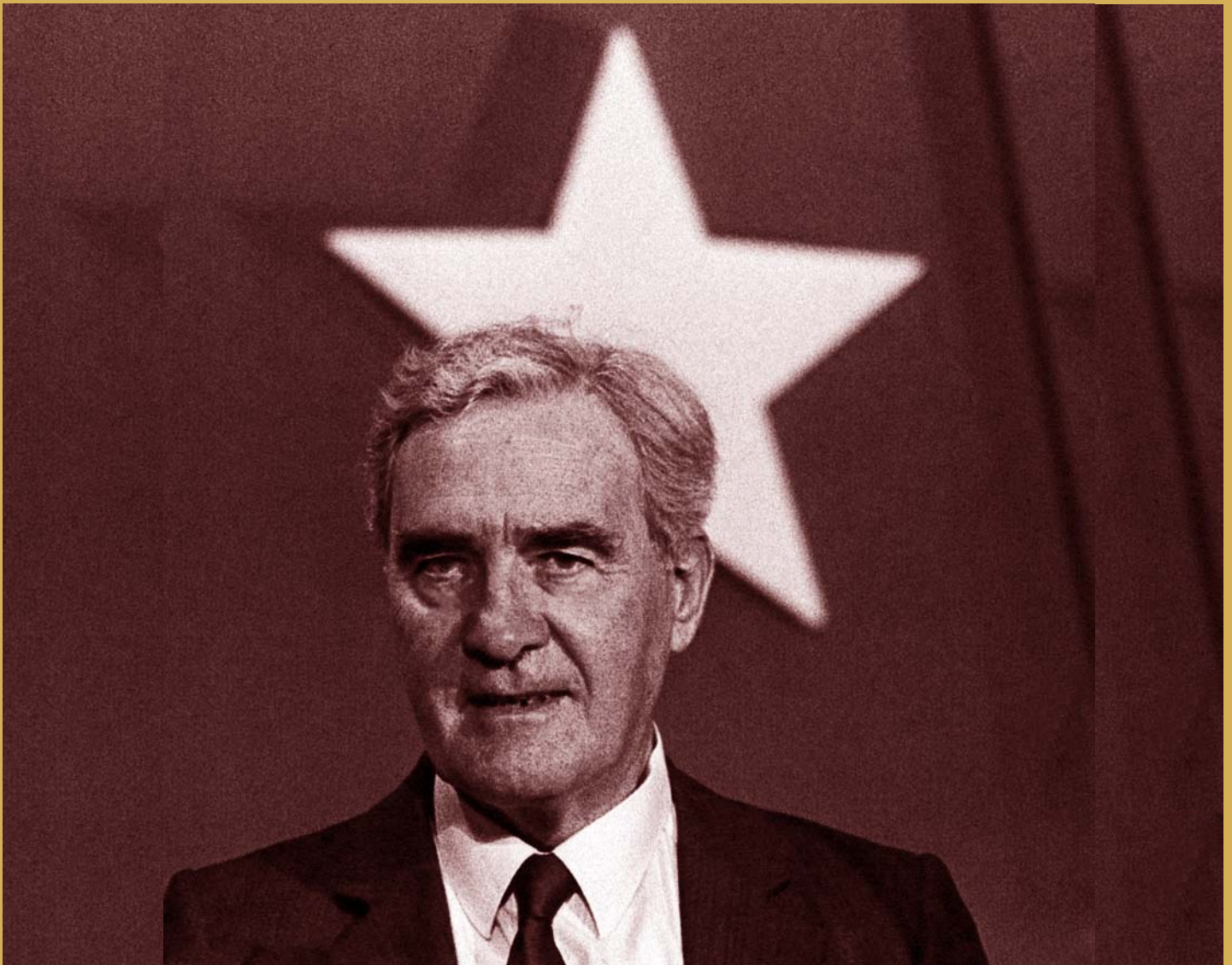


ILHS Conference, Wexford: Remembering Brendan Corish

24 November 2018

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The New Republic Speech in Retrospect



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*(Labour Party Political Director, General Secretary, 1967/80)*

## The Context

When he rose in Liberty Hall to address the 1967 Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish was about to deliver what was later described both as a manifesto and as a sermon.

But whether sermon or manifesto, it was about to shock the assembled delegates. It's true they were anticipating something special. So, too the media. But what they got went beyond all expectations and has since been included in an anthology of the fifty "Greatest Irish Speeches", and rightly so.

The address opened like a thunderclap with five words that reverberated around Liberty Hall and have since gone into political folklore: "The Seventies will be Socialist". Before that could be absorbed he went even further: "What I offer now", he continued, "is the outline of a new society, A New Republic".

Nothing like this had been done since the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil. What's more, he said, this New Republic would be forged by Labour, the half party in a two and a half party system.

And it really was a half party. With the exception of County Meath, half the country north of a line from Dublin to Galway was without a Labour TD. Within Dublin itself, where it should have been at its strongest, it was at its weakest. With only 15% of the national vote, and little more than a loose collection of rural independents, Labour seemed a most improbable candidate for leading a political revolution. Yet that was to be the thrust of the New Republic speech.

But Corish had become Leader at the right moment. Change was the spirit of the age, the Zeitgeist. The generation that had won independence had quit the stage. De Valera was already gone; and just ten months earlier, so too his successor, Seán Lemass. 1967 was one of those moments when a profound generational shift takes place and fortunately for Labour, Corish was part of that change. Fortunate too that he was highly conscious of this transition and of the opportunity

to discard the old and fashion the new. Since becoming Leader in 1961 he had doubled the number of Labour seats in Dáil Éireann. In short, he took the rostrum in Liberty Hall with the aura of a successful general.

The occasion was significant in its own right. In the Labour tradition, the Annual Conference is the supreme policy-making body of the party with the Leader's Address as its centrepiece. Read from a prepared script, and lasting about fifty minutes, it normally dealt with contemporary politics and current party affairs. But this, by his own choice, was to be something completely different.

It was intended as the next logical step in a series of advances accomplished over the previous six years: an independent electoral strategy, a new political ideology, the professionalisation of the organisation and expansion of its membership, the reaffiliation of the WUI and ITGWU, plus electoral successes. Twelve months earlier he had electrified the Annual Conference by stating socialism was the only alternative to capitalism. The mere use of the hitherto banned word 'Socialist' had been intoxicating and, for those who experienced it, the 1966 conference had been heady stuff. No wonder the delegates were expectant. That is the context in which he delivered his speech.

He prepared meticulously for weeks and set a pattern for all subsequent speeches. We would first talk privately and in 1967 we initially met in Hoynes Hotel in Arklow, a convenient half-way house between Wexford and Dublin, supplemented by meetings in our homes. In these opening conversations he would settle on the theme he wanted to develop, go on to outline his thoughts, which would be transcribed and typed up. He would also consult with his intimates and sometimes with outside experts. The speech would go through many drafts, seldom less than ten.

For the New Republic speech, the theme emerged from an irrefutable fact. The old Republic had failed in every one of the national objectives. The population was still falling, the work-force

declining, economic growth stagnating, the standard of living one of the lowest in Europe and no sign of an economic breakthrough. Private enterprise had failed as the engine of growth. Hence, the state had to step in and plan the economy. Communal and social objectives would take precedence over private profit and the fruits of growth would be devoted to increased welfare and the elimination of poverty.

Socialism would replace capitalism as the basis of society. In short, a New Republic was needed and would be created by a Labour government. In the Ireland of the day these were heretical proposals.

This line of reasoning demanded a philosophic underpinning and so the speech set out a moral basis for socialism and then systematically applied it to the problems of economic stagnation and social inequality. This, of course, is what he had always intended to do – to give practical meaning to socialism – but instead of putting political and philosophical principles first he positioned them at the heart of the speech, justifying them on grounds of practicality as well as morality, and then letting them serve as the inspiration for the political transformation with which he intended to conclude.

This structure of the speech was continuously reviewed and revised and finally fixed at the last working session. The structure chosen gave great coherence to the speech, starting as it did with an examination of the present and finishing with a vision of the future, with the two joined together by moral principles that no person of good will could reject. It ranged from history to economics, from ethics to philosophy, from politics to public administration from the abstract to the concrete. It was full of common sense and an uncommon passion for ending injustice.

It was all of these things because it was the culmination of a long process of reflection on his life experience and he had reached quite startling conclusions which a lesser man might have kept to himself for fear of ridicule. Instead, he put them

before the party and the public in terms as simple as they were dramatic: he intended to change the world of politics. The speech was broken into eight separate sections and here is a summary of what he said. But it is only a summary.

## The Introduction

The opening section of the speech is the shortest but the most memorable – and is also the most illuminating. It opened with the by now famous forecast that the seventies would be socialist, but immediately acknowledged that for this to happen Labour would have to make a breakthrough in seats and votes in the upcoming election, then expected to be two years away. The present position was merely a transition to power.

He then revealed the purpose of the speech; “What I offer now is the outline of a new society, a New Republic”. That word, outline, was not a device to dodge detailed policies because he was to initiate an unprecedented policy-making exercise over the following months which produced policy statements adopted by the subsequent Annual Conference and which formed the basis of the 1969 election manifesto.

## Crisis of Decision

He began his speech proper by arguing that the Irish people had never decided on the type of society they wanted. Because of our history, it had been impossible to debate political alternatives but there was now an urgency to make a choice because of a widespread belief that the Irish were unable to solve any of the major problems confronting them. The result was disquiet, apathy, cynicism and indifference.

As a judgement on contemporary society this was hardly contestable. The previous decade had been an economic and social disaster. For that reason he framed the crisis of decision like this: “Do we want to export another million people by the end of the century and fall so far behind

the rest of Europe that we will never catch up, or do we want to put an end to national failure and construct a New Republic?” In order to frame the choice, Labour would provide a socialist solution. That would leave the decision as one between the status quo and a new beginning.

Others were of similar mind but didn’t reach the revolutionary conclusions he was about to unveil. The Grey Book, published by Whitaker and his colleagues a decade earlier, had been predicated on the imperative of making a fresh economic start. In fact, there was more than a hint of desperation about their initiative. The Fianna Fáil government had responded with a faltering commitment to what it called “economic expansion” with a target of doubling the annual growth rate to 2%, that seems ridiculous now but was almost revolutionary then.

At least, the Grey Book had the great merit of being honest, it was an admission of failure and the subsequent Programme for Economic Expansion had been a welcome departure from the inertia of the previous decade, but for Corish it was not enough. Faced with monumental failure on a grand scale, he began by putting responsibility on the individual citizen to examine the real issues facing society and to decide on the future. This was bringing everything back to the crisis of decision.

For its part, Labour would put forward a vision of the future and if the electorate were to reject it then, for the first time, a genuine political choice would have been made. And that is what he wanted. He wanted people to think about political choices and he was convinced that if they did that they would agree with his proposals. That would be the value of the process – a thinking and socially responsible citizenry – and he was prepared to risk electoral failure if only he could get that process started.

## Analysis of the Old Republic

To stimulate that sort of thinking he devoted the next section to a rigorous analysis of the old

Republic and why it had failed. This was a logical prelude to the solution he was about to unveil. The diagnosis was almost entirely economic and dealt with the decade of Fianna Fáil rule from 1957, whose economic record he dismissed as the poorest in Europe. Far from catching up with other economies, Ireland had fallen further behind, coming second last among OECD countries in terms of growth.

In a graphic passage, he clinically dissected the Ireland of his day: “We have failed in every national objective, whether cultural, such as restoring the language; political, such as ending partition; social, such as halting rural depopulation; or economic, such as providing full employment”. The key question was, what had gone wrong? His answer was surprising, and it led to some surprising conclusions.

We went wrong, he said, in underestimating the magnitude of the national problems facing us on achieving independence. More than that, and arguably this is the core of the speech, independent Ireland had entered on a period of nation-building with an imperfect social philosophy and an almost pathetic belief in the ability of the private enterprise system to provide employment and secure equality. It’s hard to find any comparable analysis of the failings of independent Ireland.

Furthermore, the capitalists, and that’s the word he used, had “fought every attempt to use the State as a real instrument of economic growth”. The interest of the private investor was safeguarded, he alleged, “even if it meant that a million emigrants would be discarded as surplus labour in a land starved of employment”. Ordinary people suffered while the gombeen man flourished. Self-evidently, this was the language of outrage; a devastating attack on individualism and served as the moral basis for what came next, an economic solution.

## Economic Planning

In the printed version of the speech, published some months later in the form of a booklet, that

section is broken into two parts, the first being dubbed “Economic Planning” and the second “The Structure of Government”.

The rationale for planning was utilitarian. The profit motive had failed as the engine of growth, consequently, the state must plan the economy by controlling the use of capital and investing it in those sectors that were of most benefit to the community. Whereas private individuals and companies operated only on the profit motive the state must expand the range of investment to include social objectives. Profit could not be used as the sole determinant of investment. It followed that the banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions could not be left as the preserve of private enterprise. This was established Labour policy but it had been quietly buried over the years – yet here it was being resurrected in a thunderous reappearance.

This part of the speech broke several taboos. It pitted socialism against capitalism, it placed social objectives above private profit, it made planning superior to free market forces and called for finance to be subject to the state as the guardian of the people. Up to this point economic planning had no place in the political vocabulary of official Ireland because of its association with Soviet communism, yet he was openly talking about the need for a planned economy.

The concept, and indeed the practice, of economic planning was, however, an integral part of the French approach to post-war reconstruction and there had been a UCD seminar on the subject a few years earlier which had excited some economists, such as Professor Paddy Lynch, one of the team assembled by Whitaker to draft the Grey Book. But planification, as the French called it, was a step too far for conservative Ireland because it rejected the allocative law guiding investment decisions and so struck at the heart of the “laissez faire” system.

He anticipated the conventional criticism that planning was totalitarian by saying “we

are democrats, not bureaucrats” and hence the planning process would be open and participative. We Irish, he went on, would have to use “our collective intelligence by deciding together on what was most important and by giving it priority”. That, of course, was anathema to conventional economic theory and had clearly drawn a line between Labour and the two conservative parties.

His advocacy of a planned economy must have caused tremors in Merrion Street but surely nothing to the reaction in Dame Street, the heart of the financial sector.

## The Structure of Government

He then turned to the structure of government because if the government is to be involved in planning as a continuous activity then it must be geared for dealing with a huge range of problems efficiently. Speaking from his twenty-six years experience as a member of the Dáil Éireann he questioned its suitability for the task of running the economy.

The existing system made no allowance for recruiting the best brains available either for specific periods or specific tasks. There should be more interchange between the public and private sectors. Indeed, it was worth examining the advisability of drawing Government members from the Oireachtas alone, which would mean recasting the Westminster model we had inherited. He advocated the reorganisation of Departmental responsibilities and the consolidation of responsibility for semi-state bodies. The public service must itself be efficient.

In a telling passage he warned that unless the role of government was seen as that of stimulating growth then “every attempt at innovation will be resisted”. For its part, the Labour Party committed itself to using the state as the instrument for growth, drawing up a national plan, extending state activities,

guiding and controlling investment and offering a different motive for enterprise to that of the present system.

This section was to prove prophetic because on entering government in the seventies, the resistance to change was palpable and in many cases proved insuperable. That was a tragedy given the scale of our economic failure.

## The Welfare Society

Having diagnosed the problem, and having offered a solution to economic failure, Corish next turned to the fundamental question of what sort of society we wanted: an individualist one which reluctantly and inadequately discharged its social responsibilities, or a society based on welfare and equality. He turned his fire on a social system in which, he asserted, there was no equality of opportunity or of rights, no cherishing of all the children of the nation equally. In language that might be familiar now he blasted a society which proclaimed paper equality but did little to offset the consequences of unequal wealth and opportunity.

The choice he emphasised, yet again, was between individualism and socialism, between welfare and want, between a society that set out to achieve equality, as well as freedom, or one that begrudgingly accepted a small portion of social responsibility and closed its eyes to great areas of distress. Again he returned to the question of whether individuals were to fend for themselves in a spirit of competitive hostility or to work together to provide a high level of welfare.

## Socialism

There was much more in that vein leading to the meat of the speech, an open exploration, for the first time in democratic Ireland, of what was meant by socialism. In a piece of home-spun wisdom he said socialism was not “a magic word that will dispel all evil simply by being uttered”. This section of the speech was the most carefully

researched and was the product of conversations with leading thinkers, the most prominent of whom was the Dominican friar, Father Fergal O'Connor.

In fact, Father O'Connor wrote him a long treatise on socialism after one of their conversations and many of its ideas were incorporated into the speech, particularly the basic beliefs of socialism, such as freedom, including economic freedom; equality; the equitable distribution of wealth; co-operation, rather than competition, which only bred cruelty and diminished social responsibility; efficiency, because private enterprise was inherently inefficient in meeting social goals. The result was a comprehensive and accessible mini-treatise on the meaning of socialism which still stands the test to time. It was, of course, music to the ears of the delegates.

## The Party

The last section dealt with the party, which is the way he structured all his Leader's Addresses to the Annual Conference. In fact, this section is a speech within a speech and is devoted entirely to politics. Here again he took an unexpected approach and began by openly admitting that the prospect of a Labour government lacked credibility but that the local election successes a few months earlier meant that Labour had emerged as a balanced party, geographically and socially, and could no longer be ignored as a national force, as it had been to date. By dint of its successes it was now the party of the future.

Ireland, he said, had been a country ruled by tired old men, bitter and frustrated by their failures, who had sunk into an apathy which had infected public life, business, commerce, agriculture and the arts. Now they were gone. A new era was at hand and people had different aspirations and new attitudes, the primitive belief in the infallibility of one party had died out. His personal credo was that when people asked "what is politics all about" then Labour's future

would be assured. But by way of preparation it had to initiate what he called "the great debate on the future of the Labour movement and its objectives".

That is what the New Republic speech was all about. It was the first step in the intellectual renewal of the Labour movement. Quite properly, he returned to the past in order to plan the future. "We are heirs to a tradition of brave struggle" which he categorised defiantly as "the defence of working class rights": he invoked the Defenders of the 18th century, the '98 Rising, Tone, the Fenians, 1913 and, of course, 1916.

He called on all to rally to this call, castigating those who had held back, such as the trade unions, who had failed Connolly and Larkin, rural supporters who were satisfied with partial success, young urban radicals who criticised from the outside and the party at large which had fallen victim of cynicism. He finished on a high note, as he always did.

"I am convinced that the people will accept this alternative of the New Republic. We have embarked on a noble adventure..... Comrades, let us go forward together".

At which point the delegates arose and gave him a prolonged standing ovation. The conference was euphoric, said one report, and the atmosphere ecstatic. We know what happened afterwards, but it was enough to have dreamed. The core task of a Leader is to inspire with a noble vision. That he had done.

We who worked with Brendan Corish were privileged to have shared in the noble adventure he launched in Liberty Hall with his speech on "The New Republic".



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