



‘The Left Speaks’ Opening Remarks

What does being on the Left in Northern Ireland mean and what are the political priorities?

Being on the Left is not a lifestyle choice. It’s not about tee shirts and slogans. To be on the Left requires adopting a considered political position based on a serious and informed critique of our society.

People and parties of the Left are more likely to support and champion social change – but not exclusively. They are more likely to campaign on human rights issues – but they are not necessarily on their own. They are characteristically more progressive on issues such as immigration and multi-culturalism - but again these are not views that they own independently of others.

For many people ‘the left’ can be seen as a place of counter culture. Its attraction is often that that it defines what it is *not* more clearly than what it *is*. Being ‘on the Left’ – particularly for many young people - allows for opposition to the mainstream, protest, demonstrations and a chance to stick it to authority. In too many cases it can be seen as a phase or a rite of passage that people grow out of.

Others use it as a social differentiator. There can be a certain cachet about being ‘on the left’ – the phrase often used as a catch all for anyone who didn’t support Margaret Thatcher or vote for Donald Trump. But when tested it’s likely to be meaningless and vacuous.

Being on ‘The Left’ has of course long been used as a device for gathering working class votes. Very often the phrase has been used to conceal an entirely different kind of politics as anyone who voted for New Labour can testify. We’ll come to some examples closer to home later on.

One of the main ‘difficulties’ about being the Left is that anyone can claim to be so and many do. The acid test, the touchstone and the confirmation of course comes not with the claims but with the realities. It’s not what people and parties claim to be – it’s what they are that counts. Don’t listen to the rhetoric – examine the policies.

Being in favour of a women’s right to choose doesn’t confirm you as left wing. Opposing racism isn’t enough of itself to establish left credentials. Opposing the right wing doesn’t automatically put you on the left. For many though this is often the

depth of their left wing qualifications. Research by *The Journal of Public Economics* even went as far as to suggest the better looking you are the more likely you are to be on the political right!

Liberals, social democrats, environmentalists, nationalists and some shades of unionism all make claims that they are of the Left. The left, as I mentioned earlier, is not about a lifestyle, it's not about single issues or on-trend causes.

To be credible, to be meaningful and to be relevant real Left politics has to be based on a class analysis of society. It has to have as its core principles a political conviction that working people must have control of the means of production, distribution and exchange and that the state - not the free unregulated market - is the vehicle best suited to delivering jobs, infrastructure, housing, education and health and social care services.

It is class politics that differentiates the left from all other political philosophies and class politics that differentiates between those who claim to be on the left and those who actually are. It is class politics, not identity or cultural politics, which really shape our world

On a day to day basis and in the real lives of ordinary people those positions mean little in practical terms – although they must always remain the bedrock on which the policies of the left are based.

In Northern Ireland today the left must be clear about its position. It needs to be socialist, as in its policies on social and economic issues. It needs to be secular in its clear separation of church and state and it needs to be anti-sectarian and opposed to all artificial and manufactured divisions in society. That means arguing that there are not two communities in Northern Ireland but one. Already I suspect we are losing some 'leftists'.

To be on the left in Northern Ireland means leaving the European Union. I said on this platform last year that no principled socialist could possibly argue for anything other than a Left Exit from the European Union. Nothing has changed my mind on that – in fact that position has become even clearer.

On the economy the Left position has to be for the development of indigenous manufacturing and service sector jobs. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) takes the money and runs. It does not provide a platform for long term development and very often offers assembly work or low paid, part time, low skilled employment.

On housing the left must confirm the state's role as the primary provider and guardian of high quality, affordable public housing stock.

On education we must see students as an investment in society, not as a commodity. Education should be free at the point of delivery and supply an educated, skilled, informed and debt free workforce.

We must strive to challenge racism, sectarianism, misogyny and homophobia.

We must have regard and offer support to similar struggles across the globe. The Left is international.

We must welcome whatever support we can get in achieving all these tasks but unless we address the class nature of our society, unless we organise our political response on a class basis then we will be little more than well intentioned do-gooders.

For some that will go a little way to appeasing their social conscience but it will not address, challenge, overcome and replace the pernicious evils of capitalist society and the misery, missed opportunities, thwarted potential, exploitation and human suffering that it produces.

That is the real task of the left. In Belfast, Birmingham, Berlin, Boston or Buenos Aires – the issues are the same, the struggles are the same and the causes are the same.

If the left is to speak, if the left has anything to say then it has to be that we must we not only acknowledge the class basis of our society but that we must work tirelessly towards its revolutionary transformation - at home and abroad.

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