

POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES FOR THE PEOPLE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

A talk by Mr. Brendan Harkin to the Irish Association at Queen's University, Belfast
on 14th September 1972.

Although I am General Secretary of the Public Service Alliance I am not here in that capacity. This is a very sensitive topic for public servants, but the views which I now express are not necessarily those of any public servant or public service trade union. My talk reflects my own thinking. The Northern Ireland Committee of I.C.T.U., of which I am a member is currently in process of preparing its own consultative document on the structures of government for Northern Ireland. The NIC has no party, political affiliations.

The Committee knows that many of its social, economic and industrial policies can only be achieved through political processes, and few organisations are more directly concerned with the structures of government.

I must make it clear that the trade unions know better than most that a change in machinery is less important than a change in men's minds. We are here primarily concerned with machinery but one particular trade union objective - the right to work - is crucial.

ICTU has always recognised that Northern Ireland is constituted as part of the UK not to be altered except by democratic means. It rejects the use of violence to achieve political ends and condemns those who murder and destroy. But it recognises the imperative need for democratic procedures and institutions so that all citizens may pursue their political objectives without fear of intimidation or unfair discrimination. My suggestions are framed with that object.

The parliamentary body should be a Northern Ireland Assembly with an elected membership of not less than eighty and with Committees of the Assembly responsible for each of the following seven departments: Finance should be responsible for the present financial functions of the Ministry of Finance but not its Works Division: Health, Welfare and Social Security for the functions of the Ministry of Health and Social Services, with the exception of the labour affairs department: Manpower and Economic

Development for the whole field of economic development including labour affairs department of the Ministry of Health & Social Services: Education for the functions of the Ministry of Education: Agriculture for the work of the Ministry of Agriculture: Environment for the whole field of physical development including the present functions of the Ministry of Development, the works divisions of the Ministries of Finance and Health and Social Services and the forestry division of the Ministry of Agriculture, and Public Service for the management of the entire public service including the civil service, local government, the police and traffic wardens etc, excluding recruitment.

This is, I would claim a rationalisation of functions based on the experience of close working with a number of departments over the past eight years.

Manpower planning is an integral and vital part of economic development, and would remove the unhelpful link between the "dole" and employment services, which reduces confidence in these services. It is also concerned with projected requirements. The centralisation of all the agencies concerned with industrial training and employment placement would be helpful, so this department should take over the functions of the Youth Employment Service and the Training Executive, while retaining Industrial Training Boards.

Social services should be co-ordinated so that the special needs of the people will be catered for by an all-embracing service specialising in humanitarian work. Offices of such a department could be much more localised giving the people easier access to expert advice in times of need.

The Department of Environment would lead to the much more efficient use of the specialist skills of planners, architects, engineers, surveyors, etc. We could co-ordinate physical development, including urban renewal, amenity programmes, conservations, housing, roads, etc. This Department could launch and sustain public works and direct labour programmes to provide much-needed employment.

The Public Service Department would be responsible for all management aspects of the public service, but responsibility for determining entry qualifications and for recruitment would fall to a Public Service Commission, referred to later. The head of this department should be the Permanent Head of a unified Public Service. This arrangement would put all public servants in one category. It would emphasise the protective and public service role of the police. This important Department should come under the direct control of the Executive Council of the Assembly.

There should be AREA BOARDS for health and welfare, education and libraries to consist of Assembly Members, District Councillors and Neighbourhood Committee members as well as special interest appointees. Such Boards should have a voting majority of elected representatives of the people. to ensure democratic control.

District Councils for local government should proceed as planned. This process is now so far advanced that further changes in the new 26 District Council structure would only lead to undesirable difficulties, but the new arrangements should however be reviewed in a few years time.

NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMITTEES should be created, possibly based on wards or voting districts of the District Councils. District Councillors could be ex-officio members of their appropriate Neighbourhood Committee.

The new committees would give the people a more effective say in the affairs of their locality and provide opportunities for the involvement of the new leaders who have come to the fore in many localities. Local opinion could be ascertained and consulted on such questions as redevelopment, policing, local amenities, social service facilities etc.

These Committees should also be given some executive authority in local affairs, and could play a very important part in establishing a stable state of public security by helping to recruit local people to the police and the police reserve.

All elections to the above Assembly, Councils and Committees should be by proportional representation.

Assembly members would be required to spend much more time on government affairs because of the work of Committees and Boards. To attract capable and responsible persons they would have to be adequately paid for a full-time political job. Members of district councils and neighbourhood committees should be paid their expenses; in addition they should be afforded time off work without loss of pay. Their employers could be reimbursed from public funds.

There should be a unified public service with all employees employed by central government. This could best serve the public interest and employees could acquire experience in any branch of the public service. District Council staff should be treated similarly.

A public service commission should be set up for recruitment for the public service on lines similar to the existing Civil Service Commission. This would ensure that all public servants are recruited on merit alone and there is a uniformity of standards of qualification throughout the public service. This would make for more efficient use of staff and eliminate wasteful competition among various branches of the service. District Councils and Neighbourhood Committees could be given a voice in the selection of their own key staff.

The Chairmanships of Departmental Committees should be allocated on a proportional representation basis and the Chairman so appointed should form the Executive Council of the Assembly. Unlike our Cabinet it would not consist solely of members of any one political party but would draw on the representatives of all sections of the community and would give a major but not an over-riding share of authority to a major party.

In their individual capacities Chairmen of Departmental Committees would take over most of the functions previously carried out by Cabinet Ministers, answering to the Assembly on behalf of their Committee and Department.

Protection of the various minorities' rights on certain sensitive issues could be achieved at the different government levels by a mixture of proportional representation and minimum vote requirements.

A community Relations Board and a Commission (equally independent and powerful) should be responsible for the observance of Human Rights legislation based on international charters. They should conciliate, effectively investigate alleged malpractices and monitor progress. This would guarantee to all persons freedom from unfair discrimination or intimidation on grounds of colour, politics, race, religion or sex.

State security and the administration of justice should be the responsibility of the Westminster Government to assure equality before the law to all citizens of the United Kingdom and remove the obstacle to community government. Trade Union policy includes the repeal of the Special Power Act 1922 and states that UK emergency powers already exist to deal with any of the requirements of state security, to remove the present conflicts which exist between Northern Ireland law and the international human rights obligations of the UK.

An Industrial Development Authority should be set up along the lines recommended in the Economic Council report. Private enterprise operating within the rules of the market economy cannot alone hope to solve the unemployment problem. State enterprise must be encouraged, and the IDS could co-operate with a similar body being advocated for the Republic by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

A Council of Ireland along the lines envisaged in the Government of Ireland Act, 1920 should be established, possibly with a neutral Chairman appointed by the Council of Europe.

An All-Ireland Economic Council would encourage co-operation in the field of economic planning. We will have common problems with the whole of Ireland as an under-developed area of the EEC (The money available for regional policy in the EEC is less than what Northern Ireland alone receives in subsidies from the UK). This is specially important for border areas cut off from their natural hinter land. It could eliminate harmful competition for foreign investment and lead to the more efficient use of scarce expensive resources.

An All-Ireland Tourist Board makes so much sense that it requires no special advocacy.

How to fill the position of Chairman of the Northern Ireland Assembly is a problem. A local person would have to be broadly acceptable to most people. Election to the Chair could be made subject to obtaining 75% of the vote of the Assembly. It might be necessary to involve an outside, possibly international, agency in choosing a Chairman. Alternatively the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, or another person appointed by the UK Prime Minister of the day, might act. This would involve Westminster directly in day to day affairs, reflect changes in UK Government policy and might encourage a more rational interest here in the general elections for Westminster.

Structure and legislation alone will not cure our ills. There must be a change of attitudes, a tolerance of differences and a determination to achieve social justice for all. The society that violates a man's dignity contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. A man has a right to work, a right to live in peace, a right to freedom of belief and expression. We deny him these rights at our own peril.

Discussion following Mr. Harkin's paper

The main issues raised are listed under 5 headings, Mr. Harkin's answer is given after each question.

1. POLITICAL

Q. Do you see Northern Ireland continuing within the U.K. indefinitely?

A. I, personally, would hope in the long term for an all-Ireland settlement, but only if it could be attained by democratic means. Partition created two sectarian states, the needs of each have to be worked at separately; in the meantime we had better learn to live together.

Q. Since we must start trusting each other would it not be a retrograde step to insist that the Chairman of the Assembly be elected on 75% of the vote?

A. Ideally the Chair should be filled by agreement, but it is essential to move away from one-party rule by any section. I am suggesting one way this could be done.

Q. How would the Chairman of Departmental Committees be elected?

A. In proportion to party representation in the Assembly. This might mean that parties obtaining less than 10% of the popular preference vote would not have a Chairmanship.

2 PUBLIC SERVICE

Q. How would the Public Service Commission be manned and is there not a danger of the Civil Service becoming a self-perpetuating body?

A. Some Civil Servants will probably be needed on the Commission. The important thing is that it shall be composed of people of independent minds, divided from politics.

3. INDUSTRY

Q. Could public control of business be possible while a Conservative Government holds office in U.K?

A. I am not advocating complete public control. State industries alone are not enough. What we need is the establishment of an expert organisation to look for growth industries.

A. What about profit sharing?

A. Yes, but perhaps something more radical, such as a development tax, is needed.

4. DISCRIMINATION

Q. To redress the present balance must there not at first be a disproportionate favouring of Catholics?

A. A working party, under the Chairmanship of Mr. Channon, is being set up to consider this whole matter. It will gather evidence to see how big the problem really is. There may have to be preferential treatment especially in training schemes.

5. NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMITTEES

Q. Could you give some more detail about Neighbourhood Committees, especially with regard to their executive authority?

A. This needs research. The aim is to build trust at all levels. Where an office is to be filled P.S.C. might put forward short list from which Committee would make final choice. The Committee could be allocated grants for local improvements and be held responsible for their allocation.

Mr. Ritchie Ryan (F.G. spokesman on the North) was present as a guest and, at the invitation of the Chairman, contributed to the discussion. He explained that he was in Belfast because his party felt it must respond to the very specific declarations of the wish to foster North/South Co-operation made in the five policy statements of Northern parties. He was at the meeting as a private individual and as such he felt that, unless the Irish people accepted that in this island there were two groups wishing to live under different flags, there was no way out of the present morass. He agreed with previous speakers that it might be necessary to appear to be sectarian in order to avoid sectarian discrimination and pointed to the history of the Lebanon as giving some hope for the future.