
Material

Democratic Left

1996

Secretary's Report to the Annual Delegate Conference, Royal Marine Hotel, Dun Laoghaire, May 10th-11th., 1996.

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Democratic Left

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Annual Delegate Conference

The launch of... in the Department of... the Family, the Anti-Poverty... the elderly, and the demystifying... rules and circulars... understanding of the problems... about... It also breaks the long line of Ministers for Social Welfare...

Secretary's Report

Secretary's Report... November... directly to the... receiving the...

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Royal Marine Hotel, Dun Laoghaire
May 10th - 11th, 1996

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SETTING THE AGENDA

PLACING issues like long-term unemployment and anti-poverty measures at the top of the government's agenda, the first firm determination by any government to take meaningful action on Sellafield and a reversal of the run down of public housing programmes are among the major achievements of DL in government over the past year.

Given the party's size as the junior partner in the current three party government, the Opposition's confusion on whether to condemn DL for 'running the government' or 'failing to deliver' bears testimony to the party's workrate during 1995 and early '96.

The launch of numerous initiatives by the party Leader in the Department of Social Welfare, such as the Commission on the Family, the Anti-Poverty Strategy, the Task Force on Security of the Elderly, and the demystifying of many of the Department's rules and circulars showed that, given commitment and understanding of the problems, real change can be brought about in a short time. It also broke the long line of Ministers for Social Welfare presiding over cuts and secret memoranda.

Important steps

Similarly DL emphasis on the necessity of tackling long-term unemployment, firmed up as a result of an open forum last November involving organisations and individuals working directly in the area, has led to this long neglected issue finally receiving the attention it deserves.

The various measures announced in the '96 Budget represent an important first set of steps in reversing a trend, which has become apparent in Ireland and many developed countries, of accepting that unemployment for very large numbers of people "will always be with us."

Clearly first steps only have been taken. And the process of change and progress may at times seem slow and difficult. But the

party can take satisfaction in having at last brought a number of its core demands towards fruition, with the target of achieving further development in the year ahead. Faced with the contrasting demands within the different sectors of Irish society and the influence of decisions at EU and international institution level, the task of bringing about positive change in Irish society will continue to require a full commitment and determination from the party at all levels.

The role of party members and branches in bringing about such change is essential. Perhaps nowhere was this clearer than in last November's battle to finally provide divorce legislation for the tens of thousands of people whose marriages have ended. Given our size DL's contribution to the 'yes' campaign - from our members and branches right up to TD level - was indisputably the most substantial of any party.

The Year Ahead

May 1997 may well see us in the midst of a general election campaign. Indeed many of our target constituencies are already moving into battle mode - the past fortnight has seen Sen. Joe Sherlock in Cork East and Cllr Catherine Murphy in Kildare North selected as candidates at local party conventions. A target figure of at least 10 Dail seats at the next election is both realistic and achievable and would confirm Democratic Left as an even more substantial force in Irish politics and in any potential new government.

In this regard all our constituencies must look to expansion, recruitment of new members and establishment of new branches. The past year has seen some noticeable development in this regard, with new party organisations established as far apart as Phibsboro, New Ross, Tinahely and Cobh. Such new branches bring much needed ideas, personnel, issues and direction into the organisation and should form a priority in constituency planning.

Campaigning

Officials at the French embassy clearly took refuge in the "Diplomats Guide to 'How do we handle this one' Situations," when confronted by government Ministers from DL joining the picket line outside their offices following resumption of French nuclear tests in the Pacific. Similarly the broad political establishment has been taken aback at the huge turnout to meetings organised by Catherine Murphy in Kildare on the issues of planning and rezoning. Recent political sniping at the forthright position of DL in Limerick on issues such as the exclusivity of the local Civic Week led to Editorial defence of Cllr John Ryan in the local press.

Maintaining our cutting edge in representing the real demands of local communities is the best guarantee of our continued development and success.

Immediate Challenge

The most immediate challenge for DL, however, is to influence developments in Northern Ireland towards peace and dialogue and away from division and violence. The forthcoming elections and subsequent talks offer the opportunity for a comprehensive move towards peaceful progress in the region. DL will be highlighting these demands in the lead up to the May 30 ballot.

The party is also continuing to develop its links with parties at European level and will shortly host a meeting of new left parties from the continent and Scandinavia. The forthcoming Irish EU Presidency will offer an opportunity for a renewed emphasis on demands for a 'Social Europe.' Contacts with the British Labour Party have been maintained on Northern Ireland and other issues and these may be all the more important in the context of political outcomes in Britain.

Little time, then, for rest. The coming weekend, however, will provide time to discuss, plan and reflect on the party's undoubted achievements in government to date, on honing up our policies

HEALTH

The Health Committee of Democratic Left has concentrated on two principal areas during the year - women's health and drug related issues respectively.

In the case of women's health, the Committee's work was mainly reactive. The Department of Health published a discussion document on Women's Health in 1995 and engaged in wide consultation. The Health Committee was represented at a conference in U.C.D. which was part of the discussion and consultation process and which drew together representatives of NGOs, academia, etc. concerned with women's health issues. Subsequently the Health Committee made a formal submission on behalf of the party to the Department of Health. The submission comprised a review of the Department's document as well as copies of three previously published Democratic Left papers, i.e. "Women's Life, Health and Welfare": "Proposals for a Health Strategy" and "Lifting the Veil"

The second area of work - drugs related issues - was more proactive. It was considered important that the Party produce a position paper on its policies in this area. Following consultations with a number of experts (Party members and others) a draft discussion paper was prepared by the Health Committee. The Paper concentrates on demand reduction and (health) treatment of drug users. It is hoped to publish this paper soon, together with one which looks at supply reduction, as a discussion document for the Party consideration.

□ **Brid Nolan**

EDUCATION

The recent success of the Listening Day on Education on April 27th, organised in conjunction with DL, in Limerick, was encouraging for the Education Committee. The party President Proinsias De Rossa was present as was Cllr. John Ryan and invited speakers. Those present were pleased with the fact they had access to the Minister for the day and that he made valid suggestions to them regarding their organisations. They were also happy that he was prepared to take on board the remarks they made.

It is not always easy for people to travel for a seminar but we were quite happy with the turnout and the media coverage arising from it. A report will be drawn up as soon as all information from the day has been received.

We have made every effort to circulate information that comes to the Committee and to look for suggestions on policy documents and seminars, and some have been forthcoming. We are, at the moment, in the process of drawing up a programme of events for the months ahead and would appreciate input and suggestions from all interested. It is not easy to meet as often as would be desired but the committee can always be contracted through Mags Murphy c/o Head Office.

□ **Mags Murphy**

OIREACHTAS

The challenge facing Kathleen Lynch, Eric Byrne and Joe Sherlock since Democratic Left entered Government has been to ensure that the party maintains a strong identity in the Dail and Seanad from the back benches. Since our establishment four years ago, Democratic Left TDs have acquired a reputation as being among the finest performers in the Dail. Our Ministers are continuing that tradition in Government, while our two backbenchers and Senator have consolidated the party's reputation in the day-to-day business of the Oireachtas.

In the Dail, Kathleen Lynch and Eric Byrne have spoken on every important piece of legislation to come before the House, and have tabled adjournment debates on a variety of issues ranging from ground rents, to East Timor to drugs. In addition, they have made full use of Dail questions to raise matters of national importance, and to elicit information on local issues which may be of use to DL representatives throughout the country.

The best performance, of course, is only as good as the attendant publicity. The party press office sent out over 500 press releases during the past year, and organised press events on a variety of topics, ranging from nuclear testing to low pay.

Democratic Left played an active role during the divorce referendum campaign, with our public representatives speaking throughout the country and issuing statements on various aspects. This activity was reflected in a high media profile both nationally and locally.

As a socialist party, Democratic Left has always espoused the values of international solidarity. Since the last ADC, Kathleen Lynch attended an inter-parliamentary conference on East Timor in Lisbon, while Eric Byrne went as an observer to monitor the Palestinian elections. In addition, our TDs have

placed human rights concerns on issues ranging from landmines to the plight of the Ogoni people on the parliamentary agenda, both by way of adjournment debates and parliamentary question.

As the only Democratic Left Senator, Joe Sherlock has spoken on a wide range of issues in Seanad Eireann, ranging from Irish Steel to hospital services. During the year he obtained substantial publicity on the issues of a local lottery, which was covered on Prime Time and in the national press.

Our town back benchers and Senator have ensured that Democratic Left maintains a high profile in the daily business of the Oireachtas. However, they need back-up and assistance from the membership. Much of the work of the Oireachtas is very technical, and we still need to examine ways in which the party's individual members and committees might become more involved through the provision of research, background material and expert advice.

□ Alex Klemm

INTERNATIONAL

During the past year international work developed in the context of the party's participation in Government, its role in the New European Left Forum(NELF) and the stance it should take towards the forthcoming EU Intergovernmental Conference(IGC).

The present Government has the most radical set of foreign policies of any Government since the foundation of the state. DL played a central role in establishing these priorities during the negotiation of the Programme for Government. While not represented in the Dail Committee on Foreign Affairs, the party has monitored developments in foreign policy and intervened in some major issues. The committee has supported the Government during the year on such issues as East Timor, nuclear and conventional disarmament(including landmines), Rwanda and Chechnya. The party was active in opposing the French nuclear tests and the executions in Nigeria.

The major foreign policy event was the first ever comprehensive White Paper on Foreign Policy. This radical departure in Irish politics has set out the options and trends in Irish foreign policy. Irish foreign policy has been made a public affair for the first time. The International Committee played an active role in the development of the White Paper, from attending the initial public seminars to making several detailed submissions to Government during its final drafting. Many of DL's concerns from Disarmament to Development and from third world debt to perspectives towards the EU, have left their imprint on this policy document.

The party has maintained its high profile in the development of the New European Left Forum. This initially loose gathering of New Left Forces and parties is gradually taking on a more distinct identity and DL has played a prominent role in this and will host the NELF conference in Dublin this year.

On European policy and the forthcoming IGC, the International Committee has developed a clear policy and set priorities for the party, concentrating on employment and social policy aspects of EMU, development of European citizen's social, civil and human rights and the identification of a peaceful but effective security policy which rejects any take-over of European securities by militarist alliances. The party will maintain a high profile on European policy throughout Ireland's Presidency of the EU and press home our policies for a people's Europe and firm any opposition to any tendency towards a "fortress Europe".

□ **Philip O' Connor.**

NORTHERN IRELAND

At last year's Annual Conference, the Northern Ireland Committee launched a discussion document on the future of policing in Northern Ireland in a context of hope for progress created by the cease-fires. Throughout the year the party went on to put together a considered response to the Framework document, urging that we all build on the optimism evident during President Bill Clinton's visit. Previous to that DL members were involved in organising the "last" Peacetrain from Dublin to Belfast.

Our presence at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation enabled our organisation to put forward our position and spokespersons such as Paddy Joe McClean, Seamus Lynch and Mary McMahon inputted into the Forum's Report. The Northern Ireland Committee met regularly, facilitating involvement from southern members, and reported to the party's NEC meetings. Unfortunately we have witnessed a breakdown of the IRA cease-fire in recent months but we are working hard to point out that the potential for peace and progress still remains.

The AGM of Northern Ireland Democratic Left members took place on March 9th last in Belfast. We were convening in the middle of the talks process around Stormount, in which DL took a full part. The Northern Irish elections, due at the end of May, concentrated the minds of those present on the chance for us to put forward candidates, win representation and ensure that DL avails of a great opportunity to elevate our influence on political developments. Our councillor from Dungannon, Gerry Cullen, has been appointed Director of elections and a raft of candidates has been put in place to seek a mandate for Democratic Left.

We look forward to reporting a more peaceful and progressive political environment to next year's Annual Delegate Conference, with additional elected representatives from Northern Ireland.

CULTURE

The Chairperson of the Cultural Committee represented the party at a major arts conference in Cork in June 1995.

The Committee drew up, submitted and circulated the party's response to the Green Paper on Broadcasting.

The Committee has made contact with representatives of several arts and cultural organisations and is working with them on various issues, mainly in the area of community employment.

Members of the Committee are involved in the organisation of a policy workshop on Community Employment.

The Committee is currently reviewing the party's arts policy as part of the overall policy review which is being undertaken by the policy committees.

□ **Lorraine Glendenning**

JUSTICE & CIVIL LIBERTIES

The Justice & Civil Liberties Committee, which was established earlier this year, grew out of the ad-hoc Constitutional Review Committee, which prepared the party's submission to the Constitutional Review Group. In the past couple of months, the Committee prepared a position paper on the issue of bail as well as drafting a number of recommendations on matters ranging from reform of the Prison Service to developing the system of Community Service.

The incoming committee will face a number of challenges : as well as developing Democratic Left's response to increasing concerns over law and order; the party's representative on the proposed All Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution will require substantial back-up.

□ Alex Klemm