

# **Northern Ireland Policy Document**

## **We Must All See Off Sectarianism before We Advance**

**October 2005**

The Good Friday Agreement of April 1998 is the most recent political agreement designed to accommodate differences between unionism and nationalism, to allow for a political system which defines and protects the human rights of everyone, to guarantee a fair and just system of government in Northern Ireland, to reflect the wider political interests of North-South relations and also to reflect relations between Britain and Ireland.

The basic tenets of the Agreement are not all that original - devolved government within Northern Ireland, North-South institutions, robust human rights legislation, demilitarisation, reform of policing and the principle of consent in relation to the constitutional status.

Much of the Agreement's philosophical underpinning can be traced to earlier attempts at resolving the problem, such as social and economic reform of the 1970s, the Sunningdale Agreement of 1974, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, among other things. The 1998 Agreement was different in so far as it also included representatives of loyalist and nationalist paramilitaries. The unspoken quid-pro-quo was an end to all terrorist campaigns in return for comprehensive reforms and the release of prisoners.

The Agreement has been accompanied by movement indicating that substantial progress has been made in the direction of the standing down of paramilitary organisations and the ending of almost 30 years of violence.

The Agreement won the support of a majority of political parties North and South, unionist and nationalist, and was endorsed by the people of Ireland in separate referendums North and South.

The Agreement promised a new era. But it is true that seven years after its signing and eleven years since the first paramilitary ceasefires, euphoria and optimism has been replaced by growing disillusionment and pessimism about the future of Northern Ireland society.

There are a number of reasons why. Ineptitude on the part of the British and Irish governments in implementing the Agreement is one. Conflicting interpretations of the Agreement and its meaning among its supporters is another. The continued existence and activity of paramilitary organisations is another factor. But central to the continuing political antagonism between unionists and nationalists is the persistence of sectarianism.

The Agreement itself is deficient in this respect. It is built on the acceptance of a divided community as something permanent and unchangeable (thus the requirement to register in the Assembly as either unionist or nationalist and the requirement for parallel majorities on key voting issues).

A valid criticism of the implementing of the Agreement has been that it is more concerned with managing conflict than transforming and integrating Northern Ireland society for the better. There exists no vision or strategy to tackle sectarianism and to promote the concept of citizenship as an alternative to religious and historical tradition. Too often government and statutory bodies end up sustaining and reinforcing sectarianism.

Sectarianism more than anything else stands out as the greatest obstacle to the realisation of a new society in Northern Ireland which so many hope and long for. Much progress has been made in Northern Ireland, not least on the security front. People are no longer subject to the threat of death and destruction at the hands of paramilitaries on the scale we experienced into the 1990s. Many lives have undoubtedly been saved.

But for many citizens who cherished high hopes of the Agreement leading to a recasting of sectarian mindsets, the disappointment has been that, at the level of attitudes, so much remains unchanged. The people of Northern Ireland are now more deeply divided than ever. Sectarian antagonisms between Catholics and Protestants are as intense as ever. Recent studies show that sectarian attitudes and practices are present even among children as young as five or six years. This is at the root of the current political instability and is the main reason for the present failure to implement the institutions of the Agreement. Unless and until the issue of sectarianism is tackled in a comprehensive way in Northern Ireland, we will never realise the vision of a new society which leaves behind the out-dated attitudes and prejudices which have been the cause of so much misery and despair.

The Workers' Party approaches this question as a class party. The Workers' Party is a socialist party, committed to the unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. Our history in Northern Ireland is one of constant and consistent opposition to

sectarianism in all its shapes and forms. We recognise sectarianism as something which is deeply rooted in Northern Ireland (in politics, socially, culturally and in religion). We have at all times opposed it. Unaltered sectarian practices, beliefs and dispositions pose a formidable challenge to the realisation of the kind of new society the Agreement anticipates.

Tackling sectarianism requires political will. It is not enough to condemn individual sectarian acts such as the burning of churches or church halls. That is a narrow definition of sectarianism and allows either of the religious or political camps to point the finger of blame at the other while absolving themselves of any association with sectarianism or responsibility for its presence. Violent sectarian acts or riots at interface areas are to be roundly and rightly condemned. But sectarianism is present in almost all facets of life. Political parties exist on the basis that they appeal to and serve the interests of only one section of a religiously divided society. The education system is sectarian because it is organised on religious division. Even our housing is deeply divided and very often what is allowed to pass as tradition and culture is nothing more than naked sectarianism.

It is time to question the validity of much of what is accepted as cultural and traditional difference. Cultural plurality is an undeniable feature of human experience and love of one's culture is entirely appropriate. The problem arises when this love takes extravagant and exclusive forms which deny our common humanity and work against the possibility of members of the same society sharing a common citizenship.

Sectarianism, like its near relations racism and xenophobic nationalism, involves intolerant attitudes and actions that exaggerate and exploit differences. It creates antagonistic divisions in its extreme preoccupation with its own religious/cultural political interests and sense of superiority.

The Workers' Party has long believed that the people of Northern Ireland have far more in common than that which divides.

The Workers' Party will promote citizenship as the political category that provides the best antidote to sectarianism. Thinking of ourselves as free, equal citizens enables us to appreciate what we share in common despite our differences. The Workers' Party will campaign for practical steps which can be taken immediately to oppose sectarianism and promote greater integration in Northern society. These include greater support in a planned and systematic way to promote integrated education, specifically the integration of teacher-training colleges - the only sector of third-level university education not integrated. Similarly, it means more support for integrated housing to enable those who have indicated a desire to live in integrated areas the means to do so.

The Workers' Party supports all positive initiatives to tackle sectarianism and promote citizenship. Particularly we applaud the work done by the Irish Football Association in tackling sectarianism in sport. Initiatives such as the campaign for an Institute for Citizenship and Reconciliation, the First Step Campaign, the work of the trade union movement, and others in arts and culture must be strengthened and expanded.

A comprehensive strategy to see-off sectarianism is a necessary pre-requisite to building a new political order in Northern Ireland. For almost 30 years now The Workers' Party has laid out the fundamentals of such a new order. We see a local devolved Assembly in which local people can exercise the fullest democratic control over all their own affairs. A Bill of Rights must be the guarantor of individual and group rights and as the democratic underpinning of any local assembly. There must be peace and an end to all paramilitary groups and demilitarisation of society by the state and the agreed North-South institutions. The constitutional future of the people of Northern Ireland must be decided by the people of Northern Ireland.

The Workers Party believes that the emergence of a centre left block or alliance of democratic, progressive and anti-sectarian opinion would be a powerful challenge to the sectarian quagmire which has led to the present political paralysis.

As long as the Executive in any future Assembly is made up of parties allocated executive positions on the basis of a sectarian headcount then instability and sectarian confrontation and antagonism will continue to prevail.

There is a need to create a new political space which is neither unionist nor nationalist, Catholic nor Protestant. This should be the political priority for the Workers' Party and all those concerned for the future of Northern Ireland.

Consider the terrible and woeful human cost exacted by those who have been engaged in armed campaigns. They have finally come to the realisation that progress in Northern Ireland can only come about through agreement.

Thirty years ago The Workers' Party warned as to the consequences of attempts to "bomb a million Protestants into a state that they did not want" and of the inevitable inflaming of sectarian hate. This is exactly what has happened. It will take many years to overcome the bitterness brought on by years of sectarian atrocities directed at the people of Northern Ireland because of their religion, attitudes to policing and continuing preoccupation with flags and symbols. Recent studies have shown that since the ceasefires of 1994 sectarian attitudes have actually increased, resulting in even greater segregation and division in the community.

So for The Workers' Party the main political priority remains the issue of sectarianism. Our appeal is to all those who identify themselves as citizens and refuse to be categorised as Protestant or Catholic, unionist or nationalist. Our appeal is to all

those who care about the building of a new society free from the historical and outdated myths and prejudices which have been the cause of so much pain. Sectarian division has no place in the modern world. Almost all other political forces in Northern Ireland depend on such division for their existence and therefore they perpetrate sectarianism.

Our appeal is to all those, particularly those on the left, who care about the failings of our health service, the shortcomings in education, privatisation of public services and the persistence of deprivation. As a socialist party we know that for decades the working-class in Northern Ireland have suffered because of the lack of attention these vital issues received. For decades the absence of a local devolved assembly led to unaccountable and unelected Direct Rule by Ministers from Westminster.

A local devolved assembly presents an opportunity for the development of class politics in Northern Ireland. The Workers' Party will seek to bring to the fore the common interests of all workers irrespective of religion on all these matters. At the same time a local Assembly presents an opportunity to expose the contradictions within unionism & nationalism, as both are in essence anti-working class.

For the short time that an Assembly has been in existence we have seen examples of this. Despite Ministers being from local parties the local executive continues with the relentless pursuit of privatisation, particularly in health and education. The water charges issue too has its origins in the local executive.

But in spite of all the difficulties and problems associated with implementing the Belfast Agreement, The Workers' Party recognise that it still represents the best opportunity for Peace and political progress in Northern Ireland. The Workers' Party will campaign for changes to those aspects of the Agreement which contribute towards the institutionalisation of sectarianism. We have already stated that no meaningful political progress is possible unless the issue of sectarianism is addressed systematically and strategically.

We cannot leave the future of Northern Ireland to be shaped and developed in the fashion of unionism and nationalism. The Workers' Party will seek to build a political alliance of the centre-left in opposition to the failed sectarian politics of the past. There are many within Northern Ireland who are looking for political leadership and who reject what passes for politics now.

Census figures show that a significant section of the population refuses to be categorised as either unionist or nationalist. Trade union demonstrations and activity indicate a sizeable socialist constituency. The Workers' Party, in spite of recent difficulties, remains as a party with deep roots in society and as a credible and consistent voice of anti-sectarianism and workers' unity. The last European election, when an independent candidate with support from the Workers' Party stood, showed the potential for a centre-left force.

The Workers' Party will therefore in the coming period seek to consult a broad range of democratic and progressive opinion in Northern Ireland with a view to establishing a common programme for democratic, progressive and socialist action.

**Priority issues for the Workers' Party will be:**

- \* The consolidation of peace and an end to all paramilitarism.
- \* A strategy or the eradication of sectarianism.
- \* A system of policing which is fair, impartial, democratic and accountable.
- \* A social and economic programme which protects the most vulnerable and needy in society.
- \* Opposition to privatisation of public services.
- \* The promotion of citizenship.