

THE LIBERTY PROJECT

The Labour Movement and National Reconciliation

Labouring on the Hard Road to National Reconciliation

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I have entitled my address ‘Labouring on the Hard Road to National Reconciliation’ because however much has been achieved over the years since 1916 the are still huge challenges to be faced along the road to national reconciliation towards the kind of united Ireland which informs the SDLP’s vision for our future and which I believe is widely shared across our island.

A century ago two giants of the Irish labour movement bestrode the public stage in Belfast. The first was James Larkin who made a dramatic if brief appearance for several months in 1907. James Connolly was the second whose appearance was also short from late 1910 to early 1914.

Both made a significant impact organising workers to demand improved pay and conditions together with recognition of their rights to union representation. Larkin’s successes were achieved during the troubled year of 1907 when dockers, carters and even policemen went on strike demanding improved pay and working conditions.

Connolly’s successes lay in organising workers, in agitating and bringing them out on strike. The establishment of the ITGWU in the city owes much to his endeavours.

I feel particularly honoured to be asked to address tonight’s meeting because my paternal grand-father and grand uncle, John and Tom Farren knew Connolly and Larkin quite well, were both active in the labour movement in Dublin serving as early labour representatives on Dublin City Council and grand-uncle Tom going on to serve in the Irish Senate from 1922-36.

Of the two leaders, I focus on Connolly because of his role in the 1916 Rising the ninetieth anniversary of which is being commemorated this year.

Amongst the Rising’s leaders Connolly was undoubtedly one of the deepest political thinkers on a par with leading socialist writers of his day in Europe and North America. When he came North he already had a considerable reputation as a labour activist and writer in Ireland, in Britain and in the US.

He arrived in Belfast in 1910, first to organise the Socialist Party of Ireland and then as a union organiser for the ITGWU at Larkin's request. Soon he was leading his first strike in the docks. Success in winning improved pay and conditions gave the ITGWU a huge surge of support. Workers in several sectors were enrolled and the momentum of union action gathered pace.

Connolly railed against the injustices and inequities which kept Belfast workers in virtual slave-like conditions and their families in abject poverty. He passionately wanted to build a strong trade union movement to fight these injustices and he wanted that movement to represent all workers whatever their background and he also wanted to build a united socialist party to campaign politically for workers' rights.

But others were also organising Belfast's workers, some for many more years than Connolly and he didn't always find it easy to work with them. Long-time labour activist Mary Galway led an existing union, the TOSI. She accused Connolly of trying to create a new union which she believed would be predominantly Catholic in its membership. He rejected this proposition but within the Belfast Trades Council at the time it was Mary who had the greater level of support and it was her union that thrived.

Belfast's traditional divisions also loomed in his famous clash with another labour leader William Walker. In this well documented clash Connolly was profoundly self-righteous in his defence of what he regarded as the correct analysis. He was equally vitriolic in his attacks on Walker whom he described as deeply misguided because of his preference for British based unions and for affiliation to the emerging British Labour Party.

How to reconcile or even collaborate effectively with such activists were not questions that Connolly seemed prepared to examine – nor were they. Each remained profoundly self-righteous about his or her approach.

But from the perspective of how to create the conditions for an independent and united Ireland about which Connolly was equally passionate, this failure had profound implications. The odds against collaboration on Connolly's terms were extremely high in the Belfast of the time and despite his many efforts he never really managed to effectively bridge the city's political divide.

Indeed, neither Connolly nor Pearse the other leader of the Rising with a prolific written output, showed in practical terms how the unionist-protestant community could be accommodated as opposed to subsumed in the Ireland of their dreams. To Connolly leaders like Walker were mere lackeys of British imperialism. Some may have been but to say that all were, was to ignore their depth of commitment to the cause of labour and to the need, as they saw it, to fight for workers' rights in a British as well as an Irish context.

Of more critical significance, the leaders of the Rising seem to have given no consideration to what it was in nationalism that unionists found objectionable, especially the very close links between nationalism and the Catholic Church in the early 20th century or the protectionist economic policies associated with some advanced nationalist thinking. They completely ignored the issue of what needed to be addressed if unity was to be preserved and an independent Ireland inclusive of all traditions achieved.

In Connolly's defence he was scathingly critical of the role of many churchmen of various denominations who tended to defend employers and instead urged workers not to resort to strike action.

He was also contemptuous of politicians who simply sought to transfer power from London to Dublin and who showed no commitment to social justice or to tackling the worst excesses of a rampant capitalism so prevalent in places like Belfast. While he hoped that an independent Ireland would not succumb to such influences and tendencies he was realistic enough to believe that the day Home Rule was declared was the day Irish Socialists would probably have to enter opposition.

That the Rising's leaders underestimated the strength of unionism and the challenge it posed to Irish independence is not to say anything unique about their political thinking. The long established nationalist focus on how Britain could be either persuaded or forced to grant independence, seldom addressed the 'northern' question in any depth, except to dismiss it as an unruly nuisance. In so far as the unionist position had to be addressed, nationalists tended to regard it as one for a post-independence agenda.

This widely shared thinking within all shades of nationalism persisted until some realised that the question would eventually have to be addressed directly and positively. But that realisation only seriously began to dawn when four years after the Rising partition exploded any immediate prospects for an *independent* and *united* country. Seventy-seven years after partition that realisation had matured to produce the Good Friday Agreement.

Instead of being oblivious, as the 1916 Proclamation says, to 'the differences that divided a minority from the majority' the Agreement faces up to those differences, acknowledges them and offers to accommodate the people who hold those differences in an Ireland in which all can feel comfortable irrespective of identity or allegiance.

The Agreement enshrines the primacy of democratic, peaceful persuasion as the only means capable of achieving that goal. So, achieving a united Ireland will require genuine and honest non-coercive persuasion of a significant section of the unionist people and the reassurance of others. In working towards this goal, nationalism must engage with unionism much more than it does at present, not just because the numbers tell us we must, but because our desire for a peaceful future as equals and as partners, tells us we have to.

Nor are Agreement's principles temporary, tactical, or transitional. Rather, they offer, for the first time ever, a covenant of honour between nationalists and unionists that should and indeed must endure in the interests of peace and stability. So for unionist political leaders to try to "smash the Agreement" can hardly be in their own long-term interests. Such an attempt would mean freezing

indefinitely their relationships with the nationalist community, not just in the North but throughout Ireland.

The Agreement does not pretend that North-South cooperation, for example, is an immediate staging post on the road to unity. It is, however, a real hope that by working together, people and their communities North and South will overcome our legacy of suspicion and division and progress to ever-closer relationships. How these might be expressed, constitutionally or otherwise, is a matter to be determined as the Agreement takes root.

The Agreement owes much to the three relationships agenda most explicitly proclaimed by the SDLP and associated very particularly with John Hume's message throughout the 'troubles'. That agenda stressed the need to satisfactorily address relationships within the North, between North and South and between Ireland and Britain as essential to a settlement.

To a certain extent the Agreement could also be said to have borrowed, albeit unconsciously, from the example of the settlement of the trade union recognition issue over forty years ago in 1964. Then the recently reconstituted Irish Congress of Trade Unions received formal recognition as an umbrella organisation for trade unions in the North, Irish and British based, and the Northern Ireland Committee was born. Since then NIC-ICTU, as we know it, has played a very progressive role not only in defending workers rights, in combating exploitation but also in combating sectarianism and in creating bridges between our communities. Today it is being called upon to build new bridges as it defends the rights of many thousands of foreign workers who have come to these shores.

Commemorating the Rising and its times will entail a great deal of looking back to study the men and women of Easter 1916, their motives and the policies that inspired that seminal event. To do so in an uncritical way would be, to say the least, unfortunate. But to do so without an eye to the lessons to be learnt and without a commitment to building a future in which all will be truly reconciled and cherished would be tragic.

There is, therefore, a compelling case for making the years leading to the Rising's one-hundredth anniversary the decade of national reconciliation.

As a first step the SDLP is urging the recall of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation with an agenda to consider the kind of multi-cultural Ireland we should be shaping, an Ireland based on full respect for the human and civil rights of all our people, an Ireland of which Larkin and Connolly would be very proud.