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## **To the Left of Labour: the Workers' Party and Democratic Left, 1982–97**

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### **Introduction**

Over the last 90 years new parties have repeatedly attempted to break into the national political arena in Ireland so as to challenge the longtime dominance of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour. The new entrants have periodically challenged the established order in terms of shaping policy agendas, winning seats and participating in multi-party governmental arrangements. A limited number of small parties have achieved these three outcomes – impact on policy, Dáil representation and governmental involvement – including Clann na Poblachta, Clann na Talmhan, the Progressive Democrats, Democratic Left and the Green Party. Others, including the Workers' Party, while not experiencing a period in power, have both impacted on policy formation and enjoyed national electoral success. All these new entrants, however, share one common trait – namely, a poor record in sustaining their challenge to the big three parties. It has been pointed out that smaller parties can 'add a richness and depth that has an impact on democracy and representation' (Copus et al, 2009: 4). In an Irish context, however, despite this democratic value, these parties have failed to sustain a lasting political and electoral presence.

Ireland's so-called 'two and a half party system' was defined – until the general election in 2011 – by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour repeatedly filling the same pecking order in terms of votes and seats. The 2011 outcome while dramatic – but not unexpected given the country's economic decline – did not, however, bring a new party political order. Instead the results delivered a re-ordering of the established rankings of the three main parties. This situation is in sharp contrast to a previous period of national turmoil when Ireland won its independence from Britain in 1921. Such were the dramatic changes, as Chubb observed, 'the party system that emerged in the 1920s bore little resemblance to the system before independence' (1992: 91). The moderate nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party disappeared, the Labour Party – formed in 1912 – continued, while Sinn Féin divided into what was the first in a series of splits that would become a reoccurring feature associated with the party. Sinn Féin, which was established in 1905, is the starting point, albeit a distant one, for tracing the origins of many of the political parties that emerged post-independence including the two parties of interest in this chapter – the Workers' Party and Democratic Left.

Both parties enjoyed some success – the Workers' Party in electoral terms in the 1980s; Democratic Left in government participation in the 1990s. The Workers' Party emerged out the contemporary republican movement and the post-1969 conflict in Northern Ireland. Divisions over ideology and criminality in the Workers' Party led to the formation of Democratic Left in 1992. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s these two parties sought to challenge Labour's position as the dominant left voice in Irish politics. Ultimately, however, neither of these 'breakthrough' parties sustained a presence on the Irish political landscape. This chapter examines the development of

these two parties in relation to Labour, first in terms of electoral competition and second in terms of creating distinct ideological space from the larger party. Their respective failure to achieve their stated objective of replacing the Labour Party as the dominant left presence in Irish politics is discussed in the context of a failure to create discernible ideological difference.

### **Electoral Competition**

The failure of the left to develop a significant political presence in Ireland in a manner similar to other western European countries has been the subject of considerable discussion. Mair (1992) focused on a number of historic factors in attempting to account for this marginalisation. First, the absence of a substantial and politically self-conscious working class which denied the left a natural constituency. Second, the strength of a clientelist culture which stresses individual political relations over collective action. Third, the catch-all appeal of Fianna Fáil which allowed the party to promote welfarist policies. Fourth, the salience of nationalist issues in the early years of Irish politics meant that there was simply little scope for a party which devoted itself almost exclusively to working-class socialist concerns allied to the decision of the Labour Party to stand aside from the 1918 Westminster general election when many voters casting their ballot for the first time were influenced by the nationalist political agenda.

These factors combined to lessen the electoral success of the left – as evident in Table 1 for the 1973 to 1997 elections. This constituency has primarily been represented by the Labour Party. There have been periodic electoral successes, for example, Labour achieved a record national vote in 1969 and historic seat gains in 1992 and, more recently, in 2011. But there have also been periods of despondence particularly in the 1980s when the political landscape became more crowded and complex with the emergence of several smaller parties including the Workers' Party. The latter party emerged out of a split in the hardline Irish republican tradition in 1969/70 with internal differences over electoral participation and the use of violence. Those who favoured violence - the Provisional wing of the republican movement - went on to wage a 30-year campaign against British rule in Northern Ireland. The alternative group - styled the Official wing - had a preference for political activism. Its leadership argued against the use of violence but there was ambiguity about the continued existence of the Official IRA with sufficient evidence to support the argument that the organisation 'remained active throughout the 1980s' (Hanley and Miller, 2009: 591).

Official Sinn Féin - as the organisation's political wing was known - renamed in 1977 as Sinn Féin The Workers' Party and in 1982 became the Workers' Party as it attempted to move from past association with republican paramilitarism and stress a new attachment to left wing political activism. This evolution of the Workers' Party in the Irish Republic was assisted by positioning itself as a more radical alternative to Labour's more moderate policy stance. The party matched Coakley's categorisation as a 'breakaway party' - one that originated in a split within an existing party - but one which was defined by a left-wing ideological dimension that challenged the mainstream party of the left through adoption of 'radical positions of principle' (2010: 510). In the latter respect, in the 1982 to 1987 period the Workers' Party had free reign to articulate a left alternative while Labour struggled in bleak economic times as part of a coalition government with Fine Gael. The party pushed for higher taxation

and greater state involvement in the running of the economy and in ownership of strategic assets. During this time the party was able to function as an alternative voting outlet for disgruntled Labour supporters. The Workers' Party won more first preference votes than the Labour Party at the 1985 local elections, a performance the party built on as it took full advantage of Labour's negative appeal arising from its involvement in government with Fine Gael. Relations were poor the two parties were essentially fighting for the same territory.

**Table 1: Dáil Éireann election results, 1973–97**

Year	WP/DL	Lab	FF	FG	PDs	Others
1973	1.1	13.7	46.2	35.1	-	3.9
1977	1.7	11.6	50.6	30.6	-	5.5
1981	1.7	9.9	45.3	36.5	-	6.6
1982 Feb.	2.2	9.1	47.3	37.3	-	4.1
1982 Nov.	3.3	9.4	45.2	39.2	-	2.9
1987	3.8	6.5	44.2	27.1	11.9	6.5
1989	5.0	9.5	44.2	29.3	5.5	6.5
1992	2.8	19.3	39.1	24.5	4.7	9.6
1997	2.5	10.4	39.3	27.9	4.7	14.7

*Source: Farrell, 1999*

The Dublin-based leadership of the Workers' Party effectively rewrote the party's mission statement to such an extent that Rooney writing in 1984 pointed to a potential difficulty for the Workers Party's as a self-styled 'revolutionary party' with 'the increasingly social democratic nature of its politics, and the fact that these tend to be confined to an internal debate within rather than against capitalism' (1984: 96). The type of ideological transition in European left-wing politics discussed below was underway. The Workers' Party promoted a policy agenda with heavy state involvement in all facets of socio-economic life including nationalisation of the banking sector and the creation of a national health service. In the economically depressed 1980s this alternative to the agenda of the main parties won a significant audience. Progress was also helped by the participation of the Labour Party in an unpopular coalition government with Fine Gael.

The statist-type underpinning of domestic policies was coupled with a foreign policy that backed the communist leadership in the USSR. From the mid-1970s there was vocal support for Soviet foreign policy even in the face of the Soviet military interventions in Afghanistan and Poland. There were some internal doubts about this strategy but ideological purity and membership discipline necessitated that the debate was shut down. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 came as a relief to many on the reformist wing of the party as it provided strong justification for quickening the pace of ideological reform. During this period of transformation the party also fundamentally altered its approach to Northern Ireland, where hostility to traditional republicanism was considerable.

The Workers' Party was organised on an all-Ireland basis. In Northern Ireland it contested elections to the Sunningdale Assembly in 1973 but on an abstentionist

platform. This policy remained in place until internment ended and the emergency powers were dropped. The party's ten candidates in 1973 polled poorly, receiving less than two per cent of the first preference vote across Northern Ireland. In local district elections in May 1977 six Official Sinn Féin candidates were elected with the party taking 2.6 per cent of the overall votes. But three of those seats were lost in 1981 as the party's support slipped back to 1.8 per cent. There was a slight recovery four years later but throughout this period, as their colleagues in the Irish Republic were making decent electoral gains, the party in Northern Ireland failed to make an electoral breakthrough of any note.

The first evidence of electoral progress south of the border was in June 1981 with the election of its first TD to Dáil Éireann (Joe Sherlock in Cork East). Eight months later - following the February 1982 general election - support from three Workers' Party TDs - and independent TD Tony Gregory - facilitated the election of a minority Fianna Fail government. The arrangement was, however, short-lived as Workers' Party support (and Gregory's) was withdrawn in November 1982 amid proposals for austere fiscal policies. This support for Charles Haughey's government caused little political or electoral damage. Indeed, Rooney and Hopkins write that the Workers' Party 'was almost alone amongst West European communist and workers' parties in having experienced steady, if modest, electoral growth throughout the 1980s' (Rooney and Hopkins, 1992: 91). For its initial breakthrough with Sherlock the party went on to make strong electoral gains increasing its Dail representation to a high of nine seats in 1989. The party had a strong Dublin base illustrated by its 1985 local election results and De Rossa winning a European Parliament seat in the Dublin constituency in 1989 when he topped the poll with just over 71,000 first preference votes.

Throughout this period the position for the Labour Party was a very different story. Labour's share of the first preference vote had declined at each general election since 1969. There is some limited evidence that the competition between the two parties contributed to an increase in overall left support, but this strengthened support base was restricted as the smaller party was primarily taking votes from its larger rival. Labour rejected overtures for a transfer pact at the 1987 general election, which Girvin concluded 'reflected the threat Labour felt' (1989: 32). Nevertheless, even before the emergence of Democratic Left in 1992 there had been a 'slow but steady rise in the rate of transfers between the two left parties during the 1980s, though this still falls short of the degree of solidarity between Fine Gael and the PDs, and indeed between Labour and Fine Gael before 1987' (Gallagher, 1989: 80). The Workers' Party was the party on the move while Labour was in trouble. The former organisation won seats in 1987 in Dublin Central and Dun Laoghaire - both from Labour - and in Dublin South West from Fianna Fáil. After the 1987 contest there were six Workers' Party deputies in the Dublin region, twice that of Labour. Gallagher, however, pointed out a salient weakness in the Workers' Party position - an inability to match Labour's claim to be a national party: 'Although the Workers' Party now overshadows Labour in Dublin, its problem is that it has only one seat, Joe Sherlock's personal creation, outside Dublin' (1989: 77).

There were very mixed views in the Labour Party about its small rival, fuelled by both the origins of the Workers' Party and the legacy of the official republican movement. There was also the natural antipathy between two parties seeking to draw

support from a similar support base. There was strong competition in terms of Dáil seats with continued movement prevailing over the entire 1981 to 1997 period between the two groupings – Labour and Workers’ Party/Democratic Left. Relations were poor between individual party members in a variety of constituencies. Workers’ Party (later Democratic Left) TD Eric Byrne recalled: ‘We were always looking at the Labour Party as the natural enemy’ (Byrne, 2006). One senior Labour official remarked upon ‘a history of intense rivalry verging almost on hatred on the ground’ (Kavanagh, 2000: 214). Yet, coupled with the negative Labour responses there was also private – and often begrudging – respect for the work ethic and strong Oireachtas performances of the Workers’ Party/Democratic Left TDs. Finlay describes the differing Labour Party views about their rivals as ‘ranging from envy for their discipline and coherence to outright hatred, arising from individual incidents in the past’ (1999: 129).

The onward march of the Workers’ Party was halted by disappointing results in the 1991 local elections. The party was left embarrassed by a renewed focus on the criminal activities of those associated with its organisation in Northern Ireland. The internal debate about its ideological positioning in light of developments in Central and Eastern Europe was also coming to a head. In the aftermath of the 1991 local elections the general assessment within Labour was that the Workers’ Party ‘had run out of steam’ (Kavanagh, 2000: 90). Labour, now in opposition, regrouped and was repositioned to account for the threat of its rival. Labour strategists believed there was even a possibility that some Workers’ Party TDs could be attracted into joining them. It was against this backdrop that relations between the Labour Party and the newly formed Democratic Left must be seen. Moreover, the issue of the new party’s individual identity was closely linked with the Irish Labour Party. In early April 1992 Pat Rabbitte addressed these inter-party relations: ‘There is a good deal of convergence... and I certainly would look forward to maximum co-operation between our parties, but I think that there is a space in our society, to the left of the Labour Party and it is important that that space is filled’ (Rabbitte, 1992).

The question of a merger with Labour was informally on the agenda at the time of the split in the Workers’ Party in early 1992. There was, however, little support among the De Rossa (the party leader) group for joining Labour – on an individual basis or en masse – at that time. The larger party was seen as ‘very staid and not open to change’ and of its members it was said that they would ‘sell their souls’ (Rafter, 2011: 143). Pat Rabbitte was the only senior party figure to give serious consideration to the Labour option in 1992, and only loyalty to his colleagues prevented his departure. Even at that stage fundamental policy differences between the two parties were hard to identify. Many accepted that the differences were driven more by personality and individual political ambition than political ideology. ‘Very often relations were defined by what relations were like in the constituencies,’ Eamon Gilmore admitted (Gilmore, 2006). For Gilmore, the ultimately unsuccessful talks about government formation with Labour in late 1992 helped to overcome many personal difficulties at leadership level in the two parties: ‘I must say that the discussions between Labour and Democratic Left in that post-1992 election period, that’s what really brought about the subsequent merger. We had the same objectives’ (Gilmore, 2006).

During the 1980s the Workers’ Party put Labour under considerable electoral pressure – support for the latter party declined while support for the former increased. But the

split in 1992 meant the Workers' Party never got to continue its challenge and to see if its objective could be realised. The post-1987 period undoubtedly presented a greater challenge as Labour had returned to the opposition benches in 1987 and while regrouping for the larger party was difficult - evident by the 1989 general and European election results - it was better positioned to more vigorously battle its smaller rival. In any event the 1992 split sundered the Workers' Party; the party never again won a Dáil seat, and stripped of its leading public representatives it became a marginal actor in political life. But neither was Democratic Left able to build on previous Workers' Party strong electoral showings. The performance of Democratic Left in the period between 1992 and 1997 can best be described as poor with a singular failure to make a substantial electoral breakthrough most particularly in the general elections in 1992 and in 1997. Democratic Left never achieved an 'electoral spectacular' such as when De Rossa was elected to the European Parliament in 1989. The new party failed to seriously expand and develop beyond the number of constituencies where the Workers' Party had previously enjoyed success. The election of Liz McManus in Wicklow was the only new constituency opened up by Democratic Left. There was also a failure to attract new names to stand for the party. The personnel pool from which Democratic Left selected candidates was very much the one formerly associated with the Workers' Party.

### **Ideological Convergence**

Few political parties positioned under the broad left umbrella remained unchanged by the events of 1989 in central and eastern Europe and the advance of economic globalisation. In Ireland, the ideological conflict, coupled with other internal issues split the Workers' Party, and led to the formation of Democratic Left. The pressures had been building over several years. Prior to 1989 throughout western Europe socialist and social democratic parties had been engaged in internal debate and searching analysis. Over a protracted period of time those to the left of mainstream left parties in countries like Britain, Austria and Sweden – and including the Workers' Party in Ireland – were increasingly confronted with the reality that their positions, policies and outlooks were indistinguishable from the social democracy of their so-called more moderate left rivals. As Dunphy observed about the more radical left in Spain, Denmark, Greece and in Ireland (the Workers' Party), these parties were 'all relatively small organisations forced to define themselves in opposition to social democratic parties which seem to be post-socialist, never mind post-Marxist' (Dunphy, 1993: 29).

The advance of economic globalisation reduced the individual influence of national governments. In this environment the power of the Keynesian economic tools traditionally favoured by the Left significantly weakened. This transformation was underway at a time when the Left was challenged to comprehend and deal with the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet model. In this new world many parties on the Left struggled to forge a new political identity and distinctive economic policy agenda. For many, socialism's theory and past practice has been hard to discern in the policies of Left governments in countries like Britain, France and Spain in the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century. Reviewing these developments, Gottfried argued that the 'policy differences between the Right and the Left have narrowed down to mere detail. The Right accepts and even expands the welfare state, while the Left has scuttled plans for government control of industries. Talk about a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism has replaced the radical Left's appeal to

class conflict' (2005: 2). It was a scenario familiar to those in the Workers' Party who departed to form Democratic Left in 1992.

The Workers' Party was never formally styled as a communist party, and there remains, among its former leading political figures, differing views as to its ideological classification. Eamon Gilmore was emphatic that "the Worker's Party was never a communist party. It had within it people who were Marxists, people who were social democrats, people who were Left Labourites, if I can put it that way, you know, people who were socialists in a wide sense of the word" (Gilmore, 2006). This broad definition is in sharp contrast to the view offered by Proinsias De Rossa: "My clear understanding about the party was that it had evolved into what might nowadays be termed a communist party. It was much more like the communist party in Italy" (De Rossa, 2007). Despite these alternative opinions, the Workers' Party did in fact share many of the characteristics of the communist identity in western Europe. Bull isolated three factors binding west European communist parties together including a privileged link with Moscow; a commitment to building a society different from the capitalist one; and an internal organisational underpinned by democratic centralism (Bull, 1995: 79). It can be reasonably concluded that the Workers' Party met the Bull criteria as it had links to the Soviet Union, a commitment to a post-capitalist future and an adherence to democratic centralism as a mode of organisation.

The Workers' Party has been categorised as one of the reformist Eurocommunist parties which emerged in the 1970s (Dunphy, 1993). Certainly taking the definition of Eurocommunism as parties committed to revolutionary goals, adhering to democratic socialism and defined by considerable membership uniformity then the Workers' Party in the late 1970s and throughout 1980s, in effect, ticked the correct boxes. But, just like the communist model in the Soviet controlled areas, Eurocommunism was inadequate as an ideological position. It was, as Kindersley noted, "a good sales pitch" (Kindersley, 1981: 186). But it was also an inadequate sales pitch as it failed to offer a new voice and saw the left on a trajectory towards convergence with the social democratic tradition.

The internal Workers' Party debate was undoubtedly given added impetus by developments in the Soviet Union where Mikhail Gorbachev was opening up the possibility of an alternative definition of socialist democracy. The first sign of new thinking came at the Workers' Party annual conference following De Rossa's election as party president in 1989. Television producer Eoghan Harris was a key player in the background at this stage. Harris, who heavily influenced De Rossa's approach, had "acute sensitivity to those epochal changes that radically transform the basic contours and language of politics..." (Patterson, 1997: 257-8). Heavily influenced by the Gorbachev revolution as well as the new approaches adopted by the Italian Communists among others, Harris argued for a reassessment of the socialist model. The move surprised many in the Workers' Party. According to long time member and De Rossa adviser, Tony Heffernan, the Harris-inspired speech at the 1989 Ard Fheis, "shocked lots of people in the party [as] it raised questions about a whole series of assumptions that people had" (Heffernan, 2006).

Harris's intervention hastened an internal debate among his colleagues but the collapse of the communist controlled regimes in central and eastern Europe forced the Workers' Party to speed up the reconsideration of its ideological identity and

organisational model. “At stake were not merely organisational choices but also the party’s political and ideological direction,” Dunphy and Hopkins noted (1992: 92). There was some unease that senior members were clinging to the increasingly discredited ideology as represented by the Soviet-controlled states, as Eric Byrne outlined, “At annual conferences we would be most embarrassed when we’d see invitations... bringing in people from North Korea and other weird communist countries...” (Byrne, 2006). Another party veteran, Tomas MacGiolla, did not see the wider debate about the Left in Europe, and in eastern Europe in particular, as impacting on the Workers’ Party. “I was a total anti-communist and there were no Stalinists in the party. So it was never an issue [within the Workers’ Party]” (MacGiolla, 2006). But a more nuanced debate than MacGiolla acknowledged was well underway in party ranks. Others recognised the wider debate. Proinsias De Rossa recalled: “I remember making a speech where I pointed out that the fall of the Berlin Wall and what was happening in Russia was going to have far reaching effects on the Left and on the Right, and that people didn’t know quite yet what the outcome would be” (De Rossa, 2007). The debate may have consumed much greater energy within the party than it did with the wider electorate - and even a large section of the voters who supported the Workers’ Party - but the debate was energy sapping and the uncertainty drained morale.

There were other pressure points in the Workers’ Party in the 1980s unique to the party’s Irish experience and removed from the wider debate about European Left politics. The party was dogged by questions about the continued existence of the illegal Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA), an overlap in membership between the two organisations and the possibility that monies obtained by illegal means were funding legitimate political activities. While the ideological debate had been developing throughout the 1980s, the question of members with links to criminal activities had been a recurring theme since the 1970s and eventually pushed the divisions to a stage where even reconstitution of the party was not going to overcome the deep internal tensions. For many of those who ultimately exited the Workers’ Party criminality was the main motivation for the split. The Official IRA had called a ceasefire in May 1972 – and very much disappeared from the public sphere by 1975 – but questions about the organisation’s continued existence lingered. The official line from all leading Workers’ Party figures for well over a decade had been that the party was not associated with the OIRA nor was it funded from criminal activity. But the negative publicity arising from media speculation about the OIRA was a source of considerable frustration within the De Rossa wing of the party. As one senior party member observed: ‘We tolerated too many excuses within the North, special circumstances and conditions in which they lived... We didn’t want any taint of illegality’ (Geraghty, 2006).

The ideological debate had been developing over several years. The question of members with links to criminal activities eventually pushed the divisions to a stage where even reconstitution of the party was unlikely to overcome the deep internal tensions. In the latter half of 1991 talk within the De Rossa group turned to the possibility of forming a new political party. Such a move would immediately remove the burden of the history and ideology dogging the Workers’ Party. Before this next step was taken a decision was reached to make one final effort to reach an accommodation within the Workers’ Party. Ultimately, however, an attempt to reconstitute the existing party at a special conference in February 1992 was

unsuccessful. The outcome only increased the likelihood of the formation of a new party. “Most of us then decided there was nothing more we could do and we left,” De Rossa admitted (De Rossa, 1992).

At the time Democratic Left was formed there was a belief in left circles across Europe that a new form of left politics would emerge, a politics more radical than social democracy. Various labels were applied to this new thinking including ‘third way’ and ‘new revisionism’. It was, Sassoon concluded, driven by “the idea that capitalism would not be destroyed by a self-generated crisis, or by a revolution, or by the steady expansion of public property” (Sassoon, 1996: 733). This ‘New Revisionist’ theme was addressed at the founding conference of Democratic Left in 1992. Senior member Des Geraghty was one of those who attempted to place the formation of the new party in the post-1989 political context in Europe: “We have rejected any utopian or elitist politics which seek to act on behalf of people but fails to involve the people in setting their political agenda for change (Rafter, 2011: 43).

Various contributions at the foundation conference pointed towards the ‘third way’ debate. But this third way politics and new revisionism was somewhat ill-defined. Politicians like Proinsias De Rossa in Ireland were in the difficult role of trying to explain how their new positioning was different from the outlook held by their social democratic opponents. Those who departed the Irish Workers’ Party in early 1992 were not yet prepared to make the leap into a new social democratic future. They were intent on finding – and, maybe, even creating – a new type of politics. Although his contribution came at the end of the conference proceedings, De Rossa posed some pertinent questions: “some people ask – do we need a new party? And what is this new party? How does it differ?” The party leader could not avoid the subject as elsewhere the issue of difference between the new undertaking and the Labour Party was being discussed. One media commentator, Dick Walsh, who had close links with the Workers’ Party noted, “On most fronts, Labour and Democratic Left will find themselves in broad agreement, although they still differ on the North and...may employ different tactics” (Walsh, 1992).

De Rossa was hoping to lead a new political party, which would be an active democratic socialist party with a strong presence in parliament. There is little doubt but that De Rossa’s speech at the Democratic Left founding conference – and indeed the various documents approved by delegates – fitted with the Sassoon neo-revisionism thesis. But the founding vision was never defined in a way that explained the party’s distinctiveness nor was it made clear what policy instruments were to be used to implement the same vision. Democratic Left’s search for ideological relevance became a recurring theme in the party’s short life. In early 1992 the party and its leading members embarked upon a political journey in search of a middle ground, or third way between a discredited communist/socialist/republican past, and an unsatisfactory social democratic compromise. But left politics – and in particular the type of ideology framed as more radical than social democratic thinking – struggled to find a coherent programme. Like its counterparts in Italy and France, Democratic Left was confronted with the rejection of a Marxist past and its replacement with a variation of social democracy. David Arter has written how post-1989 politics led to “the neo-liberalisation of social democracy, and the associated phenomenon of the social democratisation of the radical Left: (Arter, 2003: 76). Democratic Left’s weakness was tied to its rejection of social democracy as a political

and ideological programme. The party wanted a more radical prescription but struggled to create a new coherent ideological blueprint, especially in the economic arena.

Despite the best efforts of those involved – and the work of a number of internal task forces established to address the issue – no clear understanding emerged as to what exactly was understood by 'Democratic Left'. In his report to the 1993 annual conference, the party's general secretary acknowledged the challenge. "One of the unsatisfactory aspects for members must be the continuing low poll ratings for Democratic Left. There is no simple explanation for this situation, although it is obvious that the party has still to develop a clear identity in the public mind" (Democratic Left, 1993).

The identity issue was not one that was easily resolved. It emerged once more in July 1994 in a short internal document – Youth Report – prepared for an Executive meeting. "There is a crisis of identity and purpose in Democratic Left. This has resulted, externally, in continually low voter identification and recognition for the party as a unit, its politics and its policies; internally, with the membership's morale and motivation" (Democratic Left, 1994). The prescription offered was a variation on a theme repeated time and time again in internal party documents – "The very immediate task and objective of this party is to clearly establish and define itself as a democratic socialist party on the radical left of the Irish political spectrum. This must be done on an unambiguous and unapologetic way" (Democratic Left, 1994). Included among the practical solutions put forward to enhance the party's identity was the need for a campaigning section, a party newsletter, promotion of internal debate and a change in the language and symbols of the party.

The identity problem was widely acknowledged by leading Democratic Left figures. Senior advisor Tony Heffernan said more should have been made of differences with the Labour Party: "We described ourselves as a democratic socialist party. I suppose we should have tried to explain the difference between that and social democracy which wasn't all that easy and which wasn't something that the voters were terribly interested in. We should have explained ourselves more in terms of criticising the positions that the Labour Party had taken and criticising the previous record of the Labour Party" (Heffernan, 2006). But for others the 'Labour question' was one that did not have an easy answer. "That bedeviled every left wing party that has emerged because there has always been the Labour Party, and in the mind of the people – 'why are you different?' – that certainly was an issue for Democratic Left," John Gallagher concluded (Gallagher, 200??)

The lack of a clearly defined identity stifled the party's growth. This situation was even more difficult during the life of the 1994–97 Rainbow government when the points of differentiation with Labour became even more blurred, especially for the electorate (See Rafter, 2011). The identity issue was again the focus of discussion at the meetings of the post-general election task force that convened in the summer of 1997. "The precise position and purpose of a socialist party like Democratic Left needs to be re-stated," the report concluded, adding the recommendation that a new strategic approach involved other like-minded parties to create a Left-led government (Democratic Left, 1997). In a significant recommendation – and a significant acknowledgement of the troubles facing the party at the time – the task force

members said they ‘would favour a change in the Party name but believes that this is not politically practical. However, it recommends that the Party should style itself Democratic Left – the Socialist Party on literature and elsewhere as appropriate’ (Democratic Left, 1997). The party’s National Executive did not accept the name change idea although its members agreed to commission a report “on projection of our name and policy and the production of a new logo” (Democratic Left, 1997). In the end, this failure to carve out a clear difference of identity in the public mind from the Labour Party meant Democratic Left did not achieve its aim of becoming a strong left alternative in Irish politics.

### **Conclusion**

The split in the Workers’ Party and formation of Democratic Left came at a time when the wider European Left in all its various hues was engaged in debate about forging a new radical identity in response to the challenges arising from the collapse of communism and the rise of the New Right’s free market dogma. There was a failure to find a consistent and coherent voice. The Workers’ Party backed away from change after the split in 1992, moving into a political cul de sac that brought only political irrelevance. But its successor party Democratic Left – like many other Left groups in Europe – never decided what it wanted to become; never offering a coherent explanation of how it would use a given set of policy instruments to deliver its stated goals. Globalisation has left nation states less powerful, national budgets less influential. A new message to replace Keynesianism never emerged as has been seen most recently during the post-2008 global financial crisis. The so-called ‘credit crunch’ crisis fundamentally challenged the philosophy championed by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher but there has been little to suggest that a new model is emerging from a left perspective.

The unravelling of the Workers’ Party – and the short, but eventful life of Democratic Left – was shaped by the debate in European Left politics. The blurring of ideological identity had an impact on both parties. As the rules of the game changed in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, neither the Workers’ Party nor Democratic Left found themselves able to articulate a distinct message for Irish voters. The exit from the Workers’ Party was also prompted by a specific local issue – criminality – and there is little doubt that those embarrassing revelations created a climate in which, having failed to reconstitute the party, the formation of a new political grouping was inevitable. But even if the reconstitution had been accepted – it is likely that a stronger Workers’ Party would also have been confronted by the same issues which challenged Democratic Left. In such a scenario it might have been possible to move beyond the criminality allegations but a reformed Workers’ Party would also have had to explain what were the substantive policy differences with the Labour Party.

Neither did the experience in government assist Democratic Left in this regard. While the small Irish parties that have experienced government come from different ideological perspectives they all share in common initial electoral success followed by steady decline. On first analysis it would seem that participation in government shortened their respective life cycles. Involvement in a coalition government with one or more of the three big parties – Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael or the Labour Party – may possibly have blurred the lines of difference with their rivals. This collection of small parties were each, to use O’Malley’s (2010) phrase, ‘smothered’ by their larger governmental partner.

In the aftermath of the 1997 general election serious questions were being asked within Democratic Left about the party's future, not to mention its future direction. Some members believed they had a role to play as a critical niche political party offering an alternative on the Left to the more moderate Labour Party. This argument was rejected by several senior party figures who were no longer able to distinguish real differences between themselves and their counterparts in the Labour Party. These two schools of thought were, however, united in appreciating the task involved in rejuvenating the party after the disappointing election results in 1997 which had seen Democratic Left exit government and return to the opposition benches in Leinster House. Certainly by the end of 1997 there was a realisation among many leading party figures that the process of rebuilding was going to be very difficult. Des Geraghty was not alone in addressing the scale of the work and effort being shouldered by a small group of individuals and the resulting pressure this generated. "I think we were faced by just too many elections, too quickly, and then there was the strain in a very small party, intellectually, physically and mentally..." (Geraghty, 2006). Eamon Gilmore also referred to the energy required to maintain the party when, for many senior members and the vast majority of the electorate, the party was no different from the Labour Party: "we certainly saw no future in effectively two Labour parties with little or no difference...(Gilmore, 2006).

Ahead of Democratic Left's founding conference, Proinsias De Rossa received a letter of best wishes from Dick Spring, the leader of the Labour Party, in which he wrote of "continuing the co-operation that we have enjoyed in the Dáil on a wide range of issues" and establishing "a strong and coherent Left-wing voice" (Spring, 1992). The hostility between the two parties reduced significantly during the 1994–97 Rainbow coalition. Many involved mention increased trust and the development of friendships between individuals who previously would have had no opportunity to associate with each other. The period in government also only served to highlight the perception issue, that is, how the voters saw the two parties. This identity conundrum was set alongside the ongoing organisational and mounting financial challenges. The party's future was leading in one direction, according to John Gallagher: "The Labour Party had moved on. In 1992 there would have been a more confrontational view of the Labour Party. But by 1997 a lot of old battles were over and [many] constituency battles had also sorted themselves out..." (Gallagher, 2007).

The Democratic Left experience – and that of the Workers' Party – show, however, that the challenges and threats to small parties are more fundamental than the dangers of cosy-ing-up with their larger rivals in government. When faced with a multitude of challenges such as membership, organisation, leadership and, more recently, money, new parties in Ireland struggle to sustain their political involvement. They also fail to deal with the larger parties adapting their programmes and positions to preserve their predominance. In seeking to identify why small parties have been unable to achieve longevity in an Irish context no one answer is sufficient. Democratic Left was essentially a challenger party but one without significant ideological difference from its larger rival. It was in competition with Labour based on its capacity to deliver – and what Coakley in an earlier chapter defined as a self-proclaimed superior competence and integrity in formulating and implementing policy. But challenger parties – partly due to their relative smaller size as new entrants – remain open to renewed vigorous competition from their long established and better resourced larger

rivals (Coakley, 2010). In the latter respect, the durability of the main parties has been impressive – even when faced with a decline in their first preference vote, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party have adapted to changes and challenges so that they continue to win more or less the same percentage of Dáil seats (See McGraw, 2008).

As Weeks indicates in his chapter on new parties, the emergence of new small parties is often a reflection of a failure by the established parties to respond to new political agendas – the new entrants are in tune with voter concerns. They also act as a means of registering protest or discontent with the political system, and represent certain principles. In this way small parties tend to be agenda-setters. But their agendas may be limited and once the large parties adjust their stance voters tend to gravitate away from the small parties. In this way, the electorate's support for small parties may be highly promiscuous beyond a limited core vote. The Workers' Party experience in the 1980s is an example of this fact as Labour's support declined in government but the party subsequently countered the threat of the new entrant.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael – and to a lesser degree the Labour Party – as catch-all parties with a flexibility to reach accommodation with societal changes rely upon broad coalitions of support. In general, catch-all parties dilute their ideological individuality in order to maximise their appeal to centre-oriented middle class voters. They compete for votes not on significant policy difference but rather on competency and personality with competency equating with economic management and personality defined by the likeability of a party leader. A narrowing of party difference has been evident in the main areas of political debate in Irish society over the last three decades – Northern Ireland, the economy and the liberal/moral agenda. This uniquely Irish convergence played out as the global political scene was transformed in a post-Berlin Wall environment with a merging of economic ideology and a blurring in the differences in political orientation between most mainstream parties which had their origins in twentieth century left and right politics.

Those involved in founding Democratic Left in early 1992 were aware of the poor record new entrants had in challenging the traditional dominance of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party in Irish electoral and governmental history. “It is extremely difficult to build a new party in Ireland from the ground up,” Pat Rabbitte acknowledged (Rabbitte, 2007). The challenge for Rabbitte and his colleagues was made even harder still by the uncertainty over their political identity in the context of left politics in the 1990s; the rate of change in Ireland in the same decade as many of their core issues were resolved; and the specific organisational and financial demands placed upon small political parties. It is the combination of these factors - varying in importance between different parties - which has caused the death of a multitude of small Irish parties despite the enthusiastic ambitions of their founding members.

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