

RESTORE THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION TO THE PEOPLE

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In the social and economic field the struggle of the national resistance movement throughout the ages has been unequivocally for the restoration of the wealth of Ireland, both land and industry, to the dispossessed Irish nation.

Thus in modern times the aim of the Republican Movement has been and remains the restoration of the means of production, distribution and exchange in Ireland to the Irish people. The Republican objective of real freedom for all 32 counties is but a means to an end. That end is a just social and economic system involving the equitable distribution of the nation's wealth amongst the Irish people. Full freedom is essential to achieve this and Republicans agree with James Connolly when he said:

If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic your efforts would be in vain. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through the whole array of commercial and individualist institutions she has planted in this country.

What then are the main features of the Irish economy, North and South, since 1922? The Six Counties economically is but a depressed offshoot of the English capitalist system. Its unemployment figures are consistently very high — about 8% of the insured working population, while the corresponding figure for Britain does not pass the 2% mark. In predominantly Nationalist areas (Derry, Strabane, Newry, etc) the average is much higher at 15-20%.

Housing conditions — discrimination apart — are deplorable in places, including the extreme Unionist Shankill Road area of Belfast. Indeed an English Independent Television man mentioned to me last week that many Shankill people coming from their little back-to-back kitchen houses with dry toilets (same standard as Falls Road) thought that the Nationalist Unity Walk Flats people lived in palaces! The bitter irony of it! Furthermore, cultural deprivation and alienation are not marked in the Six-County area.

Despite some changes and modifications, the 26 Counties in the economic sphere is basically a continuation of the Act of Union (1800) system. The southern statelet is a

supplier of cheap food and labour to Britain. The main instrument of industrial development has been native capitalism with foreign capitalism taking an increasing hand since 1958 (Repeal of Control of Manufactures Act). With the maintenance of the sterling links in its present form, the savings of the Irish people are channelled abroad and our people have had to follow this exported capital to find the employment it creates.

In passing, I should like to give credit where it is due and acknowledge the success of the Shannon electricity scheme, 1926, under the first Free State government and of the partial industrialisation 1932-38 under the second such administration, eg Bord na Mona, extensions of sugar production, etc.

From this necessarily summary analysis I pass to the question posed here: "What kind of economic and social system would serve Ireland best?" Sinn Féin policy visualises the main instrument of major economic development to be the State. As a country we are, relatively speaking, underdeveloped, and in view of the quickening pace throughout the world and a host of other considerations the job will have to be tackled on an emergency basis. For example, the fishing industry will have to be developed as the bogs were 35 years ago — by the State.

Some areas are natural monopolies and these will have to be nationalised eg such key sectors of the economy as banking, insurance, finance, mines, building land (local authorities would act here), cement production, fishing rights.

Money must be brought under social control. It is the lifeblood of the economy — or, as some prefer to describe it, the lubricant which oils the economic machinery, and is far too important to be left in private hands. Credit Unions would be developed and extended on a local basis and would enjoy the right, now denied to them of financing local community projects. Co-operative banks would also be developed, representative of such interests as the trade unions and farmers' organisations.

Social and economic thinking in the republican Movement is based on the Comhar na gComharsan ("Neighbours' Co-operation") philosophy which was developed over the IRA radio in 1939, promulgated in the underground War News of the early 1940s and afterwards carried into the jails and internment camps where it was earnestly discussed and debated. It is founded on the right of worker-ownership and is native Irish as well as being co-operative or distributist in character. For us in Sinn Féin it is our "Socialism" just as for Julius Nyerere of Tanzania his Ujamaa or Familyhood is the basis of "African Socialism".

Comhar na gComharsan envisages worker-owner co-operatives on a large scale in agriculture, fishing, industry and the distributive trade. The benefits of larger units and scale of production are obvious in the struggle for survival in a world dominated by the giants of the Eastern bloc, the USA and the EEC. The worker-owner system would give the workers a say in the decisions affecting them. Ideally each individual would become the possessor of an economic unit of the means of production in the form of farm, workshop, business or share in a factory or other co-operative. Here is real industrial democracy. marking a ballot-paper once every five years is but a travesty of democracy — that way the party machine governs as we have seen very clearly recently.

Neither the Western capitalism of the USA with its 30,000,000 poor and hungry amid plenty nor the Eastern Soviet State capitalism (or any of its variations) with its denial of freedom and human rights would give the Irish people “the ownership of Ireland” (1916 Proclamation). Comhar na gComharsan is based on native Irish tradition dating back to the Brehon laws and their provisions regarding communal — but not State — ownership of the means of production. It achieves a balance between the extremes of freedom and exploitation of man by man as in the US and possibly, the fully developed EEC on one hand, and the much too severe curbs on personal freedom on the other. I believe it to be an answer to the middle way sought by an eminent Churchman when he spoke within the past year of avoiding the “bottomless pit” of Western permissive society and the “concentration camp” of the Eastern bloc.

Private enterprise would, however, still have a role to play in the Comhar na gComharsan economy, but not in key industries such as cement production, to give an example which was recently very much in the public mind. State incentives would, of course, favour co-operative projects as the most socially desirable.

The Irish language and traditions would be linked to economic objectives and would be utilised as a morale-boosting factor in the all-out emergency-type national effort as has been done in Israel, Finland and even Denmark. One further point is relevant here; some useful lessons in the matter of co-operatives may be learned from the experience of Israel, Denmark and Yugoslavia where there are curbs on the activities of foreign capitalists and the attempted buying out of national assets. And have we not heard of the “Buy Canada Back” (from the US) campaign in recent times?

There is no denying that the policies outlined here will call for short-term austerity, for the repatriation of our external assets and total re-investment of savings in Ireland. But the high level of national morale and newly-released energies following a final successful outcome of

our centuries-old struggle against British Imperialism would provide the ideal opportunity. In any event it surely is far better and in the national interest that sacrifices be made for these worthy objectives than for the EEC “Promised Land” which we are told is about to be unfolded before us.

We will need to diversify our trade and will have to seek new trading partners in the non-aligned “Third World”, among the neutrals of Europe and even in Eastern Europe. Generations of our missionaries, medical people and teachers who have gone to assist the peoples of Africa have built up for us a great powerhouse of goodwill. An all-out effort to develop trade would go hand-in-hand with an active independent foreign policy at the United Nations.

In the matter of fishing rights, many of our richest rivers, lakes and estuaries are still in the hands of the descendants of the old landlords. All such inland waters and estuaries would be nationalised but would be managed and controlled by local co-operatives. The undoing of the conquest involves the dispossession of the riverlords also. Hearken to the voice of Pearse, realist as well as idealist:

Let no man be mistaken, as to who will be lord in Ireland, when Ireland is free. The people will be lord and master — a free Ireland would not and could not have hunger in her fertile vales and squalor in her cities.

Paper, paint and flag freedom was never the national goal.

Thomas Ashes, soon to die on hunger strike, wrote in 1917 in his poem

Let me carry Your Cross for Ireland, Lord.

For the empty homes on her golden plains, for the hope of her future too.

In conclusion I quote a Comhar na gComharsan manifesto:

Every man since Adam has been entitled by right to his share of the earth and the fruits of his labour . . .

Force or trickery has deprived the great majority of every generation of that right . . .

In Ireland and throughout the world today the majority of men have no absolute right to a share of the earth's fruits.

We do not advocate State ownership; there lies dictatorship. Every man must be an owner to be free.

National strength needs central government. Personal freedom needs decentralised control. A healthy nation needs both ownership by the people of all industries and a central government to co-ordinate their activities is the solution.

To accomplish this the Irish people must have in their hearts the enthusiasm of Pearse, the devotion of Connolly, the anger of Mitchel, the heroism of Emmet and the faith of Tone.

To inspire them so and to lead them is the task we have before us . . .