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Reference Code:	2017/10/61
Creation Dates:	April 1987
Extent and medium:	9 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Accession Conditions:	Open
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NEW RIGHTS, NEW PROSPERITY AND NEW HOPE
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

A Policy Statement of the National Executive Committee
of the Labour Party

April 1987

Labour 

1. Introduction

The Labour Party reaffirms its policy on Northern Ireland as set out in our 1981 Conference Statement, 1982 Programme and 1983 Manifesto. We believe that Ireland should be united and this should be done on the basis of consent and by peaceful, democratic means.

As we have made clear in our previous statements, we respect and support the wishes of people in Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom as long as the majority so choose. We therefore support the commitment contained in the Anglo-Irish Agreement that "any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland". But, as we have also said, no group or party should or will be allowed to exercise a veto on political development or on policies designed to win consent. Labour's objective is to help unite a divided island so that it can achieve and sustain economic prosperity and lasting peace.

This will not be an easy task. We will have to work hard for such consent in Northern Ireland, because without it Britain could be bequeathing to the people of Ireland a legacy of bitterness, violence and anarchy. We will also have to defeat the scourge of paramilitary violence in the process and so deploy security forces effectively and sensitively.

This requires a two-fold strategy. First, we will seek to establish, together with the Government of the Republic, a major programme to harmonise the economic and welfare systems throughout Ireland. And we will aim to reconcile the respective legal systems to ensure that civil, political and religious rights and personal freedoms of different traditions are guaranteed.

Second, and at the same time, our policy will promote discussions aimed at eliminating conflict and encouraging mutual trust. It will be important to assure both traditions that their respective identities and basic rights will be protected and enhanced. The discussions will take place at two levels: between the governments of Britain and the Republic, and among the various interests in Northern Ireland.

2. The Anglo-Irish Agreement

In Labour's Programme 1982 we said that "anything which helps to promote understanding between the two parts of Ireland is to be welcomed, even if it does not directly lead to actual political unity". It is on these grounds that we have given the Anglo-Irish Agreement our support. We have no illusions that the Agreement alone can transform the political, security, economic or legal situation in Northern Ireland, or Northern Ireland's status. But we believe that the Agreement's provisions are a step in the right direction.

We also said in 1982 that "a future Labour government will, therefore, continue to work with the government of the Republic of Ireland to achieve ways of increasing co-operation and understanding between Britain and Ireland".

It is because the Anglo-Irish Agreement now makes some contribution to the process of inter-governmental discussions that it deserves support. We believe that the two governments should use it to propose and adopt the measures necessary to improve living standards and restore civil liberties.

The Agreement also provides for the two Governments to promote social and economic development. It is to this

that Labour attaches supreme importance. For the economy of Northern Ireland desperately needs revitalisation after years of Tory Government.

In government, Labour will press on with the discussions. Talks with the government of the Republic and the political parties, both North and South, will be initiated to explore how our aims can best be achieved. We will continue to talk, too, with trade unions and other relevant interests. And we will continue to support all those groups concerned with peace and reconciliation which challenge sectarianism - and which seek to promote the interests of people in both traditions.

3. The Economy

The Labour Party believes that peace and security cannot be achieved if policies are divorced from the conditions in which people live. Successive Conservative governments have decimated the economy and impoverished Northern Ireland's people:

- * unemployment has nearly doubled since 1979 and now stands at over 20 per cent - higher than any region in Britain and second only to Sardinia in the EEC;
- * manufacturing jobs have fallen by 33 per cent since 1978;
- * 32 per cent of households have an income of less than £75 per week;
- * one child in every four is in a claimant family;
- * a quarter of the population claims means-tested benefits;

- 4.
- * over 10 per cent of housing in Northern Ireland is unfit for human habitation - a higher proportion than any region in Britain - yet housing construction has fallen by over 40 per cent since 1978.

In such conditions frustration and poverty easily lead to alienation, despair and then to violence.

The practice and principles of Labour's economic and industrial strategy will help to revitalise and rebuild the economy in Northern Ireland. And we will reinforce this strategy with additional measures designed to meet the particular problems of the area.

- * Labour's plan for economic recovery will involve the reflation of the economy to increase demand, output, and employment - with job creation being given the very highest priority.
- * Labour will implement a programme of intensive public investment - in housing and infrastructure - so as to help create more jobs in Northern Ireland.
- * Labour will help to increase investment in manufacturing - by the channelling of funds from financial institutions, by the extension of public enterprise and through our industrial strategy. Our aim will be to revive the manufacturing sector upon which the Northern Ireland economy has traditionally been based.

The Labour Government will also work with the Government of the Republic to strengthen economic links between the north and south of Ireland. Specifically, we will seek to integrate the policies of north and south on investment, economic development, energy, transport and agriculture. And we will work with the Government of the Republic to boost tourism and inward investment in Ireland as a whole.

Labour will also work closely with the organisations and representatives of working people in Northern Ireland - especially the trade unions - to implement democratic socialist policies, create jobs and build a strong economy in Northern Ireland.

4. Equal Opportunities

We recognise the rights of all people in Northern Ireland to equality of opportunity and decent living standards. In addition, therefore, to the creation of jobs, Labour will repeal the payments for Debt (Emergency Provisions) Act (NI) 1971. This has exacerbated the position of those working people already suffering most from Government policies.

We recognise that existing fair employment and equal opportunities practices can make a contribution. But both direct and indirect discrimination remain major problems. We will take steps to increase the effectiveness of anti-discrimination programmes in Northern Ireland, including the promotion of positive action programmes. We will reform, strengthen and make more active use of the existing instruments and agencies of government to ensure the effective promotion of equality of opportunity. And, through our new contract compliance strategy, contracts and grants awarded by government will include requirements to this end. Our programme will not, of course, entail a quota system or the replacement of one individual by another. The effectiveness of our anti-discrimination programmes will be further enhanced by the boost to the economy provided by Labour's economic strategy.

To give effect to Labour's opposition to discrimination on the grounds of religion, politics, sex or sexual orientation, we will introduce stronger additional measures to end such discrimination in Northern Ireland. The Fair Employment Agency, the Equal Opportunities Commission

(Northern Ireland), the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Complaints will be retained. If necessary, they will be reformed and given strengthened enforcement powers. Women's rights, including the right to abortion, will be extended as a matter of priority. And we will seek to provide for all children the opportunity of schooling in a public education system that is comprehensive and integrated, rather than confine such a system exclusively to the tertiary sector.

5. Security and Civil Liberties

Civil liberties are vital to democratic socialism and to human happiness and freedom. Their erosion represents the undermining of our way of life, and a victory for those committed to violence. For this reason, and as an essential step in its programme for a political settlement, the Labour Party is committed to the restoration and extension of civil liberty in Northern Ireland. To achieve this, and to increase the level of public confidence in the administration of justice, we will introduce a series of administrative and legislative reforms.

The right to live in peace is also a fundamental human right. This is why the Labour Party welcomes the priority attached to improving the security situation in Northern Ireland in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Labour is fully committed to the fight against all paramilitary violence. But we believe that the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1984 has proved to be ineffective and unnecessary. Labour will repeal it, in its entirety. We will thereby restore the right to remain silent, remove exclusion from the statute book and end the arbitrary provisions for detention without charge.

The Labour Party is committed to the eventual repeal

of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1978 which has earned international and domestic notoriety. As a first step, the Act will be amended to remove its more unnecessary and unacceptable powers.

The "supergrass" trials have been shown to be unfair. They have brought the legal system into disrepute with both traditions. Labour will legislate to end them. The conviction of people in Diplock Courts on the basis of one person's uncorroborated accomplice evidence is unacceptable.

We are opposed to the system of Diplock Courts in which scheduled offences are dealt with by a single judge, sitting without a jury. As a first step we will replace the single judge court by three judges - as we have said in previous statements, and as the Government of the Republic has urged. We will work towards the restoration of jury trial for all offences.

Labour will end the humiliating and degrading regime of strip searching such as that which prevailed at Armagh Prison. The sexual harassment and degradation of prisoners which resulted from this is totally unacceptable to us. While committed to maintaining prison security, we will ensure that this is done by the most modern and acceptable techniques and according to strictly enforced guidelines.

Labour will take a number of measures to increase public confidence in the Royal Ulster Constabulary and to reduce the imbalance in recruitment. We will enhance the independence of the Independent Commission for Police Complaints. We will ensure the publication of an RUC Code of Conduct. We will review present recruiting methods. And we will establish an effective system of compensation for injury - one which recognises the risks run by RUC members and reduces delays in paying compensation.

The use of plastic bullets has resulted in deaths and injuries to people from both traditions and is a counterproductive means of crowd control. Labour will end their use.

We will review the present rules governing the permissible use of lethal force by the security services. We will also review the system which allows delays of over a year before inquests are held into the deaths of those killed by members of the security forces.

Labour's comprehensive programme will help put people back to work - and begin the task of ending the scandal of widespread poverty. This programme, together with our support for security and civil rights - and for peaceful political progress - provides a coherent policy to help bring peace, stability, and unity to Ireland.

We acknowledge that the solutions to the problems of Ireland cannot be imposed from London. They must be worked out with and agreed by those who will have to operate them. But what we can do is to encourage the people of Ireland to approach the task with fresh hope.

As democratic socialists we cannot allow the problems of Northern Ireland to be neglected. Our policies offer its people new rights, new prosperity and new hope. In Government Labour will work to make them a reality.