

Rediscovering the Road Less Travelled: Lessons of Gerry Carroll's Election Victory

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Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.¹

'I am not a Nationalist or a Unionist; I Am a Socialist.'² This was the plain and unadorned phrase that newly elected Belfast city councillor Gerry Carroll used to announce his arrival on the political scene. Its innate message was clear: the long and protracted isolation of the radical Left in Belfast is now over. On the 23rd of May, Carroll became the first socialist elected to Belfast City Council for decades when he took a seat in the Black Mountain ward of the city. Not only was Gerry elected, but he won the seat quite comfortably, placing third out of 7 candidates. He was elected on the second count, just a hundred votes shy of topping the poll.



'I am not a Nationalist or a Unionist; I Am a Socialist.'
-Gerry Carroll following his election to Belfast City Council

The vote caught media and establishment pundits unawares. Neither the *Irish*

News nor the *Belfast Telegraph*-the two main newspapers in the North-saw fit to mention Carroll's candidacy, let alone the possibility that he could win, when profiling the constituency prior to the election. This was particularly interesting in the case of the *Telegraph*, which employed polling company *Lucid Talk* to carry out their projections.³ There was a reason why *Lucid Talk* didn't see Gerry's victory coming. There was a poll conducted without any actual polling: the results having been gleaned from previous electoral trends and constituency demographics. Readers elsewhere might be surprised to learn that a Northern-wide poll is carried out without any actual polling, but this is just symptomatic of politics in the North, where it is assumed that the 'tribal' pattern of voting is a permanent facet of life here. As such, no regional poll to determine the opinions of the populace is necessary: 'Taigs' will vote Nationalist, 'Prods' will vote Unionist and that is that. All that remains is to determine how the vote management of each side will work out. Or so it would seem.

Background to a Breakthrough

On the surface at least, the political background to this year's election hardly appeared conducive to a breakthrough for the radical Left. The preceding 18 months had been dominated by the unfortunate resur-

¹Robert Frost, 'The Road Not Taken', 1916

²<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/elections/i-am-not-a-nationalist-or-a-unionist-i-am-a-socialist-says-people-before-profits-new-belfast-councillor-gerry-carroll-30300411.html>

³<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/elections/belfast-city-council-full-election-analysis-from-pollsters-lucidtalk-30265995.html>

gence in sectarianism in Belfast: loyalist ‘flag protests’ and Orange marches providing the focus for a rekindling of communal enmity in the city. The proposed solution to these divisions- a series of inter-party talks led by the insipid neo-con and onetime Bush administration aide Richard Haass-proved to be an embarrassing non-starter. Talk of returning to the ‘bad old days’ of the Troubles, whether exaggerated or not, was pervasive amongst ordinary people.

This renascent sectarianism was compounded by the almost complete absence of large-scale class struggle in the North. The upturn in trade union struggles crystallized in the 2011 pension strikes had long since dissipated: the remarkable unity on display in those struggles squandered as union leaders retreated into the familiar groove of rhetorical grandstanding and practical inaction. Within the wider socialist and trade union Left there was a visible demoralisation: ‘I’ve never seen the level of struggle so low,’ remarked one union leader in the run up to the election. It was hoped that the fledgling People’s Assembly-initiated by union leaders from Unite and NIPSA at the tail end of 2013 after the success of a similar initiative in Britain-could offer a vehicle for breaking the inertia of the labour movement, only to reconfirm the intransigence of bureaucracy when it was put on the shelf immediately after being set up.

These two factors- the absence of a trade union-led struggle against austerity and the resurgence of sectarianism-were not completely unconnected. Indeed the two are mutually re-enforceable: the absence of coordinated labour militancy allowed reactionary elements to articulate class concerns in a sectarian direction, and in turn, the flag protests worked to dampen

to belief that sectarian division could be overcome. It is, without succumbing to localised particularism, the most Northern Irish of vicious circles.

But as Marx acutely put it, the ‘outward appearance and the essence of things’ rarely coincide.⁴ Whilst sectarianism was on the rise socialists understood that it was the underlying economic crisis that was fuelling it. As such we could see past the ‘outward appearance’ of the situation to understand that the same underlying factors, or ‘the essence of things’, could open up opportunities for the Left. As we wrote in this journal about the resurgence of sectarianism before the elections:

What we are witnessing is the crisis of capitalism mediated through the political specificity of the North: unemployment and austerity are causing a well of anger which reactionary forces are anxious to exploit. But as Marxists we understand that these same underlying factors can give fuel to class struggle and new opportunities for the Left. Socialists have to be confident about the possibilities that class politics offers for building a serious resistance and winning working class Catholics and Protestants to a new and effective round of mass struggles.⁵

Unique to this analysis was both a rejection of the notion that loyalist reaction was insurmountable and that the class struggle was now on hold for the foreseeable future. There was significant anger and dissatisfaction on the ground with the political impasse: people had been bearing the brunt of austerity for years and the

⁴Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts: Capital*, Vol.3, Chapter 48

⁵ Seán Mitchell, ‘The Permanent Crisis of 21st Century Ulster Unionism’, *Irish Marxist Review* 9

gloss had clearly gone off the ‘new dispensation’ in the North. The way that working class people had reacted to this, however, was uneven. Evidently, a minority of people-egged on by the combined agitation of loyalist paramilitaries and DUP politicians-had drawn the conclusion that the ‘other side’ was to blame. Still more had become disillusioned and disaffected with politics here. But where a practical lead was given on the ground-as has been the pattern across Ireland and Europe-people could shift to the left.

West Belfast: A Case Study in Building a Left in the North

Gerry Carroll launched his campaign for local council in November of 2013, though this was not the first time that either he or People Before Profit had engaged in an electoral run in the west of the city. PBP first stood in West Belfast in 2007, polling 774 votes (2.3 percent)-a result that, though far from earth shattering, nevertheless did signal a break from the usual one or two hundred votes that the Left had until then become accustomed to. Gerry Carroll then built on this achievement in 2011, polling 1,661 votes (4.8 percent) in the Assembly elections before improving on this performance (in a greatly reduced turnout) in the Westminster by-election, with 1751 votes (7.6 percent).

Truth be told, the wider Left refused to acknowledge the significance of these results, either for sectarian reasons, or for lack of confidence that class politics could genuinely take hold in the North. These votes, they declared, were the result of a ‘fluke’, ‘a protest vote’, or some machiavelian ‘pact’ arranged between the SWP and anti-Agreement republicans. But facts are stubborn things. Whether other sections of the Left were willing to acknowledge it or not, People Before Profit

was building a significant base in West Belfast. Indeed, other than an ill-prepared and disorganised incursion into the South Belfast local elections in 2011-organised by the now defunct ‘Belfast Counterfire’ grouping-People Before Profit has been the most consistently successful Left electoral vehicle in Belfast for decades. Crucial to this was the abandonment of the well-worn strategy on the left to ‘fly the flag’: whereby candidates would stand in elections without the slightest intention of actually winning a seat. People Before Profit, instead, was built on a ruthless long term commitment to actually rooting a left in the constituency before, during, and after elections.

There is an old anarchist objection to the Left involving itself in electoral politics: ‘You should have put all those resources into ground-level struggles and campaigns’. But this ignores one obvious lesson of Gerry’s campaign: it was the very act of standing in the elections that afforded us a platform to build campaigns. Why is this the case? In short, elections legitimise activism for ordinary people. Taught that politics is a specialised arena for specialised people, most folk simply do not think that they have the means to involve themselves in politics. Of course the surest and fastest way to overcome this divide is through mass agitation. But in the absence of this, elections can provide the Left with a means to relate to large numbers of people outside the organised Left who it can then pull into activism.

These rising electoral fortunes of the group were reflective of a growing acknowledgment of our campaigning work in West Belfast. Here the record speaks for itself. We were the driving force in that corner of the city during the anti-water charges campaign, organising large public meetings in various localities. We organised a campaign against an Assembly imposed ‘park-

ing tax' on residents, with meetings in excess of a hundred people on the lower Falls Road. We founded and worked within the campaign to stop the old Andersonstown RUC Barracks site from being handed over to private developers, securing a significant victory when the Department of Social Development was forced to back down. We ran a successful campaign to stop cuts to youth services and a hard-fought but ultimately unsuccessful campaign to save a local library.

This rise in community agitation continued apace in the run up to the election. First was the emergence of a resident-led campaign against the development of Casement Park. At first objections were only minor: no one opposed the redevelopment per se, only certain aspects dealing with height, capacity and planning. But faced by the deceitful tactics of planners and the complicity of local politicians in pushing the plan through, residents were forced to stage a series of large, high profile protests to attempt to stop the development. The GAA is deeply rooted in West Belfast, and the plan created divisions among its own supporters that will outlast the new project. As Joe Brolly has attested, tensions are emerging within the Association between its 'guiding principles [of] altruism, volunteerism and participation' and the creeping agenda of 'capitalism' and 'commerce' which is 'consuming [the organisation] piece by piece'.⁶ It was this 'Corporate GAA' that residents objected to, not the grassroots organisation on the ground. There were political implications too. Sinn Féin, a party that has long made much of its support for resident groups, backed the Corporate GAA over the development (as did the SDLP). It is not difficult to understand why: Casement

Park was to be the party's centrepiece in its private sector-led, tourism-driven, 'regeneration' of West Belfast. Tensions inevitably emerged. For the first time in as long as people could remember hundreds of residents marched to the Sinn Féin headquarters in Andersonstown to protest. The sole political representative invited to speak was Gerry Carroll.

In effect, the neoliberal vision for West Belfast was coming unstuck. The flip side of this vision, austerity and public sector cuts, was also being felt in the constituency. A plan by Belfast City Council to effectively privatise leisure facilities in Belfast was met by widespread derision. In the west of the city People Before Profit organised large public meetings, with one attended by over 100 people and a well-attended protest that marched to the headquarters of the SDLP (in the end, and under pressure from the trade unions and their own constituents, SF did not back the privatisation).⁷ Deteriorating conditions at the local Royal Victoria Hospital also became a focus for anger over the cuts. After the closure of the A&E at City Hospital, there were two major crises declared in the Royal: hundreds of patients were being left on waiting beds for over 24 hours, and it emerged that at least five needless deaths were being investigated in relation to the crisis. People Before Profit distributed thousands of newsletters around the constituency pointing out the obvious: cuts were costing lives.

One final example will illustrate the extent to which people were breaking from traditional allegiances. The decision by *Foras Na Gaeilge*-the organisation set up by the Belfast Agreement to promote the Irish language-to cut the number of Irish language groups it funds in Ireland from

⁶Joe Brolly, *The dying embers of the GAA*, <http://gaeliclife.com/2014/06/joe-brolly-the-dying-embers-of-the-gaa/>

⁷See the excellent report by Trade Union TV

19 to just 6 had a disproportionate effect on the North. None of the 6 organisations would be based in the North, and 4 groups-3 of which were based in West Belfast-lost their funding entirely. This funding model had the backing of Sinn Féin. Although the Irish language community in the North and Sinn Féin have never been synonymous (as Unionists would have us believe), there was always an important connection between the two: Irish language enthusiasts assumed that the party would forthrightly promote and defend its interests. But as Connolly long ago argued, the 'language question' in Ireland is an economic question. Sinn Féin's adoption of neoliberal economics did not sit well with a largely state-funded Irish language sector. People Before Profit produced local leaflets as *Gaeilge* to agitate against these cuts and joined the protests.

These protests all attest to the growing tension between SF's neoliberal project and its mainly working class base in nationalist areas. As cracks in the party's hegemonic control appeared, the political culture of West Belfast began to shift. For decades, West Belfast has been the citadel of Sinn Féin's electoral advancement. It was here that Gerry Adams won the party's first Westminster seat in 1983 (Bobby Sands was previously elected as an Anti H-Block candidate). And save for a brief interlude in 1992, the Party's advancement has progressed unchecked ever since. The term 'electoral machine' has long been associated with Sinn Féin but it is particularly apt in West Belfast. Each polling station is manned by dozens of Sinn Féin volunteers. Every available inch of non-commercial property becomes colonised with SF election posters.

But the protests of local residents, workers, and Irish language speakers had broken the mould and reset the parameters for accepted politics in West Belfast,

and the intervention of the radical Left was crucial to this. We had created a poll of attraction where anyone with an issue would approach us to help them with campaigns. Where workers or residents acted we assisted and encouraged them. Where issues existed but no lead was given we stepped in to organise agitation. And through our local literature we drew the dots together and put them into the wider context of austerity in the North.

Sinn Féin responded to emerging protests over a range of issues by blaming them on the activities of 'micro groups'-their catchall term for small 'dissident' republican groupings. This was a familiar strategy for Sinn Féin: to publicly denounce any opposition to them as being the work of 'dissidents'. Whilst bitter exasperation over Sinn Féin's accommodation with the establishment exists throughout nationalist working class areas, there is little appetite for a return to armed struggle. Contrary to the claims of republican groups, small scale armed actions have worked to strengthen the establishment in the North rather than destabilise it. It has aided SF in deflecting criticism in nationalist areas by allowing them to argue that voters have no choice but to either support the Stormont regime or accept a return to armed conflict and the return to misery that entails. In most cases people have chosen the former. In this way the continuation of armed struggle by anti-GFA republicans has been a gift to SF.

People Before Profit, however, could not be so easily dismissed as 'dissident'. We made clear that there was an alternative to the false choice of either supporting the establishment or returning to armed struggle. Through years of campaigning we built up a broad coalition of activists in West Belfast who would come to organise Gerry's election campaign. This included seasoned activists, both from the radical

Left and other political traditions, as well as scores of new activists, some of whom were involved in politics for the first time. The backbone of the campaign was made up by a small but dedicated group of people from the SWP who brought both ideological coherence and practical know-how to the election. The interrelation between these two poles—the solid socialist core and the divergent many—was crucial to the success of the campaign.

In a welcome departure from previous practice both Unite and the Fire Brigades Union backed Gerry's campaign. He also had the backing of pockets of union activists in the Royal Victoria Hospital and in the local leisure centres, along with the support of prominent community activists. His campaign was big, visible and rooted in the area. A candidate with a record of campaigning backed by trade unions and with the support of the radical Left proved to be formidable force.

One final point needs to be made with regards to the significance of this victory. Carroll's result is particularly remarkable given the 'Adams Effect' in the elections. When Adams was arrested in relation to the McConville murder there was a significant surge in Sinn Féin activity across the city. SF canvass teams swelled in size following the arrest: where there were 7 or 8 people out on canvass, teams after the arrest were made up of 40 or 50 canvassers. Three rallies were held in West Belfast in a matter of days, with at least one numbering over a thousand. And the effect was felt on the doorstep too. Disillusioned SF voters felt an obligation to return to the flock now that their leader was under attack from familiar 'dark forces'. Had the Adams arrest never happened it is quite likely that the turnout would have been lower and Carroll would have comfortably topped the poll.

A New Left in Belfast: Prospects and Pitfalls

Gerry Carroll took his seat on Belfast City Council relatively comfortably. He will be the first socialist on the council for decades. It would be hard to understate the significance of this result. Historically, the electoral fortunes of the Left in West Belfast, and the North more generally, have hardly been overwhelming. Even the greatest of all Irish socialists, James Connolly, failed to win a seat when he stood in the West. The same can be said of Tommy Geehan, the leader of the great Outdoor Relief Strike of 1932, who stood in the neighbouring Court ward and failed to get in. Of course this is not to say that the Left has never had an electoral footing in the West. In the 1980s—on the back of the hunger strikes—Peoples' Democracy secured two seats. The party was wiped out electorally, however, when Sinn Féin dropped its policy of abstentionism. And the Northern Ireland Labour Party, or variants of it, were the main voice of opposition in the area for many decades before the Troubles buried Labourism in the North.

What then are the measures of possibility in this new situation? Undoubtedly, the customary qualification remains: this is a single council seat and there is more, much more, to be done. But even the most hardened of miserabilists must recognise that a significant opportunity now presents itself. A space has been opened which allows the Left to sink real roots in working class communities. Within days of his election Carroll was contacted by residents and workers about the closure of a local post office: a protest was swiftly organised with the backing of the sacked workers and the local community. Just the next week we were spearheading a campaign against the racism of Peter Robinson, with thousands of people marching in the streets against

racist attacks and Islamophobia. A new Left in Belfast is far from fully formed: but the contours are clearly emerging.

For now Carroll's victory remains a localised phenomenon. But in the wider battle for class politics in the North we have built a significant bridgehead in West Belfast. Here we can further root socialist politics and pose a challenge to nationalism within its very heartlands. And there is more to be gained in electoral terms: a seat in the 2016 Assembly beckons. But we must also breakout into other areas, both 'Nationalist' and 'Unionist'. As Gerry told *Socialist Worker*:

The conditions that brought people out to vote for change in Black Mountain ward exist in every working-class community, and on both sides of the sectarian divide. We are proud to have worked side-by-side with people on the Shankill and in the Village areas. We will seize every opportunity to unite ordinary people against the elite who benefit from our continued division.⁸

In building a rejuvenated Left in Belfast, however, we will be faced by many potential pitfalls. As has already been outlined in this journal,⁹ any Left in the North must avoid the pulls of the two main political blocs, Unionism and Nationalism. But today perhaps the biggest pull of all is that of middle-class liberalism. Here we are encouraged to avoid all questions related to sectarianism-as divisions between Catholics and Protestants are somehow innate-and to confine ourselves to vague platitudes about 'learning from each other'

and 'moving on from the past'. Organisationally this political tendency has been most associated with the Alliance Party and newer formations like NI21.

The material basis of this politics exists in two places. Firstly it represents a middle class yearning for an end to rioting and instability-the conditions where, ostensibly, tourism, trade and 'prosperity' can take off. This trend can be seen in the 'Take Back the City' initiative held up in the media as a proper response to the loyalist flag protest: people were encouraged to shop or dine in city centre businesses to improve the economy. The main supporters of this approach to sectarianism-the Alliance Party and the now deeply damaged NI21-are in reality to the right of even the DUP on economic questions. Alliance was in favour of water charges and opposed to the cap on tuition fees, whilst NI21 declared that if it were elected to Europe it would join the European Peoples' Party, the grouping that included Fine Gael. This politics is also by default Unionist. Compare the fawning over NI21 rep Tina McKenzie after she declared her support for the Union despite her Nationalist background, with the visceral response to the declaration by Alliance's Anna Lo that she favours a United Ireland.

This liberalism dominates elsewhere in society in the North. It is prevalent in the large, state-funded NGO sector, where a condition for funding is that 'politics must stay out'. This means that challenging sectarianism, and the organisations that espouse it, is out of bounds. It also exists within sections of the trade unions, and particularly within the bureaucracy, who refuse to oppose loyalist reaction and fall over themselves to heap praise on groups

⁸<http://socialistworker.co.uk/art/38203/Newly+elected+socialist+in+West+Belfast+says,+%E2%80%9CPeople+are+fed+up+with+the+status+quo.%E2%80%9D>

⁹Brian Kelly, 'Northern Ireland: The Left, Sectarian Resurgence and the National Question Today', *Irish Marxist Review* 8

like the PUP that are promoting it. Ultimately this kind of politics lets sectarianism off the hook.

Any Left that ignores the menace of sectarianism is planting the seeds of its own demise. It is not sufficient, therefore, for the Left to be ‘non-sectarian’: it must be unequivocally anti-sectarian and be on constant lookout for every opportunity to root that politics in working-class resistance. In doing so we must avoid adopting the politics of evasion that has so afflicted sections of the Left for decades. We cannot be silent in the face of sectarian reaction, or hope that it will all blow over on its own. Famously, in 1935, the right-wing Labourist and NILP MP for East Belfast Harry Midgely went AWOL during the pogrom of 1935, when over a thousand families were burnt out of their homes, failing to provide any substantive response to loyalist reaction. Of course we cannot expect our new councillor to hold the full weight of the Left’s response to sectarianism, but it might be advisable, at least, for the comrade to avoid booking holidays in July.

The kind of bury-your-head-in-the-sand approach adopted by the likes of Harry Midgley is not an option for the Left today. Socialist politics cannot be akin to a set of scales: where we put a little green on one side and a little orange on the other until we achieve the correct balance. Instead, we must develop what George Orwell dubbed the ‘power of facing unpleasant facts’.¹⁰ We must oppose sectarianism in all its forms, all the while fighting for the unity of working class people against the real enemy at the top. And we cannot

confine ourselves to either the parameters of Green and Orange discourse or the benign banality of ‘Northern Irish’ liberalism. This will necessitate an understanding that the very structures of the Northern state institutionalise sectarianism. Caught between an exasperation with the lack of progress in the North and a fear of returning to the ‘bad old days’ of the Troubles, the working classes of the North have been encouraged to see the structures of the Northern state as a sort of bulwark against the abyss of communal violence. But socialists cannot be beholden to this view. Be it the old ‘Norn Iron’ of the loyalists or the ‘New Northern Ireland’ of the Catholic and Protestant middle classes, the unassailable truth remains: the Northern state is not the solution to sectarianism, but its irrevocable guarantor.

In building a new Left we will undoubtedly come up against the ‘old mole’ of Irish politics: the National Question. Socialists must be bold and confident in this regard. Whilst the border will hardly be the cardinal question on which the Left is built, socialists must set out to forge our own paradigm on the question. We must rediscover *the road less travelled* in Irish politics: that of a principled Left which is irreconcilably opposed to sectarianism and fights for workers unity on a 32-county basis. Therein lays the promethean promise of a resurgent Left in Ireland: only it can have the potential for overcoming sectarian divisions in Ireland and building a society that all people, Protestant, Catholic or non-believer, can have a stake in. Or to repeat a Lukcian adage: ‘The voyage is over, now the travel begins’.¹¹

¹⁰George Orwell, *Why I Write*, 1946, http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw

¹¹György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 1920