



DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST

PARTY

OUTLINE POLICY  
ON

**NORTHERN  
IRELAND**

Democratic Socialist Party.  
PO Box 508. Dublin 8.

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**POLICY ON  
NORTHERN IRELAND**

Most socialists in Ireland have traditionally accepted and supported the idea that a united Ireland was essential for progress and socialism on this island. In following this approach, socialists have merely continued with a set of assumptions derived from the nationalist movement, which sees Ireland as a natural social unit artificially divided. These assumptions, and the strategies flowing from them, have diverted socialists from tackling the real social issues, and led them up pointless and often bloody cul-de-sacs. There is no logical argument as to why socialist politics in either part of Ireland must be dependent on a united state (removing the present land border and erecting a new one between Northern Ireland and Great Britain). Those who say a unitary Irish state is essential for socialism are mystifying the issues involved in the present conflict.

The conflict in Northern Ireland is over which larger political unit Northern Ireland shall belong to. Shall it continue to be part of the United Kingdom, or shall it become part of an all-Ireland state? There is a dispute between two sovereign states over which has the right to govern it – in Articles 2 and 3 of the Republic's Constitution the Dail challenges the right of the Westminster Parliament to exercise sovereignty over Northern Ireland as it does now. The conflict hinges on this dispute between states, although it is not the armies of the two states which fight it out. On one side is the Provisional IRA, representing the demand for an all-Ireland Republic. On the other side the main military force is the British Army which defends the status quo of the Union, but without the British Army's involvement the IRA would be opposed by a popular army raised within Northern Ireland.

The communal division in Northern Ireland which breeds the violence cannot be described without oversimplifying. But the most accurate description is that Catholic nationalists are in conflict with Protestant unionists. The Protestant community which makes up two-thirds of Northern Ireland's population is solidly in favour of the union with Britain. It is probable that a sizeable section of the Catholic community also favours the union – or to put it another way, has no enthusiasm for the idea of joining up with the Republic. (After all, even at the most bitter stages of the present conflict, a sizeable number of Catholics have voted for Alliance, a party which supports the union, and the nationalist vote, of all shades, is usually of the order of about a quarter of all votes cast in Northern Ireland). The direct political representatives of the Catholic community, however, have always supported a united Ireland, with varying degrees of militancy.

## SELF-DETERMINATION

Both sides in the conflict appeal to the principle of self-determination. The unionists say that the majority in Northern Ireland have the right of self-determination. The nationalists reply that the majority in Northern Ireland is a minority on the island of Ireland and must bow to the will of the Irish majority. That a majority on the island of Ireland favours a united Ireland is something which has only recently begun to be doubted. No less than the Northern minority's representatives, the political representatives of the people in the South have incessantly expressed the demand (often called "the aspiration") for a united Ireland, and expressed it in terms which bluntly deny any right of the Ulster Protestants to reject it. Recent political leaders in the Republic have found it expedient to say that unity can only come about with the consent of the Northern majority. But this is flatly contradicted by the highest authority on state policy, the Constitution, which claims an unconditional right for the Dail to govern Northern Ireland. The repeal of Articles 2 and 3 which embody this claim is the inescapable test of the Dail's sincerity in pursuing a policy of "unity by consent". Up to now the test has been failed, and failed abysmally.

The Republic does not have now, and has not had in recent years, a consistent policy on Northern Ireland, either of coercing the Northern majority or accepting their freely expressed will. Without doubt the inconsistent policy of acting partly as a buffer, by patrolling the Border, repressing the IRA and disclaiming coercive aims, and partly as an agent of aggressive nationalism, is less destructive than a policy of connivance with the IRA and naked territorial ambition. But this inconsistency in Southern policy breeds fear among unionists and a quite unjustified hope among nationalists in the area of conflict, and prolongs the violence. The Democratic Socialist Party believes that it is time to accept the right of the Protestant unionist majority in Northern Ireland to opt out of the Irish nation-state and, correspondingly, the duty of the Catholic nationalist minority to accept the democratic limits of their position as a national minority within the United Kingdom. Articles 2 and 3, which deny all this, must be repealed.

If the movement for a united Ireland seemed capable of succeeding, and if a system of politics uniting Catholics and Protestants and expanding their freedom and prosperity seemed implicit in its success, the Democratic Socialist Party would be energetically anti-partitionist. We believe, on the contrary, that the limit of possible success for the anti-partitionist movement is an all-Ireland sectarian civil war, followed at most by a repartition. Ulster Protestant resistance to an all-Ireland state could not conceivably be contained or in the foreseeable future exhausted. But we believe that the IRA can be exhausted physically (by the withdrawal of active support in the Northern Catholic community) and morally (by the withdrawal of support on basic principle in the Republic – the repeal of Articles 2 and 3, in particular). Afterwards, when once the Northern Catholics come to terms with their position as a national minority in the UK, they cannot easily be excluded from the UK's class politics. (Consider the ambiguous position of Joseph Devlin or Gerry Fitt as "Labour men", even during the era of full-blown anti-partitionism). It is quite possible to imagine Northern Catholics playing a full part in the affairs of the UK state (without ever having needed to become

unionists), uniting with Ulster Protestants and with Catholics, Protestants and atheists from England, Scotland and Wales, in opposition on class grounds to other members of all these communities and also of their own community. This is speculative, of course. But the speculation does not clash so violently with realism as the imagined entry in large numbers of Ulster Protestants into the Irish Labour Party, or Fianna Fail, or Fine Gael.



## are the Unionists serious?

A large part of the reason why Northern Catholics are attracted to militant anti-partitionism is the belief that an all-Ireland state, by a series of bold and sweeping discriminatory measures, would soon put their community socially on a level with the Protestant community, or at least narrow the differential very considerably. In Northern Ireland the Protestants have the most and the best jobs, houses, incomes, industries, land and prospects. These have been acquired and maintained unjustly, in the opinion of the Catholics, and a state which was committed to the underdog would remedy the injustice, many of them believe.

It is certainly arguable that the Stormont state and the British state under Direct Rule have failed to adopt possible measures of promoting industry in Catholic areas. But while a section of the Catholic community is in conflict with the state forces it is least likely that such measures will be adopted. To argue that such measures would be adopted in an all-Ireland state is to close one's eyes to the massive civil conflict which any such state would inevitably face, and which would make industrialisation policies virtually irrelevant.

There can be no reasonable doubt that the Ulster Protestants will fight rather than submit to a united Ireland, although unreasonable doubts have been cast on their seriousness ever since 1886. In 1912-14 they raised and armed the 100,000-man Ulster Volunteer Force and made preparations for a Provisional Government of Ulster if the British Government tried to put the Third Home Rule Bill into effect. Some say that the UVF was a bluff. Many of its members later took part, as the 36th (Ulster) Division, in the Battle of the Somme. Futile as that battle may have been, there is no eye-witness report that suggests the men of the 36th Division were bluffing in the course of the offensive – quite the contrary. Is it likely that they would not have fought as spiritedly in Ulster, resisting what they saw as their community's death sentence?

In the period since 1920 the Ulster Protestants have defended and maintained a provincial state within the UK (which they had not wanted, but accepted because it respected their bedrock principle of not being absorbed in an all-Ireland state) and then, in the 1970s, allowed the British Government to dismantle the provincial state, on the grounds that it was inexpedient and democratically unacceptable, and resume full responsibility. In return, they understood that the British Government would organise their defence. Whenever they felt that this was not being done, or that they were being undermined, they have acted independently – most spectacularly in the UWC Strike of May 1974, which prevented the establishment of a Council of Ireland suspected of being a Trojan horse for Irish nationalism. In late 1981 when this is written, there are no lack of signs that the Protestants retain the will to act independently if they feel the British are not defending them adequately. The IRA, obsessed with the numbers' game of three and a half million Catholics to one million Protestants, are trying to provoke them to the limit. But in the event of a slaughter in Northern Ireland it is not likely that the Republic would, or could, give the Catholics any effective help. The Ulster Protestants are very much more highly motivated to resist a united Ireland than the people of the Republic are to establish it.

Historic attachment to Britain, opposition to the power of the Catholic Church in nationalist Ireland, and economic interests are important strands in the Protestant motivation. But most of all, the Protestants want to survive. Nationalism, they believe, threatens their survival (as unionism manifestly does *not* threaten the survival of the Northern Catholics). Considering the Protestant community in the Republic which has fallen in the course of 60 years from 12% of the population to about 3%, can that be called a bad judgement?

## THE SETTLERS

The Ulster Protestant community originated as a settlement of British migrants on lands removed from the native Irish, and ever since it has been a community under siege from the descendants of the dispossessed. Their social and cultural links have been with the Lowland Scots, and not at all with the Irish Catholics. Ulster, in any case, was socially closer to Scotland than to the rest of Ireland even in pre-Plantation times. Socially and economically the Ulster Protestants proceeded in close parallel with Scotland. The industrial revolution, which took fire in their community though not in the rest of Ireland, strengthened the historic link.

The Catholic nationalist movement that developed in the 19th century, uniting the descendants of the clan society destroyed by war and plantation in the 16th and 17th centuries, unintentionally but inevitably excluded the Ulster Protestants. All the

struggles around which nationalism crystallised were irrelevant or odious to them. A powerful and militant Catholic Church, intolerant of Protestant heresy, developed in a complex relationship with nationalism. The relationship was complex, but the Ulster Protestants felt that stripped to its essentials, it showed nationalism and clericalism as thick as thieves. Were they wrong? The history of the modern Irish state, where Catholic doctrine has been enshrined in law and major public services clerically controlled, does not indicate that they were.

An illusion that the Ulster Protestants, despite everything they said and did, belonged to "the Irish nation", has delayed the inevitable decision to come to terms with them. In the 17th century Gaelic clansmen had no illusion that these intruders were not politically alien to them. But the 19th century nationalist movement, drawing a confused line of descent from Protestant radical politics of the previous century, developed this illusion. Even the most militant nationalists – especially the most militant nationalists – must pay homage to the fore-ordained "unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter" even as they bomb and shoot contemporary Protestants who remain unaware of their national nature.

At the same time as the Protestants are referred to as potential or actual members of the Irish nation, they are often described in terms proper to an irreconcilable alien colony similar to the French Algerians. ("The Algerian solution" is well established among the solutions.) And of course they did originate as an alien colony – four centuries ago. The Ulster Protestants have been in Ireland for as long as white settlers have been in America, and twice as long as white settlers have been in Australia. It is true that the great majority of European settler communities who have migrated to all corners of the globe since the discovery of America have been dispossessed politically by the natives and their remnants incorporated into new nations. This has happened also to the Protestant unionist minority in the Irish Republic. But some of the settler communities remain dominant, and some of them are established beyond the possibility of undermining. The native Indians will not recover America, the aborigines will not recover Australia.

Since the Ulster Protestants did not exterminate the natives in their region, their position is not now as strong physically (or, perhaps, morally?) as the position of the white Americans or Australians. Nevertheless, it is tenable. They have made an Industrial Revolution while they have been in Ireland, and such achievements count for something. They are in Ireland to stay. The sooner this is accepted, the sooner they will modify their terms to accommodate the Catholics who live amongst them – and the sooner politics in Northern Ireland will cease to hinge on a simple and arid political/religious hostility which does so much less than justice to the capacities of its people.



**Title:** Outline Policy on Northern Ireland  
**Organisation:** Democratic Socialist Party  
**Date:** 1981

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