

‘Elections, Elected Institutions and Ireland’s Revolutionary Struggle’

Adopted by An Ard Fhéis May 2009

Introduction

The topic of what role elections and elected institutions do, or might, play in revolutionary struggle is one that has generated intense debate ever since such elected institutions first appeared as a stable feature of the political landscape. For more than two centuries Irish revolutionaries have grappled with the thorny issue of whether elected institutions can be used to bring about the interrelated goals of ending of the British occupation and the radical transformation of society.

This paper contains éirígí’s contribution to this major ongoing international debate. It outlines éirígí’s analysis of the status quo, proposes an alternative model and outlines éirígí’s view of how elections and elected institutions can be used in contemporary Ireland to further the revolutionary agenda.

Understanding ‘Liberal Democracy’

For the purpose of this paper the term ‘liberal democracy’ shall be used to describe the political, social and economic system that currently exists across Europe and much of the rest of the world. Other terms such as ‘bourgeois democracy’ and ‘capitalist democracy’ are equally valid in describing this dominant global system which provides a veneer of democracy for a capitalist system that is in fact inherently anti-democratic.

While the primary focus of this paper is that of elections and elected institutions, it is not possible to discuss these topics without also discussing the broader economic model within which elections take place and elected institutions exist.

The roots of contemporary liberal democracies can be largely traced to the eighteenth century. It was then that the twin and interrelated events of the collapsing feudal system and the industrial revolution combined to produce a new set of political, economic and social realities.

Chief amongst these realities was the creation of a new set of social classes resulting from the inherently divisive and anti-egalitarian nature of the then developing capitalist system. As

these new classes developed so, too, did popular support for radical ideas, such as that of universal equality and universal suffrage. When these popular ideas were married to the actions of a mobilised working class change began to happen.

By the early decades of the twentieth century a political, social and economic system recognisable as modern liberal democracy had emerged in a number of industrialised countries. While some pillars of the liberal democracy model, such as universal suffrage, separation of church and state and respect for personal freedoms, represented real advances for humanity, they cannot be viewed in isolation from the development of the exploitative and destructive economic system that liberal democracy is based upon.

For as liberal democracy was developing in many industrialised countries, those same countries were in the process of developing into two social classes that would represent very different interests – the ruling and working classes. The ruling class used the working class as an ‘army of labourers’ that would supply them with cheap and plentiful human resources to be exploited in the pursuit of profit. Meanwhile, in the developing colonies, the ruling class pursued a policy of pillaging vast tracts of the globe for raw materials to drive industrialisation. For those who inhabited the colonised countries theft, rape, bondage and murder were arbitrarily used to ensure submission.

To this day the liberal democracies of the rich world use a combination of subtle and crude political, economic and military means to ensure that the flow of cheap labour, raw materials and markets remains constant.

Within the liberal democracies themselves there remains the abject failure to deliver any form of meaningful economic democracy or equality. Indeed it is this failure that explains why the forces of capital have been so willing to co-exist with liberal democracies for more than a century.

Liberal democracy is the natural bedfellow of capitalism, in that it provides a system of idea and institutions most conducive to the maximum exploitation of labour and resources at home and abroad.

The capitalist class within liberal democracies actively encourage the perception of real freedom while simultaneously ensuring that the potential for genuine freedom is suppressed. History has repeatedly shown how quickly those nominal freedoms can be extinguished as soon as a threat to capitalist interests emerges. This is most glaringly true in the case of the colonies and neo-colonies whose very histories can be seen as a struggle between the forces of autonomy and democracy versus those of capital and liberal democracy.

Within liberal democracies the vested interests of the political class coincide with those of their allies in private business. It is the task of the political class to present the illusion of democracy in return for the support and succour of private industry. Central to this charade are the elected institutions that are found within liberal democracies.

éirígí recognises that real change and genuine democracy will never come from within the elected institutions of a liberal democracy. Real, meaningful, revolutionary change will instead come from events on the streets and within the workplace.

Any suggestion that the institutions of the state can be incrementally reformed or 'wrecked' through parliamentary procedure is a best hopelessly naïve.

This is the context within which éirígí approaches the issue of elections and elected institutions in the Ireland of 2009.

Towards a Genuine Democracy

Under liberal democracy people are encouraged to believe that the totality of their input into the democratic process is to occasionally elect their 'leaders' to elected institutions. éirígí recognises this as an extremely limited form of democracy, understanding that elections to elected institutions should be but one element of a wider genuine democracy.

éirígí believes democracy to be a continuous process of decision making relating to all aspects of society with those who are affected by those decisions controlling the decision-making process.

Within a genuine participative democracy the people must control, in the words of the 1919 Democratic Programme, "all the wealth

and wealth-producing processes within the nation”. For one class in society to reign over another, as they do within liberal democracies, is in direct contradiction to the principle of democracy. For as long as one class can amass wealth at the expense of another democracy cannot exist.

To make a genuine democracy a reality in the modern world will require multiple structures for the expression of popular will. Such structures will have to include not only elections to genuinely representative assemblies at a national, regional and local level but also regular popular referenda, worker-controlled workplaces and a range of additional community-based forums for decision-making.

Ultimately, real and meaningful democracy must be based upon economic democracy. It is a fact that that real power and influence are only ever wielded by those that control the wealth and wealth-producing means in society. Therefore, if we are to talk about real democracy then it must be based upon the ownership and control of the means of production by the mass of working people.

In the Irish context, éirígí believes that a genuine democracy can only come into existence by the ending of the British occupation and the collapse of the two partitionist states. In their place a single Irish Democratic Socialist Republic represents the only practical framework for the delivery of a lasting genuine, participative democracy.

Elections and Elected Institutions

However well revolutionaries may understand the inherent weaknesses of the current electoral process and the elected institutions that stem from them, this does not in anyway diminish the objective reality of their existence and their centrality to political life in Ireland today.

In deciding its view of the role that elections and elected institutions play in revolutionary struggle, éirígí has studied the national and international historical experience. That history is littered with examples of revolutionary parties, genuine or nominal, which foundered on the rocks of elections and elected institutions.

While these experiences highlight the potential dangers of engaging in the electoral process, éirígí does not believe that the

correct strategic reaction to these dangers is complete detachment from the electoral process.

Instead éirígí believes that current-day revolutionaries need to learn all of the lessons that were so cruelly taught to our predecessors who entered the arena of elections and elected institutions.

éirígí believes it is possible for a revolutionary party to move closer to its objectives by tactically contesting elections and tactically participating in specified elected institutions.

Such a tactical approach will provide a major additional platform for éirígí to challenge and expose the status quo while representing the interests of working people and promoting a socialist alternative.

Any éirígí engagement will be on the basis of a clear understanding that the existing elected institutions must ultimately fall before a new, genuinely democratic system can emerge. The primary purpose of éirígí tactically participating in elections and elected institutions will therefore be to expose the limits of the current system and give voice to those whose interests lie in direct contradiction the capitalist system.

In parallel to exposing the flaws of the current system éirígí is committed to developing alternative community and workplace based initiatives with which people can engage. Ultimately the allegiance and loyalty of working people will need to transfer from the institutions of the capitalist state towards those forums and institutions which represent their interests.

At its inception éirígí stated that *'electoral and parliamentary politics alone cannot deliver the type of change required in Irish society'* and that *'a Democratic Socialist Republic can only be established and sustained through the collective action of a progressive social movement incorporating local communities, organised labour, cultural organisations, campaigns groups, political parties etc.'* This analysis remains as valid today as it was in 2006. Elections and elected institutions are only one front in a multi-front battle against injustice and exploitation.

In moving towards the electoral arena éirígí is fully aware of the precedent of revolutionary parties being gradually reduced to little more than electoral machines. It is with this possibility in mind that éirígí will be taking the necessary measures to ensure that elections and elected institutions will form only one, relatively minor, element of éirígí's activities.

In addition, the necessary steps will be taken within éirígí's own organisational structures to ensure that, should a block of éirígí elected representatives emerge at some point in the future, those activists will remain subservient to the wider activist base and struggle.

éirígí has, over the last three years, demonstrated a real commitment to political campaigning as one of the means for shaping change in society. In the coming years, éirígí is committed to expanding its campaigning activities with a particular focus on mobilising the largest possible number of people in opposition to the current political, social and economic system.

Ireland

Outlining éirígí's view of the theoretical potential for revolutionaries to advance their agenda through the tactical contesting of elections and the tactical participation in elected institutions within the typical liberal democracies does not, of course, address the unique Irish context. The ongoing British occupation represents an added complication to how the issue of elections and elected institutions should be approached by Irish revolutionaries.

Since the partition of Ireland in 1921 the issue of elections and participation in elected institutions has been the cause of continual debate and all too regular division within republican and revolutionary ranks.

In approaching this difficult issue éirígí has been guided by our republican history, the objective realities of the Ireland of 2009 and the collective analysis of the likely scenarios that may emerge in the coming years.

While reserving the right to contest elections to all elected institutions, éirígí believes that the issue of participation in each individual institution must be judged on its own merits.

In determining which elected institutions éirígí may tactically participate in at some point in the future, a balance has had to be struck between, on the one hand, maximising the potential of such an engagement and, on the other hand, not conferring legitimacy upon British rule and the capitalist system in Ireland.

Westminster:

It is the elected institutions of Westminster which provide the spurious legal basis for Britain's claim of sovereignty over the Six Counties. To participate in Westminster would be to accept the legitimacy of that claim and the subsequent ongoing military and political occupation. For this reason éirígí will never participate in Westminster.

Stormont:

The elected institution at Stormont is intricately and unequivocally linked to the institutions of Westminster and the illegal claim of that parliament to a section of Ireland's national territory. éirígí recognises that Stormont remains what it has always been - a foreign, illegal parliament designed to create a veneer of democracy for Britain's occupation of the Six Counties. For these reasons éirígí will never participate in Stormont.

Leinster House:

For any assembly to be considered a national parliament it must first claim sovereignty over the entirety of a national territory. Leinster House, therefore, cannot be considered as a national parliament but instead constitutes a partitionist assembly.

éirígí fully understands the counter revolutionary role that Leinster House has played since its foundation; a role which it continues to play to this day. For more than eighty years the nurturing of the native capitalist class has been one of the defining features of Leinster House. Another has been its unwavering support for the British occupation of the Six Counties.

While recognising its deeply flawed nature, éirígí believes that the revolutionary project can be advanced by tactically participating in Leinster House.

In the event of éirígí securing representation within Leinster House, the basis of participation will be that of challenging and exposing the status quo while representing the interests of the

working class. In parallel, the platform provided by Leinster House will be used to promote an alternative socialist system.

Local Councils in the Six Counties:

While accepting that Local Councils within the Six Counties are largely a construct of the British occupying administration, éirígí also understands that these councils do not, of themselves, claim sovereignty or jurisdiction over any part of the national territory.

It is, therefore, possible to tactically participate within these councils without accepting, or conferring legitimacy upon, the British occupation.

In the event of éirígí securing representation within these councils the basis of participation will be that of challenging and exposing the status quo while representing the interests of the working classes. Particular attention will be paid to countering sectarianism at a council level – a cancer with a long history in the Local Councils of the Six Counties.

In parallel, the platform provided by the councils will be used to promote an alternative socialist system.

Local Councils in the Twenty-Six Counties:

As the most accessible and localised elected institutions within the Twenty-Six Counties, éirígí believes that the Local Councils represent a potentially very useful forum for the prosecution of the struggle.

In the event of éirígí securing representation within these councils, the basis of participation will be that of challenging and exposing the status quo while representing the interests of the working classes. In parallel, the platform provided by the councils will be used to promote an alternative socialist system.

Údarás na Gaeltachta:

éirígí recognises that, despite its unique responsibilities, Údarás na Gaeltachta operates within the same socio-economic framework as any other elected institution in the Twenty-Six Counties or any other liberal democracy. éirígí believes, however, that there is value to be found for the revolutionary project in tactically participating in Údarás na Gaeltachta.

In the event of éirígí securing representation within Údarás na Gaeltachta, the basis of participation will be that of challenging and exposing the status quo while representing the interests of the working classes, an Gaeltacht and the wider Irish language sector. In parallel, the platform provided by Údarás na Gaeltachta will be used to promote an alternative socialist system.

European Parliament:

éirígí recognises the major challenge to Irish sovereignty that the European Union now represents and the integral role of the European Parliament with the EU. The European Parliament plays a similar function to national parliaments within the liberal democracies in that it provides a veneer of democracy for an EU which is wedded to an inherently undemocratic capitalist system.

As with national parliaments, it is éirígí's view that the contradictions of the European Parliament and the wider EU are best challenged both from within the institution and without.

In the event of éirígí securing representation within the European Parliament, the basis of participation will be that of challenging and exposing the status quo while representing the interests of the working classes in Ireland and across Europe. In parallel, the platform provided by the European Parliament will be used to promote an alternative international socialist system.