

TIMES CHANGE

POSTSCRIPT by ROSHEEN CALLENDER

Times Change... and so do people! At the time of the first 'Coffee Circles' in early 1998, few people in Democratic Left were thinking of making any dramatic change in our *modus operandi*, our way of operating, our organisational framework. By the end of the year, most of us were not only convinced of the need for such change, but had decided on the form it should take, having ascertained that most people in the Labour Party were similarly convinced and enthusiastic about the prospect of our two organisations uniting so as to give socialism in Ireland a stronger voice in the 21st century.

The 'Coffee Circles' were, essentially, about what we wanted 'new-century socialism' to look like and how we envisaged the Irish political landscape in the years ahead. They were not, of course, what led us directly to the idea of unification with Labour, although that process began during the same period, with a May Day speech by Proinsias De Rossa to which Ruairi Quinn responded promptly and positively. What was striking about the 'Coffee Circles' was their openness and open-endedness: their openness about discussion, even of cherished fundamentals and sacred cows; their open-endedness about where such discussions might lead. The fact that they were very much 'open house, open season' debates did in some sense open people's minds to many new possibilities.

One measure of the change that took place during those six months, was that in January 1998, at the first Coffee Circle, the main speaker, Economics Professor David Jacobson, was arguing the case for an independent socialist party to the left of social democracy and the Labour Party – a view shared by the overwhelming majority of people at the meeting (and in Democratic Left as a whole). In July, at the last Coffee Circle, which was after the Good Friday Agreement and after the discussions about the possible unification of Labour and Democratic Left had begun, Fergus Finlay described the prospect of such unification as "The most exciting development in Irish politics for a very long time" – and hardly anyone disagreed!

In my view, what changed during 1998 was the perception by people on the Left of what was essential, and what was inessential, for us to carry into the new century and the new millennium. What was seen to be essential were the values and the vision, of both democratic socialism and social democracy – the desire and determination to build a better, fairer and more inclusive society, in which everyone has not only the opportunity to participate fully, but the means to avail of that opportunity. What was seen as inessential was the preservation of two separate organisational frameworks for the advancement of these visions and values, if both could be accommodated in a single, broader one. It seemed, by then, that there was considerable overlap between social democracy and democratic socialism and that left unity, encompassing whatever differences remained, was at last possible.

The achievement of organisational unity – or more precisely, the agreement to integrate the two organisations, since the process of doing so is still ongoing – is only a first step. The next is to change and modernise the organisation, in line with the changing needs of its members and supporters. Hopefully the process of integration will stimulate this at all levels of the organisation. But the process of organisational reform must go hand-in-hand with that of political and policy renewal and re-evaluation. The policies needed to advance the values of social democracy and democratic socialism in the 21st century will clearly be new and somewhat different to those of the 20th century, because our lives have been changing and will continue to do so – our working lives, our family lives, our social and political lives.

That is why we need to keep discussing fundamental issues, like what exactly are we trying to change, and why, and how? That is why many of us who organised and enjoyed the 'Coffee Circle' discussions and made some fairly radical changes in our own political/organisational lives during 1998, feel the need for similar ongoing political debate during 1999, alongside the other pressing political business of elections and parliamentary activity.

Hopefully the next series of 'Coffee Circle' debates will start this autumn under the *Times Change* banner and I wish the organisers every success in this important task.

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