

A Socialist in Stormont

An interview with Gerry Carroll MLA

Irish Marxist Review interviews Gerry Carroll of Belfast People Before Profit who, together with Eamonn McCann for Foyle, was recently elected as an MLA in Stormont.

IMR: Could you begin by telling us a bit about yourself and your upbringing etc.

Gerry Carroll: I was born in West Belfast and raised in the Andersonstown area. I am the second eldest in a family of seven children. My father worked as a coal man and a black taxi driver when I was growing up. My mother worked in the house and later as a classroom assistant in the local school when she went back to work. It was a big family, always someone to play with, and usually more than one to argue with.

I was born in 1987 and grew up at the tail end of the troubles. I am old enough to remember the British Army patrolling the streets, and can remember our primary school being evacuated after a bomb scare was reported. Stuff like that was just normal, and I'm not sure I was old enough to really comprehend it. I didn't have any other experience to compare it to. But my formative years were after the ceasefires. I can remember hundreds of cars driving up and down the Andytown Road with tricolours when the IRA called a ceasefire. It was like a big party in the area.

And I remember as well the excitement when Bill Clinton came. The whole family went into town to see him. The place was packed, brimming with people. It seems strange looking back. But it was the hope that something different was on the way, something better. I was ten when the Belfast Agreement was signed. I remember the document lying about the house, it was sent to every home. I doubt if I even looked through it, but you certainly heard a lot about it. My generation was supposed to be the first generation without violence. The first generation with a future beyond prisons and repression. I'm not sure I thought of it that way at the time of course. But that was the context.

I went to St John the Baptist primary school, and then to St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar school. I liked my time at both. I suppose I wasn't a star pupil. In fact I know I wasn't. I was more into football and music. But I learnt enough to get by, and I am very grateful for that. My only regret is I didn't stick at learning the Irish language, which is a big part of West Belfast since its revival in the last few decades. I have been going to classes in recent years to try and make up for it.

IMR: How did you first get involved in politics?

Gerry Carroll: My family were largely republican in political persuasion, and some of my relatives were involved in Sinn Féin. Some still are. Had I been born ten years earlier maybe I would have joined them. Who knows? But by the time I was a teenager the radical gloss had gone off Sinn Féin. Maybe not completely, but that was the sense. This didn't come from some sort of sophisticated analysis. It was just your experience. You would see them on TV in suits, and then you would see them at the weekend, trying to move you on from street corners. Whether or not they were part of the establishment, they certainly felt like the establishment in the area. There was a gap growing between the party and young people. Those young people who did join tended to be sons or daughters of Sinn Féin members. In fact if you did join, you were likely to be a target for merciless slaggin by your peers.

I suppose the first political thing I did was a walk out of school against the war in Iraq in 2003. We walked out of school - much to the dismay of Senior Management - who later gave a day's detention to everyone who decided to take a principled stand against the war in Iraq and walk down the school lane. I distinctly remember watching the TV coverage of the bombs being dropped on Iraq. It filled me full of rage.

In 2005 I was part of organising a 'Students Against Poverty' bus to the Make

Poverty History demonstration in Edinburgh. We organised a bus of school students from across West Belfast and the wider city to the demonstration. I will never forget the powerful experience of being on a protest with hundreds of thousands of people and the real sense that if people across the world stood together then fundamental change could be achieved. There was a fantastic feeling of solidarity and collectivism in the camp in Edinburgh with exciting discussions about how we can shape the world. This experience had a lasting impact on me and really helped begin to shape how I view the world today.

In 2008 and 2009 I was elected as the student's union president for the Jordanstown campus at the University of Ulster. It was a lot of fun. We organised mystery bus tours and fresher's events but also demonstrations against Fees and tried to instil radical politics into the student movement. It was where I really cut my teeth politically and whilst it was certainly a new experience - we constantly attempted to present a political student's union that was against war, for free education and opposed to racism.

IMR: You were banned from Belfast City Centre for a time for being involved in a protest weren't you?

Gerry Carroll: Yes, and it was a long legal battle. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone, nothing glamorous about it at all. The whole thing went on for about two years. But we were right to have protested, and we were right to have taken a stand. I was arrested at a student protest at Belfast City Hall against fees on December 9th 2010. Hundreds of students and supporters had gathered there to protest against the hike in tuition fees. It was a brilliant day: with hundreds of young people, from both sides of the divide, joining together to say no to a future of debt.

A botched attempt by the police to clear the area at the end of the protest resulted in hundreds of people standing on the road. A sit down protest began. The PSNI singled myself out for arrest (because I had a megaphone and was therefore a 'ringleader'), and dragged me from the protest. I was held overnight, and released the next day under

strict bail conditions. I was barred from entering the city centre under any circumstances and barred from attending protests of any kind.

Over the next year some of the restrictions were lifted. I was allowed back into the city centre and eventually allowed to attend protests again: under the proviso that I contacted the local PSNI station to alert them of my presence. I was again arrested a year and half later when I was leafletting in the town about unemployment rights, whereupon I was approached by two police officers who arrested me. I was on a protest they said, and had not rung the police station. This was not a protest I argued, which it wasn't, but I was brought back before the Judge again nonetheless. It was just petty harassment.

Some of the charges were dropped, including the ridiculous notion that I had resisted arrest. At the trial my solicitor held up the front page of the Belfast Telegraph. There was a photo of me being dragged by the police from the protest by my legs, with about four other people holding my arms and coat. I was hardly in a position to 'resist' arrest. That charge was dropped instantly after that photo was shown. I was convicted, however, of engaging in a 'provocative act', partly because I had chanted 'they say cut back we say fight back' on a megaphone. Ludicrous stuff.

IMR: When did you first stand for election?

Gerry Carroll: I first stood in 2011 - when I was still banned from the city centre - in the Assembly election for West Belfast. We had been involved in local campaigns from 2006; from the fight against water charges, a campaign to protect public land at the former Andersonstown Barracks site from being sold off to a private developer and campaigns against parking charges. We were very energetic about the area, and our campaign mainly involved young people.

People Before Profit were known around the community for being involved in grassroots activism for a few years. We did very well in the election, getting 1661 votes. Not long after that Gerry Adams resigned his Westminster seat to move to the South. We

stood again, and were the only party to increase our vote in that election.

These results were much better than anything left wing parties had scored in the North in decades. Naturally, some people refused to accept its significance, arguing it was a fluke or that we borrowed votes from others. But we never bothered with them, and kept doing what we were doing.

IMR: Tell us about getting elected as a councillor and how you operated as a socialist in that role.

Gerry Carroll: We knew we had a real chance of taking a seat on the City Council in 2014 based on our previous election results and our consistent campaigning on the ground. And while much of the media never gave our campaign the time of day, this spurred us on we came 100 votes away from topping the poll in the Black Mountain Ward in West Belfast. This puzzled a lot of the establishment who thought that politics could only be demarcated in the North along Nationalist and Unionist lines. And for the first time in decades there was a socialist voice in the chamber of Belfast City Council. Our election came not long after the period of the 'Flag Protests'. There was a lot of pessimism around that period but also a deep sense of frustration about the recession and attacks on public services. And not long after the protests we saw trade union strikes against public sector cutbacks and the growth in the idea that there needed to be an alternative to cutbacks.

I think the election sparked a resurgence in street protests and social movements in the city. We organised large scale demonstrations against the slaughter of Palestinians by the Israeli state, demonstrations against racism, the war in Syria, racism and for equal marriage. On the council we proposed a motion which passed, calling for the implementation of the living wage for Health Workers in Belfast, a motion supporting striking workers, a motion creating Belfast city councils first Transgender policy which provided support to staff transitioning and also committed the council to raise awareness of Transgender rights. Of course the larger parties sought to sideline us, to make it seem like they 'deliver' and we were

ineffectual. But people aren't stupid and could see past what they were doing. Our support was growing.

IMR: Your election campaign for MLA this year was obviously a triumph - what were the key factors in its success?

Gerry Carroll: Our result was indeed a fantastic triumph and it was down to a number of factors. Firstly, we had a good team ethic and a lot of people who did a lot of hard work-writing the leaflets, putting up posters and knocking the doors. This was our fifth election in five years so we had accumulated a lot of experience running in elections.

Some quarters tried to present our vote as simply a 'protest vote'. But this completely missed out on the fact that we had a coherent argument about what could be done to fight against austerity. Sinn Féin and the DUP argued that austerity was the only option, like some force of nature that couldn't be stopped. On the other hand, we argued that the Assembly were complicit in austerity and doing the dirty work of the Tories. The Assembly crafted the Stormont House Agreement which ludicrously argued for corporation tax to be slashed to 12.5% and £700 million to be borrowed to abolish 20,000 public sector workers-Thatcherite politics pure and simple. We argued for Stormont, instead of begging David Cameron to cut taxes for their corporate friends, to call for corporations to pay their way. We also argued that the £700 million borrowed could be used to create a crash programme of house building which would give people homes and create jobs for the unemployed sparks and brickies.

I think we also tapped into something deeper. There is a growing sense of the need for society to take a different direction. This was encapsulated in our slogan of 'Building a Socialism for the 21st Century.' We were the local version of the Sanders, or Corbyn phenomenon. That same mood exists in West Belfast as it does across Ireland. The election of comrades to the Dail earlier this year also helped us in terms of showing that PBP was campaigning for an alternative vision North and South, which could build an all-Ireland movement based on people power

and capable of real change.

IMR: What has been your experience so far in Stormont and how are you responding to the situation politically?

Gerry Carroll: It has definitely been a strange experience - in the sense that I have been involved in activism for over eleven years but never did, and still don't, see myself as a traditional politician. It is also strange seeing people you are used to shouting at on the TV or screaming at on the radio walk past you on a daily basis.

It can be frustrating at times, especially considering how they have stitched up the speaking time to decrease opportunities for People Before Profit to speak, and to put us to the bottom of the list, a shameful act by the DUP and Sinn Féin, something which the old Official Unionist Party would be proud of.

When we do speak, we try and act like a megaphone inside Stormont for everyone outside it. Be they classroom assistants fighting against job insecurity, same sex couples fighting to get marriage equality enacted, or the thousands of people who are waiting to be housed. It's clear that Stormont has failed ordinary people. Our job is to give voice to those people left behind, and the failure of the system to deal with people's needs in everything we do on the Hill- every time we speak or present a motion. For me it's great to have two MLAs up in Stormont especially someone with the experience of campaigning that Eamonn has. And we have a great team around us. But in the end the important thing is what happens on the streets. As I said in my first speech; 'what Stormont does, the people can undo.'

IMR: Could you explain how you and People Before Profit are dealing with the issue of Irish unity and the call for a border poll.

Gerry Carroll: PBP support a border poll on principle. We are for every exercise in democracy. We think people should be allowed to have a discussion about the border in a serious way. We can't have a 'not in front of the children' approach to the National Question. Let people discuss it, let them debate it. And guess what? Some Protestants will be for a united Ire-

land. And some Catholics will be for the border. It isn't all determined by religion. Things are much more pragmatic than that. And in that discussion we can put our own unique position, that is neither nationalist nor unionist but socialist. One that calls for an Ireland that isn't divided into two horrible states, nor one based on the Sinn Féin vision of corporate tax haven Ireland where big business are given free handouts, and unity is promoted as a new way to cut the public sector through all Ireland efficiency. No one is going to be won to that vision unfortunately. That's why support for a United Ireland is so low at the moment. And that's why Sinn Féin's strategy strengthens partition.

So there is a difference between having a border poll and winning one. PBP look at the national question through the prism of James Connolly's ideas. We live on a small island which is divided into two-this creates a division between workers in the North and the South. It also creates a divide between workers in the North. We want to see the unity of working class across Ireland, North and South, and an upheaval against both states. We believe the only way people can be convinced in large numbers of the case for a United Ireland is through a grassroots movement from below, that is actually about transforming their lives, not about flags or nationality. We see the potential for this unity through kinds of mass movements we have seen in recent years; whether the big water charges movements in the South or the public sector strikes in the North. But we need a much bigger mass movement. And when there's a convergence of struggles on both sides of the border, Ireland can begin to be reshaped in the interests of working class people. We are for a 32 County Socialist Ireland, one everyone can have a stake in, whatever your background.

IMR: PBP seems to be expanding in the North as it is in the South; can you report on the situation at present.

Gerry Carroll: We certainly are expanding since the election results. We now have seven branches across Belfast. We have had requests to join from all parts of the North since the Assembly election results. We have

grown in Derry too, where the party is doing fantastically well. I think the platform that we have in Stormont to put across principled, anti-capitalist politics that emphasises the importance of people power, strikes a chord with a lot of people who are angry about the way society is going. No doubt there will be challenges for PBP in the coming period, and we will be attacked from all sides by all sorts of parties and forces.

We have been called Unionists, Nationalists, Dissidents and everything else under the sun. But it's a bit like that scene in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, when Jack Nicholson's character is desperately trying to escape from the asylum, while everyone else looks on doing nothing and he and says to them; 'But I tried didn't I? Goddammit, at least I did that!' That's how I feel about what we are doing as well.