



The left and the racist referendum

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In March, the man styling himself Minister for Justice and Equality announced a referendum to remove citizenship from a group of Irish children. If passed, children born in Ireland would be denied the right to Irish citizenship if a parent wasn't already a citizen. He promised legislation to confer citizenship on children one of whose parents had lived in the country legally for three years before the birth.

It needs to be reiterated just how fundamentally racist this referendum was. The existing situation meant that all children were born legally equal in Ireland. Despite all the inequalities they would face from there on in, at the moment of their birth they were officially all in the same boat. The government proposal would mean that, as soon as the umbilical cord was cut, some babies would be put into a lower category – not even second-class citizens, but no class of citizens at all.

The basis of this discrimination was clearly a racial one. The government terms were framed, as far as the decorous language of parliamentary draftsmen can be, to take in children who were not white. Whites from the US or South Africa who think Kilkenny is a Tarantino film would still be able to get an Irish passport if a grandparent happened to have been born here back in the mists of time. But children born and reared here, who had never set foot anywhere else, would be excluded because their parents hailed from Africa, eastern Europe or somewhere else where skin tends to be darker. Racial discrimination was being put into the constitution.

New horizons of racist scapegoating opened with the referendum. Figures were concocted to prove that hospitals were being overrun by women giving birth to the wrong sort of baby. The health service being in bits was nothing to do with being denied money, facilities and staff: no, it was all these black babies who insisted on coming into the world. The least densely populated country in Europe, which managed to support eight or nine million when it had nothing but spuds, was suddenly unable to sustain a couple of hundred kids on the economic miracle of the Celtic Tiger. The statistics were withdrawn after being exposed as lies, but no matter: they had done their job.

The vocabulary of racism was developed and refined. The politicians had no need to be so vulgar as to attack black people explicitly. Code language like 'people who have no real connection with our country' would serve just as well. A nod was as good as a wink when the third person plural came into play: there were too many of 'them' here abusing the system. 'Protecting the integrity of our citizenship' just meant keeping it nice and white.

Not that traditional forms of racism went by the board. Good old-fashioned racist abuse made a real comeback during the referendum campaign. It never went away, of course, but when the racists saw that their point of view was now government policy, no less, they felt confident enough to abuse immigrants and anti-racist campaigners at the top of their voice and the bottom of their intellect. Even tame, government-funded multicultural quangos reported a marked increase in racist attacks following the referendum announcement.

The whole notion of putting human rights to the vote was undemocratic from top to bottom. Everyone has the right to equal treatment, whether the majority agrees with it or not. A referendum to take the right to vote away from people born on a Monday would be undemocratic even if everyone born on Tuesday to Sunday voted for it. A child born in one bed should have the same rights as the child in the next bed. It is nice if the majority agrees with that proposition, but ultimately not necessary.

The reaction of many people to the referendum was one of deep anger and a determination to do something about it. These people fought a fine campaign—open, democratic and activist. While the government parties blithely wrote cheques for €280,000 to finance their campaign, the No campaign had to beg, borrow and steal €7,000 to try and compete. Hundreds of thousands of leaflets were distributed, and thousands of posters put up, arguing a strong and unapologetic case against the government's racist proposal.

Fighting a severely uphill battle from the word go, the defeat was no big surprise, sickening and all as its extent was. Attacked by powerful enemies and abandoned by most of their presumed allies, the opponents of the referendum can be proud of the stand they made. People will one day look back at those who fought the racist referendum of 2004 and acclaim their achievement.

The response of the left

A significant number of those most active in the campaign were socialists. This is only to be expected, of course: most socialists don't need telling twice that fighting racism is a basic duty. It seems, however, that quite a few of them do. When the government threw down its racist challenge, much of the left decided that they had better things to be doing.

The earliest objection was that the campaign took every opportunity, even in its title, to brand the referendum as racist and to oppose it on that basis. One organisation was so incensed at this that it declared it would be taking no part at all. But seeing as it had taken no part up until then, they would have invented another excuse if that one hadn't been handy. Another organisation that objected made one unsuccessful attempt to change things by packing a meeting, and then limited its involvement to occasionally sending a token full-timer along, and trying to establish a rival campaign elsewhere.

The referendum was racist; we were campaigning against a racist referendum; it would have been dishonest to say otherwise. Saying so in the campaign's name made the point as soon as the subject came up, and the other side was forced to defend itself against the charge. Allowing them to sneak the debate into inoffensive, respectable arguments about legal loopholes would have handed victory to the government on a plate. There is no evidence that avoiding the racism of the referendum would have won us a single vote, and every likelihood that letting it be characterised as an inoffensive measure would have lost us more.

Some socialists (we won't argue with their self-description here) didn't want to suggest that those considering voting Yes were racist. Have these people ever stood on a picket line? A picket suggests, in no uncertain terms, that those considering crossing it will be scabs, and if it's strong enough it enforces this suggestion physically. Voting to disenfranchise children who have done nothing but be born with a darker skin is scabbing. Supporting a racist referendum is a racist act. Socialists had a duty to tell that truth. Those who were afraid to do so have no confidence that racism can be confronted—or no appetite for confronting it themselves.

Others said that the R word should be less explicit so as to involve more people in the campaign. Of course, in the confines of a campaign meeting, *they* were well aware that it was racist, but saying so in public might put people off. Again, this was a case of attributing their own cowardice to others. Fianna Fáil councillors compared the referendum to Hitler's Germany; tabloid editorials called it fascist; but self-proclaimed revolutionaries couldn't bring themselves to openly name and shame the racist referendum. All manner of civil liberties campaigners, trade unionists, anti-racists, reformist politicians and others had no problem working with the campaign. It was only our beloved revolutionaries who had to wrestle with their conscience. Their conscience lost, but then it was very weak, not to mention out of practice.

But the real problem they had was their prior engagement. June 11 was not just

referendum day but election day, and a few socialists had their names on the ballot paper. This created a dilemma for them: should they fight the referendum or fight their electoral campaigns? And if they were going to do the latter, there wasn't an awful lot of votes to be gained in opposing racism.

The responses varied from the good to the bad to the ugly. What anti-referendum campaigning they did was usually tacked on to the end of their electoral campaign, and definitely subordinate to it. Some gave their opinion on the subject if they were asked – but only if they were asked. Some leaflets mentioned opposition to the referendum – along with a dozen other issues that weren't going to be explicitly put to the voters on a separate ballot paper. Other leaflets avoided the issue entirely – because of an oversight or being printed too early, or some such excuse that would satisfy those who wanted to be satisfied.

What was the most important thing for the Irish working class on June 11? To defeat the racist referendum. This may not have been the most important thing from the point of view of getting your candidate elected, recruiting people to your party, selling your paper. But if that's your point of view, you're no good to the cause of socialism. The fight against racism has to take precedence over the interests of any organisation.

Let it be said that some socialists, to their eternal credit, did their best to combine campaigns, actively canvassing against the referendum while canvassing for their candidates. They obviously lost votes as a result, but losing these votes was the best performance made by any socialists in the elections – there are some votes we're better off without. The experience underlines the drawbacks of electoral campaigns for socialists: the pressure to water down your politics is greater, and elections put a hell of a lot of eggs in just one basket.

Some on the left claimed to be campaigning in their own fashion. They would put a class argument against the referendum, rather than an appeal to humanitarian sentiment. They would point out that the government is to blame for unemployment or the housing crisis, not refugees. They would call for a No vote as a protest against a government that was attacking working-class living standards, to send a message to Fianna Fáil and the PDs.

Chance would be a fine thing: most of these promises failed to translate into practical campaigning. This was not a class argument, however, but an evasion: instead of fighting racism itself, you try to change the subject to an easier one. As the election results show, it is perfectly possible to oppose the government on any number of issues while still supporting its attack on refugees. Racist prejudices don't just melt away because a person disagrees with government health policy.

Racism has to be tackled head on, not met halfway. It will only be beaten when people have the guts to oppose it in its own terms. Racism is an evil poison, and every human being is entitled to the same rights and opportunities whatever their ethnic background. This is a basic humanitarian belief, but also a basic socialist one, going back to Marx and beyond. More and more, the defence and extension of human rights involves a challenge to capitalism itself. The baton of fighting for universal human dignity has passed to socialists, and it is one we should be glad to accept. Building up a culture of zero tolerance for racism is a job for us and our class.

When a socialist hears someone say: 'The refugees are taking all our houses', their response is likely to be: 'No, the government is responsible for the housing crisis.' But this misses something out. The *first* thing to say is: 'No, they're not: refugees have as much right to a house as anyone else.' True, we also need to put the blame on the economic system we live under (which is far wider than just 'the government', of course), but when the rights of refugees come under attack like this, defending them takes priority. Saying that in a socialist society everyone would have a house is also dodging the ball. Until then – and even for a while after a socialist revolution – refugees with a greater need should of course get housed before Irish people with a lesser need.

To take another example, campaigning against the work permit system, which makes the jobs and residency of immigrants dependent on a single employer, must be on an openly anti-racist basis. Telling Irish workers to oppose the permit system because it will lower *their* wages isn't good enough. We need to be brave enough to argue that the permit system should be opposed in the first place because it is unjust, racist, an affront to immigrants' human rights. Their secondary effect on workers as a whole only comes into the argument *after* their primary effect on immigrant workers. The problems and struggles of those who face racism directly should be steering the fight against racism.

But ever since Connolly was shot, the Irish left has had a fatal tendency to scurry back into the bunker of economism when things get tough, to retreat to the familiar territory of 'bread and butter' issues. Some socialists have the strange idea that immigration should be supported because of immigrants' contribution to the state exchequer. What precisely is left-wing about valuing immigrants for their tax euros, seeing their presence as some kind of pension plan? Whether the capitalist economy happens to need immigrant labour or not is irrelevant. Trying to smuggle pro-immigrant sentiment into the existing state of trade-union consciousness won't work; arguing for a deeper consciousness that despises racism on principle is a harder road but a more solid one.

The May Day protests in Dublin drew significant numbers, and the protests against Bush's visit in late June even more. But there were many activists who skipped from one to the other, missing out the racist referendum in the middle. Protesting against the Fortress Europe built by the EU leaders, they neglected to notice the ramparts being erected in this part of the continent. Some anti-capitalists have their eyes always on the ends of the earth, opposing injustice when it is global and glamorous, but paying no heed when it takes a more mundane form on their own doorstep.

Worse were those who spent the referendum campaign sitting on their hands. Full of criticisms of the campaign, which they were more than entitled to, they couldn't bring themselves to do any campaigning of their own. When it didn't come up to their own exacting standards, they told each other how wrong it was, and then looked to see if there was anything good on the telly. They weren't missed.

The reality of racism

The result of the referendum exposed just how bad racism is in Ireland. Towards the end of the campaign, it was more in hope than expectation that we called for a No vote, but none of us expected a defeat as overwhelming as it was. The severe kick in the teeth that the 79 per cent Yes vote represented was depressing in the extreme. At Easter 1916, Pádraig Pearse was spat on in the street for wanting to cherish all the children of the nation equally, and history just repeated itself.

The Yes vote was clearly a racist vote. The RTÉ exit poll asked 3,310 people why they had voted for the referendum. 36 per cent said the country was being exploited by immigrants – not by multinational profit-exporters or bribed politicians, but by immigrants. 27 per cent said there were too many immigrants in the country – which probably means, given how small the numbers actually are, that any immigrants are too many for them. 20 per cent wanted to bring Ireland into line with other EU countries – not to harmonise our corporation tax or holiday entitlements, just to treat immigrants in as racist a manner as the rest of Europe. And 14 per cent said that children born here shouldn't be automatically Irish citizens – though they obviously didn't have any problem with the majority of children, the *white* ones, continuing to have that right.

These answers differ only in the degree of racism that motivated them – or maybe the degree to which the voters put a legalistic veneer on their prejudices in front of the pollsters. None of them can be accurately described as 'soft' racism, however. Soft racism is when someone says they don't like Africans because one of them lives down the road and isn't

very nice, when someone expresses a passive sense of unfocused discomfort at the presence of immigrants, not wanting their daughter to marry one. There's nothing soft at all about deliberately casting your vote to deprive newborn babies of rights because of the colour of their skin.

Some have tried to derive comfort from the generally dismal performance of openly racist candidates in the same day's local elections. To read this as a rejection of racism is completely unreal. Why would a racist voter choose ineffective, incompetent racists when they could advance their prejudice far more effectively by voting Yes in the referendum? Michael McDowell's deportation policy has done far more to achieve the kind of society racists want than the sad array of would-be Führers propping up the bottom of the election results. The racism of the state poses a far greater problem than the isolated efforts of avowed racist groups, and this is where anti-racists should concentrate their attention.

Ireland is without doubt a racist society. For generations, the travelling community have been subjected to vicious forms of segregation and discrimination with hardly a peep from the settled community. The general response to the arrival of relatively tiny numbers of immigrants in recent years has been anything but welcoming. Most people in Ireland, at the very least, go along with racist ideas to some extent. After June 11, the smug, reassuring belief that 'Irish people aren't racist' is no longer tenable.

One bizarre reading tries to sugar the pill by saying people aren't racist but xenophobic. You would need more dictionaries than de Valera to tell the difference between the two words. If anything, xenophobia is worse, suggesting a medical condition, a phobia, rather than an attitude. But xenophobia is an unusual-sounding Greek word with five syllables, whereas racism is a harsh word whose meaning is crystal-clear and spares no feelings. When doctors don't want patients to know how bad their condition is, they use the Latin name for it. Taking of xenophobia instead of racism is the same type of obfuscation.

Whether people are consciously and deliberately racist is another matter. Racism is so engrained in capitalist society that it can appear natural and acceptable in all but its most extreme forms. Not for nothing did Fianna Fáil sell their racist proposal as "Common Sense Citizenship". Just because someone claims not to be a racist, that doesn't mean they're not. The refrain 'I'm not a racist... but I think they should all be deported' (or variations on the theme) is an everyday one. Racism rarely comes dressed in a Ku Klux Klan costume with swastikas. Unmasking the acceptable face of racism and making it unacceptable is half the battle.

Socialists and the fight against racism

The Irish capitalist class are well aware of racism's corrosive effect and are exploiting it to the full. Under the work permit system that ties workers to an employer like medieval bonded labourers, a reserve army of workers with worse pay, conditions and rights is being recruited to undermine the position of the working class as a whole. Workers harbouring resentment towards immigrants are never going to pose a serious challenge to those who rule them economically and politically. Making these points is clearly a part of combating racism in the working class.

Working-class people are no less receptive to racist ideas than any other section of the population. Only people whose knowledge of the working class comes from books could deny this. Socialists should be honest enough to tell workers who support racism that they are cutting their own throats. Downplaying racism in the working class only makes it harder to overcome it. Ignoring it, or hoping it will conveniently go away of its own accord, is only one step away from opportunistically accommodating to and accepting it. Only those who think workers are too stupid to follow anti-racist arguments will be afraid to make those arguments.

But there is no way those on the receiving end of racism should be expected to wait until

the workers have seen the error of their ways. No more than women should hang around until male workers outgrow their sexism, or Catholics in the north should hang around until Protestant workers outgrow their sectarianism, immigrants are right to fight here and now without waiting for the slowest to catch up. And concrete victories against racism will do more to dislodge racist ideas than any number of explanatory leaflets.

After June 11, the struggle against racism needs to leap rapidly up the list of priorities for socialists. On a short-term basis this may be neither popular nor profitable, but such considerations shouldn't exist. The victory for racism in the referendum was a body blow for the whole concept of solidarity that socialism is built upon. Unless we begin to turn back that tide, socialism has no future.

Socialists need to wear their anti-racism on their sleeves. Instead of waiting for racism to jump out at us, we need to go on the offensive, pro-actively going out of our way to oppose it. Socialists who aren't involved in solidarity work with asylum seekers facing deportation, immigrant workers tied to an employer, or travellers dealing with systematic discrimination are doing something wrong.

The campaign against the referendum was trying to do the impossible: defeat racism in eleven weeks. Whatever could be done in such a limited time and with such limited resources, it did as best it could. Before the referendum, the fight against racism was left to a small number of dedicated activists. This has to change: a strong, continuous opposition to racism needs to be on the ground week in and week out. While the referendum brought out the worst in much of the left, real socialists are realising that they need to be an active part of that opposition. From now on in Ireland, socialists are genuine fighters against racism or they are nothing.

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