

# The Politics of Sinn Féin: Rhetoric and Reality

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A recent opinion poll indicated that Sinn Féin is now neck and neck with Fine Gael to be the majority party in the South. In Dublin, it is already the largest party, commanding 26 percent of the vote.<sup>1</sup> This transformation is remarkable. In the early nineties, Sinn Féin was almost a pariah party in the South. Its members were visited regularly by the Special Branch, their voices were banned from RTE and its activists were vilified by the wider media. The overwhelming message of official Ireland was that they - rather than the British army or its loyalist allies - were responsible for a war that had cost over 4,000 lives. Despite dropping their traditional policy of abstentionism, Sinn Féin could make no headway at the ballot box. In the 1992 election, they achieved less than 2 percent of the vote.



The Sinn Féin leadership, Gerry Adams, Mary Lou McDonald & Martin McGuinness

However, this has changed significantly after the crash of 2008. Just as Fianna Fáil transformed itself under the impact of the Wall Street crash of 1929, Sinn Féin has made the same transformation in response to the Wall Street crash of

2008. In the general election of 2011 Sinn Féin took 10 percent of the popular vote and became the second largest opposition party. Since then, it has continued to grow, mainly by presenting itself as having 'realistic' alternative policies to permanent austerity. This growth has impressed sections of the union bureaucracy. The SIPTU leadership, which is composed of die-hard Labour Party supporters, gives regular coverage to Sinn Féin in their publications and Jack O Connor frequently speaks at their events. Clearly, the union leaders want a Plan B in the event of a collapse of Labour. The shift in Sinn Féin from being 'a welfare adjunct of the IRA to the fastest growing political force in Ireland during the first half of the 21st century'<sup>2</sup> has been remarkable.

Sinn Féin's growth is the result of two main factors. From 1997 to 2007, Sinn Féin re-packaged itself as the most ardent advocate of the peace process, willing to compromise to reach agreement. By contrast, the Unionist parties seemed unwilling to share power and, according to republican sources, were supported by 'securocrats' within the British state. In a series of audacious moves, the IRA broke a republican taboo and de-commissioned its weaponry; republican politicians joined police boards and urged support for the PSNI; Sinn Féin accepted devolved power-sharing within Northern Ireland. The embrace of the peace rhetoric helped to dispel a Southern antipathy towards the armed struggle, but it also exposed a contradiction at the heart of the 'new' Sinn Féin. The Good Friday Agreement affirmed that

<sup>1</sup>'Sinn Féin level with Fine Gael, opinion poll shows' *Irish Times* 9 October 2014

<sup>2</sup>J. Tonge, 'Sinn Féin and the 'New Republicanism' in Belfast', *Space and Polity*, Vol. 10, No. 2 pp. 135-147, August 2007 p. 135.

the status of Northern Ireland could not be changed without Unionist consent and it resurrected Stormont parliament. Sinn Féin had traditionally opposed both these propositions and at the start of negotiations declared there could be ‘no return to Stormont’.<sup>3</sup> Even as late as the morning of its signing, party chairperson, Mitchell McLoughlin declared that ‘Sinn Féin was opposed to an assembly at Stormont’.<sup>4</sup> The main concessions that Sinn Féin won were not in the constitutional field but in securing the release of its prisoners and a peace dividend that allowed former guerrillas to embed themselves in community organisations. Aside from these, it is difficult to dispute Brian Feeney’s assertion that the Good Friday Agreement was ‘a pale reflection of the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement that the IRA vowed to destroy.’<sup>5</sup>

The second main factor in Sinn Féin’s rise was a left rhetoric it deployed in the South. Even before the crash, Sinn Féin used its outsider status to attack a political establishment that was mired in corruption. It presented itself as the voice of the most marginalised working class communities who were left behind by the Celtic Tiger. After the crash, it developed a coherent set of policies which challenged the austerity consensus of the mainstream parties. This was to be achieved by taxes on the wealthy and a stimulus programme which helped to create jobs. The party advocated a 1 percent tax on net wealth over €1 million with working farms, business assets and 20 percent of the family home and pension pots excluded. It called for

a third rate of income tax of 48 percent on incomes over €100,000 with increased employer PRSI contributions as well. It demanded a cut in the earnings of politicians and the imposition of a pay cap of €100,000 on all civil and public service posts for three years.<sup>6</sup> It also proposed a €13 billion stimulus programme to create 150,000 jobs.<sup>7</sup>

These proposals have been advocated by left parties in other countries but in Ireland, Sinn Féin stood out as the most vocal advocate of Keynesian economics. Its call to make the wealthy pay more tax was particularly popular among the manual working class. In the 2011 election, Sinn Féin scored nearly three times more votes among unskilled manual workers than among upper professionals.<sup>8</sup> After the election, there were clear indications, that it was scoring nearly twice as much support among the former category as the Labour Party.<sup>9</sup> These developments - combined with Sinn Féin’s membership of the ‘hard left’ GUE/NGL group in the European parliament - led some to conclude that Sinn Féin was Ireland’s radical left party. If Germany had Die Linke, Greece had Syriza and France had the Front de Gauche, then Ireland had Sinn Féin to represent views that were to the left of social democracy.

The suggestion that Sinn Féin represents a radical left formation draws on an apparent affinity between republicanism and socialism. If this connection is made simply on the basis of rhetoric, there are many signs that Sinn Féin lead-

<sup>3</sup> J. Evans and J. Tonge, ‘From Abstentionism to Enthusiasm: Sinn Féin, Nationalist Electors and Support for Devolved Power-Sharing in Northern Ireland’ *Irish Political Studies* Vol.28, No. 1. Pp 39-57, 2013, p.41-42.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> B. Feeney, *Sinn Féin: a Hundred Turbulent Years*, Dublin: O’Brien, 2002 p.436

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p.4,5

<sup>7</sup> Sinn Féin, *Jobs Plan: Investing in Ireland’s Future* Dublin: Sinn Féin, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Red C General Election Opinion Poll 24 February 2013

<sup>9</sup> Red C General Election Opinion Poll 24 February 2013

ers can employ a revolutionary left vocabulary on occasion. In 1979, for example, Gerry Adams declared that, ‘capitalist property cannot exist without the plundering of labour (and) we desire to see capitalism abolished and a democratic system of common ownership created in its stead’.<sup>10</sup> These pronouncements led academics like Ronald Munck to argue that, ‘Republicanism in Ireland cannot be reduced to an ideology of the bourgeois revolution: it has always had a radical component which has tended towards socialism’.<sup>11</sup> In more recent times, John Doyle, has emphasised how Sinn Féin has ‘a strong leftist, pro-equality agenda’ and was ‘an active participant in the “anti-globalisation” movement’.<sup>12</sup> However, the issue cannot be analysed in terms of rhetoric alone. Repeatedly in Irish history, Irish republicans have employed a left rhetoric to win a popular base and then used positions won to manage capitalism. Rather than simply focussing on left rhetoric alone, it is better to analyse the uniqueness of Sinn Féin within the wider spectrum of the Left to establish what its core project is.

## Sinn Féin’s Project: Governmental Office

The first point to notice is that the leftism bolted onto traditional Irish republicanism is of a distinctly reformist variety. It sees change coming from legislative moves in the parliament and rules out any form of revolutionary change. This is somewhat ironic as the party originally saw the Dáil as lacking legitimacy and declared that a united Ireland could only come about

through the overthrow of both ‘partitionist states’. The agency for bringing all this about was to be the IRA but as this body has now been reduced to a commemoration society, the party has given up all rhetoric about overthrowing either the Northern or Southern state.

Sinn Féin’s primary aim now is to enter a government to manage Irish capitalism rather than abolish it. It frames its alternative policies in a ‘realist’ tone that accepts that the public deficit should be reduced to 3 percent by 2016 - a parameter set by the political establishment itself.<sup>13</sup> This ‘realism’ is also expressed in its acceptance of the limits placed on Irish budgetary policy. Sinn Féin appears to accept the strictures laid down by the Fiscal Treaty which specifies that the Irish budget deficit must be reduced to 60 percent of GDP. It has also not committed itself to removing the country from the ‘excessive deficit procedure’ laid down by the EU. This also imposes strict limits on spending. But while operating in this framework, Sinn Féin does not support the repudiation of debt caused by the collapse of Irish banks. The party originally voted for a guarantee which committed the Irish state to making up for any shortfall in the payment of bank debt. Today it fails to mention repudiation of debt in its economic programme. Currently, the annual interest payment on Ireland’s national debt amounts to €8 billion per year and, with some annual variation, the payments will continue until 2053. Sinn Féin’s promise of ‘realistic’ policy change is therefore immediately constricted.

The other restriction on its radical-

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in E. Moloney, *A secret History of the IRA*, London: Allen Lane: Penguin, 2002 p.186.

<sup>11</sup>R. Munck, ‘Marxism and Northern Ireland’ *Review of Radical Politics Economics* Vol. 13, No. 3. 1981.

<sup>12</sup>J. Doyle, ‘Republican policies in practical politics: Placing Contemporary Sinn Féin in a European context’ *Working papers in British-Irish Studies*, UCD No. 45, 2005 p.3.

<sup>13</sup>Sinn Féin, *Making the Right Choices: Sinn Féin Alternative Budget 2013*, Dublin: Sinn Féin 2012 p. 3.

ism is its potential partner in government. While Sinn Féin's increase in votes is impressive, no one believes that it will form a majority government by itself in the immediate future. Who, therefore, will it join in coalition?

In the past, the position articulated, particularly by the Northern based leadership, was straight forward. - they were willing to do business with anyone. According to Gerry Adams, 'when you can do business with Ian Paisley, you can do business with anyone.'<sup>14</sup> The leadership refused to rule out coalition during the 2007 election and held open the possibility of joining one, but the election figures did not work out. At the 2010 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis, there were two resolutions calling on the party not to enter government with Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. The leadership persuaded delegates to vote them down, promising a special conference should the occasion arise. Later Martin McGuinness suggested that they had no interest in joining with Fine Gael but this left the obvious question: what about Fianna Fáil? Eoin O' Broin, a key architect of party policy, has acknowledged that 'in real terms' the party's current position 'can only mean a future alliance with Fianna Fáil, in a centre right coalition.'<sup>15</sup>

However, as Southern society shifted more leftward the party's rhetoric became slightly more ambiguous. *Internally*, the party's core membership are being told that the next government will be probably a Fianna Fáil - Fine Gael coalition and that the party will play a long game. The rhetoric about being 'ready for government' is, under this scenario, mainly an electoral strategy to garner votes to with-

stand arguments that SF is negative and unrealistic.

The formation of a FG-FF government is certainly a distinct possibility and the evidence from local councils would suggest that it may even be the most realistic scenario. In 31 of the local authorities surveyed by the political scientist Adrian Kavanagh, 21 were controlled by a FF-FG alliance.<sup>16</sup> There was no authority controlled by an alliance of SF and either FF or FG even though such voting pacts were theoretically possible.

However, the scenario of a FF-FG government presents considerable difficulties for both the ruling class and Sinn Féin. Official Irish politics has been shaped by a battle between the Civil War parties. Originally these took different stances on the 'national question' with FF challenging the neo-colonial status of Ireland as Britain's 'outgarden' and Fine Gael favouring a continuation to benefit big farmers. Both also took different rhetorical stances on the North - but, in practice, maintained the same policy. While there is no longer any substantial difference between them, the collapse of the civil war divide would be risky for the ruling class. It would expose the fake game that was Irish right wing politics and create a major space for a future left wing advance. Under pressure from a growing anti-austerity movement, the ruling class might, therefore, prefer to co-opt Sinn Féin to help demobilise that opposition. Only time will tell.

The scenario of a long game, however, also presents difficulties for Sinn Féin. First, the party is effectively a coalition of different internal cliques that is glued together by the authority of the former IRA

<sup>14</sup>General Election not a beauty contest: Adams' *Irish Independent*, 5 January 2011

<sup>15</sup>E. O'Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, London: Pluto Press, 2009 p. 307.

<sup>16</sup>'Which parties/groupings control city and county councils' Irish Elections Blog by Adrian Kavanagh 23 June 2014 <http://adriankavanaghelections.org/2014/06/23/which-partiesgroupings-control-the-city-and-county-councils/>

leadership of Adams and McGuinness. As long as there is forward momentum, the aura of success binds all elements together. The prospect of another five years of opposition might, therefore, expose the cracks in Sinn Féin itself. Second, the party has set itself firmly against a strategy of relying on ‘people power’ to reverse austerity measures (see the section on water charges below). It tells its supporters that the only way change will occur is through Sinn Féin participation in government. But if the next government is likely to be a FF-FG dominated one, then how ‘realistic’ is such a strategy?

However, while discussion of the long game scenario is confined to the party’s core membership, *externally*, the party still claims it is open to any coalition. Mary Lou McDonald claims that she would ‘prefer’ a left leaning coalition composed of Labour, People Before Profit or Socialist Party but would not rule out a deal with Fianna Fáil. Eoin O’Broin does not want Sinn Féin to ‘participate in a Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael led government after the next general election’ but does not rule out either party’s involvement in a ‘Sinn Féin led government’. There are, no doubt, nuances between these two positions but ultimately they both acknowledge that Sinn Féin’s growth has come from a left rhetoric - hence the friendly references to PbP and SP - but that its participation in government will involve a partnership with either FF or the Labour Party. Yet these parties are wholly committed to the Fiscal Treaty, paying off bankers’ debts, and ensuring that Ireland remains thoroughly prostrate before a policy of appeasing multi-nationals. Even if they are minority parties, FF, FG and Labour will ex-

ercise a veto on government policy which will tilt it in this direction.

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However, the coalition partners may not have to exercise that veto too actively as Sinn Féin’s own policies are already geared to the administration of Irish capitalism. Sinn Féin’s policies differ from both ‘old labour’ style reformism and revolutionary socialism in a number of key ways.

First, older forms of left reformism generally favoured an expansion of public ownership as a way of undermining capitalist control of industry. Sinn Féin’s focus, however, is on supporting private business rather than public ownership. Its pro-business policies would not go amiss in right of centre parties in other countries. The 2009 policy document *Getting Ireland back to Work*, is a case in point. It does not mention any form of nationalisation and the public sector is only referenced for its potential to help stimulate the private sector. The document calls for ‘support for Irish manufacturers... to reach an economy of scale, enabling them to compete with cheaper products’.<sup>18</sup> It proposes to provide R&D funding for ‘Irish firms and entrepreneurs looking to set up manufacturing business.’<sup>19</sup> It wants tax credits for multi-nationals which source Irish goods and a major drive to attract Foreign Direct Investment from international firms in the renewable energy sector. It wants a ‘venture capital fund’ for native Irish capitalists to produce alternative energy products. The document calls for the creation of dedicated business and science parks linked to universities<sup>20</sup>. These proposals are variations on the current strategy of the political establishment which is

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<sup>17</sup>The Uniqueness of Sinn Féin

<sup>18</sup>Sinn Féin, *Getting Ireland Back to Work*, Dublin: Sinn Féin 2009 p.10.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid* p.10, p. 12, p.14.

to grant more subsidies to private capital.

The difference with right parties is that Sinn Féin wants to combine support for business with an anti-austerity rhetoric. It does this primarily through tax policy that favours re-distribution rather than through any encroachments on the power of capital. At first sight, this might appear to reflect an 'old Labourist' outlook. But Sinn Féin's a tax policy only targets high *income* earners and *unproductive* capital. Nowhere in the Sinn Féin programme is there any suggestion to increase the rate of tax on *profits*. This is of some importance because Irish society subsidises the profits of multi-nationals - and Irish capitalists- by facilitating massive tax dodging. Major corporations such as Google or Apple get away with a tax rate of less than 5 percent and as a direct result taxes on PAYE workers and indirect taxes such as VAT are higher. Any mildly left reformist party which promised to use governmental office to re-distribute wealth would need to tackle this issue. Yet Sinn Féin studiously avoids it. It accepts the dominant consensus when it suggests that:

Ireland is a small open economy and as such FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) remains a crucial component of our industrial strategy, we need to ambitiously attract it but it must be developed in balance with native businesses.<sup>21</sup>

'Ambitiously attracting' multinationals means not cracking down on their tax avoidance strategy. So Sinn Féin makes no proposal either to increase corporation tax or even to impose a 12.5 percent minimum tax on profits. As People Before Profit has repeatedly pointed out, the real effective

rate of corporation tax in Ireland is a mere 6 percent. The furthest Sinn Féin goes is proposing that an extra 125 revenue staff be recruited to crack down on tax *evasion* - and so raising an extra €70 million a year. But the primary issue is not tax *evasion* - but laws which facilitate tax *dodging*. Sinn Féin's nervousness on taxing profit is even evident in their failure to fully endorse an EU Commission proposal for a Robin Hood tax on financial speculation. This blind spot on taxing profit shows that Sinn Féin's project is to forge a common front between native and foreign capitalists to develop the Irish national economy.

Second, Sinn Féin is unique among the left in Europe being one of the best funded parties in its country. One of the sources of funds is Irish America where the party is estimated to raise €530,000 a year. The funds are gathered via the Friends of Sinn Féin and come from various events such as lucrative speaking engagements or fund raising dinners. Participants in a meal in the Sheraton Hotel in Manhattan, for example, paid \$ 500 each to attend.<sup>22</sup> Other donations come from trade unions with Irish American connections and, crucially, from the corporate sector. Chuck Feeney, the owner of a chain of Duty Free Stores was a major donor in the nineties while Coca Cola donated \$ 5,000 in 2003. Sinn Féin's connections with Irish America also extend to right wing politicians. One of its key allies is Peter King, who stands on the extreme right of the Republican Party. He was the main figure who campaigned for Gerry Adams' right to enter the US and later set up introductions for him at the White House. But he has also attacked Wikileaks as a terrorist organisation and claimed that 80 percent of mosques in the US are controlled by fundamentalists.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Sinn Féin Alternative Budget October 2014 p 37

<sup>22</sup>'Sinn Féin war chest swells as global ties pay dividends' *Irish Independent*, 4 March 2012

<sup>23</sup>'The Radicalization of Peter King' *Mother Jones*, 20 December 2010.

The US flow of funds and the political connections with right wing figures such as King impacts on Sinn Féin's activities in many ways. While Sinn Féin opposed Bush's war on Iraq, it refused an anti-war movement request to boycott St Patrick's Day celebrations with the White House.<sup>24</sup> It consistently welcomed visits by Bill Clinton as a friend of Ireland and was relatively quiet about his foreign imperial adventures. Broadly, the party takes a standard left nationalist position in supporting the Palestinian and Basque struggles but it increasingly does so by urging support for a 'peace process.'

Third, Sinn Féin differs from those left wing parties who have been to the fore in defending women's rights. Sinn Féin has taken up some progressive positions, appointing a gender equality co-ordinator within its own ranks and periodically issuing statements on International Women's Day. But on the crucial issue of women's right to control their own bodies, the party is at variance with the broader international left. In 1985, a feminist current within the party won a resolution at the Ard Fheis to support a woman's right to choose but the year afterwards the leadership convinced delegates to reverse this. After the death of Savita Halappanavar in 2012, the party supported legislation to allow abortion where a women's life was in danger but wanted it restricted to cases of rape, incest or sexual abuse. Sinn Féin spokespersons made it clear that they were totally opposed to 'abortion on demand' and what exactly this meant could be gleaned from the party's stance in Northern Ireland. There it joined with the arch conservatives in the DUP in voting against

the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. As a result, abortion law in the North is governed by the 1861 Offences against the Person Act, which includes life imprisonment for any woman found to have terminated a pregnancy.<sup>25</sup>

The weakness of Sinn Féin in the area of women's liberation and gender equality has also been highlighted by the Mairia Cahill allegations that have come to the fore just as this article goes to press. Defenders of Sinn Féin will doubtless claim that this issue is promoted by the media (including the British media) and the right wing parties in order to undermine Sinn Féin just as it emerges as a real contender for office. There is a lot of truth in this but unless Marie Cahill's story were to turn out to be a complete fabrication - and Sinn Féin spokespersons are NOT claiming this - the way her case was dealt with is evidence of a very sexist culture within the organisation.

These distinctive features of Sinn Féin arise from its nationalism. The adaptation to a religious conservatism, the appeal to a wealthy diaspora, the articulation of working class grievances alongside those of native capitalists are features common to many nationalist movements. The continuing appeal of nationalism in Ireland arises from the historic experience of colonialism and the uneven development in the world economy. No matter how much talk there is of globalisation and progress, capitalism is organised under the aegis of dominant nation states. As Tom Nairn pointed out, this forces political organisations within peripheral nations into 'a profoundly ambivalent reaction against this dominance, seeking at once to resist it and somehow

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<sup>24</sup>M. Frampton, *The Long March: The Political Strategy of Sinn Féin 1981-2007*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009 p.149.

<sup>25</sup>G. Horgan and A. M. Gray, 'Devolution in Northern Ireland; a Lost Opportunity' *Critical Social Policy* Vol. 32, No. 3, 2012 pp. 467-478, 2012, p. 470.

<sup>26</sup>T. Nairn, 'The Modern Janus' *New Left Review* Vol. 1 No. 94 November-December 1975, p. 12

take over its vital forces for their use.’<sup>26</sup> Or to put it differently, parties like Sinn Féin try to mobilise different social groups to challenge Ireland’s role in the global capitalist economy - while remaining within that global capitalism on better terms. For a period, therefore, the rhetoric of nationalist parties can sometimes appear to be to the left of conventional social democrats. But one should not confuse a rhetoric designed to create an electoral base with any serious determination to challenge the nature of capitalism itself.

## The Water Charges

The gap between rhetoric and action in Sinn Féin strategy exploded dramatically over the water charges issues. During the bye-election campaign in Dublin South West, Sinn Féin faced a challenge from the radical left who were promoting ‘people power’ as a way to fight water charges.

Their candidate, Cathal King, responded by claiming that ‘Sinn Féin was the only party with a workable strategy to defeat water charges’ It was a big claim but King said that he was opposed to ‘other groups who prefer to concentrate on fostering aspects of campaigns which will ultimately hurt hard-pressed families in the long-run. This happened during the campaign against the property tax. Politicians on the “extreme-left” encouraged members of the public not to fill in forms but then abandoned them when those people received hefty financial penalties’.<sup>27</sup>

The reference to the ‘extreme left’ was to People Before Profit and the Anti-Austerity Alliance who both ran candidates in the election. The charge that they ‘abandoned’ people was simply rubbish. The reality is that a mass movement to fight property charges was defeated by a combination of fear tactics used the gov-

ernment and the failure of union leaders to back the fight. In a draconian move, Labour Party and Fine Gael TDs voted to give their government power to seize the charges from the wage packets and social welfare of homeowners. But even though this was an outrageous attack on workers’ rights, the leaders of the ICTU and SIPTU did nothing. Both these organisations are controlled by individuals who are totally loyal to the Labour Party. Cathal King chose, however, to attack those who led a fight rather than the Labour Party and the union leaders who stabbed it in the back.

To make matters worse, the leaders of Sinn Féin stated publically that they would be returning Irish Water’s application pack and would be paying the charge. They suggested that this was the only responsible position that could be taken as people might be penalised if they refused to pay. However, Irish Water is a public utility company and is not part of the revenue gathering apparatus of the state. Legislation, therefore, does not exist to allow them to seize the charge from people’s income. But even if such legislation were to be introduced, a huge movement of ‘people power’ could force the government to back down. Unjust laws have always been challenged from below and sometimes, if the movement is big enough, governments get defeated. It happened in 1996 when the government backed down on implementing an EU Water Services directive which demanded water charges from domestic users. The only basis of a claim that people might be penalised with heavy bills is that allowances might be lost by those who failed to comply. But one would only need allowances if the movement to defeat water charges was thoroughly defeated. The commitment to pay their water charge bill by Adams, McDonald and Doherty was, therefore, a stab in

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<sup>27</sup>Cathal King press release

the back for the anti-water charges campaign. Thousands saw it this way and as a result Sinn Féin paid a heavy price by losing a bye-election in Tallaght to Paul Murphy of the Anti-Austerity Alliance.

All the contradictions that lie that the heart of Sinn Féin's leftism have come to the fore on water charges. They are opposed to an organised boycott campaign because they believe that change only come from on high - by their party occupying governmental office. Despite the amazing twists and turns that have characterised their positions, Sinn Féin displays an important continuity in this approach.

The modern Sinn Féin is a product of discontinuity and change rather than simply adherence to a republican vision that stretches back to the 1916 rebellion and before that to Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen. But from this tradition, Sinn Féin drew on one central belief: that brave minorities could substitute for a passive majority. The transformation of a mass civil rights movement of Northern Catholics in the late 1960s into an armed struggle of a few hundred guerrillas appeared to be evidence of this. When that developed into a 'long war', republicans became even more entrenched in the belief that *their* military actions were the 'cutting edge' that would bring Irish freedom. The justification for that war - even when it was unpopular with the Catholic working class - arose from a mythology that the 1916 martyrdom re-awakened a passive population. Alongside this was a subterranean belief that the IRA Army Council represented the real government of Ireland in waiting. This tradition led to a strong scepticism about the capacity of the mass of people to take actions which could liberate themselves.

This approach is evident in how Sinn Féin has related to key struggles in the South of Ireland in recent years. When

a €100 household levy was imposed, a mass campaign arose to promote a boycott. Sinn Féin refused to join in such a call, claiming the tactic was dangerous. When this was followed by a property tax, Sinn Féin again disputed the ability of a mass civil disobedience movement to mount a challenge. Today they repeat the same approach on water charges. Whereas in the past armed guerrillas acted as the 'cutting edge', today it is the TDs in the Dil, but in both cases the capacity of people to act for themselves is downplayed

In support of their stance of urging the mass of people to wait until Sinn Féin enters government, the party's leaders point to their apparent success in abolishing water charges in the North. But a closer examination of the case shows the very opposite. A major campaign of public resistance forced both Sinn Féin and the DUP to backtrack on plans to introduce water charges. Some months before the final decision was made a key Sinn Féin spokesperson, Mitchel McLaughlin, said in a television interview: 'If we separate out the legacy cost and we set in front of the people the legitimate cost of running and delivering a clean and healthy water supply to people's houses, people are fair minded - they will pay that.'<sup>28</sup>

## Lessons from the North

The break between Sinn Féin and the older republican tradition arose from its willingness to change policies and strategies abruptly. The party tries to achieve a constant upwards momentum by making bold changes, guided by the political context in which they operate. This entails dropping beliefs that were previously considered 'hard core', whether in the armed struggle itself or the use of hard left rhetoric. When the collapse of the

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<sup>28</sup> 'We won't pay say hundreds of demonstrators in Belfast' Socialist World website 4 April 2007

Berlin Wall was followed by moves of the ANC and the PLO into the camp of the western powers, Sinn Féin made its own strategic shift from 'the subjective politics of the revolutionary vanguard to diplomatic forms of manoeuvre'.<sup>29</sup>

Nowhere has this shifting of position been clearer than on the 'national question' itself. In the past Sinn Féin argued, that the partition of Ireland would be ended by an armed struggle. Then its main objective became the construction of a pan-nationalist alliance. Whereas previously Sinn Féin had criticised the legitimacy of the Southern state, it now saw the Dublin government as a potential ally. If they acted in concert with the US and the EU, they could pressurise Britain to become a 'persuader' of the Protestant population. The party also argued that the Good Friday Agreement created structures that - if used fully - could help to develop all Ireland institutions.

This pan-nationalist strategy has further accentuated their desire to get into government. As O' Broin sees it, 'Sinn Féin in government in the north, and at a future date in the South, would place the party in key positions of institutional power from which to drive the agenda for re-unification.'<sup>30</sup> However, the experience of the party's participation in the Northern Executive shows what might happen if they were to succeed. It points to a continuing use of left rhetoric even as its Ministers implement neoliberal policies.

One of the implicit agendas behind the Northern peace process was to reduce the size of its public sector and to create a low wage, low business cost base for foreign investors. In line with this, Sinn Féin agreed with other Ministers to make 3 percent 'ef-

iciency savings' each year from 2008 to 2011. The effects were soon felt in reduced public services and a greater resort to privatisation. Sinn Féin's Education Minister, Caitriona Ruane, launched a policy for 'sustainable schools' and began a closure policy for those with less than 500 pupils. She also reduced provision for children with special needs and cut the number of teaching assistants. The teachers' unions estimated that at least 4,000 teachers and 12,000 support workers would lose their jobs as a result.<sup>31</sup> Sinn Féin's official policy was to oppose privatisation yet it made extensive use of Public Private Partnership and Private Finance Initiative Schemes. These are a sophisticated form of privatisation as they involve the state buying in services from private firms. Sinn Féin's Regional Development Minister, Conor Murphy, transferred large parts of the water network to these schemes. He also went ahead with plans to meter houses for water supply despite promises there would be no charges. The same Minister also introduced the Transport Act in 2011 which forced Translink to both contract out bus-services and compete with private firms for control of routes.<sup>32</sup>

Sinn Féin often claims that the gap between rhetoric and policy implementation arises from the North's dependency on the British Exchequer. Stormont Ministers, it is argued, have to work within constraints imposed by their British overlords and therefore have to make 'hard choices'. However, a similar justification is frequently used by Labour Party Ministers in the Southern government when they argue they had to take harsh measures because they are constrained by a Troika financed programme. The weakness of this

<sup>29</sup>K. Bean, *The New Politics of Sinn Féin*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007 p.190.

<sup>30</sup>O'Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, p. 307

<sup>31</sup>Horgan and Gray, 'Devolution in Northern Ireland', p. 475

<sup>32</sup>S. McVeigh, 'Sinn Féin in Government' *Irish Marxist Review*, Vol. I, No. 1 2012, pp. 34- 40

argument is also evident when Sinn Féin supports neoliberal strategies even when it is not constrained by external forces. It has led the way in calling for a reduction in the corporation profits tax rate to 12.5 percent- the same as the South. Yet, as Richard Murphy, has pointed out this would lead to an immediate loss of between €200 and €300 million in Westminster subsidies.<sup>33</sup> Northern Ireland would then be forced into a tax dumping competition with the South to meet the revenue shortfall. Moreover, in areas where Stormont has greater autonomy over decision making, there is also little evidence of a break from neoliberalism. The Northern Ireland Executive had power to change the workfare proposals promoted by the Conservative Minister, George Osborne, but despite verbal opposition from all parties, all agreed to implement it.<sup>34</sup>

Participation in the Northern Ireland Executive has exposed Sinn Féin's economic policies to full scrutiny. A pattern has emerged of using a rhetoric that is similar to left of centre Labour parties while implementing neoliberal strategies designed to re-structure the North's economy. Although the Northern Ireland executive is composed of parties who fight over cultural symbols, they achieve a remarkable unanimity on economic policy. The Good Friday Agreement has, in fact, created an ideal terrain for neo-liberal double-speak. Ministers designate themselves as the representatives of 'their communities' and compete for scarce resources. They publicly differ over cultural symbols in order to re-assure their home base - and then agree on policies which disadvantage the poor. Even when there are rare disagreements, Sinn Féin never vetoes the more right wing DUP lest it 'endanger the peace process'. Through these mechanisms, the

party can play at being both the opposition and the government at the same time.

This style of doing politics was perfected by Fianna Fáil in the South. It has long supported policies which favour the wealthy but, as a populist formation, it allowed individual TDs to oppose local cuts while never voting against the Ministers in government. Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil are very different formations because one is part of a corrupt, political establishment - the other is seeking to enter the mainstream. But despite these key differences, there is a remarkable parallel between the rise of Sinn Féin in the South and the early growth of Fianna Fáil in the late 1920s. Contrary to its current image, Fianna Fáil was once a left republican party whose leader, Eamonn de Valera, declared himself a follower of James Connolly. It advocated the replacement of the banking system with credit unions; it called for the replacement of army barracks with a citizen's militia; it supported strikes in foreign companies and often defined itself as the real workers' party.<sup>35</sup> It overtook the Labour Party by adopting a more left rhetoric, mocking that party's support for complying with the law during a land annuities campaign. Its entry into government also coincided with the global economic crash after 1929 that shook the foundations of Western Capitalism. Yet Fianna Fáil's left rhetoric soon disappeared in government.

Sinn Féin will not necessarily follow the exact same path, but the experience shows how Irish republicanism has had two faces - it appeals to the poor and downtrodden but it aims to unify the nation. It attacks the inequalities of global capitalism but it also seeks entry into its structures by leading an energised national movement. All of which shows why Ireland needs a more genuine and more radical left formation.

<sup>33</sup>R. Murphy, *Pot of Gold or Fool's Gold*, Dublin: ICTU, 2010

<sup>34</sup>'Rage at Stormont over Workfare (or Not)' *Derry Journal*, 29 March 2012

<sup>35</sup>K. Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, London: Pluto Press, 1997

