

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# Arriving at the End of the Road To Nowhere

Sinn Fein and the 'Peace Process'

Gregor Kerr

Gregor Kerr  
Arriving at the End of the Road To Nowhere  
Sinn Fein and the 'Peace Process'  
1996

Retrieved on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2021 from [struggle.ws](http://struggle.ws)  
This article was originally printed in *Red & Black Revolution*  
no 2.

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

1996



# Contents

Sound of silence . . . . .	6
British Guns . . . . .	8
Flawed Strategy . . . . .	10
Hunger Strike . . . . .	12
Bobby Sands . . . . .	13
'Left Turn'? . . . . .	15
Socialism? . . . . .	18
Persuaders for Unity! . . . . .	21
Sinn Fein now declares as its priority: . . . . .	23
Multinationals . . . . .	23

party, Sinn Fein has actually achieved one of its main objectives of the last decade — the Pan-Nationalist Alliance is firmly in place, even if the British government is hardly shaking in its shoes at the sight of it. With the demand for immediate unconditional British withdrawal having been replaced by a plea for *inclusive all-party talks*, Sinn Fein look set to become yet another moderate ‘party of the centre’. Without an armed campaign to support, their politics differ little from those of the other mainstream Irish political parties. Genuine socialists who are members of Sinn Fein should be asking themselves why.

*labour must wait* then labour will always be left behind. This is not a uniquely Irish phenomenon. It has happened and is happening throughout the world, the most notable recent examples being the ANC in South Africa and the PLO in Palestine. Because the driving political force has been nationalist rather than socialist in nature, compromise with and the eventual acceptance of capitalism is inevitable even for those who continue to call themselves socialists.

This is not because — as some might claim — the SF leadership have *sold out* on their socialism. The entire direction of the ‘Peace Process’ shows instead the bankruptcy of nationalist politics and the fact that nationalist alliances have nothing of consequence to offer the working-class. ‘Socialism’ is useful to the Republicans at times as a slogan to show why they are different, to mark them out from other members of the *nationalist family*. However the most important aim is to develop and maintain unity among that nationalist family. In order to do this the socialist slogans must be left on the backburner, to be resurrected now and again, usually at election time, when they are useful. With time, the slogans become less and less useful and will eventually be disposed of entirely. Nationalists see their rightful role as being that of governing *their* States and will do deals with almost anybody to be allowed to fulfil that role.

The question which remains is to ask what future there is for Sinn Fein. In the absence of the military campaign (which is extremely unlikely to re-commence under the present leadership for a variety of reasons), is there any real space for Sinn Fein’s politics? One thing is clear — Sinn Fein may describe itself as *socialist*, it may have as its objective a 32-County Socialist Republic but it does not have the policies or the ability to deliver on that objective. Already one Sinn Fein activist has been quoted in a national Sunday newspaper as saying that Sinn Fein could well be part of the next government in the 26-Counties (if of course they manage to get anyone elected!). As a nationalist

**Since the ending of the ‘Cold War’, many national liberation struggles throughout the world have been ‘settled’. In places as far apart as South Africa, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Palestine these national liberation struggles were led by groupings which were often seen as having left leanings. However in all of these cases the ‘settlement’ was far from socialist. The current ‘Irish peace process’ is following exactly the same lines and has nothing to offer the Irish working class North or South**

The announcement of the Provisional IRA cease-fire on August 31<sup>st</sup> 1994 was almost universally welcomed. In a statement 7/9/1994, the Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM) stated:

*We welcome the IRA cease-fire. Over the last 25 years over 3,000 people have been killed and 40,000 injured. Thousands have been through or are still in prison. The primary blame for these deaths and all the associated suffering belongs with the British state...<sup>1</sup>*

Our welcome for the cease-fire was based on our recognition of the fact that the armed struggle was a flawed tactic, one

*...incapable of achieving a solution as it is incapable of delivering a military victory and defeating the British army... and one which ...relies on the actions of a few with the masses left in either a totally passive role, or one limited to providing intelligence and shelter to the few...<sup>2</sup>*

However, while welcoming the cease-fire, we drew a very clear distinction between this and the *peace process* — a process which we saw as being inherently flawed

*The ‘peace process’ as it is called, will not deliver a united socialist Ireland, or significant improvements apart from those associated with ‘de-militarisation’. In addition it represents a hardening of traditional nationalism, and the goal of getting an alliance*

---

<sup>1</sup> WORKERS SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT (WSM) statement 7/9/1994

<sup>2</sup> WSM Position Paper: The National Question (adopted January 1991)

of all the nationalists — Fianna Fail, SDLP, Sinn Fein and the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup>

## Sound of silence

Over twelve months later, the cease-fire holds firm, the people of the 6-Counties have enjoyed the 'sound of silence' of the guns for over a year and a semblance of normality has returned to the area after 25 years of war.

But, as the British government continues to drag its heels even on the simple concessions which normally follow the ending of conflict such as prisoner release and round-table inclusive talks, and as the Sinn Fein leadership appears to have totally capitulated on its ultimate objective of a 32-County Socialist Republic and subsumed itself into the Pan-Nationalist Alliance of SDLP/Dublin and 'Irish-America', many republican supporters are left floundering and asking themselves exactly what is going on.

Less than two short years ago Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness et al — as far as the media and mainstream politicians were concerned — were *godfathers of violence* for whom the English language did not contain sufficient condemnatory terms. Now they are feted by Bill Clinton in the White House, wined and dined at \$1,000-a-plate dinners and rub shoulders with captains of industry. How has this come about? And, more importantly, how does it square with their professed aim of a Socialist Republic? How must those who believed in the republicans' 'left turn' in the 1980s feel now?

In order to answer these questions or even to begin to understand the logic of the current republican position, it is necessary to look back at the origins of the Provisional movement and to study the politics on which it was founded.

---

<sup>3</sup> WSM statement 7/9/1994

## Sinn Fein now declares as its priority:

*...to move the peace process forward...to build on the gains which have been made and to move speedily forward into all-party talks led by both the British and Irish governments...to bring about an inclusive and negotiated end to British jurisdiction in Ireland. We seek to replace it with an agreed Irish jurisdiction.*<sup>21</sup>

If socialism had to wait throughout the seventies and eighties, the realpolitik of the nineties means that the word should not even be mentioned for fear of upsetting John Bruton, John Hume or Bill Clinton. Republicans might well be justified in asking if this is what Bobby Sands died for.

## Multinationals

Meanwhile, Sinn Fein has no difficulty in attending Bill Clinton's *Investing in Ireland* Conference (Washington 24/5/95), attended by the chief executives of some of the biggest multinationals in the world all looking to see if Ireland can provide them with tax breaks and low wages to extract even more profits. Their Northern Chairperson Gearóid O'Hara calls on the anti-union multinational Seagate not to cease their exploitation of Irish workers but to offer training schemes to *...afford the youth of Derry the chance to become the direction and decision-makers of industry in their own country...*<sup>22</sup>. In the course of a debate in the U.S., the same Mr. O'Hara can declare that Sinn Fein *...have no problem with capitalism.*<sup>23</sup>

The only surprising thing is that anybody should be surprised. This is simply the logical consequence of the type of 'nation-state' politics pursued by Sinn Fein over the years. If

---

<sup>21</sup> ADAMS, GERRY speaking to United Nations Correspondents Association 5/5/95

<sup>22</sup> DERRY JOURNAL 24/5/95

<sup>23</sup> IRISH TIMES 10/5/95

shook hands with Gerry Adams. It was to be the first of many famous handshakes and the first public acknowledgement of Adams the peace-maker.

The Warrington bombing of March 1993 in which two children were killed brought intense criticism of the armed campaign from both inside and outside the Republican Movement. The massive car bomb which was exploded in the City of London in April, causing millions of pounds worth of damage, reminded the British government that the IRA was still a force to be reckoned with.

Realising that the initiative could not be left in the hands of Sinn Fein, Dublin and London had meanwhile been involved in drawing up their own set of proposals. The Downing Street Declaration — launched in December — was a classic fudge. In the House of Commons Prime Minister John Major said that the Declaration did not contain *...any suggestion that the British government should join the ranks of the persuaders of the value or legitimacy of a united Ireland...* Meantime in the Dáil Taoiseach Albert Reynolds was saying that *...for the first time ever, the right to self-determination of the people of Ireland is acknowledged...*

Despite the fact that Downing St. contained nothing that had not been in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, Sinn Fein felt that its strategy was in place and that it was in a stronger position than in 1985. Therefore, despite nearly eight months of procrastination, it was only going to be a matter of time until the IRA cease-fire was declared. The rapidity with which the Sinn Fein leadership was accepted into the arms of ‘respectability’ caught many by surprise. For Adams, McGuinness et al it was, however, simply the culmination of a strategy built up over many years.

Following the disastrous border campaign of 1956 — 1962, the IRA was practically non-existent, retaining only a handful of members and being regarded by most working-class nationalists as a thing of the past. Meantime, the nationalist middle-class had given up waiting for a united Ireland and had instead begun to look for equality of opportunity within the 6-County State. It was from this layer that the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was formed in 1967 with a very moderate (in any state that even pretends to be democratic) list of demands — one man (sic), one vote; allocation of housing on a points system; redrawing of gerrymandered electoral boundaries; repeal of the Special Powers Act; abolition of the notorious B-Specials; laws against discrimination in local government. The issue of the border was not even raised.

However, because the Northern State had been founded on discrimination, even these moderate demands could not be acceded to. Nor could the bigots who controlled the State allow dissension in the form of public protest. When the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) attacked the second Civil Rights march on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1968 in Derry, the die was cast.

The Peoples Democracy (PD) organised march from Belfast to Derry in January 1969 was to be a key turning point. When the 100 marchers were attacked by about 350 loyalists throwing rocks and stones at Burntollet Bridge, the RUC stood by and watched.

The naked sectarianism and irreformability of the Orange State had been dramatically exposed. Just seven months later the British army were back on the streets when the RUC found themselves incapable of restoring order following what became known as the *Siege of Derry*.

## British Guns

Up to this stage the IRA were non-existent in terms of military activity. The gun had been re-introduced to Northern politics, not by a highly organised republican movement determined to wreak havoc, but by the forces of the British State. It is interesting to note that the first death, the first dead soldier, the first dead policeman, the first dead child and the first bombing were all at the hands of British or Loyalist forces. The lesson appeared clear — if even the modest demands of the Civil Rights Movement were met with such massive repression by the State, there was no alternative but to meet force with force. Unfortunately the left at the time failed to offer a coherent alternative and so 25 painful years of war and bloodshed had begun.

The Provisional movement was formed following a split in the Republican movement in January 1970. When the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis (Conference) of that month voted to end the traditional policy of abstentionism from Stormont, the Dail and Westminster, the dissidents walked out. They established a provisional army council of the IRA and a caretaker Sinn Fein executive.

Their first public statements strongly attacked the leftward trend in the organisation and were vehemently anti-communist. In its Easter statement of 1970 the Provisional IRA army council stated:

*Irish freedom will not be won by involvement with an international movement of extreme socialism.*<sup>4</sup>

But it would be wrong to see the split as simply being along left-right lines. Many of the Officials (as the other wing became known) had become reformists and were in favour of a strategy of working through parliament to effect change — even being

---

<sup>4</sup> AN PHOBLACHT Vol. 1, No. 3: quoted in FARRELL, MICHAEL: Northern Ireland; The Orange State. Page 270

*National Programmes* (government/employer/union deals) and which was quite efficiently fulfilling its role as a junior partner in the western capitalist system was likely to persuade the unionists that life in a 32-County State was going to be any better for them. The realpolitik of the Pan-Nationalist Alliance meant that the need to smash both states on the island and replace them with a Socialist Republic was quietly shelved. Instead it was more important to play footsie with Dublin and 'Irish-America'. Such a policy was never likely to win working-class Unionists over from the Orange bigots.

## Persuaders for Unity!

Not alone did Sinn Fein now call on the Dublin government to take up the banner of *Irish Independence*, but the call also went out to the British government to...*join the ranks of the persuaders in seeking to obtain the consent of all sections to the constitutional, political and financial arrangements needed to establish a united Ireland.*<sup>19</sup>

With the publication of the Sinn Fein document *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland* in 1992, the strategy was fully in place. The central thrust of the document was that Britain must *join the persuaders* and Dublin must *...persuade the British that partition has failed, ...persuade the unionists of the benefits of Irish reunification, and...persuade the international community that it should support a real peace process in Ireland.*<sup>20</sup>

The first steps were now being taken to establish the 'Irish American' arm of the axis. *Americans for a New Irish Agenda* was set up by, among others, a former U.S. Congressman, Bruce Morrison. Adams and Hume went public on the results of their discussions in April 1993. In June — amidst great controversy — Mary Robinson, the 26-County President, visited Belfast and

---

<sup>19</sup> ADAMS, GERRY op.cit. Page 203

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* Page 209



— is one dominated politically by bosses. Instead, however, the drive to create the *Pan-Nationalist Alliance* was intensified.

By the early 1990s the *Irish Peace Process* (as Sinn Fein was labelling it) was well under way and Sinn Fein and the British government were in regular secret contact. Northern Secretary Peter Brooke had publicly acknowledged that he found it ...*difficult to envisage a military defeat of the IRA*.<sup>17</sup> On the other side of the coin, Republicans had realised that a military victory for the IRA was not a possibility.

The British were saying that they had no selfish interest in staying in the 6-Counties, and Brooke was involved in a series of ‘talks about talks’ with Unionist parties and the SDLP. At Sinn Fein’s Wolfe Tone commemoration in June 1991, Adams stated

*While Dublin and the SDLP refuse to stand up to the British government it will continue to think it can do exactly what it wants in Ireland.....Dublin should seek a change in Britain’s current policy of maintaining the union to one of ending it and handing over sovereignty to an all-Ireland government, democratically elected and accountable to the Irish nation. Dublin should use the opportunity of these talks [Brooke talks] to persuade the unionists that their future lies in this context and to persuade the British to accept that they have a responsibility to influence the unionist position. To secure a national and international consensus on this the Dublin government needs a strategy for unity and independence. Such a strategy would involve winning international support for the demand for Irish independence and would require the full use of Irish diplomatic skills and resources.*<sup>18</sup>

Nobody ever explained how a government which was presiding over massive unemployment and poverty, which had — over the previous 5 years — imposed severe restrictions on the living standards of workers and the unemployed through

---

<sup>17</sup> quoted in *ibid.* Page 199

<sup>18</sup> AP/RN 27/6/91

willing to take their seats in Stormont — the notorious symbol of oppression — if elected.

Because of the reformist nature of the Officials many of the younger militants — especially in the North — joined the Provisionals despite the fact that at the time they were controlled by right-wing traditional nationalists who wanted no truck with socialism.

Throughout the early 1970s, the Provos engaged the British in a hugely intensive war of attrition. Events such as Bloody Sunday in Derry (when 13 civilians were killed by the Parachute Regiment during a Civil Rights March on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> January 1972) brought floods of recruits. When the British sent heavily-armed troops into IRA no-go areas in Belfast and Derry in July 1972, there were 95 deaths. In the previous four months there had been 5,500 shooting incidents and hundreds of car bombs had devastated the centres of many Northern towns.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this time, the IRA remained heavily dependant on the conservative American Noraid network for funding. Joe Cahill had on the IRA’s behalf promised Noraid that they would deliver...*a republic without socialist or communist ideas*...<sup>6</sup>. General Army Order No. 8 banned military activity in the 26-Counties and political work in the South was confined to support for the Northern IRA.

Following a brief cease-fire in 1972 during which six Provo leaders — including Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness — were flown to London for talks with British government ministers, the IRA campaign resumed. At this time too Loyalist paramilitary groups wreaked havoc with a particularly vicious sectarian campaign of terror aimed at the Catholic population.

---

<sup>5</sup> source: BOWYER BELL, J.: *IRA Tactics and Targets*. Page 18

<sup>6</sup> CLARKE, LIAM: *Broadening the Battlefield; The H-Blocks and the Rise of Sinn Fein*. Page 13

## Flawed Strategy

It was the Provisionals' cease-fire of 1974–1975 however which was to show up for the first time one of the flaws in a strategy which relied solely on a military campaign — especially one with a purely nationalist base. Speaking of this period 10 years later, in 1985, Gerry Adams was to say

*When the struggle was limited to armed struggle, the prolongation of the truce meant that there was no struggle at all. There was nothing but confusion, frustration and demoralisation, arising directly from what I call spectator politics<sup>7</sup>*

By the 1978, Sinn Fein Ard Fheis disaffection with the leadership's handling of the 1975 truce had begun to assert itself and Adams was elected to the position of Vice-President. A new leadership began to emerge based around Adams, Tom Hartley, Joe Austin and Danny Morrison. There was much talk — especially among the prisoners — of socialism and of replacing the reactionary nationalist outlook of the past. A new type of community politics began to emerge with Republicans being encouraged to involve themselves in community groups, trade unions and cultural groups.

It was the beginning of the 'blanket protest' following the removal of the prisoners' 'special category status' in March 1976 which was to lead eventually to the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 and the highpoint of support for the Republican cause throughout the 32-Counties. By 1980, with Margaret Thatcher in power, there were 380 prisoners taking part in the 'no wash' protest and preparations for a hunger strike were well under way.

When the prison protests began in 1976, Sinn Fein as an organisation seemed incapable of the sort of political agitation necessary to highlight the prisoners' plight. When a confer-

---

<sup>7</sup> Bobby Sands Memorial Lecture, 5/5/1985; quoted in CLARKE, LIAM op. cit. Page 29

frighten them off by screaming too loudly about poverty, unemployment or the ills of capitalism!

This 'tread very carefully' philosophy was seen clearly during the Anti-Extradition Campaign of the late 1980s. Appeal after appeal was made to the 'grassroots' of Fianna Fail (FF) and attempts were made, to quote from a motion from the National Committee to one of its first conferences,...*to play on the inherent contradictions within the party [FF] between the old Dev'ites and the newer monetarists.*

At another Conference, a National Committee document stated *A primary means of pressurising Fianna Fail is through their own party structures.*

Because this remained a key focus of the campaign, event after event was scaled down or cancelled entirely for fear of alienating the couple of backbench TDs who it was hoped would issue a statement against extradition. Thus when the January 1988 Conference of the Irish Anti-Extradition Committee (IAEC) took a decision to stage a large demonstration outside the Fianna Fail Ard Fheis, this decision was countermanded by Sinn Fein and only a small picket took place.

Indeed this situation reached farcical heights following the extradition of Robert Russell in August, 1988. At the first National Committee meeting of the IAEC following Russell's extradition, Norah Comiskey, Richard Greene and Jim Doyle (all FF members) with the support of SF were still talking about organising meetings of FF members against extradition and even seriously discussed holding a press conference to call for the removal of Haughey as leader of FF and his replacement by a *true republican.*

The lessons of that period should have been clear. The complete failure of the anti-extradition campaign to make an impact should have taught Sinn Fein that any alliance with bosses — even if in this case the alliance was more illusory than real

London governments in an attempt to marginalise and smash the Republican Movement. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, which Gerry Adams himself describes as *...a coming together of the various British strategies on an all-Ireland basis, with the Dublin government acting as the new guarantor of partition*<sup>15</sup> was already two years in place. Haughey was in the process of extraditing republicans and tightening up security co-operation with the British forces. And workers and the unemployed in the 26-Counties were facing a severe economic onslaught under the terms of the government-union-employer deal, the *Programme for National Recovery* (PNR).

## Socialism?

So what of the 'left turn'? Adams still described himself as a socialist so he must have seen some role for socialists in the *Irish Ireland movement*. And indeed he did:

*The true socialist will be an active supporter of the republican character of the national independence movement. She or he will realise that, unless this character is maintained and unless the most radical forces are in the leadership of the independence struggle, then inevitably it must fail or compromise. This classical view of the matter contrasts with the ultra-left view, which counterpoises republicanism and socialism and which breaks up the unity of the national independence movement by putting forward 'socialist' demands that have no possibility of being achieved until real independence is won.*<sup>16</sup> [my emphasis].

In essence, it's the classic stages theory — national independence first, then we can think about socialism. A significant section of the 'nationalist' ruling class — so the theory goes — can be drawn into the fight for a united Ireland, if we don't

---

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* Page 108

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* Page 133

ence was held in Coalisland, Co. Tyrone in January 1978 to discuss the building of a broad anti-Unionist front which would campaign on the prisons issue, Sinn Fein criticised the naivety of the organisers and basically put forward the proposition that only those who offered uncritical support for the IRA's campaign were entitled to get involved. However by October 1979 when a further Conference was held in the Green Briar Hall in Andersonstown, the Sinn Fein line had changed dramatically and Gerry Adams proposed to the conference a list of 5 demands around which a *Smash H-Block* campaign could be built. These demands were:

1. To be exempt from wearing prison clothes.
2. To be exempt from prison work.
3. To have freedom of association with fellow political prisoners.
4. The right to organise educational and recreational facilities, to have one weekly visit, to receive and send out one letter per week and to receive one parcel per week.
5. Entitlement to full remission of sentence

These demands were agreed by the Conference and became the central plank of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee. While this Committee worked to raise public awareness and bring pressure on the British government on the issue, Sinn Fein was involved in secret negotiations with, among others, Cardinal Tomás O'Fiach — the head of the Irish Catholic Church — to try and persuade him to intervene with the British on the prisoners' behalf.

Meanwhile pressure from inside the prisons was growing and Sinn Fein began to come to the realisation that they had to organise politically — especially in the 26-Counties — if they were to make progress.

## Hunger Strike

In October 1980, the prisoners in the H-Blocks decided that their only hope of pressing home the issue of prison status was to go on hunger strike. In a communication sent in to Bobby Sands, Gerry Adams stated that the leadership of the republican movement was...*tactically, strategically, physically and morally opposed to a hunger strike.*<sup>8</sup>

The prisoners however, were determined to press ahead with their plans. The first hunger strike lasted for 53 days and involved nearly 40 prisoners in the H-Blocks and Armagh. There were pickets, marches and riots throughout the 6-Counties. In Dublin, 12,000 people marched in support of the prisoners in late October and a further 2,000 picketed a summit meeting between Thatcher and Taoiseach Charles Haughey on 8<sup>th</sup> December. Republican strategists began to realise that political agitation could be a strong weapon in their arsenal.

On 18<sup>th</sup> December — with one of the hunger strikers, Seán McKenna, fast approaching death — the British government indicated that if the fast was called off some of their demands would be met. The prisoners decided to end the protest but discovered very quickly that the document presented to them by the British fell far short of meeting their demands. Almost immediately, preparations began for another hunger strike.

Again the Sinn Fein leadership attempted to dissuade the prisoners from their proposed course of action

*...in terms of the political priorities of the moment, we did not want the hunger strike. We were just beginning our attempts to remedy the political underdevelopment of the movement, trying to develop the organisation, engaging in a gradual build-up of new forms of struggle and, in particular, we were working out our strategy in relation to elections. We were well aware that a hunger strike such as was proposed would demand exclusive attention,*

---

<sup>8</sup> quoted in *ibid.* Page 121

Anarchists would of course argue that the decision to use the tactic of participation in elections in the first place would inevitably lead to reformism. The decision to drop abstentionism was just one more step in that process. True socialism cannot be achieved through the parliamentary process. Participation in elections has the dual effect of maintaining illusions in the State apparatus and of taking away all possibility of self-activity among the working-class and replacing it with a reliance on voting for ‘good representatives’ every couple of years.

While Sinn Fein continued — and still continues — to call itself a socialist party, the central policy became one of creating the much talked about *Pan Nationalist Alliance*. Much of the leadership’s thinking on this issue was included in a document entitled *A Strategy For Peace* given by Sinn Fein to the SDLP during a series of meetings between the two parties in 1988. These meetings had come about as a result of an extensive series of contacts between Sinn Fein, representatives of the Catholic Church and indirect contact with Taoiseach Charles Haughey. In the document, Sinn Fein called for a date for British withdrawal, saying that, *Within the new situation created by these measures [withdrawal], it is then a matter of business-like negotiations between the representatives of all the Irish parties, and this includes those who represent today’s loyalist voter, to set the constitutional, economic, social and political arrangements for a new Irish state... the British government needs to be met with a firm united and unambiguous demand from all Irish Nationalist parties for an end to the Unionist veto and a declaration of a date for withdrawal...*

One of the aims of the SF/SDLP talks was, according to the document, *That Sinn Fein and the SDLP join forces to impress on the Dublin government the need to launch an international and diplomatic offensive to secure national self-determination.*

It must be remembered that this proposal was made at a time of unprecedented co-operation between the Dublin and

ciples to *Irish Republican Socialist principles* which was to lead many to believe, over the subsequent decade, that Sinn Fein had taken a 'left turn'. Ruairi O'Brádaigh resigned as President and Adams was elected to the position.

When the Euro elections were held, the Sinn Fein vote in the 6-Counties was down slightly to 13.3%. In the South — where in the 1982 general election the SF vote in the key constituencies of Louth and Cavan/Monaghan had halved since the hunger strike election — their total vote was only 2%. In the 1985 Northern local elections, the Sinn Fein vote slipped further, to under 12% but they had 59 Councillors elected.

In the South the electoral breakthrough never came. As one Sinn Fein activist put it:

*...we were not going to get votes in Ballymun because the Brits were battering down doors in Ballymurphy*<sup>13</sup>

The need to 'become relevant' to 26-County voters meant that Sinn Fein activists were encouraged to become involved in community and trade union activities. Much good work was done by SF activists on the drugs issue in Dublin, for example, over the next couple of years. However, there was a glaring dichotomy. The strategy being formulated by the leadership — that of developing a 'Pan-Nationalist Alliance', an *...Irish Ireland movement to offset, especially in the 26-Counties, the neo-colonial and anti-national mentality that exists there*<sup>14</sup>, meant that direct conflict with the 26-County government had to be avoided. Instead of realising that the failure to make 'an electoral breakthrough' in the 26-Counties was directly attributable to the failure to offer a radical socialist alternative, the leadership decided instead that the problem was abstentionism. At the 1986 Ard-Fheis the decision was taken to enter Leinster House if elected and many of the *old guard* left to form Republican Sinn Fein.

---

<sup>13</sup> CLARKE, LIAM op. cit. Page 226

<sup>14</sup> ADAMS, GERRY op.cit. Page 135

*would, in effect, hijack the struggle, and this conflicted with our sense of the political priorities of the moment.*<sup>9</sup>

## Bobby Sands

But the prisoners were determined. They felt they had no alternative and plans went ahead. On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1981 Bobby Sands was the first to refuse food. Over the course of the next seven months, ten republican prisoners — members of both the IRA and the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) — were to die on hunger strike. The National H-Block/Armagh Committee — set up on a humanitarian/ pan-nationalist axis — was to organise protests, pickets, marches, riots and even some strike action throughout the 32-Counties. It was a period of mass action but also one of missed opportunity. It was a period also which was to have long-term effects on the direction of Sinn Fein's developing political strategy:

*The hunger strike did away with spectator politics. When the only form of struggle being waged was armed struggle, it only needed a small number of people to engage in it. But, with the hunger strike, people could play an active role which could be as limited or as important as billposting, writing letters, or taking part in numerous forms of protest.*<sup>10</sup>

The mass action was indeed impressive. In the week of Bobby Sands' funeral, for example, over 10,000 marched in Dublin, 5,000 in Limerick, 4,000 in Cork. There were big marches in Waterford, Tralee, Killarney, Wexford, Bray, Meath, Monaghan, Donegal and many other places. In Belfast over 100,000 people attended the funeral. There were work stoppages — some organised, some spontaneous — all over the country, including Dublin Corporation maintenance depots, Alcan's construction site in Limerick (2,500 workers), Arigna

---

<sup>9</sup> ADAMS, GERRY: Free Ireland; Towards a Lasting Peace. Page 79

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* Page 86

mines in Co. Leitrim, building sites in Dublin, factories and shops in Limerick, Cork, Cobh, Tralee, Wexford, Bray, Sligo, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan. Trades Councils in places such as Waterford, Dungarvan, Meath, Dundalk and Drogheda called successful stoppages.<sup>11</sup> There were daily pickets and protests in almost every town in Ireland.

While this was in many ways people power at its best, the necessity to maintain friendly relations with the 'broad nationalist family' which included Southern political parties, the Catholic Church and the GAA meant that it had to be controlled. Thus the 100,000 people who attended Sands' funeral were told to go home and wait for the Republican movement to take its revenge. Thus also the failure to make workplace and community struggle the spearhead of the campaign. Ultimately the period was to prove the acid test of Sinn Fein's 'socialism' – a test they were to fail miserably.

The real lesson that Sinn Fein took from the H-Block Campaign happened almost by chance. The sudden death of Frank Maguire, independent MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone raised the possibility of a prisoner candidate standing in the bye-election. Bobby Sands was duly nominated and elected with 30,492 votes. Sands' election literature sought to *borrow* the votes of the electorate. Voters were told that by lending their votes they could help save Sands' life. In the following election they could go back to supporting their usual candidates. Apparently it would have been expecting too much to hope that people would vote for an IRA man because they supported what the Republican Movement stood for.

When Charles Haughey called a general election in the 26-Counties for 11<sup>th</sup> June, Republican prisoners stood as candidates in 9 constituencies. Paddy Agnew (Louth) and Kieran Doherty (Cavan/Monaghan) were elected. Kevin Lynch

---

<sup>11</sup> AN PHOBLACHT/REPUBLICAN NEWS (AP/RN) Sat. 9/5/1981

missed a seat in Waterford by just 300 votes. The electoral successes were to have two effects. Firstly, the Dublin and London governments moved to marginalise the Republican Movement through a process of extended collaboration that led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the extradition legislation of 1987. For Sinn Fein, the message they took from the period was that *Our tentative moves towards adopting an electoral strategy were rapidly concluded with the electoral success of that year. The centrality of mass popular struggle eventually found its place alongside the armed struggle.*<sup>12</sup>

Buoyed by the prisoners' electoral successes many Republicans began to believe that not only should an electoral strategy become more central to the overall struggle but that it was only a matter of putting up candidates and winning seats. Thus the *armalite and ballot box* tactic was developed and indeed it appeared to meet with considerable success in the 6-County area. In the 1982 elections to the newly-established *Northern Assembly* Sinn Fein candidates got 64,191 first preference votes and Adams (West Belfast), Jim McAlister (Armagh), Martin McGuinness (Derry), Danny Morrison (Mid-Ulster) and Owen Carron (Fermanagh/South Tyrone) were all elected. In elections to Westminster in June 1983 the Sinn Fein vote increased to 13.4% and Gerry Adams was elected MP for West Belfast.

## 'Left Turn'?

The first cracks began to appear in the traditional policy of abstentionism at the 1983 Ard Fheis when a decision was taken to contest the upcoming elections to the European Parliament and to take seats if elected. But it was the decision of this Ard Fheis to replace the movement's commitment to *Christian prin-*

---

<sup>12</sup> GIBNEY, JIM speaking on 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of hunger strikes, quoted in AP/RN 22/11/90