

Elections and Abstentionism

One of the distinctive features of Irish Republicanism is its abstentionist attitude to the British parliament and the two partitionist assemblies — Stormont and Leinster House. Abstentionism has been described variously as either a policy (ie a tactic) or a principle. It has also been misunderstood at times as an abhorrence of contesting elections under any circumstances. The contention being made here is that Abstentionism is a Republican principle which does not preclude contesting elections on a selective basis under certain preconditions.

The principle of Abstentionism is derived from a Republican view of where a State gets its authority to rule: the people. Elected representatives who participate in the institutions of the State effectively accept the authority of that State and its right to voluntarily rule the people they represent. By withdrawing popular support — represented on an official level by withdrawing elected representatives — from the State, it becomes impossible for the State to function. By diverting that popular support to the parallel apparatus of the revolutionary State being formed, the existing State is democratically replaced.

This was done with a great deal of success in 1919 following the 1918 General Election when Republican Sinn Féin contested seats in the election called by the British.

While the general election was for seats in the Westminster parliament, Republican Sinn Féin made it clear that they would not sit in that parliament but rather use the apparatus of the election to establish the Dáil Éireann.

Abstentionism from Leinster House and Stormont — following the creation by the British in 1920 of parliaments of ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ Ireland — was the logical extension of the principle applied to the Westminster parliament by Sinn Féin from its inception in 1905 and continued when it was reconstituted as a Republican organisation in 1917. Leinster House and Stormont were both created by British acts of parliament to implement the British interest in Ireland, making Ireland one of the first countries to be partitioned by Westminster.

By adopting the Republican view of sovereignty it could be seen that these assemblies would sap popular support away from the revolutionary structure and attempt to pacify people within the confines of partition and British rule. Therefore, Republicans extended the Abstentionist principle to include Leinster House and Stormont as well as Westminster since all of these assemblies infringed on the sovereignty of the Irish nation.

Opposition to Abstentionism and the analysis behind it can be traced to the source of all splits within the Republican Movement all the way back to the original split between pro and anti Treaty sides in 1922.

The principle is that Republicans do not recognise the authority, and therefore do not participate in, any assembly claiming to exercise sovereignty over Ireland or any part of it which works the partition system, serves a foreign interest or does not further the cause of Irish freedom and unity. The Republican Sinn Féin constitution cites as one of its fundamental principles that “the sovereignty and unity of the Republic [of the 32 Counties] are inalienable and non-judicable”.

Local government and local elections

The Abstentionist principle is not applied to local government assemblies for the above reason: they do not claim sovereignty over the territory they administer. It is therefore possible to participate in these bodies without prejudicing the right of Ireland to freedom and unity.

Republican Sinn Féin candidates do participate in local elections in the 26 Counties and if elected they do participate in the councils.

Candidates do not participate in local elections in the Six Counties because they are barred by a test oath or declaration which candidates must take before they are permitted to contest in the elections.

Republican Sinn Féin candidates have been prevented from standing in the local elections in the Six Counties since May 1989 because they refuse to accept a British imposed oath disavowing the struggle for Irish freedom. The oath reads:

“I declare that, if elected, I will not by word or deed express support for or approval of – any organisation that is for the time being a proscribed organisation specified in Schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1978: or

– acts of terrorism (that is to say, violence for political ends) connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland.”

What the oath means

The oath calls for the public disowning of the Irish Republican Army, Cumann na mBan, Fianna Éireann and a repudiation of the right of the Irish people to use force of arms to end

British occupation. That right has been asserted in every generation and since 1970 it has been asserted at tremendous cost in terms of life, liberty and human suffering.

Principled stand

Republicans have never accepted British oaths of allegiance. For 50 years under the Stormont regime Republican candidates were debarred from public office because of their refusal to take such oaths. Many public bodies were abolished for refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the British Crown. It required the great upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement and the armed resistance of the people to smash the oath at local government level.

To accept such oaths would demean the whole cause of Irish Republicanism and dishonour all those who gave their lives for Irish freedom.

Summary

There are a number of aspects that need to be balanced when dealing with elections and Abstentionism:

Firstly, Republicans do not contest elections where they are required as a precondition to make a declaration or oath which infringes on Ireland's right to freedom and unity.

Secondly, where it is possible to contest an election without making such a declaration the attitude taken depends on whether the assembly concerned claims sovereignty in Ireland;

In the case of an assembly claiming sovereignty, such as Leinster House or Westminster or Stormont on behalf of Britain, Republicans may make use of the election apparatus but would not take their seat in those assemblies if elected. They would, in fact, be candidates pledged to sit only in an All-Ireland parliament;

Or, in the case of a local council, which does not claim sovereignty, Republicans contest the election and take their seat if elected. Sinn Féin councillors sat on local bodies before 1916. In 1920, with a Republican majority, local councils broke with England and affiliated to the All-Ireland Dáil then functioning.

Participation in elections is not "unclean" provided it is done with a sense of balance, proportion and purpose. A lack of these qualities can lead to elections dragging people in the direction of constitutionalism. But when these qualities are present there isn't necessarily a contradiction between elections and Republicanism.

The All-Ireland Republic proclaimed in 1916 was endorsed by the Irish people in the General Election of 1918. The 32-County Dáil was established in 1919. The Six and 26-County States have their origin in a counter-revolution and the Westminster Government of Ireland Act of 1920. The Treaty of 1921 amended and implemented that Act and a section of former Republicans helped to partition Ireland.

All parties who broke from the Republican Movement and accepted partitionist institutions, abandoned the 32-County Republic and ended up collaborating in the maintenance of English rule in Ireland. Recognition of partitionist parliaments perpetuates English rule. Both as a matter of principles and of tactic, it is definitely not the road to the 32-County Republic. Also, the partition of Ireland is totally undemocratic.