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SINN FÉIN YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The oldest political organisation in Ireland today is Sinn Féin which was founded in 1905. The name means “ourselves” and conveys the basic philosophy of self-reliance in the struggle to establish a free, independent and self-supporting Ireland. From its inception the organisation upheld the cause of the Irish language and the promotion of home industries.

Following the Rising of 1916 a great wave of national feeling swept Ireland. Sinn Féin organised on a large scale and successfully contested a number of parliamentary by-elections. Since the Act of Union in 1800 Irish MPs had sat in Westminster but had achieved little because they were outvoted by five to one. Their agitation for Home Rule had failed and the people were searching for something new.

The Sinn Féin policy was revolutionary because their candidates were pledged not to sit in Westminster, a foreign and usurping parliament, but announced their intention of staying at home and working for the establishment of an Irish Parliament. In the General Election of 1918 Sinn Féin won 73 of the 105 seats. Many of their successful candidates were in jail at the time either in Ireland or in England, but those who were free met in the Dublin Mansion House on January 21, 1919.

At this historic meeting the Proclamation of the Republic issued in 1916 was endorsed; a Declaration of Independence was issued to the nations of the world; a Democratic Programme for social and economic development was adopted; and an independent Irish parliament, called Dáil Éireann, established. Ministers of State were appointed, courts of justice set up, a national loan floated and the Irish Republican Army came under the jurisdiction of the Minister for Defence. Local government elections were also won throughout most of the country and the Sinn Féin controlled local authorities gave their allegiance to An Dáil.

Inevitably, all this led to a clash with the English government and its forces. A guerrilla war of resistance was carried on until July 1921, when a truce was negotiated. Protracted negotiations took place, but already the Government of Ireland Act had been passed in Westminster, providing for the establishment of two subordinate parliaments in Ireland. The excuse for this was that there was a sizeable body of Unionist opinion in and around Belfast who wanted to remain in the United Kingdom. But the Act provided for the inclusion

of six out of the nine Ulster counties in the new statelet, although Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh had nationalist majorities, as well as large parts of the other four counties. The aim was to hold as large an area as possible with a safe Unionist majority. The Stormont Parliament was opened in Belfast but the attempt to set up a 26-County Parliament in Dublin fell through.

In December 1921 the Sinn Féin delegates in London signed the Articles of Agreement for a Treaty under a threat of “immediate and terrible war” from Lloyd George. Their action was endorsed by An Dáil, still under duress, and split the nation in two. The two parliaments of the Government of Ireland Act became a reality, the Dublin one being operated by the pro-treaty group. This was resisted unsuccessfully by the Republicans under Mr de Valera until April 1923. Sinn Féin continued in existence despite the defections of half of its support now called Cumann na nGaedheal and later Fine Gael, who considered the Treaty to be a “stepping stone to the Republic”. In 1926 Mr de Valera tried to get Sinn Féin to accept the 26-County Parliament but failed. He then defected with a large number of supporters and set up another 26-County party called Fianna Fail. Sinn Féin was by this time very small and weak but determined never to accept the Treaty and to work for the restoration of the Republic.

Some changes have taken place since then but the “stepping stone” was never used. The Six Counties are more firmly than ever ensconced in the United Kingdom; despite the trappings of independence the economy is still controlled by England with disastrous consequences; the Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking areas have almost disappeared. In fact it has at last become obvious to many that the partition system of government is a failure (for Ireland) and that the inevitable drift back to integration with England is well under way. The 1965 Free Trade Area Agreement is a good example of this.

The Sinn Féin of today is the same organisation as was founded in 1905 and has the same objectives as it set itself in 1918. Its most recent successes were in 1955-58 when it had two candidates elected in the occupied north and four in the south, pledged to restore the All-Ireland Republican Dáil. This was the result of a wave of enthusiasm which accompanied a Resistance Campaign carried out by the Irish Republican Army in the Six Counties. When that campaign ended, due to misrepresentation and collaboration on the part of the 26-County regime, support for Sinn Féin waned.

The Sinn Féin programme in the political sphere is aimed at contesting local and parliamentary elections north and south of the Border and re-establishing a 32-County Dáil which would seek to enforce its legislation over all Ireland. The social and economic policy is

radical and aims at nationalisation of the currency, banks and key industries; state development of the natural resources on a large scale: and the spread of co-operatives throughout agriculture, industry and trade. Foreign speculation would be curtailed and the flow of capital into and out of the country controlled. Social services and education opportunities would be vastly improved by comparison with 26-County standards.

From the short success of 1955-58 and the subsequent decline in support, Sinn Féin may well now be on the brink of a major break-through. The factors which could bring this about are:

The realisation that the aims of 1916 are nowhere near achievement and that the 26-County parties are drifting in the other direction; the need for a third force in Irish politics; the new Social and Economic Programme; the alarm being generated by the disastrous effects of the Free Trade Area Agreement (factory closures) and the grim consequences of following England into the Common Market; and, above all, the spirit of resurgence which has been generated in the Six Counties since the Civil Rights movement began to make progress in 1968.

A note on the Sinn Féin attitude to the Westminster, Stormont and Leinster House Parliaments:

The basis of the Republican position has always been that we do not recognise the right of any foreign people or government to legislate for Ireland. The partition system with its two subordinate parliaments came into existence under the Government of Ireland Act passed by Westminster in 1920. We reject all three parliaments. Our objective is to replace them with an All-Ireland Parliament, the successor to the First Dáil and Second Dáil.

This objective cannot be achieved through recognition of the three British-made parliaments, and taking seats in them involves recognition of them. Members of Westminster and Stormont also have to take an oath of allegiance to the English Monarch. Sinn Féin candidates pledge themselves to work for the convening of a 32-County Parliament. Sinn Féin elected representatives will not sit in Westminster or Stormont. They will not sit in Leinster House as a minority group, but given a majority, they are prepared to go in and assume governmental control over the 26-County area, having first issued an invitation to the elected representatives of the Six-County area to take their seats in a new 32-County Parliament.

Since 1922 various groups have attempted to use Leinster House as a “stepping stone” to a 32-County Republic and all have failed. These groups were all formed to “work from inside” and to “change the system”. In every case they were swallowed up by the system, became part of it and ended up defending it.

Fianna Fáil got control in 1932, released Republican prisoners, abolished the oath, opposed England on the land annuities question, and negotiated the return of the ports still held by England in the 26 Counties. But by 1938 they had capitulated. In that year a Trade Agreement was signed which perpetuated the domination of our economy by England and in 1939 the Offences Against the State Act was passed to preserve the system. In the seven years that followed Republicans were jailed, shot, hanged and died on hunger strike, because Fianna Fáil had become part of the system and was determined to hold on to what they had got.

The 1948-1951 Coalition Government under John A Costello came about as a result of the winning of 10 seats by Clann na Poblachta, founded in 1946 to end partition through Leinster House. Great things were promised by their leader, Seán MacBride. This government launched an Anti-Partition Campaign at home and abroad and many people thought they would succeed.

They declared the 26 Counties a “Republic” in 1949 but Westminster retaliated with the Ireland Act of 1949 which reinforced the 1920 Act. At a mass all-party rally in O’Connell Street, Dublin Mr Costello declared “we will hit England in her pride, prestige and pocket”.

When the second coalition was in office in 1954-57 the Anti-Partition Campaign had fizzled out. A request to allow Nationalist MPs of Stormont “right of audience” in Leinster House was turned down. Mr Costello said that even this gesture would “raise legal and constitutional difficulties”. This was despite the fact that MPs had been elected in Armagh and Tyrone on the understanding that they would seek to sit in Leinster House.

The “legal and constitutional difficulties” meant of course that the 26-County assembly is prevented from functioning (or even actively endeavouring to function) as a National Parliament by the British laws which established it: the Government of Ireland Act, 1920; the Treaty, 1921; and the Boundary Agreement, 1925. All the legislation of the English Parliament was incorporated in the 1937 Constitution, either in toto or in some amended form. In 1956-57 the Coalition Government used the Offences Against the State Act against Republicans, again to preserve the system.

In 1969 the Irish Labour Party pushed some long-sitting TDs onside to make way for the new brand of “socialists”, Conor Cruise O’Brien, David Thornley, Justin Keating, etc who were pledged to make Labour strong and independent and change the social system by making the ’70s socialist. Within one year they had become part of the system themselves and were arranging a coalition with the conservative Fine Gael. They also had succumbed.

Only by staying outside the partition system can Sinn Féin lead the Irish people and change that system. The 1970s present us with many opportunities of weaning the people from the system and building the alternative — a 32-County Parliament. Already there is talk of the abolition of Stormont; Leinster House will also go in due course. But there is much work to be done to achieve the Democratic Socialist Republic of All Ireland.

In August 1971 Sinn Féin took the initiative in setting up Dáil Uladh, a regional Parliament for the nine counties of Ulster, as a first step towards a new governmental structure for the 32 Counties. Tá an lá ag breacadh agus tá obair le déanamh. Cuirimis chuige.

Sinn Féin

2a Sráid Chaoimhín Íocht

Baile Átha Cliath 8

1971