Republican lecture series No. 6

ELECTION INTERVENTIONS —

Historical & contemporary

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THE PURPOSE of this lecture is, firstly, to outline the history of republican interventions in the electoral process and, secondly, to explain why the Republican Movement, in this phase of the struggle, is becoming increasingly involved in elections as part of the overall strategy for ultimate victory in our war of national and social liberation.

The reader should note that these interventions were successful or unsuccessful depending on the prevailing mood amongst the people, e.g. in 1918 it was successful because of the people's resistance to conscription and because of the growing awareness of the people to the sacrifices of 1916.

In 1927, interventions were unsuccessful because of the major rifts in the republican camp and the demoralisation that this engendered amongst the people. In 1981 they were successful because of the sacrifices of our comrades in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh.

The IRB were the first recognisable republican organisation to contest British elections when Charles Kickham and O'Donovan Rossa, whilst political prisoners, were elected to Westminster. Five years later in 1874, John Mitchel was returned as MP for North Tipperary and Cork City but was stood down by the British under the Treason and Felon Act, the same law being used to unseat Phil Clarke in Fermanagh/South Tyrone in 1955 and a somewhat similar move in Fermanagh/South Tyrone after the election of Bobby Sands in 1981.

During the 1870s the Home Rule movement emerged. They believed in a federal system within the country under a Home Rule arrangement with England. Isaac Butt led this movement and after the 1874 election he was returned to Westminster with nearly 60 colleagues. They pursued a totally reformist and constitutional position in relation to British imperialism. Their only real saving grace in relation to the prevailing republican attitudes was that they supported amnesty for the Fenian POWs.

However, in 1875, Joseph Biggar MP (who was a member of the Supreme Council of the IRB) initiated a policy of obstructionism in Westminster. On the evening when Parnell took his seat, Biggar 'entertained' the British parliament for four hours on the subject of swine fever!

Thereafter, Parnell and Biggar joined forces to stop any business being carried out in Westminster. This tactic won the support of militant nationalists and, in particular, Clann na Gael, the American leadership of the IRB. However, after discussions between various leading Fenians and Parnell, it soon emerged that Charles Stewart Parnell was not committed to the ideal of the complete separation of Ireland from England.

In Paris, in January 1869, the IRB Supreme Council rejected any alliances with constitutional forces but left the way open for individual members to participate in political activity on a strictly abstentionist basis.

The lesson to be derived from this parting of the ways between the Home Rule constitutionalists and the IRB separatists is that the former were parliamentarians who happened to be Irish, and the latter were revolutionaries who were in parliament because it was there the revolutionary work of the moment was to be done.

In this century, republican intervention in the British electoral process goes back to February 1917 when Sinn Fein contested a by-election in North Roscommon with Count Plunkett who was returned. Between February 1917 and the general election of December 1918 Sinn Fein contested three more by-elections successfully: Joe MacGuinness POW, in Longford; de Valera POW, for Clare; and Cosgrave POW, for Kilkenny.

Sinn Fein entered this general election on a clear policy of separatism, would refuse to attend Westminster and would form a purely Irish national assembly.

The result of the election was that Sinn Fein won 73 seats, the nationalist Home Rule party 6 seats, and the unionists 26 seats. Of the 73 republicans elected, 26 were in jail and 20 were on the run. Those who were at liberty decided to convoke an Irish national assembly. Everyone elected in Ireland in 1918 was invited regardless of party. Only the 27 republicans at liberty responded and met in the Mansion House, Dublin, in January 1919 and constituted themselves as Dail Eireann.

The Dail adopted the 'Democratic Programme' which showed profoundly the influence of James Connolly, and Cathal Brugha was elected as acting president on the understanding that the position was to be held open for de Valera who was then in jail.

Subsequent electoral tests showed the popularity of the republic during the height of the war between the IRA and British imperialism. In January 1920, out of 126 town and city councils, 72 went republican, 26 to republican/nationalist alliances, and 29 to unionists. In the 1921 general election, 130 republicans, 44 unionists, and 6 nationalists were elected (these figures relate to the 26-county and the 6-county returns).

The unionists formed Stormont which both Sinn Fein and the Irish Nationalist Party boycotted. Partition was now a reality.

Sinn Fein split on the Treaty with 64 TDs voting for acceptance and 57 voting against. So, by a majority of 7, the republic was betrayed.

Since partition has been imposed on us, the Republican Movement has had a consistent policy of contesting elections in both the Free State and the militarily-occupied 6 counties. In June 1922, a general election was held in the 26 counties. There were 128 seats and the result was 58 pro-Treaty, 36 anti-Treaty, 17 Labour, 7 Farmers, and 10 independents.

The anti-Treaty TDs boycotted this illegal assembly but all the other parties attended.

After the Civil War ended, in May 1923, the Free Staters called another election in August 1923. There were 153 seats available of which the republicans obtained 44 or 27.5% of the vote.

Between 1923 and the next general election in 1927, de Valera had split from Sinn Fein and formed Fianna Fail. Sinn Fein fought the 1927 elections and won seven seats. In July 1927, O'Higgins, the Free State Minister of 'Justice', was executed. Cosgrave's Free State government responded by bringing in an Electoral Amendment Act requiring all candidates to take an oath that they would attend if elected. This was dropped when Fianna Fail came to power in 1932.

Sinn Fein contested various by-elections including Louth and Clare in the 1954 general election. But in 1957 Sinn Fein entered the general election fray in earnest, contesting 19 constituencies, and were successful in 4 areas (the first time Sinn Fein had won seats in the Free State since 1927). These areas and candidates were: Monaghan, F. O'Hanlon; South Kerry, J.J. Rice; Longford/Westmeath, R. O Bradaigh; and Sligo/Leitrim, J. J. McGirl. The IRA campaign was in full swing at this stage which shows that armed propaganda has an enhancing effect on our electoral successes.



● **RUAIRI O BRADAIGH**
elected for Longford/Westmeath, 1957



● **JOHN JOE McGIRL**
elected for Sligo/Leitrim, 1957

In 1961, we contested 21 constituencies and lost the four seats which we had gained in 1957. Seamus Costello contested Wicklow for Sinn Fein in 1968 but was defeated.

Our next electoral intervention in the Free State in a general election was in 1981 under the auspices of the H-Block campaign when POWs in the Blocks stood as candidates with Kieran Doherty being elected in Cavan/Monaghan and Paddy Agnew elected in Louth. This intervention effectively destabilised the Free State government and forced an early general election in 1982 in which Sinn Fein participated but failed to win any seats.

Sinn Fein have consistently fought local elections in the Free State and in 1979 won 30 seats at this level which makes us the fourth largest party at local level.

In the occupied 6 counties, since partition we have fought both Stormont and Westminster elections. In 1925 we won two seats for Stormont and in 1933 we won a seat in South Armagh, Paddy McLogan being the successful candidate.

It wasn't until 1950 that we stood again, this time in a Westminster election when we contested all 12 constituencies without success. In 1955 we again contested the Westminster elections and this time we won two seats, one in Fermanagh/South Tyrone and the other in Mid-Ulster. We contested also in '56, '59, '64, and '66, but failed to either hold or win any seats.

Our next intervention at this level was when the late Bobby Sands was elected in Fermanagh/South Tyrone in a massive show of solidarity with the hunger-strike by the nationalist people. After Bobby Sands was murdered, his election agent, Owen Carron, stood and, despite the intervention of the pro-unionist Sticks, was returned with an increased majority. This was a good indication of the basic soundness of the nationalist people in the occupied zone.

Up until the 1981 ard fheis, Sinn Fein had a policy position in relation to participating in local elections in the 6 counties but the way is now open to us to contest these elections.

This section of the lecture outlines the political reasons for involvement in the electoral process.

The whole question now facing us is do we or do we not participate in elections? If so, what are our objectives in doing so? Firstly, it must be stated that we do not approach elections from a reformist viewpoint – we do not believe that the 6 counties can be 'democratised'.

The hunger-strike experience in particular has shown us the collaborationist role which the SDLP and the likes of Gerry Fitt play in propping up imperialism in the six counties. Similarly,







● **The election interventions of Bobby Sands** *(top left)* **and Kieran Doherty** *(bottom left)* **in the 1981 Westminster and Leinster House elections generated further publicity for the republican cause. Following the death of Bobby Sands his election agent, Owen Carron** *(right)*, **was elected with an increased majority.**

in the Free State the role of the establishment parties showed that they were more interested in defeating republicanism than in saving the lives of the hunger-strikers, yet a substantial section of the people supported the H-Block campaign which in turn increased support for the republican cause.

There is a need for us to give the nationalist and republican people an opportunity of showing whether they support the pro-imperialist policies of the establishment parties or the radical republicanism of the 1980s which demands the establishment of a democratic, socialist republic which is run by and for the people.

There is a fundamental need for republicans to create the conditions whereby the Irish people may seize political and economic control of their own destinies.

The IRA has and is bringing forward the war against the military might of Britain. Sinn Fein recognises and supports the right of the Irish people to resist the imperialist occupation. Sinn Fein must exploit the political and economic contradictions of partition.

The most important thing, from Sinn Fein's point of view, is to involve ourselves in a campaign of economic resistance against the economic imperialism and domination which prevails in all parts of the country. To do this we must be with the people in their everyday struggles against the effects of capitalism and repression on their lives.

If we can successfully do this at local level and build ourselves up it will be reflected in electoral victories. We must not do this from any cynical motivation but from a genuine concern about the plight of our people.