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SINN FEIN VOTE - VIOLENCE AND POLITICS

The Catholic vote in Northern Ireland is traditionally a nationalist vote and since the demise of Stormont in 1972 the majority has voted for the SDLP. PAB's paper of 24 July pointed out that Sinn Fein managed to reach a high point of support at the height of the hunger strike campaign, and although this has fallen away to some extent, there remains a basic strength (about 85,000) who remain supporters. It has to be assumed that the vast majority of this support accepts that they are voting for violence and in doing so are making a positive and conscious decision not to vote for the SDLP and a constitutional path to Irish unity.

2. Recent election results suggest that the Sinn Fein vote may have reached a hard core with few voters changing allegiance from Sinn Fein to SDLP. The purpose of this paper is to try to look at what changes if any could affect the voting patterns of the minority community and lead to a further reduction in support for Sinn Fein.

3. Clearly an important factor in trying to look ahead is a consideration of who votes Sinn Fein. Voting patterns show that the Sinn Fein vote is not, by any means, restricted to the urban areas although its major stronghold is West Belfast. The numbers involved suggest that Sinn Fein must attract votes across all age groups and class boundaries although in the urban areas it is primarily working class. There is nonetheless evidence of support in Catholic areas throughout the Province. We can also assume that Sinn Fein voters are Northern Catholics and have a particular mythology of Irish unity and anti British feeling fostered over generations. Not all are necessarily supporters of individual acts of violence, but in general they believe that PIRA violence has brought about progress; many Sinn Fein supporters, in an almost detached fashion, will accept that the end (Irish unity) justifies the means.

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4. It is less certain that Sinn Fein voters support the Marxist political aims of Sinn Fein's Northern leadership. Thus within the Catholic/Nationalist community communists do not do well and parties (such as the Workers Party) who put themselves forward on an avowedly class-battle ticket have suffered. Also the power base from within which Sinn Fein draw their strength is a deeply religious community and it is certainly not anti-clerical. Indeed the Catholic communities in which the strongest Sinn Fein bases remain are a peculiar mixture, militant (Republican) but yet deeply religious and conservative in general views. For example Sinn Fein had particular difficulties over the abortion issue and were forced to change its policy at the 1986 Ard Fheis.

5. All of this means that the leadership and young activists within Sinn Fein conceal, or at least do not push forward too obviously, their basic political beliefs in Northern Ireland and particularly in North America. We believe therefore that if Sinn Fein maintain their present stance Sinn Fein voters will remain faithful to the cause even though many of them do not understand, or choose not to understand, the ultimate political aims of Sinn Fein, because they favour Sinn Fein's policy on the single immediate issue of "British Occupation". The perception of Sinn Fein as a single issue party is the major reason for Sinn Fein's lack of success in ROI. We think therefore that the hard core theory is well based to the extent that it cannot be reduced by outside action. Representations from the SDLP and the Catholic Church are likely to do little to change views, and even significant moves on jobs, the administration of justice and any other benefits (which may or may not be claimed by the SDLP as having emerged from the Anglo-Irish Agreement) would have only minimal effect since Sinn Fein supporters will see them as a result ultimately of PIRA violence.

6. We foresee no changes in the "armalite/ballot box" strategy within Sinn Fein/PIRA. There have been clear signs in recent years that as the Northern leadership took command they wanted to establish a stronger political power base. They have been

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successful in Northern Ireland. As for ROI this policy was most clearly demonstrated at the 1986 Ard Fheis when Adams and McGuinness spearheaded the change in policy leading to the end of the abstentionist stance in the Dail. In the event this caused a division within Sinn Fein with the old guard forming Republican Sinn Fein. As we expected the Sinn Fein vote, to their satisfaction, held up reasonably well in the June General Election though the the Irish General Election result was a disappointment to them. Sinn Fein are looking again to see how they can improve their attractiveness as a political party especially in the South though they did make clear that they regard the 87 election as a platform from which to develop. There would be pressure on the constitutional parties North and South to include Sinn Fein in any talks that might occur in the future, if they were to suspend terrorism by way of a ceasefire; but if nothing came of the talks, or if Sinn Fein were to be excluded, there would always be the threat of a resumption of terrorism.

7. We believe that there is no prospect that Sinn Fein will follow the ceasefire path. Debate at the 1986 Ard Fheis^{centred}/around the fear that terrorism would become subordinate to the political campaign. Adams and McGuinness were at pains to show the party that there would be no weakening of the armed struggle. Indeed it was said quite explicitly that O'Connell and those who had been responsible for the post Feakle ceasefires in 1972 and 1975 and the abortive negotiations with HMG in the early 70s had nearly ruined the Provisional movement. This would not be allowed to happen again. Also in strictly political terms it would weaken the distinction between Sinn Fein and the SDLP electorate, and given a choice between two parties of more similar persuasion the tendency would be for the vote to go to the larger one. It would be in this way alone that an erosion of Sinn Fein's strength could happen. The Sinn Fein leadership is strongly aware of these difficulties and for these reasons will not wish to stray from the current strategy.

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Conclusions

8. All of this leads us to conclude that for the foreseeable future Sinn Fein strength will remain undiminished. We cannot see how it can be influenced other than marginally unless by some chance events develop internally which highlight the strong left wing politics of the leaders and their strong anti clerical feelings. However we do not foresee significant changes in Sinn Fein policy which will hasten this, nor do we see any prospect for a PIRA ceasefire to help the political struggle - indeed if anything the armalite philosphy is likely to be played more vigorously. It is worth noting that Sinn Fein produced a document titled 'A Scenario for Peace' but this was an extremely cynical exercise to re-emphasise the dual strategy merely for electoral purposes.



J E McCONNELL
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