Sinn Féin : between participation and boycott

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SINN FÉIN– BETWEEN PARTICIPATION AND BOYCOTT

Jeremy Waterfield

Jeremy Waterfield, born in Norwich in 1990, studied History at St Andrews and UCL. Since 2018 he has been studying architecture at ETH Zurich.

Sinn Féin are a left-wing Irish political party active in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. They are currently the 2nd and 3rd largest party in these legislatures, respectively. Uniquely Sinn Féin have always been an abstentionist party, meaning that they participate in election campaigning but their candidates for government do not take up their seats. Although this is no longer true of the Republic of Ireland's Seanad and Dáil (upper and lower houses) and since 1998 the Northern Irish Assembly (a devolved regional legislature), it remains true for the British Parliament in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Since their founding in 1905 politics have been considered only one of many roads to Irish Independence. For many years the republican movement saw armed conflict as the primary driver of change. Sinn Féin were seen as merely the public relations arm of the Irish Republican Army, IRA. Abstentionism represents this tension within Irish republicanism, which holds that you cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools.

Over time those in Sinn Féin who advocated political, not violent means have won the argument, but abstentionism remains. Representing something different now, it acts as a guarantor of legitimacy for party representatives who remain able to argue for a united Ireland while participating in many of the democratic processes they oppose. The author Rachel Cusk writes that to ignore someone is the final display of your own powerlessness. But this is not quite that. Taking up space, holding ground — reminding those in power that you are there — and at the same time not becoming part of the power structures, is a position filled with tension. To contend elections but never to take the seats won is a third way between participation and boycott. It's a reminder that although space to move may seem limited, there is in fact a range of strategies which, if you are willing to pay the price for it, you could take up. Despite its discomfort, this position can be a fruitful one — in architecture, as elsewhere. It reminds us, and those around us, that the structures in which we operate are only legitimate in so far as we choose to believe in them. And although we may choose to use them, we do not need to become beholden to them.

From the 11th century onwards, but in earnest from the 15th, Ireland was one of England's first colonial possessions and this history is in many ways typical. The Irish language was suppressed and from the 17th century Scottish Presbyterian Protestants were encouraged to settle in the north of Ireland. There they became both the urban majority and — also due to favourable tax incentives and preferences — economically and politically powerful. The police force consisted almost entirely of Protestants. In 1800 self-rule had ended and the island was governed from London rather than Dublin, but landowners remained loyal to the English Church and Crown. Many Irish saw no way of freeing the country from its poverty when the government in London was dominated by legislators with no interest in improving or investing in the country. During the 19th century the population nearly halved, as the country moved further into poverty, partly due to heavy handed economic policies declared from London. The situation by the 20th century was one in which the 5% of Protestants controlled almost all economic and financial resources as well as all political and police power.

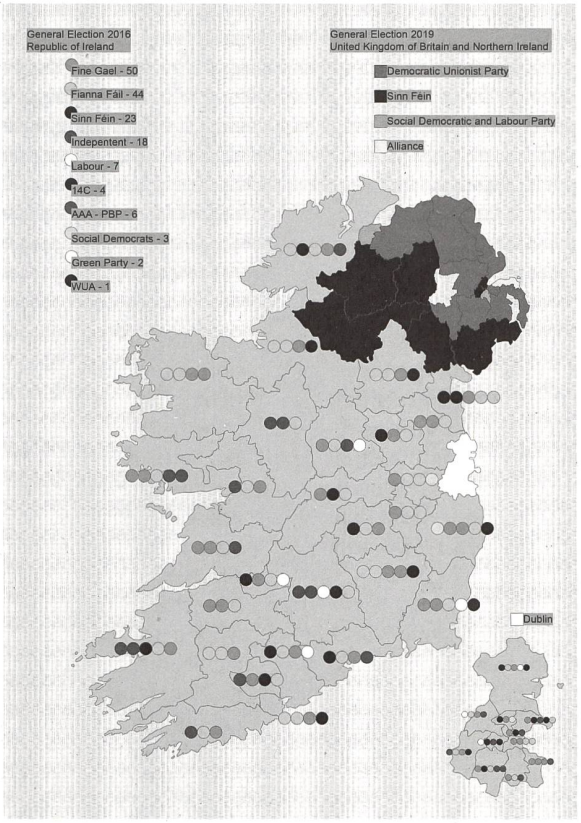
Against this backdrop Sinn Féin was founded by publisher Arthur Griffin in 1905, initially with the humble remit of advocating for home rule. But in an age obsessed with the right to self-determination of (some) peoples, in the ten years after their founding, Sinn Féin became gradually more radical. The unsuccessful 1916 Easter Rising was the start of this new phase of the fight for independence. It represented the wing of radical Irish republicanism which saw armed rebellion as the only viable means of creating change in an unrepresentative political system.

Two years later an important shift in the balance of power took place. The Representation of the People Act 1918 extended the franchise to all men over the age of 21 and to women over 30 who owned property worth over £5. The franchise in Ireland was enlarged from 700,000 to around 2 million voters. This was the first election in the history of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland when poor Irish Catholics were able to vote. Importantly for Northern Ireland, plural voting was not addressed by the Act. Plural voting meant that university graduates, business owners and property holders were able to vote more than once — in their university, business or property constituencies as well as place of residence. Partly through this mechanism Protestant middle and upper class in Northern Ireland continued to hold a greater political power than their working-class neighbours. Despite this, elections in 1918 year gave Sinn Féin almost two thirds of all Irish constituencies on a manifesto calling for an independent Ireland. The only place in which they won almost no seats was in the north where Protestant voted predominantly for the newly founded Irish Unionists Party.

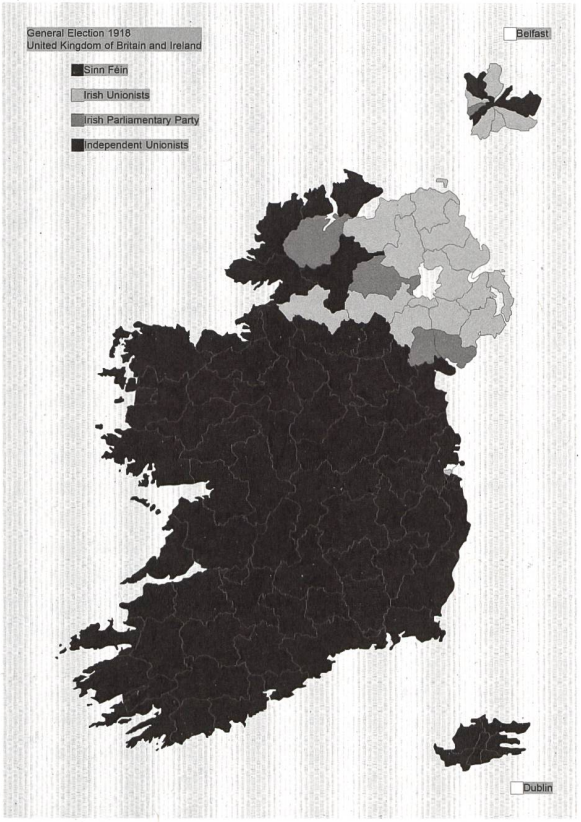
The newly elected Sinn Féin republicans refused to swear allegiance to the British Monarch — as they would be required to at Westminster — but formed their own parliament instead, the Dáil Éireann in Dublin, declaring independence. The Dáil's declaration of independence and its democratic mandate was felt to legitimise the violence, which in 1916 had been treated as criminal. Irish volunteer forces, calling themselves the Irish Republican Army, began guerrilla campaigns against the British, which continued until 1921.

The fighting mostly took the form of IRA ambushes and murders of the Royal Irish Constabulary, British soldiers and perceived traitors. The casualties were higher on the British side, leading to both British forces and Protestant volunteers using brutal reprisals to try to bring the country under control. The burning of houses and villages of families of IRA members, as well as tit for tat murders, became the tactics which would become normalised on both sides during The Troubles between 1968 and 1998.

Finally, a truce and treaty were agreed in 1921 which divided Ireland into loyalist Ulster, which would remain part of the United Kingdom, and an Irish Free State, still a domini-



The first general election following The Representation of the People Act 1918. Clearly visible are the differences in voting behaviour between the province of Ulster and the rest of Ireland.



The two most recent general elections results in the United Kingdom and in the Republic, as of 2020. Uniquely Sinn Féin operates as a transnational party across both jurisdictions.

on of the British Empire, in the South. Negotiated by Sinn Féin's Michael Collins and Arthur Griffin, the inclusion of an ‹Oath of Allegiance› in the independence agreement led to a first split in Sinn Féin. Civil conflict broke out for about another year as anti-treaty Sinn Féin declared the newly official Dáil Éireann an unacceptably compromised institution and the IRA fought the newly formed Irish National Army — commanded by the remaining pro-treaty Sinn Féin members in the Dáil. Sinn Féin's continued abstentionism in the Westminster Parliament represents the last vestiges of this split. It is the line between those who believe change can happen from within and those who think it must be attacked from the outside by other means. Although pro-treaty forces were eventually successful in calming the country and Sinn Féin was eventually reunited, these tensions remained. Partly resolved by the breakaway formation of Fianna Fáil, by members who wanted to participate normally in politics, Sinn Féin was diminished to such an extent that they only actively contested elections again in 1957 — still refusing to take their seats.

During the Northern Irish Troubles, in which some 3'500 people were killed, Sinn Féin increasingly became the political and public relations arm of the IRA. Many Sinn Féin officials held dual IRA and Sinn Féin memberships, meaning they were usually subordinated into the hierarchies of the paramilitary group.

In the early 80s the British sought to criminalise IRA members by removing their status as political prisoners and this led to the H-block hunger strikes in Maze Prison, Belfast. Sinn Féin now led by Gerry Adams realised it could capitalise on the huge outpouring of public support for those on hunger strike, and the strike's leader Bobby Sands was successfully run as Sinn Féin candidate for Fermanagh and South Tyrone in 1981. When he died in prison after 67 days of starvation, the 100'000 people who attended his funeral and the publicity generated by the strike led to a realisation that political engagement might prove more effective then violence. In Northern Ireland, the group around Adams began to argue for Sinn Féin's independence from the IRA and for a full engagement in politics.

In the 1985 local elections in Northern Ireland Sinn Féin won 59 Seats and by 1986 they had voted to remove abstentionism towards the Republican Dáil from their party constitution and begun to contend elections in the south, taking up seats for the first time. Political theorist Matthew Whiting argues that peace talks in Northern Ireland were made possible because of path dependency — once you step onto the road, you tend to be punished for stepping off it. This first engagement in politics would therefore be considered the first step toward Irish republicanism's (largely) accepted turn to a political pursuit of their goals, whilst continuing to fight elections in the Republic and in local elections in the north. It took until 1998 — following the Good Friday Agreement which began the process of ceasefire and power-sharing between Catholics and Protestants — for Sinn Féin to begin taking up seats in the reformed Northern Irish Assembly, thereby finally ending direct rule from London.

Gradually, over many years, Sinn Féin have come in from outside. It might be said that their position has matured, but it is also true that they have always gained something in return for their steps towards participation. As of the UK general election on 14 December 2019, Sinn Féin have seven seats in the Westminster Parliament, but these are not taken up — this bastion of republican principle remains. Sinn Féin Members of Parliament have offices in Westminster and draw expenses but they do not take salaries. There are many institutional and historical interplays responsible for the Sinn Féin's holding on to abstentionism, more complex than I am able to outline here, but at its core, it is proud. It is both a refusal to sell out a principle but it is also held on to in hatred and pain after years of violence.

Peace in Northern Ireland was at least partly achieved because the integration of the United Kingdom into the EU allowed identities, which had been a source of suffering and structural discrimination, to be layered over one another. The border was opened under the Schengen agreement and a Northern Irish business or person can do most of their work in the Republic. National identity became increasingly a cultural identity rather than a legal one. Abstentionism, in its obstinacy, is also a reminder that politics have real effects. The ceasefire took Northern Ireland mostly out of the spotlight for many years. No killings, no press. But during the Brexit negotiations the single red line was whether there would be border checks between the Northern and the southern Ireland. Violence flared briefly and an IRA offshoot killed a journalist. Abstentionism should always have been a reminder that while the rest of the UK forgot about them, people in Northern Ireland have continued to remember that conflict can return quickly. 20.8% of the electorate who continue to vote for Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland do so, knowing their MP will never speak for them in Parliament. It represents above all a principle.

Between 2017 and 2020 the power-sharing executive, with the Protestant Democratic Unionist Party collapsed. Sinn Féin refused to participate in the Northern Irish Assembly until the DUP's leader resigned over the ‹Cash for Ash› Scandal. After many years of power sharing, they chose once again not to participate. The position which they occupied in the media during that time was as a warning. Their representatives reminding the public of the fragility of the peace in Northern Ireland. Vocalised like this it became a threat, a reminder that politics and the institutions — whose provisionality older democracies tend to become blind to — are not the only means to get what you want. Violence is one end of a spectrum, perhaps economic pressures another — although the effects of that can be no less violent. Political institutions are supposed to hold societal forces together in agonistic conflict , according to Chantal Mouffe, but in recent times there are many examples of their failure to do so. Brexit is a glaring one.

Sinn Féin's willingness to remain outside, or half outside, of politics, is intended as an expression of their conviction that the political systems available to them are inadequate and incompatible with their beliefs. On the one hand their almost institutionalised half-participation shows a route

by which democracy can informally include incompatible views. It speaks to the possibility and necessity of participation by some means, any means. On the other hand, their policy reminds us that officially Sinn Féin does not publicly condemn historic IRA terrorism, which is still largely seen has having been a legitimate armed struggle. Whatever you may think of that, ultimately it is democratic structures which are responsible for containing beliefs. Sinn Féin's ambivalence to democratic institutions is an object lesson. If democratic institutions are working properly, they should be able to accommodate the views of all members, no matter what they are. If not, it remains imperative for both the institution and its members to find ways that space can be taken up, that people can be heard, without being forced to compromise their principles. If they do not forces can be released which are far more damaging than any bitter verbal exchange across a debating chamber.