

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Sinn Fein Ard Fheis, 2-3 November 1985

The following note is based principally on news reports of the Ard Fheis, notably reports in An Phoblacht of 7 November, 1985.

Main Points

The major feature of the Ard Fheis was a highly emotional debate on a Dublin motion which, while not seeking to alter Sinn Fein's policy of abstentionism in respect of the Dail, Westminster and the Stormont Assembly, proposed that it be viewed as a tactic and not as a principle. Supporters of this motion argued that Sinn Fein needed flexibility to develop its electoral strategy and prevent London/Dublin efforts to isolate Sinn Fein. The motion was narrowly defeated by 161 to 181. The narrowness of the defeat shows the influence of the current leadership, although news reports called it a rebuff. The old guard of the party, including John Joe McGirl who is close to the current leadership, voted solidly against. The Joint General Secretary, Tom Hartley, spoke "in a personal capacity" for the motion. It is understood that Adams, McGuinness and (less certainly) Morrison all abstained, presumably for tactical reasons. Morrison is reported in An Phoblacht as calling on delegates to support two motions restating existing policy on abstentionism, but also calling for a free and unemotional debate. He is reported elsewhere as saying the party should use every means open to it to develop and grow in the South and, would remain isolated here unless it was allowed to develop.

In his presidential address, Adams attacked the Anglo-Irish talks and said they would have the effect of "copper fastening"

partition. Expressing a general sentiment, he said the purpose of the talks was to isolate Sinn Fein through a mixture of repression and appeasement.

A debate on prisoners in jail in Ireland and in England was initiated by the recently reorganised "POW Department" of the party. Motions were passed committing Sinn Fein to "work for the rights and welfare of Republican prisoners and their families; to have each Cumann of Sinn Fein adopt a "POW" in an English jail; and to have every Cumann pay a levy of £25 per year to "alleviate the financial hardship of POWs in England and their families". Two further motions supported the campaign against strip-searching and the attempt by Sinn Fein members in trade unions to mobilise the Labour movement behind the campaign against strip-searching. There was considerable debate on social issues. Notably, delegates voted by 77 to 73 in favour of a motion recognising women's right to choose on the issue of abortion. Both Adams and Morrison voted against this motion.

There was very tight security at the Ard Fheis, supplied mostly by Northern members who patrolled the precincts of the Mansion House, including the roof, with walkie-talkies.

About 500 delegates attended among whom were a delegation of 35 from England. The latter delegation included Mr. Richard Balfe MEP. There were small numbers of other foreign delegates, notably six from France. It is understood there were no Nicaraguans present.

Reports that Danny Morrison would step down as PRO were confirmed. He said he would concentrate on education within Sinn Fein. He will be replaced by Brian McDonald of Clones, currently in the An Phoblacht office. The debate on An Phoblacht was opened by the new editor, Rita O'Hare. She said that the paper's sales had increased by 2,500 since the previous Ard Fheis.

### Debate on Anglo-Irish Talks

Gerry Adams told the Ard Fheis that the whole purpose of the Anglo-Irish talks was the defeat of Sinn Fein but that this purpose would fail. During the debate on the talks Mr. Adams said that Sinn Fein was not a party of violence nor a party of exploitation. "I do not have any problem at all repudiating terrorism but the only terrorists in this country are the British gunmen". He also stated that if the party's Ard Comhairle repudiated the armed struggle of the IRA "you would be looking for another president".

Martin McGuinness claimed that the recent build up of security operations on both sides of the border was evidence that all that remained for both Governments to do was to sell the arrangements to loyalists and nationalists. Although some concessions could be expected from the British Government this was a result of Sinn Fein resistance and increasing popular support. He also stated that the proposed Anglo-Irish Commission could offer only "increased collaboration and intensified repression of Republicans and nationalists".

### Motion on Convening an All-Ireland Sinn Fein Assembly

The motion was proposed by Ruairi O Bradaigh. He called for the convening of an all-Ireland Sinn Fein Assembly based on the 1919 Dail. Mr. O Bradaigh said that given the Sinn Fein policy of abstentionism the party's elected representatives should not be considered as members of the N.I. Assembly, Westminster or the Dail, but as members of a future 32 county parliament.

Several members of the Ard Comhairle spoke against the motion, after, they said, the party leadership had given it careful consideration. Danny Morrison said the idea was both impractical and unworkable. The motion was narrowly defeated.

"Prisoners of War"

In March of this year a new "POW Department" was set up under Mr. Seadna Breathnach. In his report to the Ard Fheis, Mr. Breathnach referred to "the upsurge in harassment of POWs in jails throughout Ireland and in England", he called on Sinn Fein to become "actively involved in all campaigns around the various prison issues." He commended "the work and achievements of the many committees, such as the campaign against strip-searching, the Stop Show Trials Committee, and the Portlaoise Prisoners Relatives Action Committee". Mr. Breathnach's call was endorsed by a Dublin motion which was adopted. There was three other motions committing Sinn Fein to "working for the rights and welfare of Republican prisoners and their families"; to the adoption by Cumainn of "a POW in an English jail"; and to the alleviation of the financial hardship of "POWs in England and their families" by ensuring that every Cumann paid a levy of £25 per year to Head Office. Mr. Breathnach said that two further motions adopted calling for a national petition in support of the campaign against strip-searching and for efforts by Sinn Fein members in trade unions to mobilise the labour movement behind the campaign against strip-searching by moving motions condemning the practice (at trade union meetings), had already been put into action.

Section 31 Campaign

This campaign is being led by Nicky Kelly of INLA/IRSP who attended the Ard Fheis. A report from a recently established coordinating committee was introduced by Mr. Breathnach. A motion was passed to establish a post of a full time coordinator for the "twenty anti-repression campaigns currently in progress". A motion was also passed committing Sinn Fein to supporting the "broad-based anti-section 31 campaign recently launched in Dublin". This decision was taken as an alternative to Sinn Fein launching its own campaign.

### Social Issues - Motion on Abortion

By a majority of 4 votes (77 to 73) delegates voted in favour of a motion recognising women's right to choose on the issue of abortion. This was against the wishes of the party leadership; indeed, both Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison voted against the motion. The vote has been interpreted as marking a major change in the party's position on abortion which although it recognised the social conditions that prompt women to have abortions, stopped short of supporting women's right to choose. In moving the motion Ms. Daisy Mules of Derry suggested that, as revolutionary socialists, Sinn Fein should play no part in infringing the rights of women and she emphasised her view that the organisation was a secular one which embraced all creeds and races.

### Motion on Abstentionism

The major feature of the Ard Fheis was a highly emotional debate on a Dublin motion which, while not seeking to alter Sinn Fein's policy of abstentionism in respect of the Dail, Westminster and the Stormont Assembly, proposed that it be viewed as a tactic and not as a principle. Supporters of this motion argued that Sinn Fein needed flexibility to develop its electoral strategy and prevent London/Dublin efforts to isolate Sinn Fein. The motion was narrowly defeated by 161 to 181. The narrowness of the defeat shows the influence of the current leadership, although news reports called it a rebuff. The old guard of the party, including John Joe McGirl who is close to the current leadership, voted solidly against. The Joint General Secretary, Tom Hartley, spoke "in a personal capacity" for the motion. It is understood that Adams, McGuinness and (less certainly) Morrison all abstained, presumably for tactical reasons. Morrison is reported in An Phoblacht as calling on delegates to support two motions restating existing policy on abstentionism, but also calling for a free and

unemotional debate. He is reported elsewhere as saying the party should use every means open to it to develop and grow in the South and, would remain isolated here unless it was allowed to develop.

It was reported that the Dublin delegates moving the motion had recently joined the party and had sought to develop an electoral strategy in the South. They were reported to be infuriated by the defeat and as blaming it on the party's old guard. Those who spoke against the motion said that, if carried, it would lead to the same situation that occurred when the organisation split between the provisional and official wings.

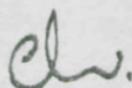
Another motion stating that Sinn Fein should register as a political party here was deferred until next year.

#### Address of Gerry Adams

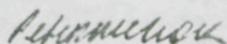
Adams attacked the Anglo-Irish process and praised the electoral successes and work of the 98 Sinn Fein councillors North and South (59 in the North, 39 in the South). He did not refer to the issues of abstentionism or of registration in this jurisdiction for Dail elections. On the Anglo-Irish talks he stated that they would have the effect of "copper-fastening" partition by being based on the premise that there would be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the agreement of the majority. He said "The Talks and any subsequent agreement are about creating a political climate in which this party can be isolated through a mixture of repression and appeasement. The extent of the repression will depend on how successful we are in the continuing process of developing our party and expanding our support". He went on to state that nationalists would judge the Agreement only on the basis of its real substance and its relevance to the struggle for self-determination, and said that the "establishment" are mistaken in their belief that Sinn Fein

only flourishes in conditions of deprivation, unemployment and one-sided laws. 'The establishment' failed to note Sinn Fein's commitment - while smashing partition, to working alongside ordinary people to win as many gains as possible within both jurisdictions. Issues such as the Flags and Emblems Act, the status of the Irish language, the conditions of prisoners and their families which have been long neglected by both the SDLP and the Irish Government, have now been elevated to a position of major importance in the negotiations with the British Government. Adams added that "the dangers of the present talks lie not in the conclusions that they may or may not reach on these issues, but in their intention of putting a diplomatic veneer on British rule and injecting a credibility to constitutional nationalism so that British rule and its interests can be stabilised in the long term". The Irish Government were also prepared he said to barter Irish neutrality in return for U.S. support for the Anglo-Irish agreement. Adams also criticised Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act and challenged Mr. Haughey to a public debate on the issue (on British television!).

Adams renewed criticisms of the Reagan Administration's policy in Central America. He referred to Sinn Fein's policy of anti-imperialism as being world-wide.



Declan O'Donovan



Peter McLvor

Anglo-Irish Section

12 November, 1985

cc: PSM  
PSS  
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Ambassador Washington  
Consul Generals New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco  
Ambassador Canberra  
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