



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code:	2016/52/13
Creation Dates:	31 October 1986
Extent and medium:	4 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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M. B. ~~Clayton~~

Sinn Fein Ard Fheis, 31 October - 2 November 1986

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1. This year's Ard Fheis will be dominated by the Dáil abstentionism debate which will take place over a 7 hour period on Sunday 2 November. We expect the motion to end abstentionism to achieve the necessary 2/3 majority. With British and Unionist opinion in mind, we would suggest that the Minister take the line that so long as the policy of the armalite and the ballot paper remains, the Irish people will continue to reject Sinn Fein.
2. It is clear from recent Sinn Fein propaganda that the taking of Dail seats (and therefore the dropping of the abstentionism policy) is regarded by the leadership as a logical development of the elections strategy initiated during the hunger strikes of 1981. At the 1981 Ard Fheis, Danny Morrison made the infamous declaration : "Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand and an armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland?" Ironically, Gerry Adams, the principal architect of the present campaign, is believed to have been opposed to the elections tactic during the hunger-strike in 1981. However, having been persuaded of its effectiveness in the Sands case, Adams took the initiative to re-open the debate on changing the Dáil abstentionism policy in particular. (His enemies claim, rightly, that this step presages the ending of Westminster abstentionism also; unless that happens Adams will have problems in retaining his seat). He laid the basis of the new direction in a speech in Bodenstown in June 1983, in which he said that a 32-county political movement was needed as well as the armed struggle in the North and that the "short-term priority of Sinn Fein must be the drawing up of a political strategy for the 26 counties". Since then, Adams's constant theme has been that Sinn Fein's future development hinges on the party becoming more "relevant" in the South and that this "relevance" can only be achieved in the

context of Sinn Fein deputies taking their seats in the Dail. He has also been encouraged by the possibility of a "tight" result to the next General Election in which a party with even one or two seats could wield considerable influence.

3. The campaign began "softly-softly". Though debated at a number of party conferences since 1983, the leadership's own formal position was itself 'abstentionist' until this year. After the defeat of an anti-abstentionism motion by an encouragingly small margin at the 1985 Ard Fheis, Adams decided to step up the campaign. With Martin McGuinness and Danny Morrison he initiated an intensive lobby within the movement to have the policy changed at the 1986 Ard Fheis.
4. Support for the change has come principally from Northern members of the movement, who are now in the majority within Sinn Fein and will be in a majority at the Ard Fheis. It has also drawn strong support from Republican prisoners whose voices carry considerable emotive weight among the rank and file. "An Phoblacht" has been used as a vehicle for conveying this support (the great majority of letters published on the issue in recent months have been in favour of change). The recent decision of the Army Council of the IRA at a special "Army Convention" to come out in support of dropping the policy was expected and should ensure the necessary $\frac{2}{3}$ majority (we can be certain that Adams and Co. would not have gone so far down the road without the certainty of Army Council support).
5. The debate has been by no means one-way traffic. Strong opposition to change has come principally (though not exclusively) from the "old guard" in the South notably former IRA chiefs, Daithi O Conaill and Sean MacStiofain, former Sinn Fein President Ruari O Brádaigh, and this week IRA veteran Comdt. Tom Maguire (symbolically important as the last surviving member of the Second Dail from which

Sinn Fein claims legitimacy). They argue that the end of abstentionism would be a disaster and that if Sinn Fein decided to "ride the establishment tiger in the South they will undoubtedly be eaten by it" (Andersontown News representing their position - the paper supports Adams). O Brádaigh and O Conaill have mounted a major countrywide campaign in recent weeks seeking support for no change, but it is almost certainly now too late to save the policy. The campaign does ensure, however, that the debate will be bitter and divisive. There are conflicting reports as to what O Brádaigh and O Conaill will do if abstentionism is dropped. They have not made explicit threats presumably on the grounds that this would be counter-productive for the vote. It is likely, however, that if defeated they will withdraw from Sinn Fein. They may have difficulty finding younger figures with the necessary energy and leadership qualities to go further and build an abstentionist Sinn Fein Party, as in 1970.

6. There are of course other motions down for debate - in all 191 from 71 branches. The categories involved are

- Prisoners
- Youth
- Social and Economic
- Foreign Affairs (including a debate on the Single European Act)
- Publicity
- Women (including a controversial debate on abortion)
- Culture
- Constitution and Rules
- Political policy
- Organisation
- Constitution and Electoral strategy (incorporating the abstentionism debate (on Sunday))

Significantly, Adams' presidential address will be on Saturday evening (instead of the usual Sunday), primarily we understand so that it can be given before the abstentionism debate on Sunday morning.

Declan O'Leary

Anglo-Irish Section
31 October 1986

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