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Sinn Fein Ard-Fheis, 31 October-2 November, 1986

The following assessment of the Sinn Fein Ard-Fheis is based on media reports and on observations received from other sources.

Summary

There was an attendance of about 630 delegates. The Ard-Fheis voted in favour of ending abstentionism by 429 votes for to 161 against. This margin was narrower than expected (only ten votes more than the two-thirds required) but on the other hand the subsequent walkout by some 30-40 delegates led by Ruairi O Bradaigh was less than expected. The latter, joined by others outside who brought the reported total of dissidents to 130, met later on 2 November in a Dublin hotel and formed "Republican Sinn Fein".

Republic Sinn Fein

The leadership of this breakaway group is as follows:

Chairman	Daithi O Conaill (former SF Vice-President)
Vice-Chairman	Des Long
Spokesman	Ruairi O Bradaigh (former SF President)
Treasurer	Joe O'Neill and Frank Graham
Secretary	Kathleen Knowles

O Conaill did not speak in the abstentionism debate because he was present at the Ard-Fheis not as a delegate but as an observer. It is believed that he resigned from Sinn Fein around 1977 (in the wake of the controversial Provisional IRA ceasefire) while O Bradaigh, also a casualty of that period, remained on as an ordinary member.

Other prominent Republicans in the new group are Billy McKee, a leading Belfast Republican and reputedly a founder member of the Provisional IRA; Bob Murray, another Belfast Republican; Sean Keenan from Derry; and Tony Ruane, a life vice-president of Sinn Fein until 2 November. According to one journalist who was present at the Ard-Fheis, most of the 30-40 delegates who walked out were older men; indeed, some were on crutches and had to be helped out of the hall. In addition to the age factor, a geographical split is also evident: the bulk of the defectors are Southern, those who remained are largely Northern. Surprisingly, however, most of the Donegal delegates joined the walkout. There is reportedly some tension among Portlaoise prisoners, particularly those from Donegal, as a result of the Ard-Fheis vote. The defectors also included some of those involved in the Marita Ann gun-running affair.

It is understood that "Republican Sinn Fein" has acquired a premises in Rathmines (belonging to a grocer from Leitrim) as a temporary HQ. According to O Conaill, Martin Flannery, Chairman of NORAI, has indicated support. Other reports, however, suggest that NORAI's publicity director, Martin Galvin, has aligned himself with Adams. O Conaill told the media on 2 November that funds had been made available to the group but he denied that they intended to set up a new IRA "at this stage". He stressed that they supported the members of the IRA in their actions.

The abstentionism debate

The vote which caused the walkout came at the conclusion of a five-hour debate in the course of Sunday, 2 November, on a motion from the Ard-Chomhairle calling for an end to abstentionism in the South. This debate was the major event of the Ard-Fheis. It was preceded on Saturday evening by a powerful Presidential Address from Gerry Adams, who stated unequivocally the leadership's commitment to ending the abstentionist policy.

Some observers have praised the stage-managing skills demonstrated by Adams at this Ard-Fheis. In his opening remarks on Friday evening, in his Presidential Address and in a number of conciliatory gestures towards his opponents (e.g. a much-applauded handshake with Ruairi O Bradaigh just before the latter spoke in the abstentionism debate), Adams conveyed an impression of magnanimity which went down well with the delegates but was undoubtedly calculated to belittle his opponents and to minimise the significance of their defections. By urging his supporters to be generous towards the pro-abstentionists and by speaking of possible defectors more in sorrow than in anger, he probably caused a number of delegates to think again - to the extent that the walkout, when it came, involved fewer and was less dramatic than expected.

The stage had, of course, been set by the debate at last year's Ard-Fheis of a motion which proposed that abstentionism should be seen as a tactic and not as a principle. This motion, to which neither Adams nor McGuinness spoke at the time, was only narrowly defeated.

In his opening remarks on Friday, Adams declared that, while some members might leave Sinn Fein after the debate, there would be no split "in the accepted meaning of the word". He pledged that he would accept the outcome of the debate, whatever this was, and that he would "not be found wanting in the job of uniting with comrades" who disagreed with him. In his Presidential Address, he repeated this theme, reminding his listeners that "we are comrades in struggle" and that "unity is strength". Moving to a more telling argument, he noted that the recent IRA Army Convention had decided in favour of ending abstentionism and that there had been "no walkouts on the issue in the IRA". Rejecting "Garret FitzGerald's spurious propaganda claims that Sinn Fein is ordered by the IRA to do its bidding", Adams warned on the other hand that, if delegations withdrew their support from Sinn Fein because a decision went against them, they would also be withdrawing their support from the IRA. "To leave Sinn Fein is to leave

the struggle". He would deeply regret a decision by "some comrades" to leave Sinn Fein and felt that such comrades would regret their decision in the years ahead. He assured his audience that "there is going to be no split in Sinn Fein on this or any other issue" and that the "spectre" of a split had been raised to "panic and intimidate us".

Adams then set out his case for ending abstentionism, which may be summarised in the following terms:

1. It would be much easier if the Irish people were to share our view of things. Indeed, if they did, there would be no need for a "Republican struggle".
2. The fact is, however, that they do not. We must try to make our struggle a "people's struggle". We must not remain apart from the people, "proud of our past but with little involvement in the present and only dreams for the future".
3. Our policy on abstentionism enjoys only minority support, particularly in the South where people "might otherwise be open to our policies on all other issues". The "reconquest of Ireland, much less a British withdrawal, cannot be completed without the support of more of these people". We must show these people the shortcomings of the present system but we can only do so at their level of understanding.
4. In 1897 James Connolly criticised abstentionism. The 1916 Proclamation speaks of "a permanent national government... elected by the suffrages of all her men and women". Abstentionism was the correct approach in 1918 but may not be correct today.
5. We must develop a "32-County-wide political struggle". While consolidating our base in the Six Counties, we must

develop "a popular struggle in the 26 Counties" which will "complement" the Six-Counties' struggle.

6. If delegates do not decide to end abstentionism now, the leadership will be back "year after year until it has convinced you of this necessity".
7. We must "break out of our isolation". Sinn Fein must "get among people in the basic way which the people accept". This means new approaches and "difficult - perhaps risky - political positions". At the same time, we must never lose sight of our national objectives.

Moving to the more concrete implications of the proposal, Adams suggested that Sinn Fein should not be unduly concerned with the number of Dail seats it might win. At the next election, it should aim simply at "broad political gains", postponing to the election thereafter the "first serious test of our ability to win major support". (Adams listed even at this juncture arguments with which electoral failure will be explained: the party's underdevelopment, its lack of access to the media, its "inconsistent" record of participation in Dail elections). Sinn Fein would not become involved in any coalition at any time with any of the "established" parties in the Dail. On the other hand, "if we at times agree on specifics" or vote similarly, "that is acceptable".

The abstentionism debate opened on Sunday with speeches by Pat Doherty (National Organiser) and John Joe McGirl (Vice-President) proposing and seconding the Ard-Chomhairle's motion. McGirl, a veteran Republican from Leitrim, was a key player in Adams' strategy. His endorsement of the new approach probably helped to sway the minds of many traditional Republicans, in particular from the North. Joe Cahill, for example, specifically declared that McGirl had spoken for him. It was noticeable that he was never far from Adams on the platform (and a photograph of him, perhaps significantly, adorns the front page of today's issue of "An Phoblacht").

McGill argued that a lifetime spent trying to achieve an all-Ireland parliament had got him nowhere and that abstentionism would have to be dropped if this goal were to be achieved. Furthermore, young people regarded Sinn Fein as their legitimate government and wanted to be represented by Sinn Fein in Leinster House.

Another key speaker on the anti-abstentionist side was Martin McGuinness, whose role was clearly to articulate the IRA's position. "The IRA freedom fighters and the Sinn Fein freedom fighters", he remarked, "are one and the same thing". The armed struggle would continue "until the last soldier has left our soil". The IRA, under its present leadership, is "the most dangerous and committed revolutionary force in the world and will remain so "in or out of Leinster House". He admitted that a small minority in the IRA favoured abstentionism but said that they "will stand shoulder to shoulder with their comrades". He suggested that those in Sinn Fein contemplating defection were people who had never been able to come to terms with the present leadership's criticism of them following the "disastrous" ceasefires of the seventies.

Other anti-abstentionist speakers criticised O Bradaigh and others for publicising their views in the media.

Of the fifty or sixty speeches during this heated and tense debate, roughly one-third were from delegates opposed to the motion. In an emotional speech, Ruairi O Bradaigh argued that entry to Leinster House would enable the established parties to claim that Sinn Fein had finally "come in from the wilderness" and that "at last we have them toeing the line". It was "not a revolutionary activity" and would "enmesh Sinn Fein in the constitutional system". O Bradaigh charged that "we have not been wrong for 65 years". Similar comments were made by other speakers, who came chiefly from Donegal, Sligo, Roscommon and Galway.

In an intervention after the vote had been taken but before it was announced, Adams appealed to those intent on walking out not to cause "a blood feud". "We should part as friends in sadness, not in anger". He warned that the RUC or British Army could exploit such a feud in order to kill "a prominent Republican".

Anglo-Irish Agreement

The final section of Adams' Presidential Address was an attack on the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In terms familiar from recent editorials in "An Phoblacht", Adams claimed the Agreement is not worth the Loyalist reaction it has provoked and that John Hume, who has said that a united Ireland is not worth the loss of a single life, should explain why nationalists are dying or being intimidated as a result of it. He repeated his allegation that joint internment North and South and proscription of Sinn Fein are on the cards. He claimed that "Mr. Barry is terrified and panicking" at the prospect of the emergence of Sinn Fein as "a crucial political force in the 26 Counties". He also warned the Fianna Fail leader that no Irish person has the authority to negotiate or renegotiate a treaty with the British Government while the latter claims jurisdiction over any part of the national territory. He regarded it as "most unlikely" that the Fianna Fail leader would initiate or press home negotiations with the British Government on British withdrawal.

Other issues

Other topics covered by Adams in his Presidential speech included unemployment; an alleged agricultural crisis; the criticism of Col. Ghadaffi by the Minister for Foreign Affairs (whom Adams accused of being more outspoken about Libya interference than about Britain's "occupation" of Northern Ireland); the Single European Act (described as an obligation to "toady to the NATO line"); Sellafield; and the divorce

referendum. On abortion, the Ard-Fheis reversed last year's decision to recognise the right of women to choose for themselves on this issue.

Conclusion

Last Sunday's vote to end abstentionism has direct implications only for Southern politics. SDLP contacts do not believe that it will alter to any significant extent Provisional Sinn Fein's electoral standing in Northern Ireland. At the same time, however, it testifies to the remarkably firm hold which Adams, McGuinness, Morrison and others of the Northern diaspora have acquired in recent years both on Provisional Sinn Fein and on the Provisional IRA. Leaving aside the persistent speculation that these individuals are, or have been, members both of the IRA's Army Council and of Sinn Fein's Ard-Chomhairle, the fact is that they are clearly in a position to engineer majorities in both organisations in favour of their positions. Much of this strength would appear to derive from Adams' considerable personal popularity, his hard work at local level and a measure of political acumen.

David Donoghue

David Donoghue,
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6 November, 1986.

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