



# The electoral strategy of the Irish Republican Movement

**RUPERT TAYLOR** examines Sinn Fein's electoral strategy and its value to the Republican Movement in the North of Ireland.

**A**s debate intensifies over strategies of participation in national and local government structures, the tactics of Ireland's Sinn Fein are interesting to examine.

Sinn Fein first provided major political resistance after the 1916 Easter Rising against British rule in Ireland, when the Irish Republican Army (IRA) emerged as the force for military resistance.

The armed struggle waged by the IRA between 1919 and 1921, and supported politically by Sinn Fein, brought the British government to the negotiating table. But rather than uniting Ireland, the Government of Ireland Act (1920) introduced the partition of the North from the

South. This settlement was unacceptable to the Catholic community. But under the force of arms, a six-county subordinate parliament was set up in Belfast, Stormont, and accepted by the exclusively-Protestant Unionist Party.

Representation in Stormont was dominated by the Unionist Party, and exclusivism was preserved by the practices of state and local government control by Unionists in areas where the majority of the population was Catholic. These grievances were accentuated by the differing social class backgrounds of the Protestant and Catholic communities, with Catholics over-represented in the lower classes. Catholics resented the law - the Special Powers Act 1922 concerning

arrest and detention was directed against them - and were hostile towards the police.

**I**n the late 1960s, with the lack of any meaningful changes, Catholic demands for civil rights led to peaceful street demonstrations. The civil rights movement revolved around demands for better houses, jobs, the repeal of the Special Powers Act and 'one-man, one-vote'. Marches were attacked by Protestant extremists, and reforms were slow to come. The Unionist monopoly of power at Stormont began to crumble and the force of events led to a spiral of conflict - the current 'troubles'.

After widespread rioting in August 1969 the British army was called in and some Protestants and Catholics

armed themselves. These events signalled the re-emergence of the IRA. A war of national liberation, launched by the IRA and supported by Sinn Fein, was mounted against the British army and the local forces of law and order.

In an attempt to quell the rise of the IRA, the Britain adopted counter-insurgency tactics, including (in August 1971) internment without trial. Following an IRA ceasefire, internment was ended in 1975. The IRA believed British withdrawal was just around the corner. This proved to be wrong, and the British army gained a huge security initiative, so much so that by the end of 1977 the IRA was almost completely demoralised.

But despite direct rule from London, the British government still found itself unable to maintain public order. And since the 1970s, with the foundering attempts at power-sharing, its policy has been essentially one of containment.

In the late 1970s the British government believed the IRA did not have much support, and the conflict in Northern Ireland came to be presented as essentially a criminal problem. So from 1976 onwards the British government tried to impose a normal prison regime on prisoners who thusfar had 'special category' (political) status (the right to wear one's own clothes, to abstain from penal labour, to free association and to educational and recreational activities). Continuing resistance by Republican prisoners to these moves led to the hunger strikes.

To Margaret Thatcher the hunger strikes represented the IRA's 'last card', and she believed that there was little support for the IRA among the Nationalist community. However, as hunger striker after hunger striker died, a huge reservoir of Nationalist support was tapped. Demonstrations and marches in support of Republican prisoners, many of which went unreported, were the largest seen in Ireland for over a decade.

Since 1981, with the election of hunger striker Bobby Sands as an MP, this support has become channelled into electoral politics. The Republican Movement was quick to see the political advantages that could be gained through widespread



International Viewpoint

*The British army 'keeping the peace' in the North of Ireland*

electoral intervention, and the IRA leadership moved towards contesting elections through Sinn Fein.

The election policy was formalised at the 1981 annual Sinn Fein conference, the most significant one in a decade. A decision to contest particular elections on an abstentionist (non-attendance) basis was taken by Sinn Fein's national executive and the 'ballot box and Armalite' strategy was born. As Danny Morrison of Sinn Fein put it at the conference: 'Who here really believes that 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 (gun) in this hand, we take power in Ireland?'

Subsequently in both the 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly election and the 1983 Westminster general election Sinn Fein captured over ten per cent of the vote. In the Assembly election they won five seats (out of 78) and in the general election Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein, was elected as MP for West Belfast. In the 1987 Westminster general election, Sinn Fein gained 11 per cent of the vote.

Recognising that the potential for expanding the base of the party is greater in the South of Ireland than in the North, Sinn Fein has, since the 1986 conference, moved towards letting its elected representatives sit in the Dail (Irish parliament). In the February 1987 Irish general election Sinn Fein captured 1.9% of the vote.

The electoral success of Sinn Fein has served an important role in

showing support, and the claim that the IRA does not receive substantial support from the Catholic community can no longer be taken seriously. But it is electoral politics with a difference.

Most observers have argued that there is a contradiction between the ballot and Armalite strategy, in that the use of force by the IRA is damaging to the electoral prospects of Sinn Fein. However, it makes more sense to analyse Sinn Fein in accordance with the principles of revolutionary social movements.

The rise of Sinn Fein in the years following the 1981 hunger strike moved the struggle for the re-unification of Ireland into a new phase. The Republican Movement moved towards strategies that mirror Lenin's arguments on organisational development for revolutionary movements. Lenin placed great stress on the principles of organisation, arguing that the key to the successful development of such a social movement is its capacity to mobilise people for support and protests, to infiltrate all sectors of society and to engage in tactics of agitation, whilst also being able to maintain effective leadership and central direction.

The role of Sinn Fein has been central in developing these principles and broadening the scope of revolutionary activity within the Republican Movement. Sinn Fein has been utilised to build an enduring political machine that links the spontaneous basis of the movement



International Viewpoint

Gerry Adams on the election trail in 1982

to revolutionary activity. In this, the electoral process is used as a vehicle for building a lasting political organisation and not as a signal of *recognition and approval* of the existing electoral procedures.

As Sinn Fein argues, there is no democratic process in the North of Ireland; and from the start the leadership of the IRA made it clear that electoral intervention did not mean a run-down of the armed struggle.

**T**he central organisational developments within Sinn Fein include the work of party activists in mobilising the community around key issues by agitation and infiltration; the extension of educative tasks and expansion of publications to legitimate the armed struggle; the growth of community advice centres which provide an alternative administrative structure in which local struggles can be fused with the national question; and the building of different levels of authority - in particular the rise of a new middle-level leadership of councillors.

Sinn Fein offers a chance of working for the Republican Movement for those who condone the armed struggle, but are not prepared to pull the trigger. For many, especially the young unemployed and alienated, involvement offers a hope and meaning to life. Pursuing forms of agitation around concrete instances of oppression has the function of increasing press coverage and sparking off demonstrations. And by adopting

tactics of infiltration, party activists have moved into the unions, neighbourhood associations and the women's movement.

*The educative task of Sinn Fein is to legitimate the armed struggle and to show there is no other way forward.* A number of educational leaflets on Republicanism have been published and a glossy Sinn Fein policy brochure is available with handouts on issues like the economy, trade unions, social services and women.

There is a weekly paper, *Republican News*, a Republican magazine, *Iris*, and an Irish language magazine, *Saoirse*. Interest in publications has become much more focused on other national liberation struggles in the world, and solidarity is expressed with the Sandinistas, the PLO and the ANC - West Belfast has been declared an apartheid-free zone.

Sinn Fein also conducts classes on Irish history and culture, especially promoting the Irish language.

The grassroots activity of advice centres focuses on 'bread and butter' issues - providing social services for the underprivileged, helping with claims for state benefits, dealing with the Northern Ireland housing executive and electricity service. In the Catholic ghettos, people turn to advice centres above all else as they are the only effective direct link between the communities and the government.

There are now over 30 advice centres in Ireland. In league with the

wider Republican Movement they deal with incidents of petty crime through neighbourhood policing. According to *Republican News*, 'any revolutionary organisation which is engaged in armed struggle has a duty and a responsibility to protect as best it can the people on whose behalf the struggle is being carried out'.

At local government level Sinn Fein's strategy is to challenge the established parties and advance Republican views in the North's councils. This is achieved through participating in these structures; Sinn Fein accepted at its 1981 conference that candidates in the North, if elected, would take council seats. In the May 1985 local elections Sinn Fein won 59 seats on 17 of Northern Ireland's 26 district councils with 40% of the Catholic vote.

Significantly, councillors have a close association with the armed struggle; one of the Sinn Fein councillors elected for Derry served a seven-year sentence for planting a bomb in Derry Guildhall - the council chambers! In the Irish Republic Sinn Fein holds 39 seats and since the early 1980s Sinn Fein councillors have served as chairmen on five local authorities.

**W**ith both the work of advice centres and the strategy of participation in local government, Sinn Fein is in a situation which it cannot lose: political benefits come either way. If material benefits are gained the Movement's support is enhanced; if they are not then the British government can be blamed for running an unjust system.

The Republican Movement faces two major problems. One is to convince members and supporters that money spent on electoral campaigns pays off in terms of organisational advantages. The other is to link the organisational advances to strategic interventions through developing tough policies that go beyond the rhetoric of 'Brits Out'.

Despite these difficulties, the experience of Sinn Fein suggests electoral intervention at both national and local levels and participation at local government level can bring major organisational advances, and does not necessarily imply recognition of the legitimacy of existing structures of government.