

Sinn Féin in 2017

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Appearing in these pages this time three years ago was Kieran Allen’s article, ‘The Politics of Sinn Féin: Rhetoric and Reality’¹ which provided a clear analysis of a party whose radical image did not match their actions. Merely updating this article would not be particularly useful as it remains relevant. Indeed, if one requires a broad overview of the party from a socialist perspective, one would be advised to re-read it. It is worth noting, however, the significant gains made by the party since then, both in the North and in the South.

The 2016 General Election saw Sinn Féin return to the Dáil with 23 seats, attracting many of the voters who had been betrayed by the Labour Party and were politicised by the water charges struggle. This led to them overtaking Labour to become the third largest party for the first time since Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin became the first Sinn Féin TD to take a Dáil seat in 1997 after the party abandoned abstentionism. Whilst this was a vast improvement on their previous 14 seats, the party performed below some expectations. All of the polls predicted a higher percentage of Sinn Féin voters and a Red C poll even predicted them overtaking Fianna Fáil just a couple of weeks before the election.² Optimism in Donegal saw a crucial error in vote management as three Sinn Féin candidates contested a constituency where only two Sinn Féin quotas existed. Two sitting TDs became one TD as incumbent Pádraig Mac Lochlainn lost his seat. Sinn Féin’s difficulties here were the

toxic reputation of Gerry Adams in the eyes of a Southern electorate, his poor performance in leaders’ debates, and an establishment media opposed to anything to the left of Thatcher (nevermind anything republican).

The Assembly election in the North but a few months later saw a continuation of what commentator Chris Donnelly had been describing as ‘nationalist malaise’³ characterised by falling voter turnout and a decline in support for nationalist parties as their traditional support base switched off from politics, changed their allegiances, or became outright disillusioned. Sinn Féin’s drop in support resulted in the loss of four incumbents, and a net loss of one MLA. One of these losses was due to a bizarre decision in Fermanagh and South Tyrone to run four candidates where only three Sinn Féin seats existed, leading to the loss of incumbent Phil Flanagan. A more significant battle took place in Foyle (Derry) where incumbent Maeve McLoughlin lost out as an expected seat gain from an increasingly-irrelevant SDLP went instead to People Before Profit’s Eamonn McCann. Arguably, the biggest blow of the election was in Sinn Féin’s heartland of West Belfast where incumbent Rosie McCorley lost out to People Before Profit’s Gerry Carroll. Carroll topped the poll with 8299 votes (22.9% of the vote), an expression of discontent from an electorate who had watched Sinn Féin sign the Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements which committed to gutting the public sector

¹Kieran Allen ‘The Politics of Sinn Féin: Rhetoric and Reality’ *Irish Marxist Review* Vol I, No. 11 2014, pp. 4-15

²Red C General Election Opinion Poll 13 February 2016

³Chris Donnelly ‘Nationalist Malaise: Facing the Facts’ *Sluggor O’Toole* sluggerotoole.com/2015/05/10/nationalist-malaise-facing-the-facts/

and accepting Tory welfare ‘reform’.

Less than a year later, the RHI scandal triggered the resignation of a visibly ill Martin McGuinness as Sinn Féin’s misplaced efforts to reconcile with an arrogant and unrepentant DUP were rejected by the party’s grassroots. A scandal revolving around the misuse of public funds and alleged corruption fell back into familiar territory as outright hostility from Arlene Foster, particularly towards Irish speakers, made this another Orange and Green election. Sinn Féin’s promise of ‘no return to the status quo’ and its commitment to ‘respect’, ‘equality’ and ‘integrity’ won voters, including those previously dormant, to their side. Stormont reform for this election included a reduction in seats from six per constituency to five. The increase in turnout of nearly ten percentage points⁴ disproportionately benefited Sinn Féin and the casualties from this seat reduction fell heavily on the Unionist side. Sinn Féin lost a single seat and the Assembly Election 2017 returned with a Unionist minority for the first time in the history of the northern state. This means that Sinn Féin now have 27 seats to the DUP’s 28, the closest they have ever been to being the largest party and taking the First Minister position.

A Westminster election was called a few months later as Theresa May struggled with a divided parliamentary party in the wake of June 2016’s ‘Brexit’ EU referendum. In the North of Ireland, this election was a polarising one with voters in their droves going to Sinn Féin and the DUP as the First Past the Post electoral system encouraged tactical voting. Both the UUP and SDLP were obliterated, losing every single seat. Sinn Féin won 7 of

the North’s 18 seats, their highest ever. They also took Foyle for the first time, previously an SDLP stronghold.

Now that I have outlined the recent gains made by Sinn Féin, it is worth looking at the issues which are most burning in the public consciousness in relation to the party. Reproductive rights have become an unavoidable issue due to the mass movement in the South (and a growing movement in the North). Coalitions are also on everyone’s mind as the Sinn Féin leadership refuse to rule out a partnership with Fianna Fáil. The National Question has also gained particular pertinence after the UK’s EU referendum and the loss of a Unionist majority in the Assembly.

Reproductive Rights

The Repeal movement in the South of Ireland appears, on paper, to have the broad support of Sinn Féin. They campaigned in 1983 against the Eighth Amendment being inserted into the Constitution as it was too complex an issue to be enshrined there. Their party policy now seeks to Repeal that amendment thirty-four years later. The progressiveness of their stance and efforts to be identified with the largest mass movement since the water charges struggle are undermined by their ‘Repeal and Enact’ position which seeks to restrict abortions to the exceptional circumstances of rape, incest and fatal foetal abnormalities.⁵

Sinn Féin have not always had this position. It is not widely-known that Sinn Féin had a pro-choice stance in their party’s constitution for one year. At their 1985 Ard Fheis a motion passed which read ‘women have the right to choose’.

⁴‘DUP largest party in NI Assembly but Sinn Féin make large gains’ *BBC News* bbc.com/news/election-northern-ireland-2017-39147988

⁵Louise O’Reilly TD ‘Repeal and Enact the only option - Sinn Féin’ *Sinn Féin* sinnfein.ie/contents/44316

However, as Maillot details in her book, the Ard Comhairle voted against it as a group and the passing of the motion was attributed to the vote taking place at the end of the conference when a number of delegates, including some from rural areas, had already departed. The following year was the 1986 Ard Fheis, historic for other reasons in republican history, and the stance was amended to read ‘we are opposed to the attitudes and forces in society that compel women to have abortions. We are opposed to abortion as a means of birth control’. Even some of those who had advocated for the pro-choice stance followed the consensus that a pro-choice stance was divisive and therefore damaging to the overall struggle for national liberation. One such delegate commented, ‘If it damages our struggle, then it will have to wait’.⁶ The priorities were clear: not quite De Valera’s ‘labour must wait’ but rather ‘women must wait’.

Tommy McKearney noted in 2011 that Sinn Féin practised a ‘populist policy in regard to many issues’ which was ‘typified’ by their stance on abortion as the party ‘regularly assured the handful of feminists in its ranks that it supported a woman’s right to choose but ensured that no such policy would ever appear on its election manifestos’.⁷ The abortion rights movement has moved on significantly since 2011 and while Sinn Féin have tried to maintain some ambiguity, they have been forced to take a stance publicly. They have moved on from when Martin McGuinness described Sinn Féin as ‘an anti-abortion party’⁸ and were able

to vote for the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act (2013) which allows for abortion where there is risk to the life of a pregnant woman. After abstaining on Clare Daly’s bill to allow for abortion in cases of fatal foetal abnormalities in 2015, they changed their policy to allow for abortion in exceptional circumstances including fatal foetal abnormalities but also rape and incest. They also made the decision to publicly campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment.

Sinn Féin representatives are now to be seen sporting the Repeal jumpers to demonstrate their progressiveness. Perhaps not Gerry Adams, but certainly Niall Ó Donnghaile, Lynn Boylan, and Eoin Ó Broin are happy to link themselves to the Repeal movement. However, despite Sinn Féin’s famous party discipline, there remains division on this issue within the party. Peadar Toibín is perhaps the most prominent anti-choice member of Sinn Féin after being suspended from the party for six months after voting against his party on the Protection of Life During Pregnancy bill. He also attends events such as the Rally for Life. Even one of their members on the Oireachtas committee considering the Eighth Amendment, Jonathan O’Brien, has publicly stated that he himself is not in favour of Repeal.⁹ He assures us that his personal beliefs will not affect his political decisions (indeed, he did not defy the Sinn Féin whip like his colleague Peadar Toibín) but he remains an odd choice for a party supposedly committed to Repeal. It is also worth noting here

⁶Agnes Maillot *New Sinn Féin: Irish republicanism in the twenty-first century*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005 p. 113-114

⁷Tommy McKearney *The Provisional IRA: From Insurrection to Parliament*, Ireland: Pluto Press, 2011 p.190

⁸Aoife Barry ‘McGuinness: Sinn Féin is an anti-abortion party’ *The Journal* thejournal.ie/sinn-fein-ard-fheis-abortion-868416-Apr2013/

⁹‘Sinn Féin’s O’Brien opposes repeal of Eighth Amendment’ *The Irish Times* irishtimes.com/news/politics/sinn-f%C3%A9in-s-o-brien-opposes-repeal-of-eighth-amendment-1.3097929

that the party are not in the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment despite it consisting of over 100 organisations, including numerous political parties.

Sinn Féin's absence at this year's ARC March for Choice was a conspicuous one given that it was the largest march yet with tens of thousands of pro-choice activists filling the streets of Dublin. Bernadette McAliskey, one of the speakers from the platform, warned Mary Lou McDonald that her party had better be entirely behind Repeal or she would never be Taoiseach. A Sinn Féin spokesperson later said that the purpose of the march for free, safe and legal access to abortion went beyond the party's position.¹⁰ Sinn Féin councillor Sarah Holland was one of the party members who attended the march in a private capacity. Writing on her blog, she expressed her 'disappointment' in her party's absence and that the 'time has long passed for us to be keeping quiet on basic rights for women'.¹¹ She announced her intention to lobby her party to take heed of the Citizens' Assembly recommendations ahead of November's Ard Fheis. She has since referenced a motion from the 1996 Ard Fheis submitted by the Women POWs of Maghaberry Prison which reads 'We believe that individual women should have the right to control their own fertility and this includes having access to safe and legal abortions locally. This Ard Fheis accepts a woman's right to choose.'¹² Sarah Holland is not the only pro-choice member of Sinn Féin and indeed many mem-

bers are active in Repeal and pro-choice groups at a grassroots level. It remains to be seen whether or not more senior figures in the party such as Mary Lou McDonald or Louise O'Reilly will publicly criticise their party's position.

John O'Dowd on BBC Question Time recently made it clear that he was in favour of the decriminalisation (if not unrestricted access) of abortion. This is a pertinent admission given that women have recently been prosecuted for the use of abortion pills in the North. Unfortunately, this stance remains firmly in the realm of rhetoric as the party has taken no steps in Stormont towards decriminalisation. In the South, Sinn Féin abstained on Bríd Smith's bill to reduce the penalty for procuring an abortion from a 14-year prison sentence to a euro fine (the Eighth Amendment requires that a penalty remain in place so no decriminalisation in the South is currently possible). Their inactivity in Stormont is also exemplified by the unpublished report on fatal foetal abnormalities.¹³ This report, according to the Supreme Court, recommends a change in the law, yet it has not been acted upon or released to the public despite being completed for a year now, predating the collapse of Stormont when Michelle O'Neill was still health minister.

Coalition

Sinn Féin's place in the northern executive has been surfeit with compromise, u-turns and the abandonment of funda-

¹⁰Harry Magee 'Sinn Féin says March for Choice 'goes beyond party's position' *The Irish Times* [irishtimes.com/news/politics/sinn-f%C3%A9in-says-march-for-choice-goes-beyond-party-s-position-1.3240392](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/sinn-fein-says-march-for-choice-goes-beyond-party-s-position-1.3240392)

¹¹Sarah Holland 'Sinn Féin needs to step up on Women's Rights' [storify.com/Sarahjt/human-rights-commission-calls-for-legalisation-of-](https://www.storify.com/Sarahjt/human-rights-commission-calls-for-legalisation-of-)

¹²[sinnfein.org/ardfheis/96ardfheis/abo.html](https://www.sinnfein.org/ardfheis/96ardfheis/abo.html)

¹³Brendan Hughes 'Sarah Ewart 'disappointed' abortion report still not published' *Irish News* [irishnews.com/news/2017/10/21/news/sarah-ewart-disappointed-abortion-report-still-not-published-1167946/](https://www.irishnews.com/news/2017/10/21/news/sarah-ewart-disappointed-abortion-report-still-not-published-1167946/)

mental principles all for the privilege of managing British imperialism in the Six Counties. Failing to negotiate the devolution of tax-and-spend powers, Sinn Féin have served under centre-right neoliberal governments from Blair to the Tories with no room to pursue radical left-wing policies. Even as Stormont lurches from crisis to crisis, differences with the reactionary DUP are patched up and agreement is found on austerity budgets, privatisation agendas, and the courting of multinational corporations. Unable to break out of this neoliberal consensus, Sinn Féin is only able to pursue identity politics as it seeks to balance the North's Unionist 'identity' with an Irish nationalist one.

Eamonn McCann characterises Sinn Féin by their 'pursuit of political respectability', exemplified by shaking the hands of heads of state and appealing to a pan-nationalist front which previously included the SDLP but is now focused on the Irish government as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, along with Irish-American capitalists.¹⁴ In order to demonstrate their suitability for governance, Sinn Féin avoid rocking the boat, championing 'realistic' policies which have involved passing numerous austerity budgets in the North. Kieran Allen notes how, in the South, they accepted the parameters of the political establishment with their aim to reduce the public deficit to 3 percent from 2013 to 2016.¹⁵ In demonstrating that they are a safe pair of hands for managing the economy to the Southern establishment and global corporate interests (often termed 'the business community'), Sinn Féin policies could be said to be dictated by Overton windows, always within the bounds of what is deemed to be accept-

able political discourse.

The current Stormont crisis, which has now gone on for ten months at the time of writing, to some extent runs contrary to the previous pattern in that no solution appears to be imminent and Westminster may step in to produce a budget quite shortly. There appears to be two currents of thought in the party at the moment. One will certainly have an eye on the Southern establishment and the business community, both of which would appreciate a stable government in the North and a sign that Sinn Féin remains a safe pair of hands, especially in the difficulties of Brexit negotiations. Another side to Sinn Féin has grown tired of constant compromise with the DUP, who have been seen to dominate Irish nationalism for the past ten years in a 'peace process' which has been largely one-sided. As the story goes, Sinn Féin representatives were asked 'what are you doing up there anyway?' by their grassroots who had seen ten years of powersharing with nothing to show for it. At a meeting of members in the Felons Club in West Belfast, after the press had left, a shout of 'bring the institutions down' was met with cheering and applause. It was to this pressure which Sinn Féin responded. The Acht na Gaeilge, marriage equality and a Bill of Rights are concrete proposals that Sinn Féin supporters can rally around. These issues were not red lines before the 2017 Assembly election but to backtrack on them now would be a 'return to the status quo' and could seriously damage Sinn Féin's galvanised and newfound support. It is no huge exaggeration to say that the memory of Gerry Carroll topping the poll in West Belfast lingers in the minds of the Sinn Féin leadership as

¹⁴Eamonn McCann *War and an Irish Town*, London: Pluto Press, 1993 p.37

¹⁵Kieran Allen 'The Politics of Sinn Féin: Rhetoric and Reality' *Irish Marxist Review* Vol I, No. 11 2014, p. 6.

they consider compromise.

Whilst coalition may be (temporarily) spurned in the North, the left-wing rhetoric of equality and rights is not reflected in the Southern leadership's courting of Fianna Fáil for coalition. In 2016, Sinn Féin members voted at their Ard Fheis not to enter government with Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael unless they were the largest party. Even as a minority partner, however, Fianna Fáil would not allow for a left government as the party of developers and bankers would certainly move to veto any measure which fundamentally altered the status quo.¹⁶

Perhaps due to Sinn Féin's stagnation in the polls, the Sinn Féin leadership are now publicly floating the idea of taking a place as junior partners in a coalition. They will have the fate of the Labour Party in mind, who, even with 37 seats, were swallowed into an austerity programme by Fine Gael and betrayed their voters. The party was demolished at the subsequent election and barely qualified for Dáil speaking rights. Sinn Féin made the decision to choose opposition rather than following the same path and so were not able to fulfil their goal of being a junior partner in two partitionist governments in time for the centenary of 1916.

Deliberately distancing himself from the legacy of the Labour Party, Eoin Ó Broin instead speaks of a 'co-equal partnership' with the centre-right parties with the alternative being opposition. This is a shift from his previous position in *The*

Politics of Left Republicanism where his alternative coalition was an alliance of Sinn Féin, Labour and the Green Party. It would also appear to be a rejection of the logic of Right2Change which, as an alliance of forces from the radical left to the centre-left, was seen by some as laying the groundwork for Ireland's first left-wing government. Although, even when engaged with this project, Sinn Féin did not rule out a coalition with Fianna Fáil. All notions of a left government appear to be abandoned now. As Gerry Adams said: 'I have to say, I never really subscribed to that notion of a left-wing government, certainly not in the short-term. I mean, who are the left?'¹⁷

Eoin Ó Broin made it clear at this year's Sinn Féin Summer School that they were willing to talk to any party about forming a government. This is a revert to type for Sinn Féin. According to Gerry Adams in 2011, 'when you can do business with Ian Paisley, you can do business with anyone'.¹⁸ Tommy McKearney's account of the party's mishandling of the 2007 general election makes for entertaining reading. He attributes its dismal electoral performance to various factors but one such standout moment is Mary Lou McDonald's comment on the party's willingness to abandon its policy of raising corporation tax in the South if invited to join a coalition. These comments have since proven prescient as the policy is now to lower the rate in the North. Reeling from their election result, 'Caoimhín O'Caoláin inexplicably offered to enter

¹⁶Kieran Allen 'The Politics of Sinn Féin: Rhetoric and Reality' *Irish Marxist Review* Vol I, No. 11 2014, p. 7.

¹⁷Pat Leahy 'Interview: Gerry Adams casts doubt on future of NI executive' *Irish Times* irishtimes.com/news/politics/interview-gerry-adams-casts-doubt-on-future-of-ni-executive-1.2952790

¹⁸Quoted in Kieran Allen 'The Politics of Sinn Féin: Rhetoric and Reality' *Irish Marxist Review* Vol I, No. 11 2014, p. 7.

¹⁹Tommy McKearney *The Provisional IRA: From Insurrection to Parliament*, Ireland: Pluto Press, 2011 p.199

into a coalition government with the Fine Gael party'.¹⁹

It is of little consolation to a working-class electorate that Sinn Féin made commitments at a previous Ard Fheis as any coalition agreement would have to be ratified at a Special Ard Fheis. A Sinn Féin leadership voicing ideas which are not compatible with the party's constitution clearly believe that a previous decision could be overturned with enough persuasion. Now that the Tories are relying on the DUP for votes, there is now a new urgency in Sinn Féin to look to the South for their own potential coalition partner, especially with their emphasis that the Irish government is a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. It remains part of the Sinn Féin strategy to advance the cause of Irish unity through being in government North and South while further developing the All-Ireland institutions. With Stormont in such a precarious position, the centre of influence may shift to the South rather than the North.

The National Question

The issue of Irish Unity has come to the fore again following the Brexit vote and the loss of the Unionist majority in Stormont. As the North of Ireland voted to Remain in the EU but is leaving due to a UK-wide vote, the democratic deficit of British rule has been highlighted. This pretext sets the stage for Sinn Féin's *Towards a United Ireland* document (2016).²⁰

It is not a particularly prescriptive document and some elements of it are to be welcomed, including an all-island national health service, free at the point of use. It does, however, mention how a

'new, unified Ireland would promote the island as a location for investment and access to the Single European Market'. This section, along with a reference to 'Brand Ireland', implies a continuing reliance on foreign direct investment, and, if this is to be a focus of their economic strategy, it is unlikely that their corporation tax policy will alter.

The new zeal that Sinn Féin have for the European Union may be shortlived. This is the party who were opposed to the South entering the EU in 1972, opposed to the North joining the following year, opposed the Single European Act, opposed to the Maastricht Treaty, opposed to the Amsterdam Treaty, opposed to the Nice Treaty, opposed to the second Nice Treaty, opposed to the Lisbon Treaty, opposed to the second Lisbon Treaty, opposed to the Fiscal Compact, and then, somehow, campaigned for a Remain vote. A United Ireland within the confines of the European Union not only flies in the face of the political demand for Irish independence but also places immediate limitations on a prospective left government who will be forced to abide by the Eurozone's prohibitive spending regulations. Indeed, Sinn Féin are already trying to navigate this contradiction as a recent article in *An Phoblacht* warns of an EU superstate's 'new imperialism in which Irish neutrality will be absorbed in the military adventures already being planned' and 'centralised economic control'.²¹

The *Towards a United Ireland* document floats the possibility of transitional arrangements for Irish unity, including the continuation of a devolved Stormont and a powersharing executive

²⁰Sinn Féin *Towards a United Ireland* 2016 sinnfein.ie/files/2016/Towards-a-United-Ireland.pdf

²¹'EU plans more centralisation against Irish national interests' *An Phoblacht* anphoblacht.com/contents/27122

in the North within an All-Ireland framework. One fails to understand how this would solve the issue of partition or the sectarianism of the northern state. This proposal is even more conservative than the previously-rejected *éire Nua* policy which proposed arrangements for a federal Ireland. The border would remain, the tension between two ethno-national blocs would remain as a powersharing executive would be held to ransom by sectarian stalemate. The only difference in this scenario, it would appear, would be a green flag over Stormont Castle.

Similarly, the document promises to recognise the role of the Orange Order in the cultural life of the Irish nation and the connection between the Unionist population and the British monarchy. Reactionary ideas are not challenged here but, in the logic of the northern state and the politics of identity, are recognised as legitimate expressions of cultural identity, to be balanced out by Irish nationalism rather than challenged. This logic is perhaps best exemplified by the recent decision of a Belfast City Council committee to award funding to both a James Connolly museum and an Orange Hall museum in a move described as a 'political carve-up'.²² When reduced only to Irish or British identity, the politics of socialism and monarchy, imperialism and anti-imperialism, are expected to live comfortably side by side.

Sinn Féin are calling for a referendum on Irish Unity within the next five years. It is likely that this demand will fall on deaf ears at the present period as the two sovereign governments are a partitionist supine Fine Gael and an imperialist Tory party. However, both are weak minority governments relying on a supply-and-

confidence relationship to stay in power and a shift to the left is being experienced across these islands. Their days are numbered. It would be surprising if discussions for Sinn Féin entering government in the 26 Counties did not involve a referendum on Irish unity.

A New Generation

As the party prepares to enter government, one issue which repeatedly crops up is the reputation of Gerry Adams. This year's Ard Fheis will see Gerry Adams announce his plans for a transition to a new leadership. Mary Lou McDonald, who is expected to take over, is more palatable to a southern electorate as she holds no baggage from armed republicanism. Fianna Fáil would certainly be more welcoming towards the idea of coalition with Sinn Féin in the event of Adams's departure.

Gerry Adams is a figure, however, who holds the various disparate elements within Sinn Féin together. He commands a loyalty within his party which no future Sinn Féin leader can be expected to possess. Mary Lou McDonald, conversely, has no real popularity in the North. She may even be regarded with suspicion in some quarters due to her Fianna Fáil background. The era of a Sinn Féin president being uncontested for over thirty years is certainly over.

The northern wing of the party is not without its efforts to rebrand either. Michelle O'Neill was evidently chosen as the new northern leader by the party's Ard Comhairle in part due to her lack of IRA past. The party has managed to secure its republican base whilst also making inroads into the more middle-

²²Brendan Hughes 'DUP and Sinn Féin accused of 'political carve-up' of £4 million council fund' *Irish News* irishnews.com/news/2017/10/21/news/dup-and-sinn-fe-in-accused-of-political-carve-up-of-4m-council-fund-1168082/

class vote of constitutional nationalism to the detriment of the SDLP. The choice of Máirtín Ó Muilleoir as Finance Minister, with business interests in both Ireland and the United States, secures one of many links between Sinn Féin and the North's affluent business community. Re-

cent election candidates including QUB lecturer Peter Doran and solicitor John Finucane also show a shift towards the professional classes. There is certainly evidence that the nationalist party is leaning increasingly towards an all-class alliance.