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comparative politics context**

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After conflict - placing the Sinn Féin party in a comparative politics context

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Abstract

Sinn Féin, the party most associated with the in public discourse with the term ‘republican’ in Ireland, is a party undergoing a process of development. It has been suggested that its recent electoral success would result in Sinn Féin moving to the centre and abandoning the civic republican focus on equality, political participation/activism and a national political project with a strong internationalist context – with which it has identified. However while aspects of Sinn Féin policy remain fluid and can lack clarity the evidence surveyed for this paper suggests that the party is not moving to the political centre on issues of social and economic equality, but is retaining a strong leftist, pro-equality agenda. Post Good Friday Agreement Sinn Féin is in its rhetoric keeping the issue of Irish unity strongly to the fore, in its manifestos both North and South. In an era of globalisation it has placed itself with the anti-corporate globalisation groupings and against right-wing nationalist parties with an anti-immigration platform. Finally, in an era of media-politics it is retaining its traditional focus on high levels of activism and participation among party members.

Introduction

Sinn Féin is the party most associated in public discourse with the term ‘republican’ in Ireland. It is also a party whose public rhetoric relies heavily on concepts at the core of the debates on contemporary civic republicanism. However, previous incarnations of the party have engaged in a static constitutionalism and an almost mythical idea of ‘the Republic’ and the party’s opponents view its rhetoric as skin deep – overlaying a more fundamental authoritarianism. As Sinn Féin is currently experiencing a period of significant development and growth these contradictory images of the party need to be analysed. Therefore without denying the legacy of republican thinking in other Irish political parties this article analyses the contemporary meaning of republicanism as represented by the Sinn Féin party (North and South), which emerged from the ‘abstentionist’ split with elements of its old leadership in the late 1980s.¹

Sinn Féin’s own self image is that its historical roots lie in the Republican ideal of the French revolution – as interpreted by the United Irish Movement of 1798 and also by the republican and socialist thinking of James Connolly in the pre-1916 period.² Sinn Féin’s own projection of its political ideology draws on a number of strands from these sets of political ideas. From the French Revolutionary tradition Sinn Féin employs ideas of equality, secularism and in the Irish context independence from Britain and Irish Unity. It would therefore follow that the party would have a focus on the common good and communitarian ideals – mixed with the language of the ‘national’ interest or the ‘national’ community. From Connolly the party derives a more explicit commitment to socialism and social justice and an anti-imperialist international position. From these revolutionary traditions and more directly from its own extra-parliamentary past, the party has a focus on political participation and activism, in politics as practice, even praxis, rather than as a purely elite driven process.

The current developments within Sinn Féin represent an interesting study of wider relevance beyond Ireland. Its left wing rhetoric, its electoral growth, its high levels of activism and its strong nationalist agenda seem, at first glance at least, to represent a counter tendency in contemporary European politics. Wider debates within international relations and comparative politics ask a number of interesting questions which help us place modern Sinn Féin in a broader and international context. Firstly, the relationship between globalisation and nationalism is a debate with obvious relevance. Where is Sinn Féin placed in a typology of European nationalist parties and how does it articulate its nationalism in an era of globalisation? Secondly, the 1990s can be characterised as seeing a rush to the centre by many parties of the broad left as they sought to win wider support after the crises caused by the perceived failure of Keynesian economics in the 1970s and the fall out of the collapse of Soviet style communism. Traditional ‘republican’ values of the left such as equality were sidelined, in this context, as individual and consumer rights were promoted as the basis for a new individualistic

¹ In 1986 Sinn Féin voted at its Ard Fheis (Annual Conference) to contest general elections in the Republic of Ireland and to take their seats if elected, reversing a traditional policy of ‘abstentionism’ going back to the 1920s. This decision led a small group of mainly older members including the previous party leader Ruairi O Bradaigh to leave the party. The vast majority of Sinn Féin members and almost all its wider public base continued to support the mainstream party.

² <http://www.sinnfein.ie/introduction>

citizenship. Is Sinn Féin following this trend as it grows. Thirdly, has the peace process or the growth of the party led to a weakening of its policy on Irish unity. Finally, declining voter turnout and low levels of engagement with mainstream political parties are now a feature of most wealthy democracies. Parties with a high level of voluntary activism are a rarity – largely confined to those with low levels of support. As Sinn Féin grows is it leaving behind its activist based extra-parliamentary past? To clarify the issues involved, this paper examines four interrelated aspects of the party's current political strategy.

- ◆ How does the party deal with the at least potentially conflicting pressures of republican thought and nationalist ideology in an era of globalisation and in the context of rising xenophobia in Europe?
- ◆ Has the peace process moderated Sinn Féin's fundamental position on the question of Irish unity?
- ◆ Has the party moved to the political centre as it has grown?
- ◆ Has the tradition of activism and participation within the party declined, since the IRA ceasefires, as a new generation of members join?

Globalisation and Nationalism

As a nationalist party Sinn Féin faces particular challenges in an era of globalisation and European integration. Critics of nationalist political movements – in particular authors such as Hobsbawm and Kaldor have placed nationalism in opposition to cosmopolitanism and fraternity, indeed at times in opposition to modernity itself.³ How has Sinn Féin sought to reconcile its nationalism with its republicanism and internationalism in this regard?

Despite the tendency in the critical literature to treat all nationalist parties as variants on Milosovic regime in Serbia at least three types of 'nationalist' party can be seen in Europe at present.

Clearly there are 'nationalist' parties in Europe of the far-right, for example the *Front Nationale* or the British National Party who reject the concept of a non-ethnic national identity and who have sought to mobilise on a platform of racism, playing on communities' fears in a period of societal change. Without the trapping of fascism the British Conservative Party is in many respects a state-nationalist party of this tradition with an increasing proportion of their political platform now devoted to issues of migration, British (or indeed English) nationalism and anti-European Union rhetoric.⁴

This is not the only model of politically organised nationalism in Europe. The Scottish National Party and the moderate Catalan and Basque nationalists⁵ have provided a more civic oriented model of nationalism which is capable of a positive engagement with

³ e.g. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge: Polity, 1999; Hobsbawm, E.J *Nations and nationalism since 1780 : programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁴ See <http://www.conservatives.com>

⁵ Specifically Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC) in Catalonia, the Partido Nacionalista Vasco in the Basque Country.

citizenship in a multi-ethnic society. This group clearly does not belong to the far right. They vary in their political ideology and in their commitment to economic equality but tend to take a positive view of European integration, at least since the 1980s, and a reasonably benign view of globalisation.⁶

Thirdly there are those who have placed their nationalism in the context of the anti-corporate globalisation movement asserting a nationalist vision in contrast to the centralising tendencies of globalisation and regional integration. Sinn Féin seeks to place itself in this context. It is an active participant in the “anti-globalisation” movement. The party calls for the cancellation of third world debt, increased development aid and the introduction of the Tobin Tax and Sinn Féin MEP Bairbre de Brún addressed the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2005 on the issue of privatisation and globalisation. The party also remains highly sceptical of European Integration, opposing the centralising tendencies of EU law-making and accusing the EU of prioritising market integration over social equality.⁷

On migration – the key defining issue for right wing nationalist parties in Europe at present - Sinn Féin has explicitly rejected an ethnic model of republicanism. Along with the Green Party they were the first political parties to oppose the Irish government’s plans for a referendum limiting the right to citizenship and immediately announced they would campaign for a NO vote.⁸ The party’s manifesto’s for the 2001 Westminster general election, the 2002 Irish general election and the 2004 local council and EU parliament elections all contain explicit anti-racist elements. In addition they call for an amnesty for asylum seekers already within the system⁹ and for the retention of an automatic right to Irish citizenship for children born in the country. The party has also had a strong position on the rights of the Irish traveller community since at least the 1980s, and calls for the recognition of travellers as an ethnic group.¹⁰ Even if critics of the party are dismissive of their policy rhetoric there is no doubt that Sinn Féin does not campaign on a far-right vision of nationalism but aligns itself publicly with anti-racist organisations.

On the wider issues raised by the public debates on globalisation Sinn Féin is highly critical of the global economic system and of the dominant role of the USA despite the considerable significance which they attach to a strategic involvement with the United States - with Irish American groups, Congress and the Administration - regarding the peace process. The party was very active in the anti-war movement on Iraq – providing speakers for all of the major rallies and opposing the use of Shannon airport by the US military and they have a highly critical position of US foreign policy in the Middle East in particular.¹¹ Inevitably these policy positions are used against them in the USA but there is no evidence that the party has sought to distance itself from these policies or

⁶ see for a discussion Keating, Michael, *Nations against the state :the new politics of nationalism in Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001

⁷ see Sinn Féin’s *EU Election Manifesto 2004*. pp. 27-28.

⁸ <http://www.sinnfein.ie/news/detail/4839>

⁹ 2001 Westminster manifesto.

¹⁰ See Sinn Féin (2001) *Many voices One country: Cherishing all the children of the nation equally Towards an anti-racist Ireland* and 2004 Local Government Manifesto.

¹¹ For example Sinn Féin (2002) *Building an Ireland of Equals*.

demote their profile. Neither is there any evidence that the party feels itself under pressure to do so from its support base.

There was, for example, considerable debate about Gerry Adams' visit to Cuba in 2001 and his very public and friendly reception by Fidel Castro. Supporters of the peace process in the US Congress were very vocal in their attacks on the visit.¹² Despite this, Sinn Féin not only proceeded with the visit but promoted it heavily via their press office. Furthermore they also went ahead with a visit to the Basque country in January 2002, despite the collapse of the peace process there.¹³ The 2002 general election manifesto showed no sign that the party was concerned that their position on Cuba was a problem for them and they explicitly called for an end to the United States' embargo of Cuba.¹⁴

The one area in this regard where the party's policy is clearly in a state of flux is with regard to the European Union. On issues of social protection and regulation Sinn Féin is clearly closer to Berlin (or indeed Paris) than Boston. In a neo-liberal era the EU has the scale to avoid being dragged in a rush to the bottom, even if the current Lisbon agenda has elements of that economic model in its strategic vision. Sinn Féin is unclear however as to whether it would welcome a more consciously social democratic EU even if such were possible, or whether it would see such a move as a violation of national sovereignty (even if in reality small states have never been able to exercise such sovereignty in a global economy).

For example, the party's 2004 EU manifesto says that the Lisbon Agenda mid-term review in 2005 should

end the almost exclusive focus on competitiveness and privatisation and refocus on the original balance with sustainable economic development, full employment and social protections' and later says 'increased tax-take from "more and better jobs" must result in better provision of public services such as healthcare, education, and transport -- the Lisbon Agenda must work towards setting minimum standards for state provision and must not result in any erosion of public services'.

However it then goes on to say that 'Sinn Féin MEPs will campaign for the restoration of economic sovereignty', that 'member state governments should retain complete control over taxation policy and strategy' and that the primacy of member states to develop their own economic policy must be re-instated'. The party is very clear that EU competition policy should be amended to allow individual member-states use more state aid to industry and allow more proactive public sector enterprises. They are less clear however as to whether EU policy should allow an individual state to pursue a policy of very low taxation, low labour costs, poor labour standards and low social services and still have full access to the EU market place. Certainly they seem to oppose the imposition even of social protection from Brussels.

¹² *Belfast News Letter* (Northern Ireland); 24 Dec 2001; Irish News 17 Dec 2001

¹³ *Belfast News Letter* (Northern Ireland); 26 Jan 2002.

¹⁴ Sinn Féin (2002) *Building an Ireland of Equals*. [Manifesto for the general election in the Republic of Ireland].

Similarly on issues of European Security Sinn Féin is very explicit in opposing any military role for the EU whatsoever. It opposes the use of regional organisations for peace-keeping except under explicit UN mandates. It does call for UN reform but does not engage with the debate on what should be done if UN reform does not happen. It simply says that military power and defence should be left to individual states and peacekeeping to the UN. It does not engage with the debate as to whether a counter weight to US military capacity in the limited arena of crisis management and peace-keeping would be a positive development globally as a balancing force with a more multilateral ethos. EU security and defence policy, indeed EU common foreign and security policy is simply dismissed as another attempt to form a superstate with military capacity.

If Sinn Féin’s critique of globalisation and European integration is vague at times it is perhaps no more so that the ‘anti-global capital’ movement more generally. As the party grows they will be forced to develop more explicit and specific policies which deal with the contradictions in their approach to the EU and which tackle thorny questions such as the impact on Irish farmers of a fairer trade regime for the poorest countries in the world. However, whatever their policy weaknesses and contradictions Sinn Féin is clearly not an ethnic-nationalist party in the model of the European right. They have a clear anti-racist position and call for a softening of immigration laws, not further restrictions. They have sought to wed the party’s politics to the global anti-establishment movement, most explicitly in opposition to the war in Iraq, but also on global trade, the environment etc. They have also pursued this agenda even when other party priorities around the peace process might have led to a softly-softly approach towards the US administration.

Moving to the Centre?

Sinn Fein’s public support base has radically increased since the 1994 IRA ceasefire as demonstrated in the tables below.

Elections in Northern Ireland – percentage support for Sinn Féin

Election	2005 - general	2004 EU	2003 Assembly	2001 - general	1999 - EU	1998- Assembly	1997 - general	1996- Forum	1992 – general
%	24.3	26.3	23.5	21.7	17.3	17.6	16.1	15.5	10.0

Elections in the Republic of Ireland - – percentage support for Sinn Féin

Election	2004 - EU	2002- general	1999 – EU	1997 – general	1994 – EU
%	11.1	6.5	6.3	2.6	3.0

As Sinn Féin has grown and become more successful we might have expected to see the party shift towards the centre in its political perspectives. Without rejecting the importance of other dimensions, policy on Irish unity and issues of economic policy, public services and social inclusion have been important elements of Irish party competition. Sinn Fein has represented the strongest nationalist position on Irish unity and has also since the 1980s articulated a strongly leftist rhetoric on economic and social

policy. If there is a tendency to moderation in their political programme it ought to be most visible on these two domains.

There is however very little evidence that Sinn Féin has moved to the centre in its broad political perspective as its support has grown. Michael Laver in an expert survey of party policy positions measured Sinn Féin's policy position on a range of economic, social and environmental scales.¹⁵ The party was placed furthest to the left on economic policy –measured as a policy commitment to public spending - (compared to all still existing parties) in both 1992 (before the ceasefires) and again 1997. In an update of this survey in 2002-3 the party was actually placed further to the left by respondents in terms of this policy dimension.¹⁶ Interesting when asked to label parties as “left wing” the Greens become the most left wing party according to academic experts, despite the Green Party's traditional disavowal of the term.

‘Expert’ surveys are obviously reliant on the views of the academics concerned. In Lavers 2002 study the respondents when asked to compare the parties in totality to their own position put Sinn Féin on average the furthest away (15.69 out of a possible 20 score marking a party furthest from the respondent's own views). This was interestingly (from the point of view of studying academics themselves rather than political parties) second only to the Progressive Democrats and Fianna Fail at approximately 13 each.¹⁷ The results from Laver's study are however confirmed by other sources. For example, *The Irish Times* in its coverage of Sinn Féin's manifesto launch for the 2002 general election in the Republic of Ireland, ran two headlines: - ‘Sinn Féin plans higher taxes for rich and businesses’ and ‘Party lays out surprisingly detailed left-wing vision’.¹⁸

An analysis of the Sinn Fein manifestos provides a rich source of material as the party has fought a very large number of elections in recent years – general elections in 1997 and 2002 in the Republic of Ireland, NI Assembly elections in 1998 and 2003, NI Forum elections in 1996, Westminster elections in 1997 and 2002, EU Parliament elections (North and South) in 1994, 1999 and 2004, in addition to local council elections. It is beyond the space limitations of this article to provide a comprehensive content analysis of the manifesto over time or its comparison to other European left wing parties. However a few key points are clear from an analysis of the texts.¹⁹ Firstly, there is a strong consistency over time – there has been no discernable policy shift as measured on a left-right axis in the economic and social arena. There is a strong and traditional left-wing framework to the manifestos which promotes greater public spending in areas such as education, health and housing, advocates stronger local government, environmental protection and rural regeneration and which prioritises social inclusion and equality. For example, the party calls for universal health care free at the point of use and increased capital gains taxes and focuses on greater levels of public spending over tax cuts.²⁰ Secondly, there are often quite detailed ‘community level’ level policies, often reflecting

¹⁵ Michael Laver, ‘Party Policy in Ireland 1997: results from an expert survey’, *Irish Political Studies* 13, 1998.

¹⁶ Laver, Michael (2003) - unpublished data, made available to author by Prof Laver.

¹⁷ Other parties were ranked as follows, Fine Gael 11, Green party 8.7 and Labour 6.88.

¹⁸ *The Irish Times*, 8 May 2002

¹⁹ They are all available on www.sinnfein.ie

²⁰ Sinn Féin (2002) *Building an Ireland of Equals*. [Manifesto for the general election in the Republic of Ireland].

the party's involvement in localised campaigns on issues such as opposition to waste incinerators, housing and drugs. Thirdly, the macro economic frameworks in particular are occasionally highly generalised. They have become a little more specific over time – perhaps in response to the growing number of elected representatives and to the party's brief experience in government in Northern Ireland. However they remain much less specific than the community level policies in particular in crucial areas such as taxation, fiscal policy and industrial development.

Apart from their focus on the peace process and Irish unity, discussed in the next section, the party's strongest macro-ideological framework is provided by the concept of 'equality'. The party has also begun to use the language of 'equality' as encapsulating its political programme in recent years. They have used the phrase 'Building an Ireland of Equals' as their overall policy document and as a manifesto title in 2002; "A budget for an Ireland of equals" as their pre-budget submission 2003, "Governing equally for all" as their programme for Government in the North and 'An Ireland of Equals in a Europe of Equals' as the title of their EU manifesto in 2004 etc. Just as Sinn Féin promoted the word "peace" in their rhetoric during the early 1990s they now use the concept of equality as a macro-frame. This is consciously linked to redistribution of wealth nationally and to concepts of global equality. It is also clearly a concept based on equality of outcomes not just a legalistic 'equality of opportunity'. Many of the current senior party leadership became politically active around the time of the civil rights protests in the 1960s and the weakness of early 'fair employment' policy based on ideas of 'equality of opportunity' without targets and timescales for change has had an impact on party policy. Sinn Féin was also very involved in the US based 'McBride Principles' campaign on fair employment and in agitating for strengthened fair employment legislation in the late 1980s. This led to significant policy discussion within the party as to what was required to alter the underlying higher rates of unemployment in the nationalist community and these perspectives now influence wider equality policy around issues of gender, race and class.

Clearly Sinn Féin has not been tested in government in the Republic of Ireland and has had a very limited experience in the North. There is also clear evidence of a high level of pragmatism in the party's actions. For example, the party opposed public-private partnership funding models in education, but Martin McGuinness as Minister for Education in Northern Ireland did not block the building of new schools in PPP projects where the alternative would have been no building at all. Likewise party councillors have voted for estimates including service charges on some councils where the alternative was abolition despite opposing them as a form of taxation.

While its economic policy is framed in a highly generalised way as prioritising greater social equality it lacks specifics in many key areas and has in some respects not moved on from their policies in the 1980s. While the logic of the party's spending plans requires an increase in taxation levels (from some sector of society) the party leader Gerry Adams was very reluctant to be specific in a pre-election address to the Dublin Chamber of Commerce in 2004 and the party's last general election manifesto for the Republic of

Ireland promised only a review. This will be a pivotal point in the party's development and will determine their medium term commitment to radical republican ideology.

Clearly we cannot know what Sinn Féin would do in a future Coalition government. However what is clear, is that they have not done so yet in a bid to win new voters. Their recent success is not based on or linked to a moderation of the party's social and economic policies.

Nationalism and Irish Unity

The second broad area where the issue of policy moderation needs to be examined is on the question of Irish unity. Literature on comparative peace processes has raised the question as to whether militant parties involved in peace-processes are 'entrapped' by the process, effectively diluting their original demands as part of the inevitable compromises in political talks. Hard line positions on core values are a crucial mobilisation tool in periods of intense conflict but in a period of compromise and negotiation they may be abandoned. In the Irish context Prof. Paul Bew has suggested that by accepting the principle of consent Sinn Féin and Irish nationalism more generally has effectively abandoned the demand for Irish unity in all practical respects in return for internal reform within Northern Ireland, and North-South links.²¹ This is also the premise of Ed Moloney in his recent history of the IRA when he characterises the 1998 Agreement as a trade-off, with unionists getting constitutional security and nationalists getting justice and reform.²² It is clear that the majority of Ulster Unionists are not at all certain that the constitutional future of Northern Ireland is secure within the UK, and do not accept that issues of internal reform are so readily separated from and traded for constitutional security.²³ There has been less exploration of where Sinn Féin sees its current position on Irish unity.²⁴

This raises a related question about the nature of Sinn Féin in particular as a party operating in two separate jurisdictions with different competitors in the two party systems and to some extent at least different priorities among their potential electorates. It is suggested in Brian Feeny's otherwise excellent historical study of Sinn Féin that the party operates two different political programmes – with a focus on Irish unity, British injustice and human rights issues in the North and a focus on community politics and social and economic issues in the South.²⁵ An analysis of Sinn Féin manifestos in recent elections suggests that despite this being a common perception it is not actually the case. All manifestoes issued by the party in recent years have had wide ranging content. In all manifestos issued in the North a clear majority of the document related to social,

²¹ e.g. *Irish Times*, 15 May 1998

²² Moloney, Ed *A Secret History of the IRA*. London: Penguin 2002.

²³ Doyle, John (2003) 'Ulster Like Israel can only lose once': Ulster unionism, security and citizenship from the fall of Stormont to the eve of the 1998 Agreement', Working papers in international studies, 2003:8 Dublin City University.
[<http://www.dcu.ie/~cis/research/publications.php>]

²⁴ For a brief discussion on why Sinn Fein supported the agreement see Doyle, John (1998) 'Towards a Lasting Peace'? : the Northern Ireland multi-party agreement, referendum and Assembly elections of 1998', *Scottish Affairs*, no. 25: 1-20, 1998; Doyle, John (2007) "Re-examining the Northern Ireland Conflict" in V Fouskas *The Politics of Conflict* ed. Routledge.

²⁵ Feeny, Brian. *Sinn Féin : a hundred turbulent years*. Dublin : O'Brien Press, 2002

environmental and economic issues not directly linked to the question of partition and related human rights issues. The 2003 Assembly election for example has 60 pages out of 93 covering social and economic issues not directly related to the conflict, the peace process or Irish unity. An analysis of press releases issued by Sinn Féin²⁶ in November 2003 (the month of the Assembly election) shows a very wide range of issues raised. Presumably the party focused in press releases on those issues they thought were crucial to mobilising and winning votes and indicates that the party press office at least believes that a wide range of policies are important to their voters and potential voters. Also in that election considerable coverage in the *Irish News* and statements issued by their nationalist rivals the SDLP concerned the performance of the two Sinn Féin ministers Martin McGuinness and Bairbre De Brún.

Likewise manifestos issued in the South generally begin with and devote considerable space to Irish unity and related human rights questions. In fact the nature of the content on Irish unity actually became more specific between the 1997 and 2002 elections. In addition to promoting the party's role in the peace process, the 2002 manifesto raises issues such as a call for a Green paper on Irish unity, the creation of a Minister of State with responsibility for the new North-South institutions, and attendance rights for MP's from Northern Ireland in Dáil Éireann.

To see the party as essentially two separate political projects is to misunderstand their recent success in the South. The development of the peace process and its relative success is not seen by the party as an irrelevancy in Dublin's working class communities but a positive addition to Sinn Féin's community activism and social radicalism. The peace process gives the party a 'can-do' image at a time when the ability of politics to deliver is questioned by many. The attacks on Sinn Féin's relationship with the IRA may lose them some votes but is also used to promote the party's anti-establishment image. Martin Ferris TD was the focus of very intense media attacks for his previous arrests for IRA gun-running and was also accused of being involved in attacks on drug dealers and criminals, but he went on to be easily elected

In broad terms Sinn Féin are also tapping into a key element of Irish political culture – and in practical terms they are winning votes from the more nationalist supporters of Fianna Fáil and Labour. The electoral appeal of Sinn Féin's nationalism in the Republic of Ireland is however hard to quantify. Opinion polls asking voters to rank the most important issues in a given election do not necessarily capture long term ideological and cultural influences of nationalism. For example a person asked to identify the most important issues in a given election may well say 'health' if that is the dominant media debate, even if they personally always vote Sinn Fein because of their nationalist stance. Two recent political events not directly related to Sinn Féin's electoral successes also suggest an ongoing electoral relevance for issues around Irish unity and nationalism.

In the 1997 Presidential election campaign there were very strident attacks on now President Mary McAleese. It was suggested that she was close to Sinn Féin and therefore an unsuitable candidate. As she had previously stood for election for Fianna Fáil while

²⁶ All their press releases are archived on their website.

living in Dublin and was a public supporter of the SDLP while living in Northern Ireland the attacks were seen by many commentators as raising a question mark over the suitability of any northern nationalist to hold the office. The nature of these attacks was rejected by a majority of the public²⁷ and the high profile debate was the beginning of McAleese's climb in the opinion polls.²⁸ The 1997 general election also saw the highest percentage of respondents highlighting Northern Ireland as the most important issue in the general election in recent years – with the questioning of Fine Gael's ability to manage the peace process a potentially key issue for marginal and floating voters in that election – enough to make a difference in a tight election.²⁹ Certainly the two major candidates in the following Fine Gael leadership race sought to position themselves in the Peter Barry or even Michael Collins mould of constitutional nationalism rather than the more neutralist tradition (as between nationalism and unionism) advocated by John Bruton as leader. Indeed in the 2002 general election Fine Gael went to considerable lengths to avoid any public disagreement with the government on Northern Ireland policy and effectively neutralised it as an issue.³⁰

Certainly the current Sinn Féin leadership is committed to the peace process. In that regard that is a clear moderation from previous positions while the IRA campaign was ongoing. However the party is clearly committed to the pursuit of Irish unity and it sees that as important to its political project in the Republic as well as Northern Ireland. Their manifestos press releases and websites clearly prioritise the party's role in the peace process and their commitment to Irish unity. There clearly is a relationship between the party's electoral growth and the IRA ceasefire and peace process but Sinn Féin continues to see the pursuit of Irish unity as the central core of their political programme and their appeal

Participation and Activism

The literature on political parties across Western Europe highlights a reduction in recent years in levels of political participation, electoral turnout, voluntary activism and a shift to smaller, full-time professional, media oriented parties where membership is largely a formal affair involving a limited practical commitment to work for the party other than at election time.³¹ Media coverage of Sinn Féin's election campaigns, especially the 'colour' pieces on individual candidates canvassing often refer to the Sinn Féin 'machine' and to the large numbers of party activists working for the party - many of them travelling from the Republic to Northern Ireland and vice versa when an election is taking place in only one jurisdiction.³² There is also a more general awareness of the party's

²⁷ *Irish Independent* IMS poll 28 Oct. 1997, including half of all FG voters

²⁸ For an account see Doyle, John (1997) 'The Irish Presidential Election', *Irish Political Studies* vol 13: 135-144.

²⁹ See MRBI poll from the *Irish Times*, repeated in *Irish Political Studies* 13 (1998): 239-40.

For an analysis of opinion polls on this issue see Michael March and Richard Sinnott 'The Behaviour of the Irish Voter' in Michael Marsh and Paul Mitchell (eds.), *How Ireland Voted 1997*, (Oxford, 1999) 151-80: 174.

³⁰ See John Doyle and Eileen Connolly Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics: a study of the 2002 election in the Republic of Ireland", *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 13: 151-66, 2002

³¹ See issue 10(4) of the journal *Party Politics*, especially Seyd, Patrick - Whiteley, Paul 'British Party Members: An Overview', *Party Politics*, 2004 10 (4) - pp355-66

³² e.g. *Irish Times* 4 Apr. 2002

high profile community activism. The extent of this activism and its divergence from wider European trends of reduced participation has not been examined rigorously but anecdotal evidence from interviews with party members suggests that party members have a very high level of activism. They attend regular cumann (branch) meetings (usually weekly), they typically take part in at least one other piece of activity per week – such as a protest, attending a community meeting or involvement in local campaigns and groups. The scale of activity of some members is very intense. It is not that other parties do not have hard working officials and elected representatives (they obviously do). What is different however is that this level of activism is visible in “ordinary” party members in Sinn Féin.

The other interesting results from this work was the scale of internal party activity designed to provide forums for members and in many cases more active supporters to meet with members of the party leadership to discuss party strategy and the peace process. Interviews with figures from the leadership and journalistic accounts of the peace process attest to the scale of the effort put in by the party to running what they call ‘republican family’ meetings. These have taken place throughout the country at every major juncture of the process and give the party leadership a very strong sense of what their support base is willing to take in terms of political compromise while allowing party members and supporters a regular channel for debate, and allowing the party leadership explain the process and their strategy to their support base. These were consciously intended to avert the types of splits which Sinn Féin has experienced historically.

Finally, Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis (party conference) is also unusual for the influence it still has on party policy. While inevitably used by the leadership to maximise positive coverage, it retains for party members its constitutional function of making policy. The nature of the debates and the number of motions passed at a typical Ard Fheis reflect an institution with significant power and authority. It is also not unusual for the Ard Fheis to reject leadership perspectives on at least one issue per year.

Conclusion

Responding to the four questions asked at the beginning of this paper it is clear that Sinn Féin has explicitly rejected an anti-immigrant, xenophobic form of nationalism. It is consciously seeking to place its nationalism in the context of the anti-globalisation movement, bringing together its previous anti-colonial rhetoric with the concerns of the modern global solidarity movement, such as fair trade and development, anti-racism and the environment. However unlike many of the organisations in the broad anti-global capital movement Sinn Féin is also a political party with significant influence on some local councils and with a brief experience of government in Northern Ireland. It remains to be tested in how this broad political approach could be reflected in the more concrete policy programmes required by a political party.

Secondly, Sinn Féin continues to place a high priority on Irish unity in its political campaigning and publicity North and South. Signing up to the Good Friday Agreement

has not resulted in Irish unity being de-prioritised in its publicity and manifestos. Rather the peace process seems to have given Sinn Féin a platform - up to now at least- to promote their longer term political project. Irish unity therefore remains a central mobilising project for the party.

Thirdly, on social and economic equality the party's rhetoric remains left wing in its focus and emphasises a commitment to a high level of equality in society. It also uses the language of 'equality' as its central macro policy framework. There is no evidence of a rush to the political centre. The party faces a challenge however as it grows to develop more specific economic policies in particular which could deliver such equality. This will be a challenge, especially if the party is involved in pragmatic coalition government formation at national or local level

Fourthly, the party has retained a high level of party activism and participation by members and even supporters in the activity and internal meetings of the party. It seems to have maintained this level of voluntary commitment from 'ordinary' party members even as the number of its elected representatives grows.