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The “crisis of political parties” in the British & Irish Isles

# Women Rebranding Sinn Féin (2018-2022)

*Les femmes redéfinissent l'image du Sinn Féin (2018-2022)*

Article publié le 15 décembre 2023.

**Élodie Gallet**

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- 1 In 2018, women were at the forefront of the political landscape in the British Isles. Theresa May was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and leader of the Conservative Party; Nicola Sturgeon was First Minister of Scotland, and leader of the Scottish National Party; Arlene Foster was First Minister of Northern Ireland, and leader of the Democratic Unionist Party. She shared political power with Michelle O'Neill, Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, and deputy leader of Sinn Féin. Mary Lou McDonald was the new leader of Sinn Féin. The situation was exceptional in Ireland, where executive positions had traditionally been occupied by men. 2018 was a pivotal year for

Sinn Féin, as after the death of the former Northern Irish Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, Gerry Adams stepped down from his role as leader of Sinn Féin after 35 years. Sinn Féin entered a new era illustrated by a rebranding and a modernisation of the party.

- 2 The present chapter is not a portrayal of Mary Lou McDonald<sup>1</sup> and Michelle O'Neill. Nor is it a study of women in Irish politics. This paper explores the actual contribution of female leadership in rebranding Sinn Féin. It will first assess the need for rebranding the party and entering a new era before focusing on the criteria that led to selecting Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill as new leaders of Sinn Féin. The last section will examine the evolution of the party since 2018 in order to determine whether the women rebranding the party were successful.

## 1. The end of an era

- 3 Sinn Féin's need for rebranding is linked to the evolution of the party in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. This evolution led to the end of an era, which was inextricably linked to the shadowy image of the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1. Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland

- 4 The history of Sinn Féin in Ireland is long, tortuous, and made up of many divisions and ramifications. This political party has evolved at the same pace as the island and each landmark in the history of Ireland was also a landmark for the party. As a result, despite a single leadership and a presence throughout Ireland, Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland and Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland have a variable image among voters and an unequal representation in government institutions. Sinn Féin was a major political party in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then became an outcast during the last quarter of that century and came back on the scene as a legitimate party in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 5 Sinn Féin was founded in 1905. After the Easter Rising, the party benefited from a strong support in Ireland: in the 1918 General Election, Sinn Féin won 73 of Ireland's 105 seats, and in January 1919, its MPs

assembled in Dublin and proclaimed *Dáil Éireann*: the Irish Assembly. At the beginning of the 1920s, a new era started for Sinn Féin after the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War and led, over the years, to a transformation of the original party. Further divisions led to the abstentionist party today known as Sinn Féin. This party supported the IRA's military – more than political – actions especially in the 1960s and in the 1970s. In the 1980s, Sinn Féin and the IRA were considered as one single entity and the same enemy to be fought.

- 6 In the 1990s, by making their strategies and discourse evolve, Sinn Féin members managed to impose themselves as legitimate negotiators of the peace process and of the peace agreement that officially put an end to the conflict in Northern Ireland in 1998 (Maillot 2014). After a steady growth in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin even managed to become, in 2003, the leading pro-reunification party, relegating the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) to the second position. Since 2007, Sinn Féin has been in government in Northern Ireland through power-sharing at Stormont. Sinn Féin's position as a dominant party has been unchallenged: it ranked first during the 2009, 2014 and 2019 European elections, and benefited from a rise in the number of first preference votes in the local elections. They cumulated 151,000 votes of first preference in 2014, and 157,000 in 2019. Whereas the number of Sinn Féin councillors remained the same (105), this result was considered as a victory notably because the main unionist parties (the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist party) and the SDLP lost respectively 8, 13 and 7 seats in the same elections. Sinn Féin even broke records in Westminster, securing 7 MPs since 2017 (Matthews / Whiting 2022: 224-242).
- 7 The rise of Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland was slower. When they started pushing candidates for the *Dáil* in Dublin in the late 1980s, they were seen as a “hardline fringe group” with strong connections to the IRA, to which many voters had “moral objections”: not only was Sinn Féin considered as the political branch of the IRA, ready to support violence, but many also felt that they were focused only on the reunification of Ireland, without having much more to offer (Fenton 2020).
- 8 It was not until 2002 that Sinn Féin managed to gain a real political support among the voters, as it became the fourth political party in

the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, in 1997, 45,000 voters gave their first preference vote to Sinn Féin – which granted the party one seat in the *Dáil* –; this figure rose to 121,000 in 2002, and doubled by 2011, with 220,000 votes and 14 seats out of 166.

- 9 Patterns of voters in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland are key to understand contrasting trends. If Sinn Féin is present both North and South of the border, attitudes diverge sharply towards the party. In the Republic of Ireland, the political landscape has been dominated by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael since the 1920s, whereas in Northern Ireland the main political parties embody two confronting communities – a unionist community on the one side, and a pro-reunification community on the other side –, which put the reunification of Ireland at the heart of politics. It is not the case in the Republic of Ireland. Those who fought, whether with violence or through the ballot box, benefit from a substantial support in the North, whereas the alleged historical ties between Sinn Féin and the IRA are considered as an electoral handicap in the South (Matthews and Whiting 2022).

## 1.2. Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and the legacy of the past

- 10 Since the 1980s, Sinn Féin has rarely been mentioned without referring to the IRA and to the two men who embodied the party: Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness (Gallet 2021: 103). Undeniably, there also lays the reason why today's Sinn Féin needs a rebranding to change this image.
- 11 Gerry Adams, who was President of Sinn Féin for almost 35 years, is one of the most recognisable and controversial figures in Irish politics: “the Man we Love to Hate”<sup>3</sup> in Britain. Born in 1948 in Belfast, Gerry Adams was soon involved in the republican movement and imprisoned twice in the 1970s. Often referred to as the mastermind of the movement, he is also recognised as the man who managed to lead Sinn Féin away from the status of a pariah supporting the violent campaigns of the IRA, to the status of a key negotiator of the peace process and a legitimate political party. Indeed, he is remembered as the one who entered into talks, together with the more moderate SDLP, with the British and Irish governments in order to pave the way

for peace. Paradoxically, at the same time, he was officially considered as a terrorist and, as such, his voice was censored in the wake of the Broadcasting Ban. Implemented in 1988, the Broadcasting Ban aimed at depriving the terrorist from “the oxygen of publicity”<sup>4</sup> by banning the broadcasting of voices of the members or sympathisers of eleven organisations. The list included nine loyalist and republican paramilitary organisations considered as terrorist by the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1984 and the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act of 1978, plus two political parties, namely Sinn Féin and Republican Sinn Féin (Gallet 2022).

- 12 Interestingly, Gerry Adams is heterogeneously depicted in Ireland and abroad. In spite of being considered as an icon of Irish republicanism, Gerry Adams never managed to get rid of controversial aspects of his past, which were constantly highlighted by political opponents, especially in the Republic of Ireland. This, soon, proved to be considered as a real impediment for voters who would adhere to the party’s aims but not to the man who would support them. Gerry Adams has consistently denied ever being a member of the IRA, but it was often claimed that he had been an active service member in West Belfast and that he was chief of staff at the end of the 1970s, at the height of the IRA’s violent campaign (O’Halloran 2017: 127). Over the last years, different controversies did not help mitigate this feeling. They included scandals within his own family as well as allegations that Gerry Adams, being a senior IRA member, would have ordered the murder and burial of Jean McConville in 1972, for which he was arrested in 2014 and released without charges after four days.
- 13 In Northern Ireland, Gerry Adams is always represented as a shadowy figure. In films about the conflict in Northern Ireland, in which he is an unavoidable character, he is the man who pulls the strings of peace and war, a man whose lines are always blurry. Gerry Adams appears more as a man of the shadows who hides behind his long hair, his beard and his tinted glasses. He is represented as extremely difficult to meet and he is usually staged in a dark, windowless room, making it hard to identify him.
- 14 This image contrasts sharply with the one of the man who was invited to the White House by Bill Clinton in the 1990s, while broadcasting his voice was forbidden in Britain; the man who attended in

2011 to promote the resolution of conflict in the Basque Country (Maillot 2005: 1-12), and the man who formed part of the guard of honour for Nelson Mandela when the latter died in 2013.

- 15 As Sinn Féin leadership was in Northern Ireland, a strategy aimed at transferring powers to the South; Gerry Adams ran for a *Teachta Dála* (TD) seat in the *Dáil*, after having been elected as an MP for Belfast West between 1983 and 2010 (except between 1992 and 1997). He was elected TD twice in a row between 2011 and 2020, for Louth constituency. He did not stand for re-election to his seat in the *Dáil*.
- 16 Another key political figure who embodied Sinn Féin was Martin McGuinness, whose portrayal in Irish politics was partly different. Martin McGuinness was born in (London)Derry<sup>5</sup> and, just like Gerry Adams, he managed to move from being identified as a terrorist to being considered as a key negotiator of the peace process and as a legitimate politician in Northern Ireland. Imprisoned in 1973 for six months, because he was involved in Provisional IRA activity, he was then elected as a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont in 1982. In an unfamous controversial TV programme broadcast in 1994, “Real Lives: At the Edge of the Union”,<sup>6</sup> he appeared as a “normal” politician, showing his daily life with wife and children – which was deemed unacceptable due to his previous involvement in paramilitary activities – (Leapman 1996: 96-117; Butler 1995: 76-77).<sup>7</sup> Martin McGuinness became the Sinn Féin chief negotiator of the peace process and of the Belfast Agreement. Unlike Gerry Adams, he acknowledged his activity in the Provisional IRA during the conflict, which certainly contributed to his political career at Stormont. Indeed, his record as a leader of the Irish Republican Army and later as a peacemaker and conciliator, proved a strong vote-winning combination in Northern Ireland. On the one hand, the Derry man’s reputation as an IRA activist was reassuring to those with a similar background and retaining doubts about the peace process. On the other hand, his relationship with Ian Paisley, a controversial unionist leader, with whom he shared the executive in Stormont, contributed to get support from moderate pro-reunification voters (Faith 2018: 208). He is also remembered as the one who shook the hand of Queen Elizabeth II, which was considered as a major step towards reconciliation.

- 17 Martin McGuinness was Minister of Education between 1999 and 2002, and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland between 2007 and 2017. He even ran for President of the Republic of Ireland in 2011. But he resigned on grounds of ill-health – also at a time when Stormont was facing additional crises – and died just a few weeks later, in March 2017. It was a serious setback for Sinn Féin, which possibly led the leadership of the party to reshuffle the cards and look for a new strategy.
- 18 In spite of a steady growth of voters in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin faced some kind of deadlock and needed rebranding in order to improve Sinn Féin’s electoral chances in the Republic but also to mark a shift that would sever the leadership’s last link with republican violence. In November 2017, Gerry Adams announced his decision to retire after 34 years as President of Sinn Féin. New elections were planned for the beginning of 2018. Thus, it was necessary to rebrand and modernise Sinn Féin in order to start a new era with a new leadership.

## **2. The perfect candidates for the new leadership**

- 19 Rebranding and modernising Sinn Féin was not an easy task, especially after Gerry Adams’ era as President of Sinn Féin. The perfect candidates for the new leadership had to match a series of criteria. Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill were the only nominees when the new leadership was elected.

### **2.1. The criteria**

- 20 Multiple criteria had to be considered to find the perfect match.
- 21 First of all, a generational shift was needed: younger candidates who would be able to attract younger voters. Strategically, the leadership had to be representative of both sides of the border, with a President in the Republic of Ireland and a Deputy or Vice-President in Northern Ireland in order to represent the specificities of the voters. In Northern Ireland, choosing someone with no link at all with the republican movement would have been risky as people (directly impacted or in-

volved in the conflict) needed to be understood. At the same time, someone with a clean record was necessary. This would immediately rule out people like Gerry Kelly, a loyal member of the inner circle of Gerry Adams. Indeed, Gerry Kelly's past would have immediately resurfaced and been an easy argument for the party's opponents. In the Republic of Ireland, a clean record was mandatory as any link with the violent conflict in Northern Ireland was a powerful leitmotiv in criticisms coming from the political opponents as well as from the voters who felt reluctant to cast their vote for a former violent activist. Nonetheless, it was important that the new leadership should stick to the political line of the party and should not negate its past: during the conflict, there was no alternative to violence; after the Belfast Agreement, each act of violence had to be condemned.

22 Another criterion was linked to the social background in 2017 and the Irish political agenda at that time. Indeed, banning abortion in Ireland was being debated and a referendum was to take place in May 2018, aiming at repealing the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. Women's rights were at the heart of a major political debate. Sinn Féin, despite counting prominent figures amongst its ranks, was labeled a masculine party and traditionally struggled to get support from women (Molinari 2020: 77-99; Matthews and Whiting 2022). Thus, selecting women for the new leadership would increase the progressive stance of Sinn Féin. In addition to being inclusive and progressive, this bet on women would further align the party's agenda, promoting wider equality – “Ireland of Equals”<sup>8</sup> –, as well as the Women Peace and Security Agenda of the United Nations.<sup>9</sup>

23 Above all, women could drastically change the image of Sinn Féin. Indeed, gendered stereotypes help understand why women are often called to soften the image of war or of a violent past. Traditional roles assign women a role of unifiers, nurturers, nurses of the woes (Donatella, 2013). It has also been argued that, in some post-conflict cases, female leaders could be perceived as “political outsiders untainted by corruption or abuse of power” (Jalalzai 2008: 212). The argument that such a choice could represent a break with a past dominated by men and lead to provide the party with a softer image seems quite convincing. It is even more convincing when we have closer look at the presence of women in Northern Irish politics. Female party leaders were not something new in Northern Ireland<sup>10</sup>: the first female lead-

ers of the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, of the Progressive Unionist Party and of the Green Party Northern Ireland were respectively Anne Dickson (from 1976 to 1981), Dawn Purvis (in 2007) and Clare Bailey (in 2018). Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick was leader of the SDLP from 2010 to 2011. First elected as an MLA in 2003, Naomi Long became the first female leader of the Alliance Party in 2016. This is not to mention Arlene Foster, leader of the DUP, and First Minister of Northern Ireland, between 2015 and 2021. Last but not least, Sinn Féin had already been led by a woman, Mary Buckley, who was President of the party between 1937 and 1950.

- 24 But the same argument should also be mitigated especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and even more in the United Kingdom where women, precisely at that time, were empowered with prominent roles. In 2018, additionally to Arlene Foster being First Minister of Northern Ireland, Theresa May was British Prime Minister and Nicola Sturgeon First Minister of Scotland.

## 2.2. Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill

- 25 The perfect matches in order to pursue the rebranding of Sinn Féin were found in Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill, who ticked all the boxes. As Shane Ross put it:
- 26 Mary Lou McDonald never wore a balaclava. She never pulled a trigger. She never planted a bomb. She has never even been in prison. Indeed, it is unlikely that she has ever incurred as much as a speeding fine (Ross 2022: Introduction).
- 27 Mary Lou McDonald is one generation younger than Gerry Adams. She is a Dublin-born, well-educated woman, whose political legitimacy could not be denied by the party's opponents. Mary Lou McDonald was raised in a middle-class family, in the south side of Dublin. She was educated in Trinity College, Dublin, the University of Limerick and Dublin City University, where she studied English Literature, European Integration Studies and Human Resource Management. As for her link with conflicts in Ireland, it dated back to Easter Rising and the subsequent death of a great uncle. She had no direct association with the IRA or its armed campaign during the conflict in

Northern Ireland, but could refer to a link with the original republican movement. In her early political career, she campaigned for Fianna Fáil, before considering that a united Ireland was a priority. She was the first Sinn Féin MEP for Dublin from 2004 to 2009 and during her time in the European Parliament she was a member of the Employment and Social Affairs committee.<sup>11</sup> Mary Lou McDonald was elected to the *Dáil* in 2011 and re-elected in 2016 and in 2020.<sup>12</sup> Before becoming leader of Sinn Féin, she had been Deputy Leader of the party since 2009. She stood in stark contrast to Gerry Adams: she represented a new face and, as a strong advocate for women's rights, could gain more mainstream appeal particularly among female and middle-class voters.

28 As for Michelle O'Neill, she was a perfect fit for rebranding Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. Mary Lou McDonald's profile would have been less convincing in Northern Ireland, notably because of her social and political background. Michelle O'Neill could notably boast strong republican roots while having no IRA record.

29 Michelle O'Neill, born Doris, in the Republic of Ireland, was raised in Northern Ireland in a working-class republican family. Her father was an IRA prisoner, one of her uncles headed the Irish Northern Aid Committee (Noraid) that raised funds for the IRA in the US and two of her cousins, who were part of the IRA, were shot by security forces, one fatally. After the 1998 Belfast Agreement, Michelle O'Neill's father was elected to Dungannon borough council. An activist since her teens, she followed his path, won his seat in 2005 after he stepped down and even became mayor. Meanwhile, Martin McGuinness and Francie Molloy, a Sinn Féin MLA, selected her to run for the Assembly in 2007, and she won a seat at Stormont (Mid Ulster). When Martin McGuinness died in 2017, Sinn Féin preferred O'Neill over more senior members to lead the party and serve as Deputy First Minister, as part of a strategy to promote younger faces with no direct ties to IRA violence. Michelle O'Neill belongs to the post-conflict generation of pro-reunification sympathisers and activists, most of whom see politics, rather than paramilitary activity, as the way forward. O'Neill's easy smile and unpretentious image have made her an asset for the party. She has honoured combatants while preaching a message that conflict is firmly in the past. Also, when she became Minister of Health following the 2016 election, one of her first decisions was to

repeal the ban preventing gay and bisexual men from donating blood in Northern Ireland. Five years later, she accused the DUP and the Ulster Unionists of denying abortion services to women in Northern Ireland (McCambridge 2022).

- 30 By choosing younger women, instead of men who had fought during the conflict, this new leadership could not be compared to a mere “changing of the guard” (Moriarty 2017). It represented not only a new generation but also a leadership that was being passed “from the military to the civilian” (McIntyre 2017). The question of gender was prominent in selecting and presenting Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill. In her acceptance speech, McDonald exclaimed that Sinn Féin was “probably the most exemplary party when it comes to girl power at this stage in Irish politics” (Roberts 2018). Also, in 2018, in their first addresses as Leader and Deputy at Sinn Féin’s party conference, Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill dedicated sections to “a new Ireland for women” and the event itself closed with Aretha Franklin’s song, “Sisters are doing it for themselves” (Finn 2018).

## 2.2. Elections with one candidate

- 31 Undoubtedly, such strategy was already in place when Gerry Adams delivered his final address as Sinn Féin President and said: “We cannot have the freedom of Ireland without the freedom of women” (McGee 2017).
- 32 Gerry Adams had been President of Sinn Féin for 34 years when he announced he would resign. So, the party did not have much experience of leadership elections. Nonetheless, on paper, Sinn Féin’s procedure for leadership selection is inclusive and decentralised; there is a low threshold for candidacy and selection by delegates at conference (Matthews and Whiting 2022: 224). In the end, there was just one nominee for the position. And it appears that both candidates – President and Deputy President – had been carefully handpicked and their election orchestrated. The selections of Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill were presented by several Sinn Féin officials as forming part of “a 10-year project of generational change”.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned before, both candidates had also been endorsed by their predecessors. Michelle O’Neill was a protégée of Martin McGuinness, and personally “recommended” by Gerry Adams (O’Connor 2017),

which she confirmed explaining how “Martin and Gerry spoke to me and asked me to take on the position” (Clifford 2017).

- 33 Two arguments reducing the impact of choosing specifically Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill were put forward. On the one hand, it was said that choosing women was a risky choice and on the other hand, whatever choice would be made, the new leadership would not really pull the strings.
- 34 The first argument was based on the idea that power-sharing or more precisely the presence of Sinn Féin in Westminster, in spite of its abstentionist tradition, in Stormont and in the *Dáil*, led to a dispersion of responsibilities (Jalalzai and Krook 2010: 5), and to different “nodes” of power (Beckwith 2015: 718). Male political leaders would be less reluctant or more willing to support a woman for party leader (Matthews and Whiting 2022: 224). This is partly convincing. If one can understand the argument that responsibilities could be put into the hands of anyone (man or woman) because that power would be mitigated due to the presence of the party in different settings (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), the argument remains paradoxical when considering that Sinn Féin had been embodied, for more than three decades by one man, Gerry Adams, or two, with Martin McGuinness. Yet, when discussing her appointment, O’Neill stressed the importance of “collective leadership” in Sinn Féin and promised to work closely with other “leaders” and senior members in the party (Breen 2017). This might have reassured those with reservations about her experience and suitability for the role.
- 35 Regarding the second argument, some authors considered that Gerry Adams would not loosen his influence on Sinn Féin (McDonald 2018) and that he would impose some cast-iron rule on his replacement: never negating the legitimacy of the Provisional IRA’s campaign and state that this campaign was as legitimate as the rebels’ fight of 1916. Some voters feared that the new leadership would be just figureheads with the party strings still pulled by “Sinn Féin hardliners” (Webber 2022). Deirdre Heenan, a social policy professor at the University of Ulster, confirmed suspicions would endure: “Sinn Féin will always suffer a question of who is really in charge but they’re trying to shake off the image of the past.” Accused of “being a puppet on a string”, Mary Lou McDonald answered it was:

completely and utter nonsense. And I have to say, and I hate – it’s terrible that I have to say this in the year 2022, but it needs to be said –Sinn Féin is led by women. And there is just the smallest amount of dog whistling, a kind of misogyny or an assumption that women can’t be in charge. So women can be in charge, and women are in charge in Sinn Féin.<sup>14</sup>

36 She then insisted on the democratic structures of the party. Ahead of her election, she famously said: “Some of you have said to me ‘you have very big shoes to fill’. Well, the truth is that no one will ever fill Gerry Adams's shoes. The truth is, my friends, I won't fill Gerry's shoes. But the news is that I brought my own. So I will fill my shoes.”<sup>15</sup>

37 Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill were the perfect candidates for rebranding Sinn Féin and starting a new era. Five years on, we can take stock of the situation and assess whether this strategy was successful.

### 3. A successful strategy?

38 In order to assess the role of women in Sinn Féin’s rebranding strategy, we will focus on the electoral campaigns and results, before examining some persistent controversies.

#### 3.1. Electoral campaigns and results

39 If we examine the results of the 2020 Irish General Elections and the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly Elections, Sinn Féin is currently and undoubtedly the first political party in Ireland as, both in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, it is the party that generated the most first preference votes. Are these results a consequence of the female rebranding of the party? Even if, in the media, Sinn Féin’s victories were assigned to Mary Lou McDonald and to Michelle O’Neill, the answer is less sure. Most analyses tend to assign these results to strategically orchestrated campaigns based on four principles: focus on “health” and “accommodation”; target younger people with a strong presence on social media; relegate the referendum on Irish unity to a second plan; be compassionate about the victims of the

conflict in Northern Ireland, whatever their side, when asked about the violent republican movement.

40 Sinn Féin's electoral success lies more on the topics and less on the people.<sup>16</sup> During the campaigns, both in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, the stress was put on health and accommodation, which are the topics that appeal to more voters. When people were asked in the exit poll which issue was most important to them when deciding how to vote the day before, the respondents said: "health" (32%), "housing/homelessness" (26%), "pension age" (8%), "climate change" (6%) and "jobs" (6%).<sup>17</sup>

41 Sinn Féin campaigns focused on topics like health, accommodation, women's rights, same-sex marriage, which undoubtedly seduced younger generations, especially during a social crisis. According to Mary Lou McDonald:

[...] we were talking about things like access to health care when you need it, things like rent that you can afford. You know, basic, basic things. We weren't promising people a pipe dream of, you know, a life of excess and extravagance. Far from it. We were saying, in a modern, you know, affluent society citizens have rights. And citizens need to have expectations that the basics for a good and decent life are met. Not just for you and for your family, but for those around you and the community in which you live.<sup>18</sup>

42 In Northern Ireland, Michelle O'Neill's 2022 campaign was described as "tightly disciplined", targeting centrist voters and focused on the cost of living and healthcare as opposed to a united Ireland. According to Jonathan Tonge, a University of Liverpool politics professor, "she has looked first ministerial. She has been personable rather than confrontational", avoiding any controversial statements that would have taken away some votes (Carroll 2022). Also, when asked by *The Guardian* about becoming the first pro-reunification leader of Northern Ireland, Michelle O'Neill did not put forward the argument of a united Ireland nor that of a referendum, sticking to a need to "stand up for everybody" and "fix the health service." (Carroll 2022)

43 Sinn Féin's narrative of change dominated both campaigns, which were particularly vigorous on social media (Kirsty and Suiter 2021: 113-134). This was part of a larger strategy aiming at getting more

votes among the younger generations. Indeed, the party has also been quick to identify and prioritise other issues affecting younger people, most notably Dublin's housing crisis. For instance, Sinn Féin's housing spokesman, Eoin Ó Broin, announced different policies including a rent freeze.<sup>19</sup>

44 Besides, in Ireland, demography is a key factor: younger generations are an electoral target. If older generations' votes will be hard to change, notably due to what they saw and underwent in the past, the vote of younger generations is the one that matters most. The results of the elections both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland confirm this assumption. In the 2020 General Elections, Sinn Féin was the most popular party among all age groups up to 65, the party's support being highest among 18-34 years old. Sinn Féin got almost 32% support in this group, compared to Fine Gael's 15.5% and Fianna Fáil's 13.6% (and the Green Party's 14.4%). Among 25-34 years-old, Sinn Féin reached 31.7%, compared to 17.3% and 15.2% for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Among 35-64 years old, the three parties stalled around 20% each, but Sinn Féin's support dropped to 12.2% over 65 years old, an age category in which Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael reached 30%. Voters now appear more concerned about social justice and housing than the party's historical connections.

45 However, Sinn Féin performance should be mitigated as most of the party's results between 2016 and 2020 suggested support was declining in the Republic of Ireland: a poor presidential election in 2018, the loss of two of its three MEPs and the loss of nearly half of its councillors in 2019. Out of prudence, Sinn Féin decided to run – only – 42 candidates for a total of 160 seats. If it is clear that the party's position was secured in most of these constituencies, the result in other places would be less predictable.<sup>20</sup>

46 In Northern Ireland, what most media considered as a victory of Sinn Féin, was more a failure of the DUP. Indeed, if one cannot deny that the number of first preference votes rose for Sinn Féin (from 224,000 in 2017 to 250,000 in 2022), the number of seats in Stormont remained the same. To put it differently, following the Assembly Elections Michelle O'Neill should have become First Minister (and not Deputy First Minister anymore) only because the DUP lost many seats, not because Sinn Féin had won additional seats. The party se-

cured 27 seats in May's Assembly elections, making it the largest party in the North for the first time in its history.

## 3.2. Controversies

- 47 Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill are also facing controversies that bring them directly back to the legacy of Sinn Féin. Firstly, they are accused of not denouncing the republican violence during the conflict in Northern Ireland. Secondly, the party is facing accusations of bullying within its own party. Both arguments could potentially bring them to a deadlock similar to the one encountered by the previous leadership.
- 48 In Northern Ireland, Michelle O'Neill faced criticism as soon as 2017, as she honoured IRA gunmen as "great lads" (Webber 2022). Also, in 2020, a major controversy occurred during the pandemic when Michelle O'Neill and Mary Lou McDonald attended the funeral of Bobby Storey, a prominent member of the IRA. Their presence was controversial for two reasons: first of all, social distancing was not respected at a time when Covid restrictions were in force, so many expected that prosecutions would follow, which never happened. Then, the funeral was described as a "paramilitary parade": those who carried out the coffin were republican veterans dressed in traditional outfit. This stance, consistent with Sinn Féin's previous leadership to never disown the war but reprimand each act of violence since the Belfast Agreement, was confirmed in August 2022, when Michelle O'Neill stated: "I think at the time there was no alternative, but now, thankfully, we have an alternative to conflict and that's the Good Friday Agreement". (Carroll 2022) Mary Lou McDonald was also criticised for not denouncing terrorism strongly and attending events commemorating former IRA members (Tillett 2022).
- 49 Secondly, Sinn Féin was accused of forcing women out. This accusation resulted from the number of high-profile resignations of female representatives registered by the party, which was higher than Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael put together in the last two *Dáil* terms (Moore 2022). This contrasts sharply with Mary McDonald's statement to the party ahead of her election, that Sinn Féin was "probably the most exemplary party when it comes to girl power at this stage in Irish politics".<sup>21</sup> Ireland is the first country in the world to apply a le-

gislative gender quota under a single transferable vote system. Since 2016, the quota has required parties to ensure that at least thirty percent of their candidates running in the general election are women (Keenan and Brennan 2021: 606). Among the various *Dáil* party groups, the highest proportions of women are Sinn Féin (34%), ranking after the Social Democrats (67%) and the lowest proportions are within Labour (0%), Fianna Fáil (13%), Greens (17%), Fine Gael (17%), and Solidarity–PBP (20 %).<sup>22</sup> Still, widespread allegations of bullying and indiscipline are not new in the party, which have resulted in the resignations of councillors and one senator.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

50 Undoubtedly, a new era started in 2018 for Sinn Féin. Rebranding the party contributed to secure its position as a protagonist in Ireland as a whole. If passing the leadership on to women certainly contributed to break with a legacy image of former “terrorists” turned into “key advocates for peace”, it is hard to assert that only women were critical in this rebranding. According to most media, Sinn Féin’s electoral success is only due to Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill. Photographs, smiles and a strong presence in the media in Ireland and abroad reinforce this argument. But Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill were everything but new in Sinn Féin and in Irish politics. Mary Lou McDonald was a prominent MEP and TD, often appearing close to Gerry Adams. Michelle O’Neill had been part of the reshuffle that had taken place after the restoration of Stormont Assembly in 2007 and had, since then, occupied positions of Minister for Agriculture and Development and Minister of Health.

51 As soon as they became Leader and Deputy Leader of Sinn Féin, not only did the face of Sinn Féin change, but so did its narrative. If a united Ireland remained the ultimate goal of the party, other topics entered the stage and caught the attention of younger generations, whose votes were crucial in the last General and Assembly Elections.

52 Actually, in spite of being the first political party on the island of Ireland, Sinn Féin is still in a deadlock. In Northern Ireland, no executive has been formed since the 2022 Assembly Election, depriving Michelle O’Neill from acting as First Minister. In the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin was prevented from forming a government and the

main two historical parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, united in a coalition together with the Green Party. The legacy of the past is still an important impediment, especially in the Republic of Ireland. Mary Lou McDonald failed to reassure some voters and political opponents. Her political legitimacy and availability on the media sphere are currently challenged by her reluctance to condemn the violent past linked to Irish republicanism and could potentially make her another “shadowy figure” of Sinn Féin. This red line could potentially slow the rise of the party in the Republic of Ireland. Recently, the proposal for a referendum on a United Ireland has resurfaced more actively, especially in the United States where advertisements were published in prominent newspapers. Next elections will be crucial in determining Sinn Féin’s strategy.

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  - 4 In 1985, Margaret Thatcher famously used this locution in the USA in order to denounce the publicity provided by the media to “terrorists”.
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15 “Mary Lou McDonald nominated to succeed Gerry Adams as Sinn Fein president”, 20 January 2018, available via <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/mary-lou-mcdonald-nominated-to-succeed-gerry-adams-as-sinn-fein-president/36510469.html> Consulted 01 April, 2023.

16 See Cunningham, Kevin and Marsh, Michael (2021). “Voting behaviour: the Sinn Féin election”, in Michael Gallagher, Michael Marsh and Theresa Reidy (eds), *How Ireland Voted 2020. The End of an Era*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 219-253. According to the authors, the role of leaders seemed slight, and candidates seem to have been less important than in the past.

17 Chart 3. RTÉ, Irish Times, TG4, UCD, Ipsos MRBI Exit poll, 9 February 2020 available via <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/election-2020-analysis-sinn-fein-surge-shows-generational-split-1.4166993>. Consulted 01 April, 2023. To know more on the 2020 Irish general elections, see [https://www.tcd.ie/Political\\_Science/people/michael\\_gallagher/Election2020.php](https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/people/michael_gallagher/Election2020.php) and Gallagher, Michael, Marsh, Michael and Reidy, Theresa (eds), *How Ireland Voted 2020. The End of an Era*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 219-253.

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### English

In 1998, the Belfast Agreement put an official end to the conflict in Northern Ireland. Twenty years later, a new era began for the Irish republican movement. Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness put the leadership of Sinn Féin into the hands of two women, Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill. As Martin McGuinness, the former Northern Irish Deputy First Minister, passed away and Gerry Adams stepped down from his role as leader of Sinn Féin after 35 years, some commentators denounced a political vacuum while others focused on a potential metamorphosis of the party.

This paper investigates how Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill helped change the image of Sinn Féin and position it as the first political force both North and South of the Irish border.

### Français

En 1998, l'Accord de Belfast mit officiellement un terme au conflit en Irlande du Nord. Vingt ans plus tard, une nouvelle ère commença pour le mouvement républicain lorsque Gerry Adams et Martin McGuinness placèrent la présidence du Sinn Féin entre les mains de deux femmes : Mary Lou McDonald et Michelle O'Neill. Lors du décès de Martin McGuinness, l'ancien vice-Premier ministre de l'Irlande du Nord et de la démission de Gerry Adams après 35 ans à la tête du parti, certains commentateurs évoquèrent un vide politique tandis que d'autres envisageaient une métamorphose potentielle du parti.

Ce chapitre explore la façon dont Mary Lou McDonald et Michelle O'Neill contribuèrent à changer l'image du Sinn Féin et à en faire la première force politique tant en Irlande du Nord qu'en République d'Irlande.

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### Mots-clés

Sinn Féin, femme, élection, conflit, Irlande

### Keywords

Sinn Féin, woman, election, conflict, Ireland

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