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

Sinn Féin’s electoral success

Évaluation de l’impact d'un gouvernement Sinn Féin sur la perspective de réunification

15 December 2023.

Agnès Maillot

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Introduction

1 Sinn Féin's spectacular growth on both sides of the island became the biggest news story after its electoral success in the February 2020 general election in the Republic of Ireland and its subsequent performance in the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections. With Sinn Féin at the gates of power in the two jurisdictions, the political conversation has dramatically shifted. In Northern Ireland, a Sinn Féin-led government, while it might not radically alter the way politics are conducted, is an important step forward for the party. Indeed, Northern Ireland will be led, for the first time in its history, by a Sinn Féin First Minister[1]. This is highly symbolic, since the two executive roles (First and Deputy First Minister) carry similar responsibilities (Sar-

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geant 2022) but it does signify the end of the historical unionist [2] hold on political power. In the Republic, opinion polls consistently place Sinn Féin ahead of its two main rivals. In September 2023, the party was credited with 32% voting intentions, compared to 21% for Fine Gael and 17% for Fianna Fáil [3]. The party could be in a position to lead the next government, much to the displeasure of both its main opponents who in 2020 decided to enter a coalition and did not engage with Sinn Féin, in spite of the party's robust electoral performance. This prospect therefore raises new challenges for the mainstream political parties (Little 2022).

2 Sinn Féin is, and has always been, intrinsically linked to the aspiration of a United Ireland (Maillot 2022). This is the party's *raison d'être*, a constant in an organisation that has undergone many transformations, both strategic and ideological. Its support for Irish unity is unwavering, and its vision is embedded in most of its policy documents, North and South. However, whether this is the main reason why voters cast their ballot for a Sinn Féin candidate, and whether the rise of the party brings the prospect of a United Ireland closer, are complex questions. This article contends that Sinn Féin's success, particularly in the Republic of Ireland, is as much due to its traditional republican, nationalist stance as it is to its discourse on social issues. It will first look at the manner in which Sinn Féin has successfully reinvented itself, after having spent years in the shadow of its controversial alter ego, the Irish Republican Army. It will then examine the current debate on reunification, and the manner in which Sinn Féin has positioned itself throughout this debate. Finally, it will look at how Sinn Féin has strategised its view of reunification by firmly positioning this project within what it calls the Equality agenda.

1. Rebranding the party

3 Sinn Féin is anything but a traditional party. Until the start of the century, it was the outcast of Irish politics, and an outlier in the EU political landscape. For decades, it was associated with an armed group, the Irish Republican Army. Its approach to politics was unconventional, as it refused to recognise the institutions in place and created, whenever possible, alternative institutions, particularly in Northern Ireland (Craig 2014) [4]. Furthermore, the fact that it was, and

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still is to a large extent, the only party which runs for elections throughout the whole of the island (with the exception of smaller formations such as People Before Profit and Aontú) makes it a very different political organisation to its counterparts.

4 The signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and more specifically the IRA's decision to "formally order[ed] an end to the armed campaign" (IRA 2005), provided Sinn Féin with the latitude to sever the link that was systematically made between the political party and the IRA. This was no mean task. For decades, Sinn Féin had been part of the republican movement, an umbrella term used to designate both the party and the paramilitary organisation, in unison in their defence of the armed strategy to achieve the ultimate goal, Irish unity. With the peace process, the party started to shape its identity in such a way as to be seen both as independent from the IRA, but also as its firm and loyal supporter. This was achieved by retaining a discourse that was unapologetically supportive of the armed strategy yet at the same time by reassuring their supporters that they were fully committed to peace. In the words of former Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams, "the IRA cessation, which facilitated peacemaking, is a logical consequence of a decision by that organisation to embrace another way forward and to go out of business as a result". (McCarron 2000: 222).

5 Talking about the IRA has been and remains a delicate balancing act for Sinn Féin, particularly since the start of the 21st century, when revelations by former members of the organisation or by its victims have contributed to giving the public a fuller picture of the types of activities in which the IRA volunteers were involved. The traditional tropes that were developed during the conflict, that of the IRA volunteers as defenders, freedom fighters, sacrificing their youths and sometimes their lives for the republican cause (Shanahan 2008), started to be altered by the accounts of those who had suffered at their hands. In 1999, the episode of the disappeared [5] brought to light a practice that had been silenced until then, framed by the IRA as a necessity and which for a long time "escaped scrutiny" (Dempster 2016: 250). Testimonies also came forward regarding sexual abuse, which had all been concealed at the highest level, even if such issues still occupy a marginal space within the overall narrative of the conflict (O'Rourke and Swayne 2017). Increasingly, Sinn Féin found itself in a

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delicate position, having to condemn such cases without disowning the organisation responsible.

6 Revelations of past IRA actions tend to fuel a debate which is still highly divisive. The current Sinn Féin leadership avoids being drawn into any controversy and refrains from condemning the past. Mary Lou McDonald's rhetoric therefore firmly looks forward, because in her view "going back again and again and refighting battles and re-opening hurts, I don't believe achieves a whole lot" (McCurry 2022). However, the legacy of the IRA remains a problematic area that can at times be used by Sinn Féin opponents to cast a shadow over the party's democratic credentials. As Leo Varadkar's unambiguously stated: "It is our view Sinn Féin is not a normal party" (McGrath 2020).

7 However, Sinn Féin's strategy has increasingly consisted in turning away from an IRA-led narrative to one where the former paramilitaries are still valued for their past contribution but have no role to play in contemporary Ireland. Sinn Féin spokespersons regularly dismiss their opponents' criticisms, and they forcefully deny what they consider allegations that the IRA maintains a level of control over the party. Hence, the 2015 report by the MI5 and the PSNI which concluded that the IRA Army Council was still in existence and continued to supervise political decisions made by Sinn Féin (PSNI/MI5, HMSO 2015) was categorically rebuked by the Sinn Féin leadership. Mary Lou McDonald explained in the aftermath of the 2020 general election that "the reality is that we now live in a peaceful dispensation, the war is over, the IRA has gone away and democracy is the order of the day and there's no dispute around that". (Gallagher 2020)

8 The party may also be counting on the memory of the past violence to fade, or to become a second-hand memory. To some extent, this is already the case in the Republic of Ireland. The controversy over the *Celtic Symphony* song that the women's soccer team chanted after qualifying for the world cup, in October 2022, which contains the chorus "Up the RA", was revealing of the unease that the legacy of the IRA still conjures up in many quarters. The song, released in 1989 by the band the Wolfe Tones, was defended by its writer Brian Warfield on the basis that the IRA "put us here and gave us some hope when we had no hope" (Reid 2022). While it might have been written with that particular message in mind at the time, the act of singing reflects

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a more complex process. *Irish Times* columnist Una Mullally, closer in age to the younger generation, saw it as a sign of defiance towards the older political generation, pointing to the long road that Sinn Féin had travelled and to "how many of the tropes that previously made Irish republicanism unfashionable, and which many in older generations still think of when it comes to republicanism — macho culture, violence, sectarianism, Catholic fundamentalism — have been dismantled" (Mullally 2022). Her colleague Fintan O'Toole took a very different view. For him, evoking the memory the IRA, in whatever circumstances, is fraught with difficulties and cannot, nor should it, be dissociated from the suffering and mayhem for which the organisation was responsible (O'Toole 2022). Interestingly, when asked to ascribe a meaning to this specific episode, 59 per cent of respondents said they "don't think people mean to glorify the IRA by singing these songs", with hardly a difference and age (slightly higher with 63%) (Leahy 2022b). Public opinion in the North also tends to take a less critical view of the IRA than political leaders. When Michelle O'Neill claimed that there had been no 'no alternative to violence', approximately 7 out of 10 Nationalists approved. The figure increased to 85% among Sinn Féin voters but more surprisingly perhaps, 74% of the 18–44-year-old group were in agreement with the statement (*Belfast Telegraph*, 19 August 2022). Neither of these findings necessarily mean that the younger generation's understanding of the conflict is insufficient or denote disrespect for the victims or their descendants. Rather, they point to the way the collective memory of the IRA is used by present generations to make sense of their present reality (Rimé 2015).

2. Irish Unity, a time old objective

9 Sinn Féin has been and continues to be the party which is most closely associated with Irish unity. As Pearse Doherty, the party's Finance spokesman, stated in 2020: "We're Irish republicans. We're passionate about Irish unity, it's what we get up in the morning to try and achieve" (youtube 2020). The unification of Ireland could be considered the only major solid ideal that the party has retained since partition in 1921, making Sinn Féin a unique political organisation on the island, one that has a vision to which it has steadfastly held, one that can look beyond the ordinary mandate and present a utopian

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project. That vision sustained its political and military strategy throughout the conflict. The Good Friday Agreement was seen as a pathway to Irish unity and sold as such to its supporters. As Gerry Adams stated in 2018, in his last speech as president of Sinn Féin: "As Irish republicans our primary political objective is to end partition and secure a united Ireland. Everything we do or say must be set in that context" (Adams 2018). However, Sinn Féin gradually adapted its strategy and discourse to the political situation at hand. Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, which the party fully supports, a United Ireland will only come about with the consent of the majority of the population. This obviously means that the long-held republican aspiration will only be achieved when the party has convinced most of the electorate, North and South of the border, of the merits of such a prospect.

10 However, the constitutional future of Northern Ireland is far from being a foregone conclusion, and Sinn Féin still needs to overcome major challenges to deliver its all-Ireland agenda. The first is that Irish unity is a priority for a relatively low percentage of the electorate. The findings from *The Irish Times*/ARINS [6] survey series gave an interesting insight into how people on both sides of the border view the future of the island. When asked to list, in order of importance, the most relevant issues, respondents scored last the statements related to Irish unification, whether it was to prepare for a referendum (12% and 11% in the RoI and NI respectively) or achieving a United Ireland (15 and 10). This does not necessarily reflect a lack of interest on the part of the electorate. Indeed, successive polls have shown that public opinion, in the Republic, does engage with the issue. A 2022 study showed that 66% believed that the two sides should be unified, against only 27% in NI. The percentage of those who believed that a referendum should be held on that issue was larger with 76% and 55% respectively (Leahy 2022a). Sinn Féin has been actively calling for a border poll and has repeatedly called the British government to prepare for such a referendum (see for instance Mark 2023), a prospect that is far from straightforward according to an assessment conducted in 2021 (Renwick & Hayward).

11 On its website Sinn Féin claims to be "*the* United Ireland party" (my italics, sinnfein.ie/irish-unity), thereby sidelining its competitors on this issue. Rooting its policies into the fundamental ideal of Irish unity

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has given Sinn Féin a vision with which it can be closely identified, and an edge over its competitors. But this does not make it the only organisation to work towards that objective, and most parties in the Republic and some in Northern Ireland would dispute such a statement. The SDLP for instance claims that it was "founded in 1970 as an anti-sectarian political movement with the aim of reconciling the people of the island in a united, just and prosperous new Ireland" (SDLP, nd). Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil prefer to speak of a "shared island", for which a specific unit was established in 2020 (Share Island website, nd). Both see reunification as their ultimate objective but with different priorities, Fine Gael believing "uniting people is even more important than uniting territory"[7] and Fianna Fáil seeking "to secure in peace and harmony the unity of Ireland and all its people"[8]. Some might complain that Sinn Féin has somehow hijacked the united Ireland agenda (the news radio station *Newstalk* claimed that "Fianna Fáil is worried that Sinn Féin now owns the narrative around Irish unity", Wilson, 2022), and republicans have taken the lead on this issue. The findings from the aforementioned *Irish Times*/ARINS thus deemed Sinn Féin to be "best placed to navigate the politics of a united Ireland, were that to happen in the future" (Leahy 2023), even though the levels of interaction between the two sides was found to be quite low. This vindicates the party's strategy consisting of keeping the issue of reunification at the top of its agenda.

3. A Republic for All

12 Sinn Féin has fine-tuned the appeal of a united Ireland, with an increasing injection of pragmatism into its discourse. One of the core messages that has been focused upon is that it makes economic sense to reunify the island (Sinn Féin 2021). The party is not the only one to point to the benefits that this scenario would generate. *Investment Monitor*, A Deloitte Economics, estimated that "economists argue that the adoption of the Irish tax system, reduced red tape and a greater openness to FDI would boost the north's business attractiveness and encourage greater investment" although the author also acknowledges the many difficulties that would need to be overcome in the event of reunification (Davis 2022). Obviously, the discussion on this prospect has to be seen in the context of the 2016 vote on the UK European Union membership, which in Sinn Féin's view has been

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driving the conversation on Irish Unity (Savage, 2023). Indeed, since 2016, there has been a notable increase in interest in a United Ireland. In 2017, Ireland's Future, a non-political group that advocates for Irish unity and consists of members of civil society, North, and South, such as Senator Frances Black, QUB Professor Colin Harvey and journalist Brian Feeney, was formed (Ireland's Future, n.d.). There is a growing volume of academic studies on the topic and assessments on the economic feasibility of reunification. But this has not translated into a surge of support for Irish unity (Diamond, & Colfer 2022). Public opinion still needs convincing, particularly in the North, where the most favoured constitutional option is, quite consistently, that of Northern Ireland within the UK with a devolved government. Furthermore, the growth of a middle ground in the political landscape, as seen in the 2022 Northern Ireland elections, has changed the manner in which the debate on constitutional issues is approached, with the Alliance "positing a middle stance which is neither hostile nor favourable to Irish unity" (Murphy 2022). Interestingly, findings from a recent study show that Sinn Féin has refrained from overly capitalising on the crisis generated by the successive agreements, as it sought to "mitigate the economic fallout that it would generate for the economy, particularly in border regions, rather than using it to push for a United Ireland" (Evershed, & Murphy 2022: 248).

13 Sinn Féin's vision of Irish Unity has been grounded on the principle of equality for which the party claims to have always advocated (Maillot 2022). Equality will be achieved, in Sinn Féin's view, with a better redistribution of wealth and a greater involvement of the State in public services such as housing and health, two of the themes that Sinn Féin has prioritised in the last years. Arguably, Sinn Féin's success in the 2020 general elections was less due to its traditional republican/nationalist appeal than to its core message to the electorate, the need for change (Gallagher *et al* 2022, 126). The party successfully modernised its message to further expand its electoral base. Its rise is in great part due to a notable shift in the demographic profile of its voters. While for years it was firmly rooted in working-class areas, it succeeded in 2020 in making inroads into a different group of voters: the urban youths. Exit polls showed that while the party's share of the vote had increased among all age groups, it had dramatically done so in the 18-25 age group, with 31.8% of the youth vote, but also among

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women, going from 15.1% in 2016 to 21.5% in 2020 (exit polls 2016 and 2020).

14 Exit polls also showed that the two issues ranked highest were, respectively, health and housing. Given the continuing crisis with which the Irish State has been grappling over the last decades (Bowers 2023), it is perhaps unsurprising that Sinn Féin's discourse should have captured the interest of the youths, who are amongst the most directly affected by the ongoing housing crisis. Indeed, CSO figures show that the average age of house ownership has steadily risen from 34 to 42 years old for sole purchasers, and from 35 to 38 for joint purchasers, with a peak in 2016 of 43 and 39 respectively (CSO 2020). The housing crisis has also had devastating consequences for those on the lower end of the salary scales. This disproportionately affects migrants, youths and women. In the first quarter of 2022, rents for new tenancies in Dublin were €2,015 per month and outside Dublin €1,127 per month, with an average rent increase of 9% over the same period (RTE 2022). With approximately 10% of the Irish workforce on minimum wage, the ERSI study concluded that Ireland had the "highest relative share of young workers on the minimum wage" (ERSI 2021: 31). With proposals such as an increase in the building of social and affordable housing, rent controls and security of tenure, Sinn Féin has positioned itself as the most vocal party on the issue of housing, even if experts have pointed to the pitfalls of the Sinn Féin proposals.

Conclusion

15 Shane Ross, Mary Lou McDonald's unofficial biographer, recently questioned Sinn Féin's commitment to Irish unity. In his view:

16 McDonald's greatest achievement has been to rid Sinn Féin of its pariah status and bring it into the political mainstream. Her tireless populism has almost eliminated rival opposition parties in the Republic, while sidelining the other nationalist flag bearer — the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) — in Northern Ireland. Although she never wore a balaclava, McDonald's endless lip service to the "armed struggle" and "the patriot dead" reassured the IRA veterans during her charm offensive on the South (Ross 2022).

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17 Ross' analysis reproduces the tropes that Sinn Féin is aligned with - from pariah to mainstream, populism and balaclavas. The adjective populist with which Sinn Féin is qualified is ill-defined and as the term is used in a wider European context to designate right-wing parties, it can also be misleading. The fact that Sinn Féin has now joined the mainstream but is at the same time still linked to the IRA is an argument that has been used to question Sinn Féin's democratic credentials. But the ultimate criticism, that Sinn Féin has "given up on a united Ireland", is perhaps the most unusual of all. Clearly, the focus of its message is no longer exclusively on unification and Sinn Féin does not want to be seen as a single-issue party, as shown by the very titles of its election manifestos, *Giving workers and Families a break* (2020) and *Time for real change* (2021)[9]. Its approach to a United Ireland has become more pragmatic, advocating a process based on the Good Friday Agreement and on consent. But it is nevertheless keeping its eye on the prize and there is rarely a public occasion where the issue is not mentioned. Sinn Féin in government on both sides of the island will not necessarily accelerate the process, as the Secretary of State will need to be convinced that a majority in Northern Ireland is in favour of holding a poll on Irish unity. This scenario would, however, send a signal to London, but also to its political opponents, that the prospect of a United Ireland needs to be taken seriously.

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1 The Good Friday Agreement provides for a government led by the leaders of the two main parties in each community, nationalist and unionist. Until 2022, the post of First minister was held by a unionist, but the May Assembly elections gave Sinn Féin a larger representation in the Assembly, thus paving way for the party to lead the next government.

2 Since the creation of Northern Ireland in 1921 and until 1972, unionists had a monopoly on the executive, as they had an inbuilt demographic majority which meant that elections always returned a unionist majority. This is what the Good Friday Agreement sought to redress, by introducing power sharing institutions that oblige all parties to govern together, on the basis of their representation in the Assembly. However, while the five main political parties (Democratic Unionist Party, Ulster Unionist Party, Social Democratic and Labour Party, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party) have held government

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positions, the post of First Minister has until recently been held by unionism, being the majority party in the Assembly.

3 https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/ireland/

4 For instance, Sinn Féin set up clinics all over Northern Ireland which looked after issues such as housing, employment, acting as intermediaries between their constituents and the State, but also using these centres as power houses (Craig, 2014). The IRA, for its part, used coercion to police their communities, arguing that the police forces (Royal Ulster Constabulary) were not to be trusted, and Sinn Féin supported this type of unofficial use of force until the late 1980s.

5 18 people who were abducted and killed, mainly by the PIRA, and whose bodies were buried in undisclosed locations. The process of recovering their remains started in 1999.

6 The Irish Times/ARINS survey North and South series surveyed 1,000 people and conducted focus groups in February 2023 to "provide independent and unbiased information on the state of public opinion in both jurisdictions on the constitutional future of the island, on what influences the views of people, how they might change in the future and what a united Ireland – if it were ever to happen – might look like". (2023,North and South Series)

7 Fine Gael, *Northern Ireland and the future of our shared island*, https://www.finegael.ie/our-policies/northern-ireland-and-the-future-of-our-shared-island/#:~:text=Fine%20Gael%2C%20the%20United%20Ireland,more%20important%20than%20uniting%20territory.

8 Fianna Fáil, *Aims and objectives*, https://www.fiannafail.ie/aimsobjectives

9 The sections on "planning for Unity" come on p. 11 of the 2020 document, and on p. 8 for the NI manifesto, after "cost of living crisis", "working together in the executive" and "health" (Sinn Féin, 2020 & 2022).

English
Sinn Féin is anything but a traditional party. For years it was the outcast of Irish politics, and an outlier in the EU political landscape. It has however become the main political force on both sides of the island of Ireland. Undoubtedly, rooting its policies into its fundamental ideal, Irish unity, has given the party a vision and an edge over its competitors. Indeed, its pragmatic approach to this ideal, which is presented as entirely attainable, has

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been constructed with the dual principles of equality and consent which the party has always claimed to defend. This article first looks at the manner in which Sinn Féin has successfully reinvented itself and rewritten its own narrative, after years spent in the shadow of its controversial alter ego, the Irish Republican Army. It will then analyse the approach the party has taken to the debate on Irish unity, as this objective remains at the heart of all its strategies. It will finally assess the way Sinn Féin has embedded what it calls the Equality Agenda into its discourse, with a particular focus on health and housing.

Français

Le Sinn Féin est tout sauf un parti traditionnel. Pendant des années, il a été le paria de la politique irlandaise, et une exception dans le paysage politique européen. Il est toutefois devenu la principale force politique des deux côtés de la frontière irlandaise. De toute évidence, le fait d'ancrer ses politiques dans cet idéal a conféré au parti une vision et lui donne un avantage certain sur ses concurrents. Son pragmatisme sur cette question – la réunification étant présentée comme un objectif parfaitement réalisable – se base sur les principes de l'égalité et du consentement, que le parti dit avoir toujours défendus. Cet article examine dans un premier temps la façon dont le Sinn Féin a réussi à se réinventer, et à réécrire son propre récit, après des années passées dans l'ombre de son alter-ego pour le moins controversé, l'Armée républicaine irlandaise (IRA). Il analyse ensuite la manière dont le parti aborde le débat sur la réunification, objectif qui reste au cœur de toutes ses stratégies. Il étudie dans un dernier temps le discours du parti sur le thème de l'égalité et plus particulièrement le logement et la santé publique.

Mots-clés

Sinn Féin, IRA, réunification, égalité, élection, consentement, accords du Vendredi saint, Brexit

Keywords

Sinn Féin, IRA, Irish unity, equality, election, Good Friday Agreement, consent, Brexit

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