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briefing

Sinn Féin's partitioned approach

Writing ante-deluvia, Peter Robinson in this very magazine (Issue no. 213, of 1985) said that were Sinn Féin (hereafter SF) to take the first rank in nationalist parties, it would be a declaration of war. SF did not contest their first council election in the North until 1983 (Seamus Kerr, Omagh). We now have: the first SF Lord Mayor of Belfast, SF top ranking nationalist parties in local elections; 5 SF TDs in the Dáil; 4 MPs and an SF office in Westminster. How did it happen?

Strategy, borne of circumstance and inwit, was well applied. Early Troubles era figures like Sean MacStiofáin learnt to use propaganda and the media by the early 1970s. SF made a drive for more academic smarts when its political neophytes were still earning their cell-credibility in the 1970s and '80s. Open University Degrees abounded in the H blocks and elsewhere. SF began to organise itself, and did so with the efficiency one normally attributes to a military force. They learnt the non-speak before New Labour. They targeted the US cultural nostalgia market like revolutionary Jerry Falwells and milked it for funds long before the UUP got a US office.

In the North, SF have campaigned on equality, discrimination, and injustice cards – 'new' republicanism. In the South, where they have just asserted their 'All-Ireland representative' claim to the alarm of the political establishment, their TDs and officials have campaigned for respect of the Nice Treaty Referendum result (Aengus O Snodaigh, Dublin South Central), supported the Aer Lingus strikers (Sean Crowe, Dublin South West), called for extension of the Medical Card scheme to minors in full-time education or those on minimum wage (David Cullinane, Waterford

Spokesperson), and action to save factory jobs (Arthur Morgan, Louth). The book? Local, effective socialist minded representation: Trotsky O'Gill and the little people.

Gerry Adams appeared with Bono to campaign for Third World Debt relief in New York in February 2002. This contrasts with his attendance of a W.T.O. event again in early 2002. The proof of mixed message is the SF merchandise available on line which includes keyrings, t-shirts, baseball caps and calendars. SF has worked its way in Southern Irish political discourse, and specifically in the context of grass roots politics in areas of untreated deprivation where voters care about healthcare, education, and needle parks more than decommissioning or kneecappings. In the Republic the SF message has been cleverly tailored, and is, the rebel west excepted, seeming 'Republican Lite'.

Two ideas inform southern SF policy: working class experience, and the transmutable nature of that experience viz direct community action in anti drug campaigns, demonstrations etc. SF has shown itself capable of projecting a disciplined party persona responsive to the concerns of its proposed constituents and so preferable to 'detached' mainstream parties: this, at the expense of the Irish Labour Party, Fianna Fail *et al.* Context is also relevant, as state-wide voter apathy resultant of lacklustre administration of public services was broken by a strong SF message. Quoth the manifesto – "Health care is the big casualty of the Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat tax-cutting strategy favouring the rich." SF directly accused this coalition of having, 'worsened social inequalities and widened the gap between rich and poor'. So SF proposed the eventual abolition of private

healthcare, affordable childcare, community based drug rehabilitation schemes etc. The question the main parties must ponder is perhaps whether the turn to SF, is disillusionment or Francophile recklessness? More the former. Opportunism, and old fashioned graft on micro level social problems and solutions are the hallmarks of the southern Sinn Féin gains.

In the North, the battle has been easier won, due to longstanding SDLP lassitude and fresh bloodlessness, which handed SF the nationalist mandate. SF made use of the online census and electoral register in recent northern council elections to identify those (usually young) eligible yet unregistered to vote. Callouts and personal exhortations made to those people, to register and vote SF, proved a very successful pressgang tactic. The local policing services of the Boys has meant that in poor nationalist areas in the north, SF have been able to claim that only they and not the PSNI can maintain order and quash crime. The related tactic of promoting vigilantism among the laity has allegedly been used in the Republic, though the chaos of the 'drug wars' in the estates has obfuscated this. The party organisation itself is so efficient that when a Councillor in Killarney was accused of intimidation in May the party had a rep on site within some few hours. No other party in Ireland is as well motivated and organised as SF. Some degree of failure of traditional politics is at the heart of SF success in the Republic. Voter interest seems to exist now in ends, not means. Until the mainstream parties (such as the SDLP or Fianna Fail) recontact with local issues and people the SF mandate will continue to grow.

