

**The 1970
Sinn Féin
Ard Fheis

An Analysis**

Citizen Press

Preface to Online Edition

This pamphlet was originally published ten years ago to mark the fortieth anniversary of the 1969 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis which, because of the exigencies of the time, was actually held in January 1970.

This edition has been created using OCR technology to create an exact copy of the original document. The only change made is that the format has been altered from the original A5 format to an A4 format.

We hope that this online edition will bring this analysis by the Workers' Party of the momentous Ard Fheis of January 1970 to a new and wider audience.

The Workers' Party
2020

Introduction

The Sinn Féin Aid Fheis that took place in January 1970 was a defining moment in the history of republicanism in Ireland. It made clear that Republicans would not be deflected from the path they had chosen. It demonstrated that they were committed to completing the transition from narrow nationalist militarism to revolutionary socialism; that they had embraced the return to the anti-sectarian egalitarian republicanism of Tone and Connolly; and that Republicans would not be deflected from that path either by the actions of the conservative governments in both states, nor by the forces of conservatism within the Republican Movement itself. The Aid Fheis of January 1970 was a landmark in the development of The Workers' Party, and of modern Ireland.

This short pamphlet, part of a longer and more detailed work yet to be published, analyses developments within the Republican Movement from the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the Troubles in August 1969 to the Ard Fheis of January 1970. It describes the origins of the tensions within Republicanism that came to a head in the period after August 1969. It outlines the attempts of Fianna Fáil to reverse the advance of progressive politics not just within the Republican Movement, but also within the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the broader civil rights movement. It describes Fianna Fáil's two-part plan for ending the threat posed by the Republican Movement.

The first part of the plan was to split the Republican Movement in alliance with conservative and sectarian elements attached to it, who had failed to divert the Republican Movement down the cul-de-sac of sectarian militarism. The second part of the plan was to take over the civil rights movement, in which the Republican Movement played the leading role. The pamphlet reminds us that the Republican Movement continued to promote democratic, socialist and secular politics across the island despite the pressures placed on it by events in the North. It continued to educate, agitate and organise for the unity of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter and the establishment of the Socialist Republic.

**Research Section
The Workers' Party
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I: The Origins of August 1969

Political and sectarian tensions had been rising for some time before August 1969. The Divis Street riots of 1964 and the UVF murders of 1966, and its attempted murder of republicans that year, demonstrated that elements of unionism were ready to use violence in defence of the status quo long before the civil rights campaign openly challenged the discrimination on which the Unionist state rested. Paisleyite responses to the civil rights marches had often turned violent – most famously, and outrageously, at Burntollet, but there had also been rioting in Armagh, Newry, and Derry, where the famous 'You are now entering Free Derry' slogan appeared as early as January 1969. That anger had been growing among anti-unionists was clear from these riots, and from the turnout at the funeral of Samuel Devenny, who died in July as a result of a beating in his home by the RUC during riots in Derry in April. However, the ferocity of the violence that broke out in August 1969 took everyone by surprise.

The main source of that ferocity lay within unionism, and its response to the demands of the civil rights movement. As detailed in The Workers' Party pamphlet, *Civil Rights: Reform or Revolution?*, the Republican Movement was heavily involved in the civil rights campaign in the North, as part of its broader all-island strategy. Under the leadership of Cathal Goulding and Tomás Mac Giolla, the Movement sought to make republicanism relevant to the people by becoming involved in political, social and economic agitation. The focus of the Movement was being shifted towards politics.

The Movement involved itself in the campaign for greater democratisation and the expansion of civil rights in both states. In the pages of the *United Irishman*, as well as on the streets, Republicans agitated for the political, social and economic rights of the people of Ireland, whether they lived in the Gaeltacht, Dublin's slums or the housing estates of Belfast and Derry. Democracy was at the top of the Republican Movement's agenda; not only did it struggle for one man, one vote in the north, it campaigned vigorously against Fianna Fáil's plans to remove proportional representation in the south. The origins of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association lie in this re-orientation of the Republican Movement.

The peaceful civil rights strategy destroyed the Unionist regime. The civil rights campaign and marches, by bringing the discrimination on which the state was built into the spotlight and exposing the injustices of Northern Ireland before public opinion at home and abroad, ensured that change would happen. In the aftermath of the RUC attack on the NICRA march in Derry on October 5th 1968, the London government made clear to Terence O'Neill and his Stormont Cabinet that the systematic discrimination in the electoral franchise, local government and housing would have to end. Northern Ireland had embarrassed the British government internationally, and changes would have to be made. On 22nd November 1968, a package of incomplete reforms was announced. However, the Northern Ireland Cabinet papers, now held at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, demonstrate that in the months that followed, Unionist ministers sought to preserve as much as they could of their state, seeking at every turn to frustrate and delay the implementation of reform. The extent of their duplicity is demonstrated in the fact that some attempted to argue that they could not introduce electoral reform granting equal rights to all citizens until they had held an election on that issue. In these circumstances, NICRA and the Republican Clubs quite rightly continued to agitate for civil rights to ensure that the issue stayed before the public eye, and to put pressure on London not to allow backsliding on the reforms.

As the months passed, many elements of unionism grew increasingly bitter and angry that their state was in the process of being radically reformed. The announcement on 23rd April 1969 by the Northern

Ireland government that it would accept one man, one vote angered many unionists, including some who had been supportive of O'Neill. The clashes that took place in the months prior to August 1969 need to be seen in this light - large numbers of unionists believed that they were losing the control of the state on which they believed their future depended. They reacted all the more violently to what they perceived to be a danger to the continuation of the Union with Britain.

The Republican Movement's turn to the left had not gone unnoticed by the Unionist Party. The Unionist Party's political strategy since the foundation of the state had been to constantly tell its supporters that any splits in the unionist ranks endangered the very existence of the state. Sectarian solidarity was essential to the entire nature of the state and its politics. The growth of the Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1960s, the emergence of the Republican Labour Party under Gerry Fitt, and the new anti-sectarian and socialist political strategy being pursued by the Republican Clubs were all a source of concern to the Unionist Party: the unionist monolith depended upon the absence of class politics, but class politics was increasingly on the agenda both within unionism and its opponents.

The Unionist Party was especially frightened of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, which took 45,000 votes in the Stormont elections of February 1969. The Unionist Party feared the long-term capacity of left-wing politics not only to weaken its hold on power within Northern Ireland, but also to weaken unionism's position against nationalism. The Paisleyites refused to accept the Unionist Party's demands for obedience, but they were even more fearful that socialism could destroy Northern Ireland, as seen in Paisley's rhetoric about the dangers of an alliance between "Marxists and Romanists". The success of NICRA, whose origins lay in the Republican Movement and whose Executive included many Republicans and Communists, deepened unionism's fear. Nearly five decades of a paranoid style of politics where the state was constantly in danger from Lundy's, nationalists, Republicans, and Reds would reach their logical conclusion in the attacks on anti-unionist areas by state forces and loyalist mobs in August 1969.

How realistic were these fears? On March 19th 1970, the Northern Ireland Cabinet received an inventory of the armaments held by the RUC and Ulster Special Constabulary. The RUC was around 3,000-strong, with the B Specials numbering around 9,000. The arms available to the state consisted of more than 15,000 rifles; 15,000 revolvers, pistols and shotguns; nearly 3,000 automatic weapons; 117 mortars and 970 mortar bombs; over 2,000 hand grenades; nearly 8 million rounds of ammunition of various sorts; 27,000 illuminating cartridges; 3,000 miscellaneous primers, detonators, flares etc; 120 tear or gas grenades; and 41 armoured vehicles. In addition, there were 5,000 British troops in barracks in Northern Ireland. The Republican Movement must have been a formidable organisation indeed for such a well armed state to fear it.

By comparison, in 1972 Liam McMillen recalled the situation of the Belfast IRA in 1969. It had around 120 men, and a grand total of 24 weapons, most of them pistols. In parts of the city such as Ardoyne, the IRA had problems finding sympathetic people to store what arms it did have. Eamonn McCann, who was working closely with Republicans in Derry at this time on issues such as housing and civil rights, has claimed that the IRA Officer Commanding for Derry told him that the IRA had three guns in the city just before the Battle of the Bogside. The IRA, as anyone who read the *United Irishman* knew full well, continued to deploy violent direct action in support of the social and economic demands of the Movement. Some of the more significant actions were carried out in support of striking workers, such as the burning of buses for scab workers during the EI strike, and attacks on property in support of demands for land redistribution and an end to the private ownership of natural resources. IRA members also prevented evictions.

Much has been made by some of the Military Council document captured with Sean Garland in early 1966. This document has been used to argue that the Goulding - Mac Giolla leadership was still committed to the idea of an armed struggle to drive the British out and unite the country by force, and that the continued recruitment and training of IRA members north and south must be seen in this light. It has also been used to accuse The Workers' Party of re-writing the history of the transformation from Republican Movement to The Workers' Party. The document outlined a strategy for a radical overhaul of the Republican Movement, which would give primacy to politics, with a concentration on open political work and work within the trade union movement and other peoples' organisations such as co-operatives: these activities would prove to be "a training ground for revolutionary government".

The document envisaged the growth of Republican strength in the peoples' organisations and in electoral politics resulting eventually in a situation where they acted as alternative centres of economic, social and political power: the Republican elected representatives would meet outside Leinster House, and pass laws, for example nationalising a foreign-owned factory. This would bring the two rival power structures into conflict, and "military action" would resolve the situation - but military action was defined as the seizing of the factory in question rather than storming the Dáil. This section of the document was clearly influenced by events in Russia in 1917, and laid out a plan for a similar revolution in Ireland.

The military strategy section of the document outlined a plan for a campaign in the north. The extent to which it was a realistic proposition can be judged from the list of armaments it outlined as necessary to carry it out: hundreds of automatic rifles, a thousand short arms, 300 bazookas with 3,000 shells, thousands of grenades and 10 tonnes of plastic explosive. This from an organisation that was perpetually in financial difficulties and had only limited amounts of modern weaponry.

The Military Council was used to alleviate tensions within the Movement over the shift to the left and the discussions that had already begun over abstentionism. Put bluntly, giving the militarists something traditional to do kept them occupied, and lessened the likelihood of them frustrating the real aims of the leadership as outlined in the political section of the document. Again, the real emphasis of the Movement on politics was obvious to anyone who read the *United Irishman* or who observed Republican involvement in social and economic agitation, and the campaigns to extend and protect democracy north and south.

In short, then, the Republican Movement lacked the military capacity to threaten the existence of the extremely heavily-armed Northern state. In fact, it is highly likely that the Unionist regime could have held off the Irish army with the RUC and B Specials had the pipedream of an invasion ever occurred. Although the IRA did carry out some armed actions in the North in the year or so before August 1969, these were of an extremely limited and specific nature, and did not represent a move towards a new campaign. As outlined in *Civil Rights: Reform or Revolution?* Republican involvement in NICRA was not aimed at achieving a united Ireland, but only at democratising the Northern state. However, what both the Republican Movement and the most reactionary elements of unionism understood very well, was that in reforming the Northern Ireland state the old system of Unionist dominance would be irreversibly shattered. It is this realisation among the unionist extremists both within and beyond the Unionist Party, both within and beyond the forces of the state, that accounts for the ferocity of the violence unleashed by unionism in Derry, Belfast and Armagh in August 1969. They understood that the days of their unfettered power were over, and they lashed out in frustration, bitterness and sectarian hatred.

2. Tensions in the Republican Movement before August 1969

The violence in Derry, Belfast, and Armagh unleashed by reactionary unionism posed fundamental questions for the Republican Movement. The Republican Movement had met the forces of reactionary unionism head-on, mobilising the resources at its disposal to defend the areas under attack. There can be no doubt that without the actions of the Republican Movement in organising and coordinating the defence, the number of people killed and the amount of damage done would have been much greater. As Liam McMillen noted in the aftermath of its actions in Belfast during mid-August, "the Republican Movement enjoyed a popularity among the people that it had never experienced before". But that popularity also served to exacerbate existing tensions in Belfast and further afield over the direction being taken by the Republican Movement.

The New Departure undertaken under Cathal Goulding had met with scepticism and resistance in some quarters within the Republican Movement from the start. The disaffection had proven greatest in rural areas, with North Kerry the heartland of discontent, but there had also been rumblings in Belfast, with resignations and a failure of some Volunteers to follow Army orders and join the Republican Clubs. Not all disaffection sprang from the same source. Some were unhappy with the move towards secularism, and refused to sell a United Irishman that contained a call for an ending to the saying of the rosary at republican commemorations. The real issue for others was the move away from Catholic nationalism, and the placing of the unity of Protestant, Belfast and Dissenter back at the centre of republican politics. The fact that the political language of Republicanism had changed to embrace anti-sectarianism, that the Republican Clubs in Belfast were opening communications with housing activists from the Shankill and that Sean Garland's 1969 Easter speech in Belfast stressed the need for Republicans to seek support from all sections of the people appalled those who saw the IRA as a vehicle for Catholic solidarity. Others objected to the Movement's socialism, and cooperation with other left groups. Cumann na mBan was stood down for its anti-socialism, although the IRA had already begun the process of integrating women into its organisation. Disaffected Cumann na mBan groups continued to operate. For Jimmy Steele, who used the return of the bodies of Peter Barnes and James McCormack in July 1969 to make a vicious public denunciation of the leadership, the problem was the 'foreign' ideology of socialism. He claimed that "one is now expected to be more conversant with the thoughts of Chairman Mao than those of our dead Patriots". This was the language of the red-scare, and had been used for general elections by Cumann na nGaedhael in 1932 and Fianna Fáil just the previous month. If Steele's language demonstrated the extent to which he was part of the Catholic nationalist right in Ireland, he also revealed his narrow militarism and sterile approach to the abstentionist question in speaking derisively of "politicians" and "constitutionalists".

The question of abstentionism was the main cause for discontent. The amount of opposition to the dropping of abstentionism was higher within Sinn Féin than it was within the IRA. This largely reflected the older age profile of Sinn Féin members, many of whom had personal memories of the Civil War or of friends and relatives killed by Free State forces. Many also remembered the period when Sinn Féin and the IRA had become separated, and saw their prime loyalty to Sinn Féin and not the IRA. On the other hand, the IRA was by its nature younger, and its leadership in particular had experienced the failures of the Border Campaign first hand. In addition, many of those who had joined in the 1960s had done so precisely because of the socialist policies and moves to get involved in political and social agitation that traditionalists resented. There were members of the IRA opposed to the policies of the leadership, some in senior positions, like Sean Mac Stíofáin, who shared Jimmy Steele's contempt for politics and commitment to militarism, and who resented the fact that military action was no longer the main focus of the Movement. However, those opposed to the overall direction being taken by the Movement remained a small minority, especially within the IRA.

During the Border Campaign, discussions had taken place among prisoners north and south about the need to get involved in politics, and perhaps to embrace electoralism. The question of abandoning abstentionism had been raised at an Army Convention and at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis as early as 1964, and was debated at a special Ard Fheis in 1965 to discuss proposals for re-orienting and integrating the Movement, when it had been decided to maintain abstentionism. The question of abstentionism, and the linked question of socialism, would from this point on be matters for constant discussion with the Movement. At the ordinary Ard Fheis for 1965, four motions from Kerry advocated strong support for abstentionism, while another motion called for Sinn Féin to abandon the strategy of agitation and not get involved in labour disputes. In other words, these were calls to abandon the most dynamic activities in which the Movement was engaged, and which were succeeding in attracting new support, in favour of the sterile attitudes of the past that had dragged the Movement into crisis by 1962. Aware that they were in the minority, and that the IRA was more sympathetic to change, elements from Kerry would soon seek to ban Army Council members from membership of the Sinn Féin Ard Comhairle, while others called for Sinn Féin to be autonomous from the IRA. Discontented elements began leaking stories to the press from late 1965 that Communists were taking over the Republican Movement.

The Republican leadership however continued with its policy of political and social agitation, and to keep the question of abstentionism under review, while pressure built from below change the policy. Many IRA members were frustrated by the traditionalist attitudes of many within Sinn Féin, and one motion at the 1966 Army Convention even called for the setting up of a new political organisation if Sinn Féin refused to embrace the new strategy. At every Sinn Féin Ard Fheis, there were motions calling for an end to abstentionism. These motions came from across the island, including places like Dublin, Fermanagh and Tyrone. In 1967, reflecting the shifting balance of power within Sinn Féin in favour of the Goulding strategy, the constitution was amended to make Sinn Féin's aim "the establishment of a democratic Socialist Republic based on the Proclamation of Easter week 1916."

During 1968, the question of abstentionism grew in importance. In January 1968, Sinn Féin decided to contest the Wicklow by-election, putting forward Seamus Costello, who was already a local councillor, as the candidate. Although Costello later complained that he had received insufficient support from around the country, Sinn Féin had committed a large proportion of its financial and other resources to his campaign. Costello performed creditably, polling over 2,000 votes, and coming fourth. At the 1968 Ard Fheis, the Belfast Comhairle Ceanntair and others proposed that Sinn Féin stand for and take seats in Leinster House, and there were also motions calling for the Republican Clubs to contest and take seats in Northern Ireland. It was clear that there was a large majority in favour of ending abstentionism, but not if it would reach the necessary two-thirds majority. The leadership, keen to avoid a bitter dispute that might precipitate a split, proposed an amendment calling for a commission to examine the fundamental strategy of the Movement, and this motion was passed. Two days, later however, the MP for Mid-Ulster died, and the question of Republican electoral strategy was re-opened.

This election, coming in the aftermath of October 5th and as the civil rights movement was moving into a higher gear, offered a great opportunity to demonstrate the strength of support for civil rights. Tom Mitchell had won the seat as a Republican candidate twice in the mid-1950s, and the civil rights movement was very active in the area. The opportunities to promote the civil rights campaign and republican politics provided by the by-election were stressed by the local Republican Clubs organisation. Kevin Agnew warned the Ard Comhairle that if the Republican Clubs stood an abstentionist candidate "there would be no Republican Movement in mid-Ulster in a month's time". Figures such as Garland and Mac Giolla were concerned that the issue had the potential to cause a

split throughout the country, and suggested instead that local Republicans find an agreed anti-unionist candidate friendly to the Movement instead. In the event, the selection convention went ahead, with Tom Mitchell refusing to stand again as an abstentionist candidate. Kevin Agnew was selected on an abstentionist basis after it seemed that a split might occur if the convention went against national policy on abstentionism. Fear of a split had once again prevented those advocating change from pushing as far as they would have wished, but 6 people, including an Ard Comhairle member, resigned in protest at the futility of abstentionism and the wishes of the local organisation being overridden. In the event, Bernadette Devlin stood as an agreed civil rights candidate, and easily took the seat. In the south, the Wicklow Comhairle Ceanntair again pushed to be allowed to contest the general election of June 1969, and was granted permission to do so on an abstentionist basis. It was agreed that any area able to stand candidates on the same basis could do so. The situation, then, was that by June 1969 a significant majority of the Republican Movement had not only embraced socialism, anti-sectarianism and social and political agitation instead of narrow nationalist militarism, but it had also come to the conclusion that abstentionism was a serious impediment to the policy of the Republican Movement, and had to go.

Those opposed to the policies of the leadership were also reaching their own conclusions by early 1969. Those committed to militarism and a sectarian nationalism began to organise themselves as tensions rose in the north and within the Movement. Mac Stíofáin claimed later that he had begun secretly moving weapons to people in the north opposed to the leadership early in 1969. He also said that he had heard reports that people who had previously been in the IRA, but now had no connection to it, had also been making efforts to acquire arms and hold training camps, but withheld this news from the IRA. Whether these reports are accurate or not, it is certainly the case that people like Jimmy Steele and Billy McKee were agitating against the IRA leadership in Belfast. People like Liam Burke were also visiting other areas looking for signs of disaffection, while Mac Stíofáin and others were spreading the idea that the IRA had fallen into the hands of Communists, and stressing that they would never accept an end to abstentionism nor cooperation with other left-wing groups.

Liam McMillen resisted "heavy pressure" in May and June to mount gun attacks on the RUC and loyalists during fighting in parts of north Belfast on the grounds that the IRA had insufficient weapons available, and that to do so would provide the pretext for greater repression and could incite sectarian pogroms. In June 1969, a Dublin businessman, acting on behalf of the Fianna Fáil government, offered the IRA weapons for defensive use in the north if a separate northern command were established. A similar offer had been made in February that year.

By August 1969, then, tensions within the Republican Movement were growing, and a split was highly likely. The commitment of the leadership and a large majority of IRA and Sinn Féin members to the new departure was clear; but so was the fact that some would never be reconciled to the adoption of anti-sectarian socialism, political, economic and social agitation and the abandonment of abstentionism. The new strategy was gaining support for the Movement across the country, and the civil rights strategy had undermined the very basis of the Unionist regime. The leadership, aware of the damage done by splits in the past, sought to avoid forcing the issue. Internal dissidents like Mac Stíofáin and the Ó Brádaighs stayed within the Movement in the hope of gaining control of it; or, failing that, of taking as many people with them as possible. It must be remembered that, especially in Belfast, those most unhappy with the direction of the Movement had long since been out of the Movement, and so had little influence within it. However the fact that, unlike these former republicans, Fianna Fáil had the material means to facilitate a split meant that outside forces did in fact play a large role in the formation of the Provisionals.

3. August 1969 and the Republican Movement

As noted above, the Republican Movement experienced unprecedented popularity in the aftermath of August 12th - 15th 1969. In April 1969, after serious rioting between the police and the local population in Derry, Goulding had pointed out that the IRA would act if its hand was forced. Interviewed by BBC Radio's The World at One, Goulding stated that republicans did not want violence but that if in order to deny civil rights, sectarian violence was unleashed by the state, 'we will have no alternative but to protect our own people or allow them to be slaughtered, and we are not going to allow them to be slaughtered.' In August, republicans kept that promise. Bombay Street was burned, but there was a widespread recognition that without the actions of the Republican Movement, the situation would have been much worse. The experience of the violence, especially in Belfast, had transformed many people's attitudes to the IRA. Large numbers of people flocked to join. One Belfast quartermaster recalls the difference in public attitudes before August 1969 and after: "Before, if you had asked someone to keep a gun for you, they would have laughed at you. Afterwards, if you had said to them "I have a tank here", they would have said 'Bring it in'".

As barricades sprang up in working-class areas across different towns and cities, such as Belfast, Derry, Newry and Armagh, the Republican Movement coordinated the emerging broad-based citizens' defence organisations in non-unionist areas. In alliance with these committees, the Movement organised vigilante patrols both for defence and to keep order, as well as ensure that necessities were available to people behind the barricades, and that people could continue to get to work. At the same time, frantic efforts were made to get Volunteers and weapons to the north. Recruitment to the Movement increased in the south, while Sinn Féin organised rallies and meetings demanding that the Dublin government act, and give guns to those who needed them. This of course was a demand also being made right across the anti-unionist population of the north. An IRA statement signed by Cathal Goulding in his capacity as Chief of Staff outlined the efforts that had been made by the IRA, and called on all Irish people to unite against the forces of British imperialism. It pointed out that the IRA had for several years given its support to peaceful demands for civil rights "in the genuine hope that reforms obtained by constitutional agitation would provide a framework within which a peaceful settlement might be arrived at to the outstanding problems of our people". The IRA had now been "reluctantly compelled" into military action because right-wing Unionism had met peaceful demands for civil rights with force, and was working with the popular defence organisations. Ultimate responsibility for the actions of the B Specials, the statement said, laid with Westminster, which had allowed this situation to develop. The statement warned British soldiers that until the B Specials were disbanded, civil rights granted, and until the troops were in fact removed from the country, they were in a "very perilous situation". If they allowed themselves to be used against legitimate attempts at self-defence from the forces of sectarianism, they would have to face the consequences.

The statement called on the Dublin government to use the Irish Army in defence of those facing persecution, and to bring the situation in the north before the UN, to expose Britain's claim that this was an internal matter, and to turn "the searchlight of world opinion" on the mess Britain had allowed to develop in the north. It called on Irish people in the south to "put every pressure you can" on the Dublin government to live up to its responsibilities to the "victimised people of the North", and to donate generously to the relief funds set up for both Catholics and Protestants turned out of their homes. They should organise meetings and demonstrations of support, regardless of their political views.

Goulding stated that there could only be a political solution to the crisis. Republicans saw the only acceptable solution as British withdrawal and a 32-county parliament elected by proportional representation under UN supervision. An independent republic was the only system that would guarantee civil rights to all religions, to unite the working class, and clear the way for progressive advances leading to the socialist Republic.

This was a complex statement. It clearly attempted to strike a balance that would do nothing to further endanger the unity of the Movement, while making clear what its policies were. It reiterated the fundamental republican belief that the British must withdraw for the Irish problem to be solved, warned British troops about their presence, and made clear that the IRA was active and would continue to be so in defence of those at risk of sectarian violence. It also called on the Dublin government to act in accordance with its constitutional claim to the 32 counties. Yet at the same time it made clear that the events in the north would not change the focus of the Movement. It still aimed to "lay the basis for democracy and socialism in our country", and the immediate demands were in line with those of the civil rights movement: the disbandment of the B Specials and the implementation of the civil rights demands. The remarks addressed to the British troops did speak of their being in peril until they were withdrawn, but reminded them that the same British ruling elite that was a curse to the people of Ireland had been the same to the people of Britain. The remarks addressed to the troops warned them that if they allowed themselves to be the tools of sectarian reaction, there would be consequences. There is no suggestion of them being targeted by virtue of their being on the streets alone. It is not a declaration of war. The remarks about relief for Catholics and Protestants forced out and about only a republic being able to guarantee full rights for all were a clear reminder that the Movement continued to reject sectarian politics despite what had occurred.

The Republican strategy had been shaped by the conviction that the unionists could not be coerced into a united Ireland. That conviction also came out here in the statement that there must be a political settlement. The statement demonstrated that the Republican Movement was determined not to be diverted from its course: while it would act in defence of the people, it would continue to agitate for civil rights and the unity of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter.

While Goulding sought to ensure that the Republican Movement stayed the course of anti-sectarian progressive politics, the sectarians and the narrow militarists saw their chance. As noted by Liam McMillen, popular support "created the conditions which brought so many disgruntled and ex-members of the IRA out into the open again and which led to the establishment of the Provisionals." The wave of recruitment after August 1969 included former members who were taken back for their experience. Dáithí Ó Conaill, for example, was appointed O/C of the Donegal/Derry area despite being inactive for several years. Many of those seeking to join the IRA had no background in republicanism, and retained the attitudes of Catholic nationalism. The likes of Jimmy Steele, Billy McKee and Joe Cahill - whose vision of republicanism extended no farther than using weapons against the British and Irish Protestants, and who had done nothing for years - saw, their chance. On August 24th, a meeting was held in Jimmy Steele's house in the New Lodge Road to plan a coup against the Republican leadership. On September 22nd, members of this group arrived armed at the venue for a Belfast Command Staff meeting. The dissidents demanded that Liam McMillen resign as the O/C of Belfast, and when he refused, they demanded that the Staff be enlarged to include their people, and that relations with GHQ be broken off until Goulding, Mick Ryan, Roy Johnston and Seamus Costello had been removed from the leadership, and therefore that no delegates from Belfast attend the forthcoming Army Convention. Keen to avoid confrontation and a formal split, McMillen agreed to their conditions, while remaining loyal to the IRA, and keeping in contact with Goulding in secret. When the dissidents discovered this, they began setting up their own northern command structure.

4. Fianna Fáil and the IRA

The Republican Movement had been transformed by the new departure. Sinn Féin had become the most active campaigning party in the country. The United Irishman of the time records the numerous agitations on housing, fishing, the ownership of natural resources, land distribution, the rights of the Gaeltacht, and for civil rights in the north in which the Republican Clubs were engaged. The defence of proportional representation against Fianna Fáil efforts to abolish it was also a major theme of the paper. The paper also details the other activities of the Republican Movement, in supporting the labour movement, agitating in trade unions and supporting strikes, in exposing the greed and corruption of Ireland's political and economic elite, exemplified by Taca, Fianna Fáil's fundraising arm, and its connections to property developers. The paper also reflected the Movement's increasing socialism, publishing extensive documents on socialism and ideology, the EEC, economic resistance and the nature of capitalism and imperialism in 1960s Ireland, and international struggles in Vietnam, Palestine, Latin America and Africa. The very ability to sell the paper itself and the right of Republican Clubs to exist were of course important civil rights issues in the north, and featured prominently in its pages. Even after the crisis had broken out in the North, the United Irishman's pages continued to be filled with stories of social and economic agitation.

Fianna Fáil and their wealthy friends were the main target of the United Irishman, and they - along with their northern unionist equivalents - stood to lose the most from the development of revolutionary socialism in Ireland. They had taken early notice of the threat, using the red scare against the Republican Movement, and they welcomed any signs of discontent with the leadership and the political direction of the Movement. By early 1969, they were sufficiently concerned and sufficiently convinced that there was an opportunity to wreck the Republican Movement that they prepared to act. A Department of Justice Memorandum of March 1969 was quite clear of about what was required. Referring to discontent within the Movement over its socialism and direct action against private property, it stated: "Their uneasiness needs to be brought to the surface in some way with a consequent fragmentation of the organisation. It is suggested by the Department of Justice that the Government should promote an active campaign in that regard." A separate Department of Justice document specifically referred to the example of the Republican Congress, arguing that a split would discredit the Left within the Movement. The offers of arms and finance in return for the establishment of a separate northern campaign that came both before and after August 1969 can only be seen as part of a deliberate effort by Fianna Fáil to carry out this programme. The existence of this plan was a vital element in the creation of the Provisionals: it is likely that without Fianna Fáil encouragement and support, the Provisionals would not have been able to attract as many people as they did, as they would have appeared a much more insignificant force. That the consequences of their actions would be many sectarian murders was of little concern to men like Charles Haughey when weighed against the threat of socialism.

Fianna Fáil's plan was comprised of two main elements. The first was to precipitate a split in the Republican Movement, and the second was to wrest leadership of the civil rights movement out of the hands of the Republican Clubs and their allies. During the Battle of the Bogside, however, Fianna Fáil did take some action to address the situation. Field hospitals were set up on the border, and soon arms training was provided to people from across the Border, including IRA members. Dáithí Ó Conaill helped facilitate some training using Irish army weapons with the aid of a local Fianna Fáil TD. Moves were made to get guns to the north as well. Those involved were later charged, but were cleared in the Arms Trial of 1970 after a disastrous attempt to buy guns from Belgium. The Cabinet established a sub-Committee made up of Neil Blaney, Pádraig Faulkner, Joe Brennan, and Charlie

Haughey, with Ir£100,000 for relief of people in the north. On August 17th, Cathal Goulding was contacted by a priest in London with an offer of funds for weapons for the North. On arrival, he met Charlie Haughey's brother, Jock. Goulding told him he would need at least £50,000, and was given £1,500 with the promise of more. Jock Haughey later personally delivered weapons to IRA members at Dublin airport. Goulding and those loyal to him did have access to money provided by Fianna Fáil, but this was soon halted.

Other IRA figures were also approached. Captain James Kelly, a southern intelligence officer, had been in contact with dissidents in Belfast, and they had decided to accept the offer of weapons in return for splitting from the IRA in early September. This was before their attempted coup in Belfast - we can only speculate as to whether they would have acted so boldly without the promises of guns and money from Fianna Fáil. On September 22nd, Francie Donnelly, the O/C of the IRA in South Derry who had been approached previously, was now approached again by Captain Kelly and a local businessman with links to Neil Blaney. They said that a separate Northern Command that rejected socialism and cut links with Goulding, Ryan and Costello would receive arms. Johnny White, the IRA O/C in Derry city at the time, claimed 35 years later that Captain Kelly offered him £50,000 for arms if several republican leaders were killed. At the least, it is certain that they were looking to see those concerned removed from positions of influence within the IRA. Fianna Fáil's initial aims seems to have been a coup within the Republican Movement that would have seen the socialist leadership removed and replaced by militarists. Failing this, they sought to facilitate the establishment of a separate northern organisation.

The Republican Movement exposed Fianna Fáil's plan to take over the civil rights movement in the United Irishman for November 1969. At this time, based primarily on the economic policies of Fianna Fáil, the Republican Movement suspected that there were plans for a federal solution to the problem in Ireland, which would bring the south back under closer British control. The United Irishman interpreted not only the Lemass-O'Neill meetings in this light, but also Fianna Fáil machinations within the civil rights movement in this light.

Fianna Fáil's attempt to take over the civil rights movement (and to bring northern nationalism closer to it) was centred round the Voice of the North newspaper, which was produced by Seamus Brady, a journalist who had worked for the Dublin government and Fianna Fáil's Taca organisation, and Aidan Corrigan, a member of the Dungannon Civil Rights Committee who would later join the Provisional/People's Democracy rival to NICRA, the Northern Resistance Movement. Brady was travelling throughout the north meeting and wooing civil rights leaders, especially those from the constitutional nationalist tradition. The Voice of the North pledged to speak out "fearlessly for the Irish people of the Six Counties". As the United Irishman noted, "it speaks out for Fianna Fáil, is financed by Fianna Fáil money, and seeks to equate Civil Rights in the North with Fianna Fáil in the South". The paper regularly quoted De Valera, and condemned the continued use of the Special Powers Act, while ignoring the fact that Malachy McGurran and Frank Card were then in jail under its terms. The Voice of the North was distributed in Belfast by republican dissidents, further cementing their alliance with Fianna Fáil. Attempts to mobilise supporters of Fianna Fáil to push the Republican Movement out of the civil rights movement quickly failed however.

The Fianna Fáil plot to take over the civil rights movement failed, but its plan to split the Republican Movement proved all too successful. Neil Blaney was so pleased with himself that he boasted of the role of himself and other members of Fianna Fáil in creating the Provisionals in the British press in 1972.

5. The January 1970 Ard Fheis

The IRA Army Convention met on December 13th/14th 1969. The main items of business were motions in favour of the National Liberation Front and the ending of abstentionism. Both were passed, by large majorities. At a meeting afterwards, the Provisionals were established by Mac Stíofáin and Ó Brádaigh. The overwhelming majority of areas and of Volunteers stayed loyal to the IRA. The split was inevitable by this stage, its timing partly dictated by the intervention of Fianna Fáil. The formation of the Provisionals gave a name to something that had already occurred in Belfast and a few other places. The question now was what would happen at the forthcoming Ard Fheis. A statement released by the Provisionals on December 28th revealed their existence. The statement got their excuse for being in a small minority at the forthcoming Ard Fheis in early, accusing the leadership of trying to stop their opponents attending. They falsely claimed to have the support of the majority of republicans, and outlined their basic cause of complaint: the move towards politics had undermined "the basic military role of the Irish Republican Army". The statement released by their political wing after the Ard Fheis reiterated their objections to entering the parliaments and to the "extreme socialism" of the Movement and working with other left-wing groups. There could be no greater testament to the sterility of their political vision - they offered nothing but force.

At the Ard Fheis itself, the National Liberation Front motion was passed by such a large majority that there was no need for a vote. The proposal to end abstentionism won 153 votes, 19 short of the two-thirds majority necessary to change the Sinn Féin constitution. Dennis Cassin of Armagh proposed a vote of confidence in the IRA leadership, which had already abandoned abstentionism. Mac Stíofáin subsequently seized a microphone, announced his allegiance to the Provisional Army Council, and his supporters, around a third of the delegates, walked out with him. The Provisionals had a great deal less support in the Republican Movement as a whole - the dissidents were over-represented within Sinn Féin compared to the IRA, partly because many of them had long retired from the IRA.

Tomás Mac Giolla's Presidential speech was a clear statement of Sinn Féin's vision. He began by addressing the situation in the Gaeltacht as Gaeilge, before turning to the events in the North. He described how the Dublin government's economic policies were leading to depopulation in the west, and "the end of the native, natural life of the country people of Ireland." This was a process, he warned, that would be accelerated by joining the European Economic Community. However, he also noted the growth of resistance in the west, in the demand for Gaeltacht civil rights and the spread of Land Leagues, which were often initiated and led by Slim Féin members. Turning to the north, Mac Giolla noted the intense sympathy aroused for the victims of discrimination, and the fact that only Republicans and the UVF had refused to lavish praise on the British Army and Jim Callaghan. He reminded his audience that responsibility for Stormont's misrule lay at London's door, and that the British had stood by for two days for the right propaganda moment to act. He warned against the idea mooted by the Nationalist Eddie McAteer of a "little UN" of the islands, and of the danger of a federal solution. Mac Giolla argued against those moderates and "political opportunists" who called for an end to the civil rights struggle - freedom of expression and of political association were still denied to the Republican Clubs. Under Craig's 1967 ban, he pointed out, republicanism as a political philosophy was banned - be it that of Richard Nixon or that of Chairman Mao. The only political party on either the right or left banned was the Republican Clubs; and the only banned political journal was the United Irishman.

Mac Giolla stressed that despite the "deliberately fermented sectarianism" in response to the civil rights campaign, the civil rights movement had to emphasise its non-sectarian ethos. "This is also the most difficult and most challenging task for Republicans in the 70s". Only the unity of workers of all

religions could build a new Ireland, and Republicans were injecting a coherent ideology into the body politic of both states to foster that unity. The Republican struggle would continue along two fronts as it always had - "The separatist struggle of the Irish nation against British Imperialism and the struggle for ownership of the land and resources and wealth of the nation by the mass of the Irish people against the foreign exploiters and the native gombeen men ... If needs be, we must be prepared to win back our country farm by farm, river by river, mine by mine, shop by shop, and factory by factory." Mac Giolla reminded his audience that the dominant economic class controlled the machinery of government in both states. Republicans needed to gain control of that machinery for themselves to effect their revolutionary programme. "The controversial use of Parliamentary participation by Republicans in furtherance of such a revolutionary programme has been the subject of debate at this Ard Fheis. Whatever political methods are used in the struggle ahead I am convinced that all Republicans now have a much clearer view of the way forward and the most vital ingredient for success is unity of action." He closed his speech with an appeal for unity among Republicans to meet the challenges ahead.

Although the motion abandoning abstentionism had narrowly failed to secure the two-thirds majority necessary, the Ard-Fheis of January 1970 was a turning point in the politicisation of the Republican Movement, and in the transformation of the Republican Movement into The Workers' Party. The way was now clear for the Republican Movement to continue along its anti-sectarian, socialist path unimpeded by the alliance of hidebound traditionalists and apolitical sectarian gunmen that formed the core of the Provisional Alliance with their friends in Fianna Fáil. The Republican Movement had faced up to and resisted massive pressure to abandon its political programme, pressure that came from both external and internal factors. The bitter resistance of those locked in the past; the machinations of those who saw republicanism as nothing more than another name for violence; the vitriol of those committed to Hibernian Catholic nationalism; the anti-socialist fervour of the right-wing north and south; the malign intentions of the most corrupt and opportunistic elements of Fianna Fáil; the repression of the Unionist state; the maelstrom of sectarian violence; none of these had succeeded in diverting the Republican Movement from the path of Tone and Connolly. Republicans had shown in the clearest terms their commitment to democratic, secular, socialist politics, and to revolutionising the island of Ireland. As the Ard Fheis ended, the long and difficult task of building a revolutionary party of and for the working class began in earnest.

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This pamphlet is the second produced by the re-established Research Section of The Workers' Party. Part of a larger project that will produce more detailed material, it uses oral testimony from those involved, primary research, and draws on histories of the period, to provide an analysis of the pivotal 1969/70 period in the consolidation of the socialist agenda by the Republican Movement.

The pamphlet describes the origins of the tensions within Republicanism that came to a head in the period after August 1969. It outlines the attempts of Fianna Fáil to reverse the advance of progressive politics not just within the Republican Movement, but also within the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the broader civil rights movement.

It describes Fianna Fáil's two-part plan for ending the threat posed by the Republican Movement.

This study culminates in an analysis of the events and decisions of the Ard Fheis of January 1970.

See Also:

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