Gerry Adams and the Modernisation of Republicanism

by
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INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF PROVO MODERNISATION

Twenty years after its formation in 1970 the Provisional IRA is arguably the most formidable terrorist group in the world. Its active service units are able to strike regularly on the British mainland and against British military personnel in Europe as well as in the streets and country lanes of Northern Ireland. It has a daunting arsenal of weaponry and Semtex explosive given it by Libya in 1985-1986 and, although the security forces in the Irish Republic have uncovered some of this material, it is reckoned that the IRA has enough hardware to sustain it to the end of this decade. Yet all is not well with the Provisionals. Their supporters are increasingly war-weary and the wild optimism of the early 1980s has given way to circumstances where leading republicans can openly contemplate defeat. This essay will attempt to locate the present problems of the Provisional movement within the new strategic perspective developed by a group of Belfast republicans in the mid-1970s. The key figure in this group was Gerry Adams and by an examination of Adam's project it hopes to throw light on the present dilemmas of Irish republicanism.

Gerry Adams, current president of Sinn Fein and since 1983 MP for West Belfast, is recognized as the central figure in the development of the strategy of the Provisional republican movement since the mid-1970s.[1] He was associated with an increasing emphasis on the need to "broaden the battlefield" from the almost pure militarism of the early Provisionals to incorporate a new active role for the political wing of the movement, Sinn Fein. Politicization was linked to the recognition that a militant republicanism confined to the ghettoes of Northern Ireland was destined for defeat and that it was therefore necessary to enlist the support of the masses and particularly the working class in the Irish Republic. By the end of the 1970s Adams was at the centre of a younger and predominantly northern leadership cadre that had effectively displaced the older and largely southern group which had dominated the Provisionals since their formation in 1969-1970. The Adams' group was originally associated with a new emphasis on economic and social radicalism but also with a more ruthless and remorseless attitude towards the Protestant population of Northern Ireland. The original Provisional leadership, particularly David O'Connell and Rory Brady, had developed a federal element in their basic *Eire Nua* programme. This was seen as reassurance for Ulster Protestants that they would at least control a provincial assembly in the "new Ireland." Adams and his supporters regarded federalism as a dangerous compromise with what they regarded as a reactionary "labour aristocracy" or "colon" population. Thus the first constitutional reflection of their domination in the movement was the deletion of federalism from the Sinn Fein constitution in 1982. Adams replaced Brady as president of Sinn Fein the following year.

By this time the 1980-1981 hunger strikes had given a major impetus to the new emphasis on political development as a complement to the "armed struggle." Despite strong initial reluctance to risk facing the electorate, Sinn Fein was impelled by the hunger strike mobilizations into its first serious electoral intervention in the elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1982. Its successes then were augmented during the 1983 Westminster election, and for a time the skilled republican publicist Danny Morrison's claim that the movement could take power in Ireland by a combination of "ballot-box and armalite" did not appear totally fanciful. As Sinn Fein appeared to be encroaching on the electoral hegemony of the constitutional nationalist party in Northern Ireland, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), governments in Dublin and London moved towards a political initiative aimed directly at defending the SDLP.

In fact by the time of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985 there was increasing evidence that Sinn Fein support in Northern Ireland had peaked, and that it would not succeed in its ambition of replacing the SDLP as the dominant party in Catholic electoral politics in Northern Ireland. This made it all the more important from Sinn Fein's point of view to open up a "southern front" electorally. But although the organization had a number of councillors at the local government level in the Irish Republic they had not had anyone elected to the Irish legislature, Dail Eireann, since 1961. The most obvious factor that explained this absence — to the Sinn Fein leadership at least — was the organization's maintenance of the traditional abstentionist position. From the time of the defeat of the republicans in the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) intransigent republicans had refused to recognise the legitimacy of the two states created by the "partition settlement" of 1921. This entailed contesting elections but refusing to take any seats that were won. In the Irish Republic this had been a recipe for political marginalisation from 1923 onwards. One of the central causes of the split in the republican movement in 1969-1970 from which the Provisionals emerged had been the proposal of the then leadership that the movement reconsider its position on abstentionism. Adams was convinced that abstentionism had to go, at least in relation to elections in the Irish Republic. By 1986 his political and ideological domination in the movement was strong enough to allow a resolution against abstentionism to be passed at the Sinn Fein *Ard Fheis* (annual conference). It had previously been cleared by a special IRA convention. A walkout led by some of the most prominent leaders from the first generation of the Provisionals resulted in the formation of a new organization, Republican Sinn Fein, which now claims that Adams is leading the republican mainstream toward a compromise with "constitutionalism and reformism."

However, Adams' greatest problem is not the criticisms of these former comrades, but rather the increasing evidence that for all the political and ideological developments that he has encouraged, the movement is still essentially confined to the ghettoes of Northern Ireland. Here the failure to make gains in the Republic is most telling. At the 1986 annual conference he cautioned against over-optimism about immediate and dramatic electoral gains in the

Republic, and asserted that such gains could be looked for not in the forthcoming election but in the subsequent one. In fact, while Sinn Fein got 1.8% of the vote and no seats in the 1987 election, it performed even more disastrously in the 1989 election when its vote dropped to 1.2%. The result was all the more chastening because of the performance of the Workers' Party (WP). The WP is descended from the other side of the 1969-1970 split — it was then the Official Republican movement and represented the majority view of the need to get rid of abstentionism. The Officials became Sinn Fein: The Workers' Party in 1977 and simply the Workers' Party in 1982, breaking along the way with violence and much of the traditional republican ideology as well. While this has consigned them to a marginal role in Northern Ireland it has allowed them to emerge as a significant force on the left of politics in the Republic. In the 1989 elections they won seven seats in the Dail and a seat in the European Parliament in the Dublin constituency. They have displaced the Irish Labour Party as the dominant force on the left in the Dublin area. The success of the WP may have written finis to the hopes of Adams that the Provisional movement could reach out to the "exploited" masses in the Republic to mobilise them behind the "anti-imperialist" struggle in the north. In order to understand the temporary successes and the ultimate failure of the Adams' strategy of modernisation it is necessary to put developments in the last twenty years in the context of post-Civil War republicanism and particularly an important current within it that can be termed "social republicanism."

ADAMS AND SOCIAL REPUBLICANISM

Adams was born in 1948 and brought up in the Lower Falls, an area of mid-nineteenth century mill housing near the centre of Belfast. In his mid-teens his family moved further up the Falls Road to Ballymurphy.[2] Both his father and mother came from families with strong republican traditions. His father had been shot and wounded by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and imprisoned during the Second World War. Adams became involved in republicanism himself in 1964 in the aftermath of the Divis Street riots which had been sparked by an attempt by the RUC to remove the Irish flag from the window of the republican candidate for the West Belfast constituency in the general election of that year. At that time the IRA in Belfast was a tiny organization still recovering from the collapse of its 1956-1962 military campaign against the Northern Ireland state. It was strongest in the Lower Falls area where its dominant figure, the Belfast commander Billy McMillen, lived. McMillen gave cautious support to the rethinking of republican strategy that had been inaugurated by the IRA Chief of Staff, Cathal Goulding, in 1962-1963.[3] Goulding wanted a break with the simplistic militarist thinking that had underpinned the 1956 campaign. He turned to the social republican tradition for support. Put baldly social republicanism looked for inspiration to the sole socialist leader of the 1916 insurrection, James Connolly. The social republican tradition had insisted that republicanism was doomed to perpetual marginality if it failed to enlist the masses by taking up issues that concerned them in their day-to-day existence. Thus in the 1920s and 1930s the left in the IRA, led by men like Peader O'Donnell, George Gilmore and Michael Price, urged the IRA to get involved in the struggles of peasants against the payment of land annuities and of the urban working class for employment and higher wages. This proposal was resisted by the mainstream of the republican leadership who were often fervent Catholics with socially and economically conservative views, and who saw the views of social republicans as dangerously divisive of the "national cause." In Belfast where the deeply ingrained patterns of sectarian communalism inevitably affected the IRA there was an added impetus to the dominance of a conservative Catholicism.[4]

The national leadership of the republican movement in the mid-1960s saw Belfast as being largely a bastion of Catholic reaction. Cathal Goulding, who was willing to enlist the assistance of intellectuals close to the tiny Irish Communist Party to plot a new direction for republicanism, faced increasing resistance from more traditional republicans. In Belfast many republicans who had been involved in the campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s were deeply opposed to the new direction and dropped out of involvement in the movement. Some of these people like Joe Cahill, Jimmy Drumm and Seamus Twomey would emerge in 1969 as leading Provisionals. Billy McMillen had many reservations about the new direction and seems to have maintained his loyalty to the national leadership through a mixture of military discipline and personal loyalty to Goulding.[5] Nevertheless, at a time when the national leadership was emphasizing the need for more involvement in social agitations and politics, McMillen continued to concentrate on the traditional concerns of the IRA -- military training and preparedness.

The new strategy was most fully expressed in the document *Ireland Today*, produced in 1969. It remained committed to the traditional objective of overthrowing the "imperialist" partition settlement of 1921 but envisaged a strategy in which republicans mobilised a broad "national liberation front" of trade unionists, small farmers, tenants and other "oppressed groups." This mobilization was to be open and legal, and the traditional role of the IRA as a military vanguard was downplayed.[6] In the Republic the aim of the new policies was to wrest the leadership of "progressive" forces from the Irish Labour Party which was condemned for its weak and compromising nature. In Northern Ireland the way forward was defined as developing the civil rights struggle against the sectarian and discriminatory Unionist regime. By forcing the British government to reform the Northern Ireland state it was hoped that the grip of the Unionist Party on the Protestant working class would be weakened and that at least sections of this class could be won over to an "anti-imperialist" alliance with the Catholic working class and small farmers.

Adams had joined the IRA at a time when the tensions between the new direction and more traditional republicans were becoming clear. He was actively involved in the main agitations that Belfast republicans initiated under pressure from Goulding — agitations on housing and from 1967 on civil rights issues. He was sympathetic to the increasingly leftist tone of the national leadership — in 1967 Sinn Fein committed itself to establishing a socialist republic — and has subsequently commented on the "liberating" experience of being involved in economic and civil rights agitations with non-republicans. He appears to have had little time for the many conservative republicans who continued to snipe at the new direction from the side-lines. Some of his closest friends at the time would later end up as prominent members of the Official republican movement. Thus he was particularly friendly with Joe McCann who became in 1970 and 1971 perhaps the most prominent Official IRA activist in Northern Ireland and was shot dead by British paratroopers in 1972.[7] When the split occurred and the new Provisional organization issued its first statement it denounced the "extreme socialism" of the Officials and denounced the National Liberation Front strategy. Adams, who was also bitterly critical of Goulding's leadership, nevertheless wrote to the Provisional leadership in Dublin denouncing their attacks on the socialism of the Officials and the NLF strategy. For some months after the split Adams and his supporters in Ballymurphy maintained their independence from both Officials and Provisionals, although ultimately they joined the Provisionals.[8]

The ambiguities of Adams' attitude during the split provide clues to his crucial role in the subsequent development of the Provisional movement. His major difference with the Goulding leadership was over strategy in Northern Ireland. He argued that the scenario of civil rights reforms leading to a reconstructed northern state in which it would be possible to appeal to sections of the Protestant working class was grossly unrealistic.[9] Here he was undoubtedly correct. The dual pressure of the civil rights movement and the Wilson government produced a major crisis for the Northern Ireland state and the hitherto hegemonic Unionist Party. If sections of the Protestant working class were breaking with the Unionist Party after 1967 it was to move towards the growing anti-reformist movement of petty bourgeois and working class Protestants led by the militant pastor Ian Paisley.[10] The north was moving not toward gradual reform but rather toward intense sectarian confrontation which culminated in serious violence in August 1969. For Adams and many other republicans the response to this crisis was to work for the destruction, not the reform of the Northern Ireland state. Reflecting the common sense assumptions of the Catholic ghettoes they poured scorn on the idea of unity with any section of the Protestant working class. While this line of thought was obviously more attuned to the realities of Northern Ireland than the prognosis in *Ireland Today*, it was in its own way even more dangerously unrealistic about the potentialities of the growing crisis of the Northern Ireland state. For it was believed that the disintegration of the northern state would bring the "Irish People" back to the situation of 1921 — a straight confrontation with "British Imperialism". Thus the northern crisis could immediately change into a campaign for British withdrawal. The Goulding or Official republican line at least had the virtue of recognising that the major obstacle to a united Ireland was the Protestant population of Northern Ireland, not the British government.

The intense communal violence in Belfast in August 1969 in which whole streets of Catholic housing were destroyed and five Catholics and two Protestants were killed[11], brought to the fore the question of the Belfast IRA's traditional role as a Catholic defence force. Although McMillen had built up the IRA from a couple of dozen members in 1963 to around 120 by 1969[12], it was clearly pitifully inadequate both in numbers and weapons to deal with the onslaught in August 1969. Many of the more traditional republicans now blamed the new line of leftward politicization for the IRA's inability to defend Belfast Catholics. As dozens of young Catholics began to look for military training and guns to defend their areas the nucleus of the Provisional IRA began to form around republican traditionalists in the main Catholic ghettoes. Although the existing IRA in Belfast remained largely loyal to McMillen and the national leadership and would be the nucleus after the split of the Official IRA and Sinn Fein, it would be soon dwarfed by the "pogrom levy" of young working class Catholics eager to "get back" at the Protestants and the state's security forces who were seen as colluding in the August violence.

From the formation of the Provisionals their main aim was to exacerbate the crisis in the Unionist regime by a bombing campaign, to provoke internment — which they succeeded in doing in August 1971 — and ultimately to force the British government to abolish the Unionist regime and institute direct rule. This, it was hoped, would make clear that the main conflict was between the "Irish people" and the British state. The Ulster Protestants were treated as a group whose support for the British connection was determined by a mixture of "false consciousness" and "marginal privileges." Once the "Brits" were forced to withdraw the Protestants would realise that they had no alternative but to work out their future with the rest of the Irish people. In the interim there was absolutely no point in trying to win Protestant support and the Officials were effectively criticized for their desire to maintain the Unionist regime and their support for reform and dialogue with Protestants.

Nevertheless, although the Provos could plausibly argue that it was their campaign that brought the abolition of the Unionist government in March 1972, once direct rule was instituted the massive limitations of their "strategic" thinking became evident. For although their intense campaign of shootings and bombings resulted in the deaths of considerable numbers of British soldiers and destroyed much property, it did little to shake the bipartisan consensus at Westminster: that as long as a majority in Northern Ireland wished to remain in the United Kingdom withdrawal was unthinkable. When the first secretary of state for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, had six leading Provos, including Adams, secretly flown to England in July 1972, he soon discovered the uncompromising intransigence of Provisionalism, which could contemplate no concession on the demand for a British declaration of intent to withdraw. From then until 1975 the Provo message was the brutal, but increasingly implausible one that a maintenance of the "armed struggle" would break the British government's will to remain in Northern Ireland. This was the period of slogans like "1973 Year of Victory," which only served to increasingly demoralise even their most ardent supporters as the victory was annually postponed.

Adams, who had been more receptive to non-republican currents of politics and ideology than most Provo leaders, was increasingly convinced by the critique of Provo militarism made by the student ultra-left group, the Peoples' Democracy (PD). While sharing the Provo objective of British withdrawal, they argued that a purely military campaign could never succeed. In its stead the chief PD ideologue, Michael Farrell, called for the development of an "anti-imperialist" movement that took up a much broader set of issues on which to enlist mass support. In particular it was emphasized that a pre-requisite for success was the mobilization of the working class in the Republic. In prison in 1975 and 1976, Adams became the central figure promoting a new leftist Provisionalism aimed specifically at ending the situation where the IRA was waging an isolated "war" and its former supporters and sympathizers were increasingly demoralized and war-weary.[13]

The promotion of this new line was aided by the way the existing, largely southern Provo leadership was discredited by its support for the truce between the Provisionals and the British Army and RUC which lasted for most of 1975. The leadership, in particular David O'Connell, believed that the British could be negotiated into a settlement or that at least the appearance of negotiation with the IRA would so destabilize the British position in the eyes of the Unionists that the British would have no option but to disengage. The disruption of the British government's strategy for power-sharing by the Ulster Workers' Council strike in 1974 was believed to have brought about a fundamental reassessment of the link with Northern Ireland. This notion was encouraged by Northern Ireland Office negotiators, who needed a truce to create the conditions for the release of the remaining internees and the planned move towards the "criminalisation" policy of denying terrorists political status.[14]

The truce caused widespread division and demoralization in Provisional ranks. Adams and his supporters now claim it was during this period that they came nearest to defeat. When it became apparent that the British had no intention of withdrawing, the leadership associated with the truce was heavily compromised and discredited. The way was now open for Adams and other young northerners to assert their own strategic perspective. At the centre of this was the notion of the "long war," i.e. that it would take years and perhaps decades for the British will to be broken, and the associated imperative to widen the "struggle" to enlist the support of much broader swathes of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland and the Republic. In 1977, Jimmy Drumm, one of the older republicans who had played a central role in the emergence of the Provisionals in 1969, gave the annual address to the Wolfe Tone commemoration ceremony. A traditionalist had been chosen to read out a major critique of the main lines of Provisional strategy since 1970 and inaugurate a new, contradictory and still unresolved engagement with the themes of social republicanism. At the core of the speech was a major reassessment of the "armed struggle" and the need for politics:

> We find that a successful war of liberation cannot be fought exclusively on the backs of the oppressed in the six counties, nor around the physical presence of the British Army... the isolation of socialist republicans around the armed struggle is dangerous and has produced the reformist notion that "Ulster" is the issue, which can be somehow resolved without the mobilization of the working class in the 26 counties.
>
> We need to make a stand on economic issues and on the everyday struggles of the people. The forging of strong links between the

> Republican movement and the workers of Ireland will create an irrepressible mass movement and will ensure mass support for the continuing armed struggle in the north.[15]

Such ideas were not novel, in the sense that they were the staple of the social republicanism of the inter-war period and had been reiterated again by Goulding and his supporters in the 1960s. But they were certainly new to the Provos, and to many of the old guard and the "hard men" in the IRA they smacked uncomfortably of the hated and despised Officials. Nevertheless, the very obvious bankruptcy of the almost pure militarism of the first six years of the Provos did demand some response. It was Adams, himself an erstwhile sympathiser with many aspects of the rethinking of the 1960s, who was best placed to provide that response. Whereas the subsequent evolution of the Officials had demonstrated that it was impossible to sustain for long a strategy for political development and "armed struggle," for Adams there was room for a combination of political development and a military campaign, less intense and more "discriminating" than that of the early 1970s. Over the next decade he would certainly succeed in developing the political and ideological presence of Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland and internationally, but the continuation of the commitment to "armed struggle" would ensure that the key element of his strategy — the development of support in the Irish Republic — remained unrealized. The next section will consider the possible implications of this failure.

THE LIMITS OF MODERNISATION

Writing at the end of the 1970s Eamonn McCann, one of the most articulate leftist sympathizers with the Provisionals, was still critical of their subordination of political development to military concerns. He quoted the self-abnegating lines of the secretary of Sinn Fein in 1975:

> Sinn Fein is the political wing of the Republican Movement . . . the allegiance we give does not allow for haggling or hankering after other political groups, be they large or small . . .. There can be no room for dissidents or those at variance with the Leadership. The Ard Comhairle of Sinn Fein supports all actions taken by the Leadership (IRA Army Council).[16]

By then, however, McCann detected hopeful signs in a speech by Adams given at the Wolfe Tone commemoration in June 1979. In it Adams had referred to the need for links with those "oppressed by economic and social pressures" and for an agitational struggle in the Irish Republic centring on "an economic resistance movement, linking up Republicans with other sections of the working class." He had called for the development of "revolutionary politics" and for Sinn Fein to "encourage the independent mobilisation of workers . . .. We must ensure that the cause of Labour becomes the cause of Ireland, a task neglected since Connolly's time."[17]

In the decade since his speech Adams has been at the centre of a major shift in the respective weights of politics and "armed struggle" in the republican movement, which by 1986 had led some of the more traditionally minded in Sinn

Fein and the IRA to fear a creeping "Stickie" (Workers' Party) trend in his leadership. No longer was it possible to write as Sean Cronin had in 1980 that "The Provisionals have no political organisation worthy of the name in the North."[18] Ten years after a British Army Intelligence document had commented that the IRA had a "strata of intelligent, astute and experienced terrorists who provide the backbone of the organisation."[19], a knowledgeable commentator on the republican movement noted:

> It is no secret that since 1982 Sinn Fein has attracted most of the best that the Provisional movement has had to offer- in terms of brains, ability, understanding of and commitment to the armalite and ballot-box strategy. Sinn Fein has taken and continues to take talent away from the IRA.[20]

It had been Danny Morrision who, in the atmosphere of euphoric optimism produced by the Hunger Strike election victories, had justified a commitment to a serious and continuous electoral strategy in a speech to the 1981 *Ard Fheis*: "Who here really believes that we can win the war through the ballot-box? But will anyone here object if with a ballot paper in this hand and an Armalite in this hand we take power in Ireland."[21] Sinn Fein had by the end of the 1980s certainly consolidated its position as a political organization representing about 11% of the Northern Ireland electorate and a substantial minority of the Catholic population.[22] It had however made little progress in displacing the grip of constitutional nationalism on a majority of northern Catholics and, despite the removal of the ban on participation in the Republic's parliament in 1986, there is little evidence of its being able to make any significant breakthrough in the future. The latter is a failure with major implications for Adams' modernising project.

In his presidential address to the 1986 *Ard Fheis* Adams had defined the development of a "32-County-wide political struggle" as the most important task facing the republican movement.[23] It was of course an emphasis that had figured in his writings and speeches since the late 1970s. However, it was not until the mid-1980s that Adams and his supporters felt confident enough to push against the ban on participation in the Irish parliament. He justified the new direction in part in terms extracted from the social republican tradition. "The Reconquest of Ireland, much less a British withdrawal, cannot be completed without the support of more of these people (population of the Irish Republic)."[24] To some all this clearly smacked too much of the arguments of previous modernisers. Adams criticized those who associated "politicisation" with degeneration into constitutionalism and particularly with the detested Officials, now the Workers' Party:

> The great and the most recent example of the corrupting nature of "politics" which is often quoted by some of our membership is the Sticks. Indeed, in the past few weeks some republicans who should know better have actually referred to some people on this platform as Stickies. . . . To compare us with the Stickies is an obscenity. To talk of 'only the personalities being changed' and

> of 'some people believing that the British can be talked out of Ireland' is contemptible.[25]

His riposte to such critics was the assertion that, whereas the then leadership of the republican movement had by 1969 abandoned armed struggle, the current leadership made clear its support for the IRA.[26] Joe Cahill and other veterans of the 1969-1970 split, like John Joe McGirl, spoke in Adams' support and proclaimed the completely different conditions that supposedly allowed them to support the step that they had denounced 16 years before. However, Cahill's contribution exemplified the problems that the leadership's strategy would soon face. Commenting on Adams' claim that it would be the election after next in the Republic which would give some indication of their political progress, he claimed that by that time "the freedom fighters of the IRA will have forced the Brits to the conference table."[27] This harking back to the perspectives of the early 1970s — when the Provisionals consistently reiterated their claims that the "armed struggle" was just about to force the British to withdraw — was a clear effort to win support for what was the culmination of the "long war" approach. As such, it demonstrated some of incongruities in Adams' approach.

According to the new Provisional analysis developed after the crisis of the mid-1970s, the "struggle" could never succeed as long as it was waged on the backs of a "minority of a minority." As Adams made clear in 1986 Sinn Fein was still a tiny force in the politics of the Republic. Quick victories of the type promised by Cahill — whatever their short term effects on easing the passage of the anti-abstentionist resolution — were unlikely to materialize and they indicate the extent of the problems faced by Adams and his supporters. While the consolidation of their electoral support — demonstrated in the 1989 local government elections in Northern Ireland — has clearly illustrated the existence of a core republican vote, there is little evidence of Sinn Fein's capacity to erode the support for the SDLP whose vote in fact increased in the election.[28] The limited survey evidence available seems to support the conclusion of two political scientists that, "The gap between Sinn Fein and the SDLP reflects two largely different electorates — only to a limited extent are they fishing for votes in the same pond."[29] Sinn Fein votes are heavily drawn from the manual and semi-skilled working class and the unemployed -- a third of Sinn Fein voters are unemployed compared to 13% for the SDLP. Sinn Fein is also disproportionately strong among the young — about half its voters are under 34 compared to a third for the SDLP, and Sinn Fein is over-represented in the 18-24 age group.[30] Such evidence would seem to support the image of the party encouraged by the Sinn Fein leadership in the early 1980s as the vanguard of a young and impatient Catholic working class. It does not encourage much confidence in the increasing concern of Adams since 1986 to develop a broader "anti-imperialist" alliance to include at least significant sections of SDLP supporters.

In fact the desire to build a broad front from the "anti-imperialist" population and in the process to demonstrate that Sinn Fein was the only serious "anti-imperialist" force, was quite compatible with the social republican tradition from which Adams and other leading northern republicans had drawn their inspiration. From Liam Mellows through O'Donnell and Gilmore to Goulding in the early 1960s class was significant as a resource to be mobilized behind a pre-existing objective. It was not seen as being related to a new and distinctive view of the world which could even put into question the very nature of the republican project. Adams was quite consistent with this tradition when he developed a set of populist and class-based themes to bring republicanism out of the militarized ghetto of the mid-1970s. There were certainly those in the republican movement who did tend towards a serious attempt to synthesize republicanism and socialism and a minority of republican prisoners seem to have been very seriously influenced by marxism.[31] In response to the 1986 decision on abstentionism approximately thirty prisoners in Long Kesh resigned from the republican movement and established a League of Communist Republicans. The prisoners stated that the abstention decision, while it influenced their resignation, was not the only, or the main reason. This they claimed was the fact that the leadership of Sinn Fein had no desire to move beyond a vague Catholic nationalist populism — "Sinn Fein's desire to 'appear all things to all men' meant that the struggle for socialism within the Movement was finally lost."[32] People like Adams, Morrison and Tom Hartley had few illusions about the effects that the development of a more principled leftism could have on Sinn Fein's electoral support in many parts of the north, particularly the rural areas and smaller towns. Although they were prepared to admit that the development of Sinn Fein as a substantial political force would have major implications for republicanism and that there was a need for debate and discussion to develop a "republican politics,"[33] there would be strict limits to such restructuring. Thus, when in 1986 Sinn Fein began to circulate an internal discussion sheet to deal with questions of politics and theory, Morrison warned of the need for it not to become a "Marxist esperanto club."[34] The traditionalists who left in 1986 and some who remained had been concerned with the influx during the Hunger Strikes of new members drawn from various small leftist groups like the Peoples Democracy. The fear was that these people, who were identified as the most committed opponents of abstentionism and who were "purely political," would soon call for a reconsideration of the "armed struggle" itself as an obstacle to electoral progress.[35]

It was certainly the case that Adams, while maintaining a very traditional republican contempt for "armchair theoreticians" who lectured the Provisionals on their political backwardness, was quite influenced by some facets of the writings of "green" marxists, particularly the most formidable Peoples Democracy intellectual Michael Farrell, author of the classic "anti- imperialist" history of the northern state.[36] But Adams had a typically republican instrumental attitude to such writing. In the construction of his composite radical persona for the Provisionals a core component was the use of the notion of "labour aristocracy" -- a crucial element in Farrell's analysis. The value of the labour aristocracy notion was twofold. First, it provided a plausible argument to counterpoise to the airy implausibility of federalism. In 1982 federalism was dropped from the constitution in a major reverse for the rapidly declining southern leadership group — in 1983 O'Bradaigh resigned from the presidency of Sinn Fein. Second, it allowed the Adams' axis to provide an internationally appealing version of their struggle. Just as the IRA and Sinn Fein were presented as the equivalents of the ANC and the PLO, the very substantial obstacle to a united Ireland represented by the Protestant community was identified with privileged "colon" reaction from Algeria to Israel and South Africa. The increasing dominance of the Adams' group of young, plausible radical-sounding Belfast Provisionals did much in the early 1980s to increase the republican movement's constituency on the British Labour Party left. The degree to which Provisional leftism in the early 1980s — the emphasis on its working class roots, socialist inclinations and even its feminism — was determined by a calculated wager on a hoped-for future Labour government, in which the left would have significant influence, is unclear. Nevertheless, it seems clear that at least part of the brief leftist phase was determined by a conjunctural alliance with the upsurge of constituency leftism and municipal socialism in Britain. Even then it was impossible to prevent Adams' blossoming relationship with Ken Livingstone and the Labour left from being strained by the irruptions of the logic of an "armed struggle" which demanded such periodic shocks to the "imperialist heartland," as the Harrods bombing at Christmas 1983, which killed eight people. The consolidation of Thatcherism and the resultant substantial strengthening of a revisionist centrism in the Labour Party — which has consigned Sinn Fein allies to the protesting margins — has removed one of the pressures for a leftist persona from the Adams' leadership. The transition from the pursuit of the British left to calls for a muting of abrasive class rhetoric in the interests of alliances with the supporters of the SDLP and Fianna Fail was determined by the new possibilities which the Sinn Fein leadership detected since the Anglo-Irish Agreement. While demonstrating the essentially instrumentalist approach to socialist themes and emphases, it should not be allowed to detract from the skill with which the Sinn Fein leadership can shift from "left" to "right" idioms to suit changing circumstances. As Adams pointed out during the debate on abstentionism, "Our experience teaches us that, as a group, we are often successful when we have a flexible approach. We are at our weakest when we are forced into a static political position."[37] If recent election results demonstrate a strengthening of the SDLP and the reduction of Sinn Fein to reliance on its urban heartland of support, then we might expect a return to a sharper and more "socialist" tone as the possibilities that were detected in the period of talks with the SDLP between March and September 1988 disappear. The talks, the most serious dialogue between constitutional and physical force nationalism since the onset of the current Ulster violence, foundered on Sinn Fein's unwillingness to consider SDLP demands for an IRA ceasefire. But a return to a more radical rhetoric would not disguise the formidable problems that face this final spasm of social republicanism.

In its first participationist electoral intervention in the Irish Republic Sinn Fein got less than 2% of the vote and had no-one elected. Gerry Adams argued that the 1987 election came too soon after the anti-abstentionist decision at the 1986 *Ard Fheis* and that the party still suffered from the severe restrictions on its political resources brought about by Section 31 of the Republic's Broadcasting Act which excludes Sinn Fein from radio and television. He rejected the argument that points to the low level of support for the existing left in the Republic as an index of the problems facing Sinn Fein, by arguing that the

Labour Party is "reformist" and the Workers' Party "two-nationist" i.e. effectively Unionist. Thus, he insisted that the potential exists for a new "republican-labour" party like Sinn Fein.[38] But the thesis that there is a substantial constituency for a party that is more radical than the Labour Party and militantly republican is implausible. Outside of some major crisis in the north the constituency for militant republicanism is safely corralled inside Fianna Fail, and there is little evidence that it has time for attempts to talk about the "class nature of this struggle," as Adams referred to current Sinn Fein strategy.[39]

That a constituency for social radicalism does exist in urban Ireland is, to a limited extent at least, demonstrated by the existence of the Irish Labour Party and the more recent development of the Workers' Party. However, the left has traditionally been a weak political force in Ireland. This was originally a reflection of the fundamentally conservative nature of the Irish revolution itself and the associated domination of political discourse by the concerns of a conservative countryside buttressed by a fiercely anti-socialist Catholic Church. Faced with a formidable dominant party in Fianna Fail with its successful mix of nationalism and populism, the highest vote ever recorded by the Irish Labour Party was 17% in 1969. Since then the development of the Workers' Party has tended to be at the expense of the Labour Party rather than representing any significant increase in the left vote. Thus, in the most recent general election in 1989, one where there was an increase in the total left vote, the combined Labour Party and WP vote was 14.5%, still less than highest Labour Party vote twenty years before.[40] Given the great difficulties that the two established parties of the left have in expanding their vote, there is little sign that the space exists for yet another competitor party. This is even more the case given the strong evidence that, for the bulk of the electorate,association with the north and violence is a distinctly negative factor for any Irish political party. The evolution of the Workers' Party away from militarism and nationalism would seem to indicate that a prerequisite for progress is that southern workers are not alienated by the feeling that their conditions and grievances are being used as the raw material to mobilize support for a different struggle entirely. Yet this is precisely what the modernized Sinn Fein commitment to electoral intervention in the Republic amounts to. As an editorial from *An Phoblacht/Republican News* made clear, in defending the decision to jettison abstentionism, the role of Sinn Fein was to move working class consciousness in the Republic from a trade union level to a "republican" one. This entailed enlisting popular support for the "armed struggle" in the north — "... rather than compromise or be evasive, republicans must explain the origins of the war and the justifications and correctness of physical force." It added uncompromisingly, "We can then learn to live without the support of those to whom armed struggle is an insuperable difficulty."[41] Only those who were suffering from the myopia of northern ghetto vision could believe that such continuing intransigence could be anything else than a recipe for continuing marginalization. Yet it is the case that only the existence of the "armed struggle" gives the vague social populism of Sinn Fein any distinctiveness in the Republic. The Officials' earlier evolution blocks the possibility of an exit into a more substantial socialist radicalism. The very existence of the Workers' Party forces Sinn Fein into emphasising the main thing that separates it from the "Stickies" -- the national question, the north and the "armed struggle" — identifications that leave the electorate in the south largely cold and indifferent.

In a revealing interview with a Dublin journalist Danny Morrison provided an illustration of the dilemma faced by the current republican leadership as it struggles to come to terms with realities in a state where anti-partitionism is largely an affair of piety and bad conscience:

> Question : In terms of a political solution, what about those who don't want a United Ireland?
>
> Morrison : Tell us. People of the 26 Counties that don't want the Six Counties, **let us know**. If they're telling us to fuck off, telling us they're happy with the state they've got and fuck 1916, then tell us. Because, if they don't want us then I would **have** to look again at the situation.....if they think theyve [sic] got an Irish nation inside the 26 Counties they should build a wall and lock us out.[42]

The "armalite and the ballot-box" strategy justified itself to those suspicious of increasing political involvement by holding out the prospect of political advance in both states which would complement the "cutting edge" of the IRA. The unlikelihood of political progress of any extent in the Republic, has been complemented by increasing evidence that Sinn Fein electoral support in Northern Ireland, while still substantial, has been subject to some erosion in rural areas and relies heavily on the urban working class in Belfast and Derry. The latter is, of course, a major resource but it still leaves contemporary republicanism a long way from being able to shake the hegemony of the SDLP's constitutional nationalism in Catholic politics.

CONCLUSION

The one major achievement of Adam's modernisation of republicanism has been the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It is difficult to conceive of Mrs. Thatcher having signed an agreement which gives the government of the Republic an ambiguous but institutionalized role in the government of what remains a part of the United Kingdom if the electoral progress of Sinn Fein had not raised fears about the political demise of constitutional nationalism. Leading members of Sinn Fein have denounced the Agreement as a "copper-fastening partition" by eliciting the direct involvement of the Republic's government in the administration of the "six county state." It is certainly the case that the Agreement has strengthened the British government internationally, as it now appears to have the government of Ireland "on its side." This makes traditional republican attempts to portray it as an imperialist power less plausible. It has also improved the status and morale of the SDLP in Northern Ireland. But here it seems merely to have accelerated an existing tendency for the limits of Adam's strategy to become clear. Sinn Fein's inability to expand beyond a maximum of 40% of the Catholic electorate was already apparent before the Agreement and anyone with a knowledge of the political culture of the Republic would not have predicted any but the slowest of progress there. Adams won the support of many IRA "hard men" for his politicization of the movement by arguing that political victories would strengthen the "cutting edge of the armed struggle." The limited nature of the political gains made, and the signs of some recession in support in Northern Ireland have led to increasing signs of internal disputes and some degree of demoralization.

One manifestation of this decline has been the increasing impatience that Adams and other Sinn Fein leaders have displayed toward what they refer to as IRA "mistakes." The most well-known of these was the bombing of the Remembrance Day ceremony in Enniskillen in November 1987 in which 11 people were killed. But there have been a steady stream of "accidents" and "mistakes" in which ordinary people, usually in Northern Ireland, but including a baby and two Australian tourists in Europe, have been killed. Adams has had increasing occasion to criticize IRA actions of this sort and in March 1990 an internal Sinn Fein conference in Belfast was devoted to the discussion of the "problems" for Sinn Fein's development caused by the deaths of "civilians" and the bombing of "economic targets."[43] At the same time the participants made it clear that they were not questioning the continuing legitimacy of "armed struggle."

In an interview Adams expressed the desire "intellectually and emotionally" for a purely political struggle, but immediately added that the "hard Republican political reality" was that this was impossible: ". . . there is going to be an armed struggle, but what type of armed struggle?"[44] In the same interview he admitted that the republican movement was facing the biggest challenge of its history and said he could see "this big boxing glove of pacification" heading rapidly toward it. His problem is that the continuing imperative to support an "armed struggle," even of a more refined sort, will continue to cut Sinn Fein off from any possibility of electoral development in the Irish Republic. The basic rationale of his modernisation strategy was that, without the development of significant political support in the Republic, the republican struggle was doomed to inevitable marginalization and defeat in Northern Ireland. No-one has more clearly set out the futility of the present IRA campaign than Adams himself. He appears increasingly, not as an active originator of republican strategy, but as someone whose personal analysis of the situation is superseded by simple loyalty to a tradition and by a recognition that, since Sinn Fein's political advance has been halted, only the prolonging of the IRA campaign continues to give him the public significance that political success produced in the early 1980s. Yet there is little future for him if he is reduced to the role of alternately critic and apologist for a campaign of violence with no broader perspective of political development. The crisis of Adam's strategy could signify a more fundamental and terminal crisis of Irish republicanism. However, if this is to be the case important changes in the policy of the British state are necessary.

Sinn Fein's and the IRA's hard-core support is largely impervious to the government's depiction of them as "terrorists" or as a "Mafia-type" conspiracy. Problems created by the British Home Secretary's ban on media interviews in October 1988, while serious, do not impinge much on their significant influence in crucial areas like West Belfast. What they rely on is the continuing evidence of British government disinclination to develop a serious reformist strategy for the most disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland. By now the republican movement's presence — military, economic and political — is so entwined in the fabric of everyday existence in parts of Northern Ireland, that only a veritable economic and social "revolution from above" designed to create the conditions of effective citizenship for the Catholic "underclass" could hope to undermine it. A leading republican recently admitted, "repression we can cope with, reform we can't."[45] Ten years of Thatcherism have both exacerbated the problems of unemployment and poverty and made the possibility of a reformist agenda seem remote. The Anglo-Irish Agreement represented, for the British government at least, an alternative to the ideologically distasteful and costly strategy of dealing with the material basis of Catholic grievance. A "Fair Employment" strategy with no serious commitment to economic regeneration and job creation is a recipe for Catholic frustration and intensified communal competition.

The United Kingdom under the Thatcher government exhibits many of the polarising effects of a neo-liberal regime prepared to consign millions to the status of those excluded from effective citizenship by a combination of the factors of region and class. In this situation sections of Northern Ireland's marginalized, Catholic working class use Sinn Fein as a form of political voice. The message of that voice is equivocal. Sinn Fein argues that it represents, at its core at least, a "principled republican vote." Yet much of the propaganda of the republican movement deals with the alleged "irreformability" of the Northern Ireland state. At the core of this "irreformability" is its historic and current inability to offer employment to a substantial section of the Catholic working class. As two English sympathizers put the case, "In 1981, Northern Ireland male Catholic unemployment was 30.2% while in the worst region of the mainland it was 19.1% (the Protestant male unemployment rate was 12.4% while the UK average was 11.3%)." In some of the Belfast areas most associated with hard-core republican support male unemployment rates varied between 50 and 60 %.[46] The Anglo-Irish Agreement has not initiated any serious attempt to deal with such problems. The British government's commitment to a programme of action to "address the social and economic problems in the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast and other deprived areas"[47] is a predictable piece of cosmetic minimalism. The final dismal spasm of social republicanism is thus symbiotically tied to the future of the Thatcherite project. If Thatcherism, even of a moderated sort, survives the present prime-minister, then the material conditions for the continuation of the "long war" will remain, whatever the counter-pull of political disillusionment and war-weariness in Sinn Fein's heartland.

It is not being argued that there is an economic solution to the problem of terrorism in Northern Ireland. Clearly, just as there is no simple military solution or political formula that can end the conflict, economic regeneration will not, on its own, eliminate terrorism. However, if the political strategy embodied in the Anglo-Irish Agreement is to be consolidated and developed it has to include a real economic dimension which will enable the problem of structural inequality to be dealt with without provoking a backlash from

Protestants. In present conditions where high levels of unemployment encourage a "zero- sum" outlook, "fair employment" is inevitably seen as threatening by many Protestants. The political dimension of government strategy also needs clarification. At present Peter Brooke, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has been engaged for a number of months in discussions with Unionist and SDLP leaders and with the Irish government. The objective is to create conditions for agreement on a new structure of devolved government in the province, within the broader framework of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The central problem is that the Unionists see the talks as a way of ultimately removing those aspects of the Agreement which they dislike, while for the SDLP and the Irish government the Agreement can only be "transcended" if its essential spirit is maintained. There is a danger that if the talks eventually fail, it will enable Sinn Fein to again proclaim the irreformablity of the Northern Ireland state and allow Adams to recover some of the impetus his strategy clearly lost by the mid-1980s. Arguably by placing so much emphasis on the need for agreed devolutionary institutions in Northern Ireland, the British government increases the possibility of political instability if devolution proves impossible to negotiate. Like the Agreement itself, the desire for devolution reflects British disinclination to be so deeply and directly involved in Northern Ireland. The irony of this is that it is the evidence of British distaste for the whole problem, understandable as it undoubtedly is, which continues to fuel republican hopes that eventually the will to remain can be broken. Therefore, despite the increasingly obvious failure of the Adam's modernisation strategy, republicanism remains a force that would be dangerous to dismiss. While its broader strategic vision has disintegrated, it may have the capacity to survive by exploiting the weaknesses and contradictions in the policies of its enemy, the British state.

Endnotes

1. The sources for this overview are: Gerry Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom* (Dingle: Brandon Press, 1986); Patrick Bishop and Eamon Mallie, *The Provisional IRA* (London: Heineman, 1987); and Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and Socialism in Modern Ireland* (London: Hutchinson/Radius & New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).
2. For Adams' background see Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, and also his *Falls' Memories* (Dingle: Brandon Press, 1982).
3. Billy McMillen, *The Role of the IRA 1962-67* (Dublin: Repsol, 1976), and an interview with McMillen in Rosita Sweetman, *Off our Knees: Ireland 1972* (London: Fontana, 1972).
4. For a more detailed analysis of social republicanism, see Patterson, pp. 5-25.
5. Interviews with Cathal Goulding and Jim Sullivan, a key figure in the Belfast IRA in the 1960s.
6. Republican Education Department, *Ireland Today and Some Questions of the Way Forward* (internal Sinn Fein document, March 1969).
7. Interviews with Gerry Adams and Seamus Lynch, a young IRA member in the 1960s and now a prominent figure in the Workers' Party in Northern Ireland.

8. *Where Sinn Fein Stands*, a statement by the Caretaker Executive of Provisional Sinn Fein on 17 January 1970, subsequently reissued as a pamphlet, *These are the Provisionals* (Dublin: Sinn Fein, 1972).
9. Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, p. 14.
10. See Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, *The British State and the Ulster Crisis: From Wilson to Thatcher* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 40-41.
11. See Patterson, pp. 114-18 on the violence in Belfast.
12. McMillen, *The Role of the IRA*, p. 10.
13. For an analysis of Adams' prison writings, see Liam Clarke, *Broadening the Battlefield: The H Blocks and the Rise of Sinn Fein* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1987), pp. 229-230.
14. Bew and Patterson, pp. 78-88.
15. *Republican News*, 18 June 1977.
16. Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London: Pluto Press, 2nd edition, 1980), p. 174.
17. Ibid.
18. Sean Cronin, *Irish Nationalism: A History of its Roots and Ideology* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), p. 210.
19. "Northern Ireland: Future Terrorist Trends," reprinted in Cronin, p. 342.
20. Ed. Moloney, "Mistaken Strategy," in *Fortnight: An Independent Review for Northern Ireland*, May 1989.
21. Bishop and Mallie, p. 301.
22. In the 1989 local government elections in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein's vote remained the same as it had in the previous local elections in 1985 at 11.3%. However, this disguised a significant loss of support outside Belfast and Derry where, in rural areas, its vote dropped by about 5%. This was in part because of IRA "mistakes" in which civilians were killed. It maintained its support in Derry and in Belfast where its vote increased by 3.1% in 1985. *Irish Times*, 20 May 1989.
23. Sinn Fein, *The Politics of Revolution* (Dublin, 1986), p. 11. This pamphlet contains the main speeches and debates from the 1986 *Ard Fheis*, including Adams' presidential address.
24. Ibid., p. 8.
25. Ibid., p. 11.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 22.
28. Cynthia Irvin and Eddie Moxon-Browne, "Not many floating voters here," *Fortnight*, May 1989.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. See the Sinn Fein Education Department booklet, *Questions of History* (Dublin: AP/RN 1987). Written by "Irish Republican Prisoners of War," it is very obviously influenced by Marxism. Jim Gibney, a leading member of Sinn Fein, told a meeting in Belfast chaired by Adams that republicanism lacked an adequate political philosophy and that this could only come from what he referred to as "creative marxism". The speech was reprinted in the Peoples Democracy journal *An Reabhloid* (The Revolution), 4, no. 2 (December 1989/ February 1990).
32. *Congress 86: Quarterly Journal of Communist Republican Prisoners*, 4 (no date).
33. *The Politics of Revolution*, p. 10.
34. "The language of revolution," in *Congress 86*.

35. Interview with Jimmy Drumm.
36. Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (London: Pluto Press, 1976). Adams recommended this book most highly in his writings from prison.
37. *The Politics of Revolution*, p. 9.
38. Interview with Gerry Adams.
39. *The Politics of Revolution*, p. 11.
40. Paul Bew, Ellen Hazelkorn and Henry Patterson, *The Dynamics of Irish Politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), pp. 150, 223.
41. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 6 November 1988.
42. Joe Jackson interview with Danny Morrison in *Hot Press*, 25 August 1988.
43. *The Irish News*, 26 March 1990, "Republican sources said they were conscious of the criticisms levelled against the republican movement, on the one hand wishing for development, investment and jobs in areas like West Belfast, and on the other hand IRA actions taking place which may result in job losses."
44. "In the shadow of the gun," David Hearst interview with Gerry Adams, *The Guardian*, 2 February 1990.
45. Robin Wilson, "Insecurity Policy," *Fortnight*, September 1988.
46. Bob Rowthorn and Naomi Wayne, *Northern Ireland: The Political Economy of the Conflict* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 116-117.
47. From the Review of the Anglo-Irish Agreement published by both governments and reprinted in the Irish Times, 25 May 1989.