

THE STRENGTH OF SINN FÉIN



**The Presidential Address delivered
by the Rev. Michael O'Flanagan at
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The Strength of Sinn Féin

IN my address to-day I propose to review the history of this organisation, with the object of throwing some light upon the measure of success and failure that has attended it up to the present. If the light I throw on it be not entirely satisfactory, I shall at least have directed the minds of others to a problem of vital importance. For if we are ever to make satisfactory progress we must be prepared to learn from the mistakes of the past.

IT is easy to distinguish at least four distinct motives that brought members into this organisation. The first was to found a political organisation that would teach the Irish people the doctrines of Independent Irish Republicanism and to attempt to have them put into operation. The second was to honour the men of Easter Week. The Third was to end the futile policy of sending Irish Representatives to the English Parliament. And the fourth was to fight Partition.

THE foundation of the organisation was laid at a conference held in the Mansion House in April, 1917. This Conference was summoned by Count Plunkett after his election in North Roscommon a few weeks earlier.

THE reason why it was Count Plunkett who summoned and presided over the conference was this. Count Plunkett was elected by the people of North Roscommon in order to voice at the Peace Conference the demand of Ireland for complete national independence, and also to honour the patriot martyrs of Easter Week. Some of you may remember that it was contended that the Insurrection of Easter Week was a Rebellion. That is to say, it was a rebellion in the true sense of the word, a rebellion against Ireland itself. As the right of each nation to independence was a dominating cry all over the world at the time, the only defence that could have been made for the murder of so many brilliant Irishmen was the absurd one that they were rebels against Ireland, and that they were put to death in the name of and with the sanction of the people of Ireland.

SOME colour was lent to this plea by the words of many of the leading people in Ireland, including, sad to relate, the mouthpiece of what had been up to then and still seemed to be, the largest Irish political organisation.

TO vindicate the honour of the people of Ireland, and to save them from the foul charges that were thus being levelled against them, it became necessary to make a direct appeal to them. An opportunity was afforded at a by-election which was to be held in North Roscommon in February, 1917. Count Plunket was selected as candidate because he was at the same time a man of outstanding honour, a man of the highest principle, a man of great reputation as a scholar, and, above all, the father of one of the men who signed the Proclamation of Easter Week and sealed their signature with their life blood. A vote for Count Plunkett was intended to be, and was indeed as explicitly as was feasible at the time, a vote for the Republic of Easter Week.

AS Count Plunkett was at the time interned in England, there was no time or opportunity to have him issue a campaign address. Hence it was decided to write him a letter inviting him to stand. This letter was intended to take the place of a campaign address. In it the Count was invited to stand for North Roscommon, in order that the people of one district in Ireland might commence to give him a mandate, to demand in the name of the whole people of Ireland recognition of Ireland's right to complete National Freedom at the Peace Conference.

THE result of the election was a triumphant vindication of the Irish people. It silenced the charges that were being made against them that they did not appreciate the sacrifice of the heroic men who died for them. In so far as the voice of one constituency could be a test of the views of the people of Ireland as a whole, it proved that the people of Ireland were prepared to accept as their principles, the principles propounded in the Proclamation of the Republic of Ireland in the preceding Easter Week.

ACCEPTING the verdict of North Roscommon as a mandate, Count Plunkett issued an address to the people of Ireland, and invited a Conference to meet him in the Mansion House in April. Two proposals were put before the Conference, one by Count Plunket and the other by Sean Milroy. Count Plunket proposed that a new Irish Republican Organisation be formed, the branches of which were to be known as Liberty Clubs. Sean Milroy, on the contrary, proposed that no new organisation be formed, but that existing organisations, Republican and non-Republican alike, be federated under one supreme governing body. After full discussion,

the Milroy amendment was defeated and Count Plunkett's motion was carried by an overwhelming majority.

AT this point the traditional Irish fear of a split seized the Conference, and for a short time it seemed probable that a section of the defeated minority might leave the hall. That would have been a misfortune according to the ideas that prevailed at the time. Therefore an arrangement was come to. A composite committee was formed to preserve the unity of the movement. And as usual, being a composite committee, the one thing that it did preserve was the division in the movement.

AFTER the Conference, people in some parts of Ireland proceeded to organize Liberty Clubs, while in others they started branches of a non-Republican organization which had been founded years before, and which was known by the name of Sinn Fein. This organisation had as its object the restoration of Ireland's independence as a kingdom, thereby constituting Ireland and Great Britain a dual monarchy on a model similar to that of Hungary and Austria. That is why the old Sinn Fein Policy was known as the Hungarian Policy.

THE propagation by a member of the Committee of an organisation entirely in conflict with the mandate given to the Committee, soon created a situation that could not be allowed to continue. Two weekly meetings of the Committee were allowed to pass without any attempt being made to deal with the problem thus created. At the third meeting, however, the problem was put before the committee in clear and definite terms by a man whose name will go down into history as one of the most illustrious Irishmen of our generation, Cathal Brugha.

AT the fourth meeting the Committee were presented with certain terms on which the old Sinn Fein organisation would agree to go out of existence and turn over its branches to the new organisation. These terms were to apply only to the provisional period. That is to say, they were subject to repeal at the first National Convention. By these terms, the provisional organisation was asked :—

- (1) To accept the name of Sinn Fein.
- (2) To accept for the provisional period the constitution of Sinn Fein.
- (3) To accept as its Chairman the Chairman of Sinn Fein.
- (4) To co-opt on the provisional committee six nominees from the outgoing organisation.
- (5) To take over the Office at 6 Harcourt Street, and all the other assets of the old organisation, and to accept responsibility for its liabilities.

IT was a big price to pay. Too big, as subsequent events have proved. It was paid in order to retain the support of Arthur Griffith and his followers, and in order to secure the assistance of the weekly newspaper of which he was editor. Yet these conditions were unanimously accepted, with one answering condition imposed by the provisional committee itself. This was, that the Liberty Clubs should also be asked to nominate six members for co-optation on the enlarged committee. In this way was preserved the balance on the provisional committee.

A SIMILAR arrangement was made soon afterwards with the Nation League, an organisation that had been formed a short time previously to oppose Partition. The Nation League did not even regard abstention from the British Parliament as a matter of principle. To accept six nominees from the Nation League might have given the non-Republican element on the Committee a decisive majority. Before the Nation League was taken over, however, the prisoners of Easter Week were released. It was agreed that six of the prisoners be co-opted so as to balance the six from the Nation League. This completed the Provisional Standing Committee. This Provisional Standing Committee guided the organisation during its initial stages, and prepared for the first National Convention, which was held on the 25th and 26th of October, 1917. It was this provisional body that first drafted the Constitution of Sinn Fein. The Constitution drafted by this provisional body was an agreed Republican Constitution.

LET us look at this Committee a little more closely. It was a dual body from the start. It was built upon compromise at the start. It began with two members. Arthur Griffith was one; I was the other. We were appointed by the Conference to bring about unity between the two sections of the Conference, the majority section that voted for Count Plunkett's Republican proposal and the minority section that voted for Sean Milroy's non-Republican amendment. Arthur Griffith and I agreed to ask the Convention to appoint six others to act with us on a provisional committee. He selected three and I selected three. He selected Sean Milroy, Alderman Tom Kelly and Stephen O'Meara; I selected Count Plunkett, Cathal Brugha and Dr. Tom Dillon. Then, without consulting me, Arthur Griffith, on the plea that Labour should also be represented, added William O'Brien. I then suggested Countess Plunkett as a representative of the women.

PEOPLE wonder how it was that the new Sinn Fein organisation split in two, four years later. The split was there from the start. The so-called treaty was only the wedge that burst the two sections asunder. An organisation is very much like a material structure. If a serious mistake is made in the design of a ship or a house or a bridge, disaster will follow in due course. It is the same with an organisation. None of us understood

that at the time, or at least if anyone did, nothing was said about it. Let us hope that it will be understood in the future.

HOW acute that split was will be understood by anyone who reads the pages of "Nationality" for the year 1917. "Nationality" published in full the invitation to Count Plunket to stand for North Roscommon. "Nationality" was loud in its jubilation at the result of the election. Before the Plunkett Conference was held, "Nationality" did all in its power to make it the great historic gathering which it undoubtedly was. But after it was over its importance got little recognition in the pages of "Nationality." Anybody who depends upon "Nationality" for the history of the next few months will know next to nothing of how a new Republican organisation came into existence. He will not know the history of the absorption of the old Sinn Fein, of the Liberty Clubs and of the Nation League, or how the released prisoners came to be represented on the provisional committee. He will be left under the impression that the old Sinn Fein suddenly grew into a great National organisation. Indeed, the ordinary daily press of Dublin, supplies the material for a truer history of what happened than the paper that was supposed to have become the semi-official mouthpiece of the organisation.

MY object in dwelling so long upon this matter is to drive home a lesson that is needed at present and will be needed in the future. It is that the most important task of any organisation is to preserve the purity of its principles. No member should ever be elected to a representative place in an organisation except one whose adherence to the fundamental principles of the organisation is wholehearted, clear-sighted, single-minded and ripe in years.

THE national spirit of the great mass of the Irish people is sound and genuine. The Irish people have always responded to the call of Irish nationhood, whenever they saw any reasonable prospect of success. The Irish people are not infallible. The Irish people, that is to say, the majority of the Irish people, are quite capable of being led astray. They are quite capable of making mistakes. But the mistakes which the people make do not as a rule originate with the people. The political mistakes that have been made in Ireland during the past dozen years did not begin amongst the people. They began amongst the leaders of the people. The worst of them did not come from outside the ranks of Sinn Fein. They came from within the ranks of Sinn Fein. For some years past the Sinn Fein organisation has lost the confidence of the great mass of the Irish people. Our great task now is, not in the first instance to regain that confidence, but rather, to so mould our organisation that when the confidence of the people, spontaneously comes back, there will be no danger of its being abused as it was in the past.

THE duality that was put into the provisional committee at the originating conference in April, 1917, was inevitably repeated and emphasised at the first National Convention in October of the same year. The two vice-presidents elected were the two men of opposite views who formed the nucleus of the provisional committee. The two secretaries elected were Austin Stack and Darrell Figgis. The two treasurers were Laurence Ginnell and William Cosgrave. The highest votes for membership of the standing Committee were given to John MacNeill and Cathal Brugha. When the so-called Treaty came, one of the original vice-presidents of the organisation became its foremost champion. The other remained on the side of the Republic. One of the secretaries became an eloquent spokesman of the Free State cause, the other fought against it to his last breath. One of the treasurers became for many years the leader of the Free State majority party. The other died in harness in the ranks of the Republic. Of the two who came first in the list for the Standing Committee, the name of one will go down into Irish history as that of the outstanding hero martyr of the Republican cause; that of the other as the leading intellectual champion of the policy of compromise. We had only one president. The president found it impossible to divide himself into two.

SO much for the first split in Sinn Fein, the split of 1922. Now for the second split—the split of 1926. As we have seen, the first split was built into the organisation on the very first day of its existence. The second split was introduced two months later, when the prisoners were co-opted on the provisional Standing Committee. The prisoners were co-opted because they were heroes. The Irish people love a hero. They are given to hero worship. Some people think hero worship is a weakness. Other people think that hero worship prevails in every other country as well as in Ireland. But whatever hero worship may be, a strength or a weakness, the Provisional Standing Committee decided to take full advantage of it when the released prisoners were co-opted on the Standing Committee. Thus it came about that three distinct elements went into the construction of the first regular governing body of Sinn Fein. They might be compared to the side walls and the roof of a house. Ultimately the sides fell apart and the roof landed in the middle.

THE ideas upon government that have come down to the people of Ireland from past generations are derived from two sources. One is monarchical, the other republican. The ancient Irish were governed by kings. But they were elected kings. Yet they were not chosen from the entire population. They were chosen from amongst the near relatives by blood of the kings they were to succeed. Here you had a mixture of monarchism and republicanism. In the English form of government, as it was introduced into Ireland, there was nothing republican. When a

king died, his successor was one person already defined by the accident of birth, and the reins of government passed into his hands automatically. The English King was supposed to come from above. The Irish people never at any time accepted English rule. Therefore the mind of Ireland was enever harmonised with the theory of pure monarchy. The spirit of republicanism was always present amongst the Irish people. But it was only in the time of Wolfe Tone that the theory of pure republicanism was first boldly and clearly enunciated in Ireland.

WE are disciples of Tone. It is our business to teach the people of Ireland the principles of pure republicanism until all traces of the spirit of monarchism is eliminated from the country. In a monarchy the people are called subjects. The king is over all. The others are divided into higher and lower. The lower look up to the higher, and the higher sometimes graciously condescend to look down with favour upon the lower. The height is determined by the favour of the monarch. In a kingdom, therefore, or even in a country in which the mind of the people is in a muddle between monarchism and republicanism, favour is all important. Even at elections, candidates go round from man to man and ask for votes as a personal favour. They sometimes have the hardihood to suggest that when elected they will repay. This is a form of bribery. It is the most destructive form of bribery. It produces that most pernicious form of individual, the man of influence. The man of influence is able to get votes for a friend, and then he is able to go to his friend and get jobs for his supporters. Woe betide the people who are governed by such a system. It rots the very heart and soul of public administration. It reduces the public life of a country to a quaking bog.

A REPUBLIC is ruled entirely by considerations of duty. It is a duty to vote for the best man. It is a duty, not to him, but to the public whom he serves. A candidate is under no obligation to those who vote for him, except the obligation of honest service which he owes to the entire population. Those who have the appointment to public office confer no favour on those whom they appoint. It is their duty to appoint only the most suitable person available. Where the spirit of pure republicanism prevails, there is nothing to sap the independence or integrity of a single individual citizen. In a republic the man who gives money for work is in no way superior to the man who gives work for money. The idea that because a man gives work for money, he has therefore necessarily lost anything of his independence or integrity is an idea that can originate only in a mind still in the muddle of monarchism.

IN a republic therefore there is no room for influence. There is no room for it in a republican organisation. The fact that we allowed it entry into this Republican organisation is accountable for most of our reverses. In our desire to gain to our side the influence of a newspaper, we laid the

foundation of the first split. In taking advantage of the influence of hero worship, we made possible the second split. In allowing itself to be diverted from the straight road of republicanism by an allpowerful influence, Sinn Fein saddled itself with some of the responsibility for the splitting of Ireland itself into two sections. This mistake was made in the midst of the most victorious period of our entire existence, at the general election of 1918. In the midst of the election campaign a section of the standing committee met and hurriedly made a bargain dividing eight seats in the North of Ireland with the semi-defunct Home Rule party. So that while Sinn Fein was Republican all over the rest of Ireland, it was in that most vital part of the country a mere section of a confused alliance utterly at variance with sound principle and hopelessly shortsighted as a mere matter of tactics. Is it any wonder that since then there are a lot of people in Ireland who are not quite satisfied as to the consistency of our attachment to Republican principles. Here again Sinn Fein was tempted by influence to depart from the road of principle.

THE next mistake to which I shall refer was made not by Sinn Fein itself, but by Dail Eireann, which was the child of Sinn Fein. In selecting delegates to negotiate in London, Dail Eireann did indeed save itself from making the worst mistake it could possibly have made. It did not send its President. But it made the next worst. It sent the two men who next to the President enjoyed the greatest personal popularity in Ireland. The two men, therefore, who next to the President had the greatest influence. This influence came from two entirely different sources. The influence of one arose from years of brilliant work in a non-republican cause. The influence of the other from his reputation as a fighting man. Men less prominent, less sure of their following, would never have dared to sign an agreement without the explicit sanction of the body they represented. If they had signed against their instructions it would have been an easy matter to repudiate them. But the task of repudiating two men who had such a large personal following proved to be one of practically insuperable difficulty.

ONE of the most difficult problems we have tried to solve during the past year is that of establishing harmonious relations between ourselves and certain other patriotic organisations of a non-political character. These efforts have hitherto been unsuccessful. A clearer understanding of the nature of our organisation as a Republican political body will, I believe, lead to a satisfactory solution of that problem. Sinn Fein is the political arm of the Government of the Republic. Each arm of the Republican government should be free. Free from any direct bond that would tie it to the other arm, but equally united to the common body of the Republic. Members of those other organisations are of course free to become members of Sinn Fein. But when they join Sinn Fein the position they occupy in the other organisation should not be allowed to influence their standing in Sinn Fein. A man may have outstanding merit in a military organisation without

being thereby fitted for leadership in a political organisation. This principle was violated when the Prisoners were co-opted on the provisional Standing Committee in June, 1917. Sinn Fein paid the penalty in 1926.

SINN FEIN has not really split. What has happened is that those sections of its governing body that were intruded into it in violation of the principles of democratic organisation have fallen away. And the rank and file of Sinn Fein, that is to say, the great mass of the Irish people, puzzled and confused, by the confusion at the top, have gone into panic. For surely nothing short of panic can explain the antics of so many different sections of our population to-day.

THE immediate task that lies before us is to clarify our minds on the essential principles of pure republicanism, to apply them with unswerving consistency in the daily activities of our organisation, to show how their general application would solve all the pressing problems of the whole people of Ireland, and to work out in detail a plan of government, that will make the enlightened public opinion of Ireland the dominant and effective controlling influence, in all the secular affairs of the Irish people. That the Standing Committee during the past year has not been unmindful of this task will, I think, become evident to you in the course of this Convention. You will do your part if to-day you give us the benefit of your mature judgment on the problems that come up for settlement, and if you elect an executive as good, and if possible, better than the executive of the past twelve months. By the time the task I have suggested to you is completed, indeed, long before it is completed, I am satisfied that the great mass of the Irish people will have renewed their allegiance to the Republic of Ireland.

