

S I N N F E I N

Attitude to Leinster House, Stormont and Westminster Parliaments

It would seem from letters which have appeared in the Irish newspapers from time to time and from remarks made at meetings and debates, as well as in private conversation, that many people do not understand fully the attitude of Sinn Fein to the Leinster House, Stormont and Westminster Parliaments. The Coiste Seasta of Sinn Fein wish accordingly to outline once more the policy of the organisation vis-a-vis these administrations.

The immediate objective of Sinn Fein is to achieve the unity and freedom of Ireland. One of the means adopted towards this end is the contesting of elections and the organising of the Irish people into an effective political movement. The reasons for not taking seats as a minority group in Leinster House, and not taking seats at all in either of the other two assemblies, are based on both principle and tactics. We shall explain the policy from the point of view of both.

Sinn Fein rejects outright the claim of England to a right to rule any part of Ireland; it recognises authority derived from the universal suffrage of all the Irish people as the only lawful authority, under God, in this island. A partition system of government was forced on this country in 1920-21 and England set up two partition institutions of Government, Leinster House and Stormont, ruling 26 and 6 Counties respectively. The powers and functions of both were limited by the terms of the Act which set them up, the Government of Ireland Act, passed by the parliament of Westminster in 1920. Eighty per cent of the functions of Government in the Six Counties were and still are reserved to Westminster. A number of changes were made in the 26 County state, its name was changed twice, a new constitution was adopted in 1937 and a "Republic" declared in 1949.

Despite any constitutional changes effected since 1921, Leinster House is still what it was designed to be the first day, a partition institution which is prevented from functioning as a National (32-County) Parliament by the British laws which established it: namely, the Government of Ireland Act, 1920; the Irish Free State Act (the "Treaty") 1922; and the Boundary Agreement, 1925. This legislation of the British Parliament was incorporated in the 1937 Constitution, either in toto or in some amended form, e.g. Article 3 of that constitution says the laws shall extend to the 26 Counties only.

To operate the Leinster House or Stormont parliaments is to accept England's right to partition Ireland and to set up partition institutions of government here. This conflicts with one of the fundamental principles of Sinn Fein: that the only authority we recognise is the authority derived from the votes of all the Irish people. We reject all laws, pacts and treaties which in any way restrict the Sovereignty of the Nation.

" Legal and Constitutional Difficulties "

Not only can the Leinster House assembly not function as a National Parliament, but the "Nationalist" M.P.s of Stormont have even been denied what is called right of audience, i.e. permission to attend without voting. Explaining why this was not possible in October 1954, the then Taoiseach, Mr. John A. Costello, said that such a step "would raise legal and constitutional difficulties". What he meant was that Leinster House could function only as a partition institution bound by the terms of reference England had given it in 1920.

Once you accept the partition institution any position other than that of carrying out its purpose is untenable. Those who accept Stormont and Leinster House accept the British laws which created them and acquiesce in the consequent limitations of their sovereignty and jurisdiction. To enter either of these institutions is to bind oneself hand and foot, as politicians of all parties have done, with these "legal and constitutional difficulties".

The Sinn Fein attitude to Leinster House is clearly set out in our National Unity and Independence Programme where it is stated that we will not enter Leinster House as a minority group, but given a majority we are prepared to take over the assembly, invite in all the elected representatives of the Irish people and proceed to legislate for all Ireland. By doing this the 26-County parliament set up by England would be abolished and a 32-County assembly established.

Remaining Clear of Entanglements.

Sometimes it is said that (as happened in 1957) if we got four T.D.s elected they should take their seats and that we would win four more seats at the next election, and so on. It is said that a majority could be built up gradually in this way. It is well to remember that during the five, ten or fifteen years that the minority would be sitting in Leinster House, they would be subjected to very great political pressures and that some if not most of them, while drawing their salaries and looking after the day to day affairs of their constituents, probably would lose sight of the primary objective

of freeing Ireland. It will be said that we do not trust ourselves, but experience has shown that all who went into Leinster House and accepted the partition system (and some went in with great sincerity and the best of intentions) became so enmeshed in it that they shirked the possibility of the clash with Britain that an attempt to set up a National Parliament would bring about.

By remaining clear of the entanglements which are inseparable from Leinster House or Stormont, the Sinn Fein representatives, alone among those chosen at parliamentary elections, North or South, are free to work for and lead the entire Irish people towards an All-Ireland Parliament.

Further, those who operate England's system of colonial exploitation and refuse to assemble an All-Ireland Parliament are the real abstentionists. They are the abstentionists from a National Parliament. Sinn Fein are quite prepared to take their place as a minority in any All-Ireland Parliament, no matter who convenes it, provided it is actively endeavouring to rule all 32 Counties. At the moment though, it does not appear likely that any of the existing parties are prepared to do this. They have too big a stake in the present system. One movement which has maintained a national approach to Ireland's problems is the Labour movement, and they might be expected to reject the partition system and forge ahead to full freedom, were it not that most of their leaders lack the necessary moral courage to do so. It must be obvious to them by now that they are fighting a losing battle in Leinster House politics.

In the 26-County Local Elections of 1960 Sinn Fein had 30 candidates returned and they took their seats on the bodies to which they were elected. Taking part in the affairs of local authorities does not involve accepting the partition system as these authorities would operate in a similar manner under a National 32-County Parliament. Just as was done when the whole country was under the direct rule of Westminster, Sinn Fein is prepared to use the election machinery and to sit on local bodies.

To Change the System.

Attendance as a minority group at Leinster House would not mean that Sinn Fein spokesmen would get any more publicity or any fairer reporting of its policy and activities in the Press. The coverage obtained depends entirely on the attitude of the press. A good example is the amount of space given to statements of the Six-County Liberal leader, the Rev. Albert McElroy, whose candidates polled 17,000 votes in the Westminster Election of October, 1964. Republican candidates polled 101,000 votes, yet statements by Republican leaders got scarcely any space at all.

This deliberate attempt to prevent Sinn Fein policy statements from reaching the public is one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the Republican Movement.

To sum up, the position is that Sinn Fein seeks to change the partition system imposed on us by England more than four decades ago; not merely to change the personnel operating it, but to change the system itself. This is a primary or fundamental national issue. Until this is done, it will not be possible to develop the resources of this country in the interests of the Irish people. Becoming part of the system and perpetuating it will not bring about its abolition. Two points made above are worth repeating here:

1. Like any other political organisation, Sinn Fein, if given a majority, will form a government.
2. Even as a minority, Sinn Fein will sit with any other group in an All-Ireland Parliament.

Finally, Sinn Fein has a Social and Economic Programme which it intends to put into effect in the free Ireland. Freedom is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve an end - the welfare of the Irish people. The tasks which will have to be tackled in the new Ireland may well be no less difficult than the mighty one of achieving complete political, financial and economic freedom.