

**A Proud History Gives Confidence of  
Victory – 1956**

**Sinn Féin**

**1905-1956**

**CARETAKER EXECUTIVE  
A PROUD HISTORY GIVES  
CONFIDENCE OF VICTORY**

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**1. THE BEGINNING**

Fifty years ago the Sinn Féin Organisation was formally established at a Convention of the National Council, held in the Rotunda, Dublin, on November 28, 1905, under the chairmanship of Edward Martyn. The impact of the British regime for so long aided and abetted by the so-called 'National' education system, based on British Imperialistic ideas, had practically obliterated the idea of separate nationhood.

Arthur Griffith, who had been ploughing a lonely furrow in the columns of his paper the United Irishman (partly financed by the IRB) was the mainspring of this new party. He gathered round him a small group of nationally-minded men and women, mainly recruited from the Celtic Literary Society, Inghinidhe na hÉireann and the Gaelic League, all functioning at the time in very restricted fields, but all determined to restore and build up the National morale. Under the motto "Sinn Féin" the organisation was launched from which emerged the movement that converted Ireland from being one of the British Isles into a 32-County Republic.

The title "Sinn Féin" had its origin in a small propagandist sheet, published in Oldcastle, Co Meath, in 1902-3, by Máire Ní Bhuiléir (Mrs O Nuallaion). She suggested the name to Arthur Griffith for a National Revival movement — she was a language enthusiast — and he adopted it.

The policy of "Sinn Féin" was laid on constitutional lines, following the economic doctrines of Fredrich Liszt, a German economist, and aimed at making Ireland independent industrially, as well as agriculturally. National independence, in every sense of the term, being the permanent idea.

Within a few months Belfast had set up over 20 branches and the movement in Dublin and Cork was going from strength to strength. The weekly paper Sinn Féin edited by Griffith,

continued its propaganda, and fearlessly ranged itself on the side of all victims of political or religious intolerance. With little backing and less resources, a Sinn Féin Co-Operative Bank was set up and did well for a time.

Only supreme courage, and implicit faith in Ireland's destiny, stimulated those pioneers — among them were a few old Fenians — and carried them on through the years from 1906 to 1916. The work accomplished was mainly cultural, though they did contest and gain a few seats at Municipal elections and the platform afforded by those elections was availed of for furtherance of the Sinn Féin policy, and appeals for the restoration of the Irish language.

Even in those early years a change was taking place in the character of the organisation; in 1910 Sean Mac Dermott published a fortnightly paper called Irish Freedom, a definitely Republican organ, carrying all the marks of the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood) with its slogan: "Damn your concessions England, we want our country." This departure was a shock to those who regarded Sinn Féin and its associates as being merely academic.

The 1914 World War showed very emphatically the side on which Sinn Féin stood, and the threat of conscription was met by stout resistance from every creed and class in the community. The Irish Labour movement staged a one-day strike, which was the most spectacular and complete demonstration ever seen in Ireland, and an anti-conscription pledge was signed by the nationally-minded people in practically every Parish throughout the country. At a meeting in the Mansion House, Dublin, it was declared:

"That the passing of the Conscription Bill by the British House of Commons must be regarded as a declaration of War on the Irish Nation."

A manifesto from the Bishops of Ireland stressed and supported this view, styling the Bill "an oppressive and inhuman law which the Irish people have a right to resist by every means, consonant with the law of God." The tiny seed planted by Sinn Féin was taking root.

The Rising of 1916 removed any doubts as to the organisation's Republican outlook, though it had little influence at the time. The caption "Sinn Féin Rebellion" and the title "Sinn Féiners" were really imposed on the Irish Volunteers and the IRB who were responsible for the Insurrection. Sinn Féin as a civil organisation had no military commitments.

## **2. SINN FÉIN VICTORY**

The winter of 1917 cast the shadow of famine over Europe and Sinn Féin took steps to ensure that cattle, oats, butter, etc would not be exported to the detriment of the Irish people. It set up a Sinn Féin Food Council. This action increased the popularity of Sinn Féin and helped materially to conserve food supplies for home use.

Deportees of the Rising were being released by February 1917 and in that month a by-election occurred in Roscommon. Count Plunkett then an internee in Oxford, was asked to stand as candidate. He was elected, and his election was taken as an endorsement by the people, of the Rising of 1916. Father Michael O'Flanagan, a curate from Crosna did Trojan work during this campaign. He continued, up to his death a few years ago, as a staunch Sinn Féiner, and was both President and Vice-President of the organisation at various times.

In April 1917, a bye-election was won at Longford by Joe McGuinness. In July, Eamonn de Valera won a seat in Clare. In August, WT Cosgrave was successful in Kilkenny. Arthur Griffith captured a seat in Cavan. The flame was spreading.

The first National Convention, at which a Republican Constitution of Sinn Féin was submitted, was held in Dublin on October 25 and 26, 1917. The Constitution was unanimously accepted and the following officers elected:

President: Eamonn de Valera.

Vice-Presidents: Rev M O Flanagan and Arthur Griffith.

Treasurers: WT Cosgrave and Larry Ginnell.

Secretaries: Austin Stack and Darrell Figgis (the latter giving place to Harry Boland subsequently).

Austin Stack retained his post as Honorary Secretary of Sinn Féin until his death in 1929.

An intensive organisational drive was undertaken in the winter of 1917 and met with great success. When the British parliament was dissolved in November, 1918 Sinn Féin was in a position to contest every seat, and did, except Trinity College, North Down and four other Ulster Constituencies, that, by agreement, were allocated to the Parliamentary Party.

Polling day was December 14 and John Dillon declared that “the Irish Party will fight Sinn Féin with all the resources at their disposal,” and of course they were considerable. Sinn Féin, on the other hand, was overwhelmed with disabilities. Over a hundred leaders were in jail, papers were suppressed, the Post Office held up literature, etc. In spite of all, when the results were declared on December 28, out of a total of 105 seats, Sinn Féin had won 73, Unionists 26, and the Irish Party 6. Dillon lost his seat to de Valera in Mayo.

There was no ambiguity about the Manifesto issued by Sinn Féin to the electorate. It plainly declared that Sinn Féin stood for sovereign independence and an Irish Republic, and pledged itself to “make use of any and every means available to render impotent the power of England, to hold Ireland in subjection, by military power or otherwise.”

On January 21, 1919 the first Dáil Éireann met. The President of Sinn Féin, Mr de Valera, being in Lincoln Jail, Count Plunkett proposed that Cathal Brugha should preside, and Father O’Flanagan recited the prayer to the Holy Ghost for wisdom and guidance.

Of the 73 elected 36 were in jail. The Dáil set up its various Ministries, and proceeded to legislate for the country. Austin Stack – Secretary of Sinn Féin – as Minister of Justice, set up law courts, and soon the King’s Writ no longer ran in Ireland.

Those Courts were availed of by the most unexpected litigants, and their decrees were carried out to the letter. Then the Black and Tans arrived; terror followed terror; the jails were filled; burnings and lootings by Crown Forces became frequent, but, through it all, the Sinn Féin Courts and the IRA operated with the help and backing of the Irish people at home and abroad.

On Armistice Day, 1920, the Partition Bill passed its third reading in the British House of Commons. In December, Arthur Griffith was arrested, and de Valera returned from America, where he had passed in triumph from State to State, as the representative of the Irish Republic.

### 3. THE TREATY

The 1921 Ard-Fheis of Sinn Féin showed a steady increase of membership, the number of Cumainn affiliated up to date being close on 1,500. At this Ard-Fheis, Mrs Wyse-Power and Eamonn Duggan were elected Treasurers and given custody of the funds of Sinn Féin, made up of affiliation fees and monies subscribed by the public. A resolution pledging allegiance to Dáil Éireann was passed.

On July 11, 1921 came the Truce. In December, 1921 the so-called Treaty. Forces were divided. In rejecting the Treaty, Mr de Valera said: "I stand definitely for the Irish Republic, as it was established in 1916 –as it was constitutionally established by the Irish Nation in 1919, and I stand for that definitely, and I will stand by no policy whatever, that is not consistent with that – we will, as in the past, stick to the Sinn Féin Constitution."

All the women in the Dáil opposed the Treaty, but by a majority of seven, the Republic was surrendered.

A special Ard-Fheis of Sinn Féin was held in the Mansion House, Dublin, on February 21 and 22, 1922 for the following purpose: "To interpret the Constitution of Sinn Féin with reference to the situation created by the signing at London, of the Articles of Agreement for a Treaty, and the approval of Dáil Éireann by 64 votes to 57, and to decide the policy of Sinn Féin in view of possible forthcoming elections."

On the second day a draft agreement, prepared by de Valera and Griffith, was submitted to the Ard-Fheis and passed without a dissident. The text of the Agreement was as follows:

"In order to avoid a division of the Sinn Féin Organisation, and to avert an opportunity to the signatories of the London Agreement to draft a Constitution, so that when the people are asked to vote at elections to decide between the Republic and the Saorstát the Constitution of the latter may be definitely before them.

It is hereby agreed:

This Ard-Fheis shall stand adjourned for three months.

That in the meantime:

The Officer Board of the organisation shall act as a Standing Committee.

Dáil Éireann shall meet regularly and continue to function in all its departments as before the signing of the Articles of Agreement, and that no vote in Dáil Éireann shall be regarded as a Party vote requiring the resignation of the President and Cabinet.

That in the meantime no Parliamentary Election shall be held, and that when held the constitution of the Saorstát in its final form shall be presented at the same time as the Articles of Agreement.

That this Agreement shall be submitted to the Ard-Fheis, and if approved shall be binding.

(Note — This Agreement was ratified by Dáil Éireann on March 2).

It was not until May 1922 that the pre-election “Pact” was drafted by de Valera and Collins. When this “Pact” was broken by Collins, de Valera — who had been appointed sole trustee of Sinn Féin funds by a resolution of the Standing Committee in February 1922 — wrote to the Treasurers (both of whom supported the Treaty) for a list of assets, deposit receipts, etc. The return correspondence was evasive, the only result being the closing down by Mrs Wyse-Power and Eamonn Duggan (Treasurers) of the Headquarters at 6 Harcourt Street, and the lodging of the funds — then amounting to £8,610 5s 11d in Chancery without any reference whatever to the Officer Board of Sinn Féin, or any authority from an Ard-Fheis of Ard-Chomhairle. Austin Stack and Harry Boland, Honorary Secretaries, wrote to the Treasurers protesting against this action and continued, despite the closing down, to address their correspondence as from 6 Harcourt Street.

It has to be borne in mind in considering the comparative inactivity of Sinn Féin at this juncture, that during the whole period there was violent conflict and open war; that on July 30 Harry Boland, Honorary Secretary of Sinn Féin was fatally shot by Free State troops at Skerries, that on July 5, Cathal Brugha fell fighting in Dublin; that on August 22, Michael Collins was killed in action in Cork. Later Seamus Devins, TD, died fighting in the West; Joseph McDonagh died on being transferred from Mountjoy Jail to the Mater Hospital and Dr Ferran died in the Curragh Internment Camp. Moreover, Pádraig O’Keeffe, the paid Secretary of Sinn Féin, was now Governor of Mountjoy Jail, and his attitude towards Sinn Féin need not be stressed.

The difficulties created by the withholding of the funds at this critical time cannot be overestimated and in June 1923 the number of Cumainn affiliated fell to 16, and a re-organising committee was set up to cope with this debacle.

This organising committee was conducted from Sinn Féin Publicity Bureau at 23 Suffolk Street and proved so successful that Sinn Féin decided to contest seats at the General Election in August 1923, and put forward 87 candidates on an abstentionist policy. The Manifesto issued stated that: "The Sinn Féin candidates in this election, stand as they have stood in every election since 1917, for the unity and untrammelled independence of Ireland."

Of the 87 chosen, 64 were prevented from addressing their constituents by reason of being in prison or "on the run" de Valera himself and the Director of Elections were among those arrested. In the net result 44 Sinn Féin candidates were elected, an increase of 8 over the number elected in June 1922 and although Free State military and police continued a campaign of persecution, successful meetings continued a campaign of persecution, successful meetings continued to be held, and two more seats were won in bye-elections in November 1924: Sean Lemass, Dublin, and Dr Madden, Mayo.

At the Ard-Fheis on October 16, 630 Cumainn were represented. A week later 424 political prisoners in Mountjoy went on hunger-strike, and hunger-strikers in Newbridge, Kilmainham and other camps and prisons followed immediately.

Sinn Féin's activities focused around the prisoners and their dependants. At a meeting of the Ard-Chomhairle in the Mansion House on November 29, 1923, figures were submitted showing that affiliated Cumainn had increased to 729, including three in England, and representing every county in Ireland except Tyrone and Fermanagh.

One of the resolutions dealt with "the withholding of Sinn Féin funds, by persons who were no longer members".

In February 1924 three bye-elections were contested until the Sinn Féin vote had increased considerably. In the same month Sinn Féin decided to boycott the Tailteann Games unless the prisoners were released, on the grounds that when Aonach Tailteann was agreed on in 1921 de Valera was elected Honorary President and now in 1924 he and 1,200 other Republicans were in jail, so the Games would not be representative of the National sentiment and would give visitors a false impression.

In July 1924, though Fermanagh still had no Cumainn, Tyrone had six, and in the same month de Valera and Austin Stack who had been interned were released, and a highly successful meeting was held in Ennis on August 15. An Ard-Fheis was fixed for November 4, 1924. More than 1,000 Cumainn were in existence. All attempts to kill Sinn Féin had failed.

Lectures were printed and distributed to the Cumainn and an employment bureau for ex-internees was set up.

At the bye-elections early in 1925 two more Teachtaí were elected — Oscar Traynor in Dublin and Sam Holt in Sligo-Leitrim — showing a steady revival of Republican spirit. About this time it was decided to commemorate officially on Easter Sunday each year all those who gave their lives for the freedom of Ireland in 1916 and afterwards.

#### **4. NEW BETRAYAL**

About July 1925, whatever the reason, it was reported by the Director of Organisation — Eamonn Donnelly — that there was a falling-off in enthusiasm and that the organisation in Limerick, Clare and Tipperary was not in a healthy condition. Great Britain was visited by Austin Stack and Art O'Connor and cheering reports came from them "that Sinn Féin was the only National Organisation, officially recognised in England and Scotland."

In this month the Ard-Chomhairle instructed all members to refuse to vote at the forthcoming election of Senators to the Free State Parliament and the election proved little better than a fiasco.

On November 17,18 and 19 was held the Ard-Fheis which had been postponed from October. To it was submitted the Cahirciveen resolution, calling for an undertaking from Sinn Féin deputies "to enter only a Republican Parliament for all Ireland". The majority of the delegates clearly favoured it. It was persistently opposed by de Valera.

After two days speechmaking it was agreed that no change be made for the present in the policy of the organisation, in view of the fact that for two months previously what was called a "Sinn Féin platform" was being hammered out by a sub-committee, with Father O'Flanagan as Chairman and JJ O'Kelly (Sceilg) as Secretary. De Valera, who was a member of the Committee, was absent from most of the meetings, his absence being explained by illness.

The findings of this Committee, though duly published, were never implemented. When early in 1926 de Valera proposed to the Ard-Chomhairle that an extraordinary Ard-Fheis be held on March 10, strained relations were already evident among members of the Standing Committee many of whom saw — too late — the need there had been for the Cahirciveen resolution.

De Valera's motion to this Ard-Fheis showed clearly his eagerness to enter Leinster House if the Oath was removed. This motion was countered by an amendment by Father O'Flanagan, repudiating the idea of entrance to a partition parliament on any terms. But, though this was carried as an amendment, it did not get the requisite majority when put as a substantive motion. A composite committee was then set up in an effort to restore harmony and arrive at some agreement by which the former unity of the Sinn Féin organisation could be maintained.

It was agreed that copies of the findings of this committee should be sent to the Ard-Chomhairle of Sinn Féin and to the Second Dáil. De Valera then and there resigned the Presidency of Sinn Féin, and soon founded Fianna Fáil, after which he was deposed from the Presidency of Dáil Éireann, the Government of the Republic. Having announced his intention to enter the Free State Parliament only if the Oath to the King of England were removed, he soon led his Party into the usurpers house, swallowed the Oath, and swung into Power over the backs of the Republican prisoners with the slogan: "Put them in to get them out".

At a subsequent meeting of the Ard-Chomhairle of Sinn Féin a resolution was passed calling on all Teachtaí who has embraced the "new departure" to hand in their resignations, as members of Dáil Éireann to the Ceann Comhairle (Sceilg), and to notify Sinn Féin Secretaries that they no longer represented the Organisation which had nominated them and secured their election, and to refund their election deposits which were supplied by Sinn Féin. This the Fianna Fáil deputies refused to do, denying that they owed their election or election deposits to the Sinn Féin Organisation.

Some years later — July 1933 — Mr de Valera, speaking in Leinster House on the subject of the Republican funds — which included American Bonds — said: "I stated the moneys belong to the Second Dáil — I believe it. If in 1927, when we were still outside this House, we had got a majority in the election, we would have summoned the Second Dáil and accounted to it. The money had been subscribed for an Irish Republic for all Ireland; the Free State is not that Republic for all Ireland; the Free State is not that Republic, and the balance of the funds should not go to that State. Those who have continued in that Organisation (Sinn Féin) which we have left, can claim the same continuity that we claimed up to 1925. They can do it."

In July 1947 a move was being made for the misappropriation of those funds then amounting to £25,000 by using them for pension purposes and Sinn Féin decided to contest the issue in the Law Courts in an attempt to defeat this move.

There is no gainsaying the fact that de Valera had a very substantial following and that his defection severely depleted the ranks of Sinn Féin.

## **5. NEW TASKS**

We were left without resources — there being only about £26 left in the Treasury — and we soon had to evaluate the expensive headquarters in Suffolk Street and move to 16 Parnell Square. Those premises were burnt out and many of our historical documents lost. We led a roving existence for some time, holding our meetings in Dawson Street, Molesworth Street, etc and were subjected to raids by Free State troops who searched, or attempted to search those present, and confiscated documents and literature which were never returned.

## 6. ON TO VICTORY

It is a far cry from 1905 to 1956, and if “the survival of the fittest” has any meaning it is surely exemplified by the fact that this year — 51 years after its inception — Sinn Féin pitted its strength against all the resources of Empire, and marched into its stolen territory — the Six Counties — claiming its right to represent every inch of Ireland by contesting on an abstentionist policy, every one of 12 constituencies in the Westminster General Election. Even one success in this historic field would do more to end, partition than all the lip-service of professional politicians.

The Organisation threw its full force into those elections, with the result, that not only one, but two seats were won — by prisoner candidates — Philip Clarke in Tyrone-Fermanagh, and Thomas Mitchell in Mid-Ulster — a total of 152,310 votes being cast for Sinn Féin.

In addition the propaganda value of the campaign was enormous and the results were a severe shock to the Unionists, who at once lodged a petition to unseat Clarke on the grounds that “a convicted felon” serving over 12 months imprisonment is a disqualified person. They knew this of course when his nomination was accepted, but they never visualised his return at the head of the poll. The steps taken in Mitchell’s case were different: he was unseated by the British Imperial Parliament, and another bye-election was ordered. Sinn Féin once more nominated Mitchell, who was again returned, with over three times the majority he had in the General Election. This time the Unionists lodged a petition as in Clarke’s case, and in due course both were declared unseated and their seats awarded to their Unionist opponents. In a third Mid-Ulster election, Tom Mitchell won 24,124 votes against Unionist and “Nationalist” opposition.

This panic counteraction is the greatest compliment that could be paid to Sinn Féin, connoting as it does, the realisation of the revival of a truly national spirit in the country — and above all in the stronghold of the enemy — which was fondly hoped to have been merged into the materialistic trend which dominates the world today.

Whatever the result of Britain’s latest attack on democracy the fact still remains that the spiritual and national outlook of the Irish people as a whole is unchanged and unchangeable. As Pearse said at the grave of O’Donovan Rossa: “They cannot undo the miracles of God, Who ripens in the hearts of young men, the seeds sown by the young men of a former generation.” And which Terence McSwiney emphasised when he wrote: “When the scroll of God can be reached to, and re-written by a mortal hand our dreams may vanish, and the fight for Freedom fail; but as long as the decrees of Heaven stand, crying

aloud on high justification and hope, thus long will there be endurance and loyalty to the old Love, in the hearts of the Gaedheal.”

Sinn Féin today embodies the principle teachings and hopes of all the patriots of the past, and with God’s blessing will emulate their endeavours, and carry on the work for Ireland, which is our heritage. They have passed the torch on to us, let us work, with the hope that to us may be given the joy of seeing, in our day, Caitlin Ní Ualiachain enthroned again as unchallenged mistress of her “Four beautiful, green fields”.