

Desynchronized Irish Republican Political Strategy: The Dichotomy of the Armalite and the Ballot Box

BY EVAN MALGREM

The Irish Republican movement has been historically riddled with discontinuity, ideological infighting, and a myriad of fragmenting splinter groups. These tensions are visible in the union of the Provisional Irish Republican Army and Sinn Féin, which adopted the “armalite and ballot box” strategy of pursuing their goals simultaneously through subversive militancy and constitutional politics during the 1980s. This strategy is often seen as having reflected a surge in the popularity of radical politics in Northern Ireland, or else the radicalization of mainstream nationalist contingencies. Along with this, the PIRA and Sinn Féin are generally understood to have existed as inseparable organizational bodies with coordinated goals and interests. In many ways, though, these strategies were less harmoniously aligned than many had believed, and helped lead to the moderation of Republican politics and ultimately the demilitarization of the Republican movement. Thus, hindsight demonstrates that the Republicanisms of Sinn Féin and the PIRA were ultimately irreconcilable; the armalite and the ballot box were not complimentary sources of power or legitimacy, and the strength of one came at the expense of the other.¹ The armalite and the ballot box, or the PIRA and Sinn Féin, are probably better understood as icons of competing ideologies rather than constituting a united front.

If “the armalite” and “the ballot box” are understood to be a dichotomy rather than constituents of a holistic approach, then the coherency of republicanism itself falls into question.

¹ Frampton discusses the difficulties that Sinn Féin faced in reconciling their non-abstentionist politics with their image as a legitimately Republican organization. Martyn Frampton, *The Long March: The Political Strategy of Sinn Féin, 1981-2007* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Sinn Féin was predominantly a mouthpiece for the PIRA after a split in 1970, and did not drum up much political support until after rectifying its strategy after the 1975 ceasefire.² Once their electoral politics proved viable, they became increasingly willing to shy away from the armalite in order to maintain constitutional authority. Thus, in some ways, the PIRA became a subservient organization to Sinn Féin whereas previously the opposite was true. It is worth considering whom the armalite and ballot box strategy belonged to, as it was carried out across distinct republican bodies with increasingly divergent interests. If groups such as the CIRA and the RIRA are taken into consideration, then the armalite and ballot box strategy continues even to this day, except that “the armalite” is now even further removed from “the ballot box” as dissidents accuse Sinn Féin of orchestrating British rule in Northern Ireland. The beginning of the strategy, then, may be understood as the sewing of a long-lasting schism in republican politics.

It should be noted that the armalite and the ballot box were not always powerful forces in Irish republicanism. Indeed, in the wake of the 1956-62 border campaign, the old IRA held a relatively weak presence in Northern Ireland, was not particularly well armed, and had largely reformed as a revolutionary socialist rather than nationalist party.³ Thus, republicanism was in a slump during the 60s, and a nationalist civil rights movement rose to replace it in the north. This movement mostly sought Catholic equality rather than independence from Britain, and was largely inspired by civil rights movements taking place abroad. However, as it became increasingly targeted by the aggression of loyalist paramilitaries, violence escalated towards the end of the decade. This violence eventually culminated in the riots of August 12-17 in 1969, during which the old IRA was

² The organization also undertook its first significant action during this process, in manning the ‘incident centres’ that oversaw the ceasefire. Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1993* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1993), 98.

³ Richard English argues, however, that the practices and infrastructure of the old IRA were indeed quite influential upon the development of the Provisionals. Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Pan Macmillan Ltd, 2003), 132-133.

seen as having been completely ineffective in protecting Catholic communities in Belfast.⁴ After a number of Catholic deaths, republicans increasingly sought armed protection. The police were vehemently pro-unionist, the old IRA was seen as impotent, and as a consequence, “the Provisionals emerged as necessary defenders of the Catholic community.”⁵

By 1970, the armalite had risen as the dominant impetus of republicanism, and violence escalated between republican and loyalist paramilitary groups. Amongst republicans, support for militarism spiked once again in 1972 in the wake of Bloody Sunday.⁶ At this point in time, the ballot box was hardly a feature of republican strategy; indeed, Sinn Féin lacked a coherent political platform throughout most of the 70s. Rather, the organization primarily existed for publicity, and as an outlet for women and the elderly who could not contribute militarily. This began to change during the ultimately unsuccessful ceasefire of 1975, and it was around this time that a shift began to take place in republican strategy. Many prisoners, as well as people in leadership positions, began to discuss a protracted 20-year struggle rather than a quick 5-year victory, and Sinn Féin’s political mission was thus reshaped.⁷ Gerry Adams led much of this push, ascending to the position of joint vice-president of Sinn Féin in 1978 and becoming a leading figure in moving the organization away from the abstentionist and southern-based leadership of Ruairí Ó Brádaigh and joint vice-president Dáithí Ó Conaill. Although still subservient to the militant PIRA and not quite contesting elections in the late 70s, Sinn Féin was re-conceptualized as a political force.

As the nature of the struggle came to be perceived as a long-term ordeal, the role and identity of the IRA’s political prisoners became an increasingly important facet of republicanism.

⁴ This is, of course, a necessary oversimplification of these events. For a concise yet more satisfactory history leading up to the creation of the Provisional IRA, see: Tim Pat Coogan, *The I.R.A.* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 341-353.

⁵ English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, 81.

⁶ Richard English focuses on the enraged sense of empowerment that the IRA built up in the wake of Bloody Sunday, also including their official press response. *Ibid.*, 155.

⁷ Jeremy Smith, *Making the Peace in Ireland* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 146-147.

Fighting for the rights of republican prisoners also came to be seen as a way to legitimize republican involvement in assembly politics.⁸ Sinn Féin assumed a position of campaigning on behalf of the prisoners, and enjoyed a massive swell in popularity around their activities during the early 80s. As internment was phased out, the Northern Ireland Office's policy of criminalization led to a series of prison protests: first the 'blanket' protests, and then the powerful hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981.⁹ The nature of Sinn Féin's alliance with the Provisionals changed dramatically as a result of these escalating protests, and particularly with the brutal hunger strikes of 1981. Jeremy Smith argues that it was this particular event that caused Sinn Féin to grow from an IRA mouthpiece into "a powerful, community-based, media-sensitive and tactically astute Republican movement."¹⁰ As they continued to contest elections, the ballot box became just as significant as the armalite in commanding republican authority.

Thus "the armalite and the ballot box" was born as a reaction to an upsurge in political support revolving around the hunger strikes, and particularly the political victory and subsequent death of Bobby Sands in 1981. Danny Morrison first articulated the strategy at Sinn Féin's annual conference, Ard Fheis, that very same year:

Who here really believes 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 the other, we take power in Ireland?¹¹

Early successes at the ballot box fueled optimism for this two-pronged strategy, as Sinn Féin enjoyed international legitimacy and secured 9-13% of the vote between 1981 and 1986 despite

⁸ Richard English mentions the legitimization of Sinn Féin's participation in elections surrounding the rights of political prisoners. English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, 224-225.

⁹ For an incredibly detailed account of the H-block hunger strikes, see: David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1987).

¹⁰ Jeremy Smith, *Making the Peace in Ireland*, 115.

¹¹ English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IR*, 224-225.

remaining an abstentionist party. This was a time in which Sinn Féin needed to be particularly careful with their politics, insisting that the armed struggle was still paramount to their cause.¹² However, as the public's fervor surrounding the hunger strikes began to subside, the party failed to overtake the SDLP as the dominant nationalist party in Northern Ireland. This led to infighting, and in 1986 republicanism split for the first significant time since 1970. The larger group, which retained the leadership of Gerry Adams, abandoned abstentionism to focus more on building Sinn Féin as a political party, while the newly formed Republican Sinn Féin and Continuity IRA split from Sinn Féin and the PIRA, respectively.¹³

Although the PIRA remained active at this point, participation in the Northern Ireland Assembly demonstrated a significant change of heart on the part of Sinn Féin. Recognizing the British government's infrastructure in hopes of reaching a greater electorate, Gerry Adams took his party in a much more moderate direction. Despite this, the armalite and the ballot box continued to dominate the spirit of republicanism throughout much of the 80s, until a number of setbacks caused Sinn Féin to rethink its political strategy once again. Notably, the party's loss of 16 council seats in 1989, as well as Gerry Adams' loss of the Belfast West constituency in 1992, demonstrated the long-term strain that the PIRA was putting on Sinn Féin's electoral viability.¹⁴ By the late 80s, the organization began to deny links to the IRA. Although these links still existed, it is clear that the armalite and ballot box strategy had undermined the ideological coherency of republicanism. On the one hand, hardline dissidents in the CIRA and RSF condemned mainstream republicanism, and on the other, Sinn Féin was forced to publicly abandon support for militarism.

¹² For a brief exposition of the balance between political contestations and armed escalation during Sinn Féin's first bout of elections, see: M. L. R. Smith, *Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement* (London: Routledge, 1995), 169-172.

¹³ Smith discusses this split as reconsolidating the center of the Republican movement in the North, as well as acknowledging "a need [...] to go 'slightly constitutional.'" Smith, *Making the Peace in Ireland*, 136-137.

¹⁴ Ian McAllister, "The Armalite and the Ballot Box: Sinn Féin's Electoral Strategy in Northern Ireland," *Electoral Studies* 23, no. 1 (March 2004): 123-142.

As the dismal likelihood of a PIRA military victory became increasingly obvious and the perceived efficacy of constitutional republicanism grew, the PIRA became a political liability to Sinn Féin. They grew ever more willing to bargain it off by the late 80s, and Gerry Adams moved towards lowering the price for an IRA ceasefire. The power of the armalite had faded substantially. In 1986, he suggested that the Provisionals would settle for something less than an imminent British withdrawal, and began to engage in talks with John Hume of the SDLP. Although these broke down, they resumed once more in 1993 when Adams indicated the potential for an IRA ceasefire in return for British support for eventual Irish unification.¹⁵ Eventually, Adams and Hume reached a point upon which an IRA ceasefire might be mutually accepted by both unionists and republicans: the right to self-determination.¹⁶ The peace process began to move forward, and in essence, Sinn Féin had embraced the ballot box wholesale, only using the threat of the armalite as a final bargaining chip.

Sinn Féin's signing of the Belfast Agreement was not only a final abandonment of the armalite, but also of traditional republicanism. In settling for the right to self-determination, Gerry Adams entirely strayed from his old line that he would accept no less than the end of partition in exchange for ceasefire. Indeed, as late as 1989, the public stance of Sinn Féin remained "totally opposed to a power-sharing Stormont assembly."¹⁷ Nonetheless, Sinn Féin claimed the agreement as a political victory, pointing especially to the advents of power sharing, self-determination, and cross-border cooperation. In fact it could be argued that the agreement constituted a victory for Sinn Féin on some level, as their voter representation continued to rise and eventually overtake the

¹⁵ Ed Moloney reveals that the decision to strategically make this concession had been made behind tightly closed doors as early as 1988. Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 392-395.

¹⁶ The arrangement of the eventual peace talks were largely midwifed by the persistent efforts of Hume. Martin Mansergh, "The Background to the Irish Peace Process," in *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2006), 24-40.

¹⁷ Kevin Bean, *The New Politics of Sinn Féin* (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 231.

SDLP as the dominant nationalist party.¹⁸ However, it still represented a firm moderation of republican politics. Sinn Féin's cooperation on the Belfast Agreement was a direct descendant of their armalite and ballot box strategy, as well as evidence that the magnetism of the latter eventually managed to outweigh the momentum of the former. Although the PIRA took a further 12 years to fully disarm, the association of the armalite and the ballot box had ended in 1998 after a period of decided deradicalization.

Although the supposed union of the armalite and the ballot box ended with Good Friday, it is debatable that the dichotomy still exists to this day. Indeed, the Belfast Agreement encouraged another split, as many republicans did not support the move towards ceasefire. As Bernadette Sands McKeivitt, sister of Bobby Sands stated, "Bobby did not die for cross-border bodies with executive powers. He did not die for nationalists to be equal British citizens within the Northern Ireland state."¹⁹ This sentiment was certainly felt by others, and she later went on to form the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, a community pressure group that exists as the abstentionist political body of the newly formed Real IRA.²⁰ These organizations remain committed to traditional republicanism, and reject the ballot box in clear favor of the armalite. Moreover, they decry Sinn Féin as merely orchestrating British rule and imposing partition government.²¹ Although the armalite still exists as a force of republicanism to some extent, its power has been thoroughly sapped by the impetus of the ballot box. Today, the active political and militant wings of republicanism are entirely disassociated and oppositional.

¹⁸ Mainstream political success also came to necessitate an even further moderated policy in securing a continuing political growth. By the 21st century, Sinn Féin was entirely divorced from the support of political violence. Frampton, *The Long March: The Political Strategy of Sinn Féin, 1981-2007*, 143-150.

¹⁹ English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, 316-317.

²⁰ Although this relationship is contested by the 32CSM, the connection is generally held to be true.

²¹ The party position on Sinn Féin is outlined in the 'background' section of their website. "The 32CSM - Background and Objectives," February 27, 2014, <http://www.derry32csm.com/p/32csm-background.html>.

The armalite and the ballot box were less a coherent strategy of republicanism and more a schism that was created vis-à-vis the fundamental philosophy behind the anti-partition movement. The two power bases were not complimentary, but rather mutually detractive.²² As has been demonstrated, the initial republicanism of the Troubles relied entirely upon the armalite, from roughly the August riots of 1969 until the hunger strikes of 1981. In 1981, the ballot box became a force of republicanism out of circumstance as support for militancy swelled around the prisoners' protest. This began an uneasy cooperation between the armalite, or the PIRA, and the newly empowered ballot box, or the restructured Sinn Féin, until roughly 1989. At this point a series of political setbacks necessitated a preference towards one or the other, and the ballot box started to win out. From then until the Good Friday agreement of 1998, the power of the armalite shrank at a rapid rate, until it was fully forfeited by Sinn Féin in favor of pursuing republican goals constitutionally. The dichotomy of the armalite and the ballot box still exists today between dissident and mainstream republican organizations. Unlike in the 80s, these groups do not present themselves as congruent power bases, but the reality of their antagonism remains relatively unchanged from that time.

²² Smith points out that Gerry Adams himself acknowledged this to some extent during the early stages of the armalite and ballot box strategy. Smith, *Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement*, 172.

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