

# NEW DEPARTURES FOR SINN FEIN ?

Sinn Féin's recent election success in Northern Ireland have focussed attention on the Provisionals' new turn to political activity at local level. There have been parallel developments in the organisation in the 26 Counties. *Gralton* spoke to PADDY BOLGER, Ard Comhairle member and National Organiser, with special responsibility for Dublin, about the changed perspective.

GRALTON: We have heard a lot about Sinn Féin's more serious involvement in constituency work in the North. Is there something similar happening in the 26 Counties? Are you now planning for the local and European elections next year?

BOLGER: There have been major developments in our political appreciation of the situation in the country over the last few years. The basis of this is the realisation that military action and political action purely in support of that were not sufficient, to build a base even for national liberation and the realisation that sloganising about socialism and relating it to a vision of a better future and to some magical formula which would work itself out when the British withdrew, were not a sound basis on which to build a conscious mass movement.

The developments that have taken place in the movement are general, and not confined to the North. A lot is due to the fact that the people who were young activists in the early 1970s, some of them in the late 1960s, have by a natural progression moved into more prominent positions. For the first time in decades, republicans have had the opportunity through this long struggle, on a sound minimum basis, to develop our politics not abstractly but in experience.

GRALTON: Was that a difficult process? Did you have difficulties in dealing with the traditions, and maybe even a certain traditionalism in the organisation?

BOLGER: It was more of a gradual process than a difficult one. In the early 1970s there was a definite belief, supported by some of the circumstances, that a short quick push would secure a withdrawal. The fall of Stormont was one of the major factors to influence that kind of thinking. After the Loyalist workers' strike and the period of the cease-fire with the British, we saw that the British were not going to go and that the idea that they wanted to go and were simply looking for a way out was a false one.

We also saw that it was going to be a long process. Some people realised it in prison, other people realised it in their daily activity. We had to have a long-term strategy for political consolidation of the organisation. It was

only when the movement in the North got over the effects of the Mason repression that we were cohesive enough to come up with that kind of strategy. The broad front around the prison issue and the hunger strike was a fruit of that.

Some people were suspicious of what they saw to be political work. The movement has always had two extremes in the past — the constitutional extreme which ran away from radicalism of any description and tended to be strictly parliamentary and the military extreme which said: Keep your powder dry until the day you can rise and the opportunity presents itself. The second of them may have been more legitimate in terms of anti-imperialism but in the end was still based on short-term activity only.

GRALTON: Do you think the memory of what has happened the Officials in the late 1960s was in some people's minds as well?

BOLGER: Some people went further back than that, even, and looked at Fianna Fáil. But the gradual development — and it could be called that, rather than a dramatic change — took several years, through a process of debate and education. The people who were dubious about these moves were quite sincere in their doubts. But there has been an acceptance at the last few Ard Fheiseanna that the strategy that had been unfolding is correct and what's wrong with people who go into Leinster House and betray and what's wrong with politicians who renege even on the partition question, not to mention armed action against the British, is that their ideology was bad before their tactics were bad. What was wrong with the Officials, for instance, was that they wanted to reform the Six Counties.

Our attitude is that as long as our basic republicanism is not diluted we have no reason to fear for the future. The new outlook is accepted throughout the organisation. It's not just a question of a few radicals in Belfast holding these views.

GRALTON: What has been happening within the organisation in the South, precisely to overcome this



Paddy Bolger

notion that the Provisionals' new radicalism is a Northern phenomenon?

BOLGER: We have two problems in the South; firstly, we do not have the mass community base that exists in the Six Counties for all the obvious historic reasons and for some political reasons. We are significant for the public's eye in relation to Northern events. So, we are going through a major internal re-organisation to switch from mainly propaganda activity in relation to the North to structuring the movement in order to face local issues and political issues in the South. We now have a much more developed education programme to motivate our members.

We recognise that the political parties we are opposing don't just fool the people at election time. They actually have a real domination for instance of tenants' organisations (Fianna Fáil ideology, in particular, dominates the individual members). Our first task down here is to improve the public's perception of us, first of all by refining our policies and bringing them down to earth, and secondly, by the hard slog of local organisation and by principled work on issues convincing people that our analysis is correct.

Having broken through on that basis, we would want to make the Northern issue count, less on the basis of moral condemnation, of those who have ignored it, but by saying particularly to Fianna Fáil voters: the party's policies have not worked, the hope for British goodwill is

misplaced. We have not changed our basic position but we have amended our approach for putting it to the people.

GRALTON: You refer to "the public" and to "the people". Do you have within the 3 1/2 million population strategic targets you are trying to reach?

BOLGER: We have two objectives. The principle one is to secure a British withdrawal, and bring about a situation where self-determination can be asserted. In that area, we address ourselves to everybody in the 26 Counties, saying that the Six Country state is irreformable and that the policy of compromise with the Loyalists not only is not accepted by the Loyalists, but has failed, as history has proven.

We also have a social objective and in terms of our social policies, we would be much more specific. We are aiming at the working class base and at the small farming base. We have in a strip along the Border and down through the west, a reasonable local government base in the real small farming community. That is likely to be sustained. Our main breakthrough, we believe, must be in Dublin and Cork.

The middle class in the 26 Counties is affected by factionism. The professional middle class veers between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael depending on whether the national question is a major issue at the time. And we address ourselves to them on the national question, on civil liberties and on the general issue of economic sovereignty.

The rest of that class is probably at this stage, through the development of Fine Gael, committed to anti-national and, currently, monetarist positions. But there are sections of the people who could not be described as working class or small farmer who would not be reactionary on economic issues. Fianna Fáil have, through mild social democratic policies, maintained that broad constituency of working class, petit bourgeois and small farming support. That is the base that we would be aiming at as well, primarily because they are the people who need to be given a project for a political and economic independence, with a socialist programme — not an ultra-Left programme, but a thoughtful socialist programme with a long-term objective.

GRALTON: How would you measure success for this strategy a year from now? Given that it is long-term, what would be a reasonable aspiration in your view?

BOLGER: The aspirations are internal as well as external. We would hope in Dublin to be well organised in every local government constituency and we are organising at the moment on that basis. We are already organised reasonably well at cumann level in about two thirds of Dublin, city and county, a couple of corporation seats in Dublin and Cork we would see as a major step forward.

We don't expect to make a great big splash because of the hegemony of the other parties. We see the Workers' Party as a problem but not a major blockage. Working class support for Fianna Fáil on the national question and trade union acceptance still of Fianna Fáil's project for the economy are our major problems.

GRALTON: Do you not recognise that this concern for



electoral achievement imposes certain patterns of work and obligations to engage in service politics? Is that a price you reckon you have to pay?

**BOLGER:** The problem that the Left here and throughout Europe has to face is that in a non-revolutionary situation — and that's what we have in the 26 Counties — you can't always advance as far along the lines of your programme as you would like. We are very conscious of the dangers of slipping into reformism. At the moment, we are providing in Dublin what could be called a clientelist service. It is better and more principled than the service which the other parties are providing, including the Workers' Party. We see this simply as a means of establishing our presence and our credibility in the areas. People are extremely cynical of all parties.

We do not believe that revolutionary sloganising, however correct its content, will produce results. We are now building up our organisation to get ourselves accepted as a credible and locally informed organisation. But we see that only as the basis to build up agitational politics. We would also hope to build a base for propaganda work, through publications, seminars and surveys at 26-County level.

Our education programme is geared to preventing an influx of new members who don't have a definite ideology but might be attracted to us because of the Northern successes. We want to prevent such an influx blunting our revolutionary edge. But we have no fantasies about the possibilities for red revolution in the 26 Counties. We know it's a hard slog. The clientelist work is principled service. People are in need and even if we only provide a better service than the rest we will be accomplishing something. We need to develop, as the major left parties in Europe have done, an alternative constituency, a body of the working class who just don't accept the strategy that the other parties offer.

**GRALTON:** Do you find in your service work when acting as intermediaries between the consumers and the state or the local bureaucracy, you get a response as Sinn Féin?

**BOLGER:** Certainly in Dublin Corporation we haven't experienced any prejudice from the administrative people. A lot of them are very helpful. Even at this low level of servicing they recognise that there is a real concern. The average TD will deal with problems by correspondence whereas we have two full time people working with Christy Burke in the No. 6 electoral area who actually go to the Corporation every morning and work through the files with the Corporation people. We certainly have credibility with them.

We have been very successful in housing matters, particularly with transfers. The Labour Party and the Workers' Party won't deal with such cases because they are transferring votes out. We have a woman working in Ballymun area part-time who is likely to be the candidate there, but she is handling transfers out of the constituency. We also involve the community in the work we are doing. We have advisors invited on to tenants' associations in three city centre areas.

**GRALTON:** How do you choose issues at local or regional or national level for your involvement? The issues volunteer themselves in the service work but how do you decide to commit resources to an industrial issue



Gerry Adams, post-election speech

Derek Smeets (Report)

or a political issue?

**BOLGER:** We have a general policy mapped out by the Ard Comhairle. So, in the industrial sphere, we are opposed to closures and in favour of occupations to prevent them. We have always been opposed to centralised wage bargaining. Strike action is spontaneous and specific — often not very different in structure from the kind of problem we get in the clientelist work — and our members have directions to support that kind of action. They do it not as a political intervention, but in support of the workers' own demands.

**GRALTON:** Let's take Rank's as an example. You are heavily involved there. How did that arise and what's Sinn Féin hoping to achieve through its involvement?

**BOLGER:** The situation there is that the workers had a high level of consciousness about the state of the industry. They were politically fairly advanced already. They were isolated at the start of the dispute and some of them turned to us. We did not get involved politically. We didn't want to get them a bad name, as you might say. But we did provide the service of a phone, stationery and contacts with journalists and trade unionists who might assist.

Our attitude is that we did not intervene. The workers asked us to become involved. We didn't initiate any policy decisions they took. We're very pleased from our own political position to see how they have responded, especially in their manifesto (published in *Gralton* no 7) which is one of the best pieces of trade union commentary which we have seen for years.

We didn't believe that a party can intervene in a strike if

the workers themselves haven't decided on a line of action. We're the only grouping on the Left which has a substantial base which gave Ranks' workers any help. We would have preferred if the trade union movement had given them more active support.

**GRALTON:** Were you influenced at all by the fact that Ranks is a multi-national and that there was an implicit issue of sovereignty in the dispute? Would your response have been the same if it had been a local company?

**BOLGER:** Local companies don't exist on the same scale, at least not with the same relationship to distribution and to imports and exports. I think our response would have been the same if it had been an Irish-owned company. Ranks symbolises what is wrong with the economic strategy in the 26 Counties and there are political lessons to be learned from the dispute. What's happening there is an indication of the insecurity of the current economic structures, with foreign companies being invited in with bigger concessions than they would get over in Sri Lanka or Mexico and without any concept of state planning in relation to them. We're opposed to



Derek Smeets (Report)

... and the armalite.

multi-nationals in principle as a pattern of development, because of their threat to sovereignty. Even in a purely capitalist sense they have nothing to offer in terms of economic development.

But we should be careful not to exaggerate our role in this area. We have a lot of militants who are republican in their political work and republican in their trade union work. They're not zany, but are as thoughtful as any decent trade unionist. They introduce the republican questions when it's appropriate and when the opposition doesn't block it. They're now getting some general direction from the organisation. But our work as Sinn Féin is still largely limited to individual, specific actions, for instance in support of strikes. We believe that industrial work is not of itself enough to change working class consciousness. We have to carry out the local work as well.

**GRALTON:** You referred earlier to the need to take steps to prevent the rapid influx of people with political expectations you couldn't meet, perhaps looking for some instant success. Has Sinn Féin had a problem with the turnover of members since those periods, notably

during the hunger strike, when it was the focus for young people in Dublin who were looking for action? Are you now consciously looking for a different kind of recruit?

**BOLGER:** Particularly after Francis Hughes died on hunger strike there were a lot of young people, particularly from the poorer districts of Dublin, coming on to the demonstrations. Most of them accepted the republican position about keeping the demonstrations peaceful, about keeping militancy controlled. Most of them then went away again when the hunger strike ended. It wasn't all that different from the North, except that up there we have been able to give that support a political focus. Because of our dominance in so many areas turn it into the beginnings of a mass political movement.

The problem in the South is that we haven't been able to provide that focus. A lot of young people who did join the campaign as activists, and not just for the demonstration, were driven away by the police. We suffer greatly from police harassment. Most of the people we have now as activists are essential activists, the same people as we had in 1977 who weren't scared away by the repression under the Coalition government. Many of the

H-Block action groups which might have developed into Sinn Féin cumainn — and that would have been a natural progression — were broken up by police action. Since the successes in the North and since the realisation that we might become a serious political force down here, some of the best of those people have started to come back. We're quite convinced that if we could make ourselves credible electorally — well, at least initially, electorally — a lot of the support the hunger strike had in Dublin would come to us. The next local government elections are our immediate target in that regard.

**GRALTON:** Are you consciously grooming candidates at this stage, a year ahead of the earliest possible date for the local elections?

**BOLGER:** All of the candidates we'll be running in Dublin have been selected locally. They haven't yet been ratified by the Dublin Comhairle Ceanntair but that's really a formality, as it would be a formality at Ard Comhairle level. We have six advice centres, one of which is full-time. We're currently buying caravans which would be mobile advice centres. We have already earmarked eight definite areas in Dublin that we'll run in.



We haven't ruled out running in more, or in all, if organisational improvement allow.

**GRALTON:** What we've talked about so far is a strategy for building Sinn Féin as a party. But in relation to issues in which other organisations come into play, do you have any guiding strategy in co-operation with these? How do you decide on your possible involvement in such campaigns as the anti-amendment movement and the Nicky Kelly defence campaign?

**BOLGER:** We don't only work with those who agree with us on the North, or who share our view of economic and industrial questions. In the Nicky Kelly campaign, for instance, most of the best activists were our members or very immediate supporters. We are opposed to the constitutional amendment but, as much for organisational reasons as any other, we didn't throw ourselves into the campaign. We're not sure what we might have contributed anyway because of the line-up of forces in that very broad campaign.

But we have no objection in principle to taking part in a campaign, say, on divorce or on contraception or on housing in Dublin or on taxation. We do not have an exclusivist position. We might have been guilty of this in the past. But we do not believe that single-issue campaigns are the basis for building a revolutionary organisation. You must build on your politics.

**GRALTON:** You say you aim to be less exclusive than you may have been in the past. Are you at all embarrassed by what happened Declan Bree at the Mullaghmore rally? It's safe to assume that the people who heckled him were supporters, if not members, of the republican movement.

**BOLGER:** It was the media which turned the Mullaghmore rally into "an event". The problem with Declan Bree is that there is a lot of local resentment against the fact that he ran against Joe McDonnell, the hunger striker, in 1981. Bree's vote was very close to the margin by which McDonnell lost. There's a residue of bitterness about that. He knew the platform he was on and he should have anticipated the response he would get for the remarks he made about the armed struggle. But he is entitled so to say what he said, even if we don't necessarily agree with it.

**GRALTON:** Do you believe that it will be necessary to establish more clearly in the minds of members that part of the price of a higher political profile is having to accept criticisms from people with whom you are also co-operating?

**BOLGER:** People will have to realise that hitting the opposition, or even the slightly friendly middle ground, over the head with a hammer. Only by convincing people that our policies are thoughtful will we advance. Stridency is no replacement for sound argument. A lot of us are turned off by pub republicanism, in which is generally not indulged in by our own activists but by people who become patriots in drink. We're quite determined that we're not going to go hammer-headed at people. What we're concerned to do is on the one hand, build a general attitude in the 26 Counties that the British have to withdraw and, on the other, work with other progressive forces, without immersing ourselves, to build up an alternative socialist ideology among the people.

## THE FIANNA FAIL STORY

**THE RISE AND DECLINE OF FIANNA FAIL.**  
Kevin Boland. Mercier. £3.30.

**SEAN LEMASS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN IRELAND.** Paul Bew and Henry Patterson. Gill & Macmillan. £15.00.

The analysis of the role of Fianna Fáil, and the associated necessary synthesis of a replacement with a stronger Socialist component, capable of taking the Irish revolution a stage further, has been the primary task of the Left since the '30s. The comprehensive and consistent failure of the Irish Left to address this task (for which the present writer must take his share of the blame) requires explanation, but this is another day's work. Into the ensuing theoretical vacuum, however, have come two books which, while not fulfilling the needs may provide stimulus and raw material for those who are perceptive enough to understand that this task is still at the top of the political agenda.

*The Rise and Decline of Fianna Fáil* by Kevin Boland gives a useful insider's view, while *Sean Lemass and the Makings of Modern Ireland* by Paul Bew and Henry Patterson is a scholarly collaboration between Queens and the Ulster Polytechnic which consciously takes a detached, outsider's ("two-nationist") view. There is a danger that the latter may be taken as a Marxist analysis, on the superficial ground that Paul Bew has contributed to the London magazine, *Marxism Today*, on Irish topics. It is anything but.

Kevin Boland, an unrepentant thirties Fianna Fáil man, makes a creditable attempt to chronicle how the rot set in. The 26th anniversary of Fianna Fáil (1951) was held with fanfares in the Capital Theatre, an oration from de Valera and publication of a souvenir brochure

outlining the triumphant history: "... a record that enabled every member to see himself or herself in the gallant company of our heroic dead who had striven over the centuries to free Ireland from the tyrannical grip of the foreign enemy". Boland, with a nice sense of irony, contrasts the 1976 situation. A prestigious historian, T.P. O'Neill of UCG, Dev's biographer, was appointed in 1974 to produce for 1976 the history of the first 50 years of Fianna Fáil. It has, however, not yet appeared. T.P. O'Neill in an interview on *Feach* subsequently denied that he was writing it; he was to edit the contributions of others: "... even at this early stage there were problems arising for his professional integrity as a historian: "... Yet no dogs barked. There appeared to be a cover-up: "... a rigid decision by media controllers that the unsavoury matter safely and efficiently swept under the carpet in 1970 was to stay there undisturbed. ... the loyal Fianna Fáil households ... proud owners of the story of the first 25 years, have no corresponding record of the second twenty-five".

The 1970 events, of course, were those at the root of the Haughey-Blaney-Boland "Arms Crisis". The neglect of the North by Jack Lynch's (and indeed all previous) Governments, and their insensitivity to the issues raised by the Civil Rights movement, had produced an opportunity for a regenerative "... Caucus which insisted that this was our business,



Backroom boys and floppy-disks

the moment of truth for the Fianna Fáil party. ... The elimination of the Caucus by Jack Lynch (on a tip-off originating from British Intelligence, which monitors all shipments of arms into Ireland, legal or illegal) laid the basis for what Boland calls "Mark II Fianna Fáil" which deploys "... with ever-increasing efficiency the full resources of our security forces along the border imposed by the foreign enemy, where they act on our behalf in concert with Her Majesty's army to defend the integrity of Her Majesty's realm ... the case for the ending of the Union ... has been officially withdrawn by the Mark II Government ... (replaced by) ... the policy of Cumann na nGaedheal, the one-time government under contract with the enemy to maintain his overlordship".

The roots of this betrayal go back to the Lemass period, and indeed to the de Valera period, and are there to be seen in the Bew-Patterson analysis. Boland, being the active politician concerned primarily with the shop-window of the political process does not detect them until they have thrived and blossomed. He has, however, enough gut-feeling to recognise and reject them: "the necessary measures to save our economy would be in breach of the EEC laws, framed as they are specifically and totally for the well-being of the unscrupulous capitalist proprietors of Europe ... it is illegal to have the only realistic type of Buy Irish campaign possible ... appeal to the patriotism of the supermarket-owners? We want our collective head examined".

Boland represents a high-point of Fianna Fáil radicalism; he has remained consistently pointing in the right directions: against British imperialism and the neo-Unionism

of the Common Market. The Left, however, has always found him unpalatable, mostly because he explicitly despises them: "... tiny minorities opposed to all our traditions". If an Irish Left were to emerge with growth potential and with a creative respect for the democratic republican core of our national and social revolutionary traditions, Boland and his like would end up as respected fellow-travellers, bringing with them what remains of the grass-roots Fianna Fáil radical democracy. In the absence of such a Left, Boland remains an isolated, and somewhat embittered, maverick. The Bew-Patterson analysis traces the roots of the decline of Fianna Fáil back into the depths of Boland's "Belle Epoque", specifically to the backtracking on agrarian policy: "... I think it is a mistake to give land to landless men" (Sean Moylan, Minister for Lands, April 1946); also to the participation in the Marshall Plan (1947). The treatment of the transition period leading up to the conscious abandonment of protectionism in 1958, with the First Programme and its associated welcome to penetration by the transnational corporations (TNCs), however suffers from its view being restricted to the vision of the prominent Establishment analysis of the time. There was analysis, of a sort, going on in the Fifties, without academic specialist resources, by the present writer and others. We identified the key weakness of Fianna Fáil '30s radicalism as failure to achieve an independent Irish financial system, with the consequent inability to control the movement of capital. During the pre-1958 period of investment-starvation, Ireland

(North and South) was a net exporter of capital. The Irish rentier-bourgeoisie preferred to deal on the London stock-exchange.

We identified Partition as the main obstacle to the achievement of this important step in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, contrasting the Irish scene with other relatively successful bourgeois democracies such as Denmark or Norway. The copper-fastening of Partition by declaring an independent 26-county Punt in the '30s, '40s or '50s was politically unthinkable. It is ironic that this has since been achieved, in a manner of speaking, within the greater EEC straitjacket, when the ability to use the financial system in the control process has been abandoned. However, for Bew and Patterson to admit arguments like this into the analysis of the '50s would be for them to invoke what at all costs must be suppressed: the national question, the whole of Ireland as the national political and economic unit.

Indeed, the Bew-Patterson concept of imperialism is curiously eclectic: "(either) a malign force deliberately generating underdevelopment in dependent States... or) a progressive force which tends to develop productive forces on a world scale". They complain that there is little detailed discussion of specific cases based on any reliable documentation: I suspect that this is an artefact of the English-dominated academic system; most analysis of imperialism is in the literatures of the anti-imperialist movements. Having said this, they go on to document the Anglo-Irish negotiations of 1947 in such a way as to conclude that neither model of imperialism holds in the Irish case.

On the whole this is an unsatisfactory analysis of the period, unlikely to fuel the necessary synthesis of the national-democratic and socialist forces. It should, however, be bought and read for the partial insights it gives; perhaps it will stimulate a response from some marxist academic who understands what imperialism is all about and has some feel for the complexities of the Irish national question, if there be any such who integrity the academic brain-washing machine.

**ROY JOHNSTON**

This is just not good enough, especially when at the end of the day one is left with the impression that the "main enemy" is the protectionist Irish bourgeoisie, feeding a common fallacy of the contemporary Irish Left.

As regards Lemass himself, the impression comes over of someone with a good radical position trapped in a system over which he has no control. To gain control would, however, mean unleashing forces which would tamper with property rights. This Lemass himself would (in 1945) have been prepared to do: "... the rights of owners should not include the right to allow land to go derelict ..."

There is a quote from Kevin Boland's *Up Dev* which sums up pitifully the role of the Irish bourgeoisie: "... Mr Lemass did make an effort to get ... investment ... but he found that patriotism was in short supply ... the highest ... aspiration was to win or breed a winner of the Derby ... for the glory of old Ireland". In the period leading up to the repeal of the Control of Manufacturers Act (CMA) Lemass continued to defend the principles behind the Act but was unable to stem the tide of tendentious advice from economic pundits which promoted "good management, technical knowledge and capital all at once from the subsidiaries of big foreign companies" (Charles Carter, QUB, 1957).

Because the contemporary pundits quoted by Bew and Patterson were themselves unaware of the extent to which Irish emigré scientists and technologists were fuelling the R&D systems of the TNCs, the authors managed to avoid exposing this important national myopia. (Irish geologists who could have told Irish governments of the effects of tax-holidays on mining concessions were themselves working for the foreign mining companies, etc). Nor do they query the conventional wisdom, implicit in all their sources, that the right of Irish men of property to invest abroad is untouchable.

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