

The hunger strikes and their consequences

T.G. Fraser, *Ireland in Conflict 1922-1998*, Routledge, 0-41516-549-0, pp 65-7

In 1976, the government announced that it was ending the special category status for paramilitary prisoners which Whitelaw had introduced. This was part of a wider policy of 'Ulsterisation' under which security primacy passed from the army to the RUC. The attempt to impose prison conditions met with a determined rejection by republican prisoners who refused to accept that they were criminals. By 1978, they were engaging in the 'dirty protest', which involved smearing their cells with excrement and menstrual blood. The initiative lay with the prisoners. A hunger strike which began in October 1980 was called off after fifty-three days when it seemed that concessions might be forthcoming. When they were not, on 1 March 1981, the IRA commander in the Maze prison, Bobby Sands, began a hunger strike. Sands was followed at intervals by others, including the INLA Maze commander, Patsy O'Hara.

The tense situation acquired an unexpected dimension with the death of the Independent MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone. In the resulting by-election, Sands defeated the Unionists' Harry West. On 5 May, Sands died, his funeral being attended by an estimated one hundred thousand people. In what had become a grim war of attrition between the republican prisoners and the government, a further nine hunger strikers died. On 3 October, after intense mediation by senior Catholic churchmen working with hunger strikers' families, the hunger strike was called off. Special category status was not reintroduced, but the main demands of the hunger strikers were quietly implemented. A

Although Thatcher later claimed that the events had been a defeat for the IRA, the facts indicate otherwise. That ten men had consciously starved themselves to death, showed the depth of their commitment. Sands's election victory opened up new prospects. In August, this was confirmed when Provisional Sinn Fein's Owen Canon, standing as a Proxy Political Prisoner, retained the seat. The hunger strikes had changed the face of Northern Ireland politics in a way its originators could scarcely have imagined, but at the human cost, not just of the hunger strikers, but of a milkman and his son stoned by protestors in Belfast, two young girls killed by plastic bullets, and a woman census collector shot dead in Derry.

The first public indication that the two election victories might spur republicanism in new directions came at the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis on 31 October when Danny Morrison voiced a possible strategy based upon the ballot box and the armalite rifle, opening the way for the party to fight elections. The test would be whether Sinn Fein could build sufficiently on its core support to challenge the SDLP's dominance of nationalist politics. Vindication of the new direction seemed to come in October 1982 in elections for a new assembly when Sinn Fein won 64,191 first preference votes compared with 118,891 for the SDLP. Although both the London and Dublin governments were alarmed at the strength of the Sinn Fein vote, in fact it carried a mixed message. While Sinn Fein's appeal was undoubtedly to a section of the electorate which had never been attracted to the SDLP, it could not be denied that the latter had polled substantially worse than Hume's 1979 European election total. The British general election of June 1983 brought Sinn Fein a further boost when Gerry Adams won West Belfast, defeating the SDLP's Joe Hendron, with the sitting MP, Gerry Fitt, in third place. Adams's electoral victory, with its high international profile, was soon followed by his election to the Sinn Fein presidency.

One result of Sinn Fein's political success was a dawning community of interest between London and Dublin. Even here the process was not straightforward, since Margaret Thatcher was bitterly resentful over what she saw as the unhelpful attitude of Charles Haughey's Fianna Fail government during the Falklands conflict in 1982. It fell to Haughey's Fine Gael successor, Garret FitzGerald, to find a way forward. FitzGerald had an ambitious agenda which had at its core a new British-Irish structure which would strengthen constitutional nationalism. Part of this would be a North-South court and police structure, but he also felt it necessary to air the concept of joint London-Dublin authority over Northern Ireland. These ideas were explored in the New Ireland Forum in which Fine Gael, Fianna Fail, Labour and the SDLP thrashed out various options. When the Forum reported in May 1984, it set out three possibilities: a unitary Irish state, a confederation between north and south, and joint British-Irish authority. Rejection by unionists was, of course, inevitable but before the British government could give its definitive response the IRA intervened, to devastating effect.

Since the death of the hunger strikers, Thatcher had been a priority target. In the early hours of 12 October 1984, as the prime minister was preparing her speech for the Conservative Party conference, a bomb exploded in Brighton's Grand Hotel, killing five people. The following month, after an Anglo-Irish summit, she sharply rejected the three Forum models, causing no small offence in Dublin. Anglo-Irish relations had touched their nadir, or so it seemed.