

Chapter 6

A Time to Think, A Time to Talk

Irish Republican Prisoners in the Northern Irish Peace Process

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Introduction

The mid 1970s and early 1980s in Northern Ireland are rightly remembered as being among the most violent years of the Troubles. Perhaps paradoxically this chapter will argue that this period should also be considered as the beginning of the Republican Movement's gradual advance towards the acceptance of peaceful politics. At the dawn of the Troubles, in the early 1970s, the Irish Republican Movement, most notably the newly established Provisional IRA, was experiencing an influx of new young recruits. Many of this young membership, as well as those who joined in the late 1960s, would go on to play a significant role in shaping the course of Irish Republicanism. It was under their leadership that the Provisional IRA took part in a sustained and brutal terrorist campaign during the Troubles. However, it is also under this leadership that the majority of the Irish Republican Movement eventually accepted the necessity for peaceful politics in the place of armed force. This politicisation was only made possible by an extended process of internal debate at both leadership and rank and file levels. One of the most prominent forums for this strategic debate was within the Republican prison populations.

The purpose of this chapter is to look at the role prison – as a forum - played in the gradual acceptance of peaceful politics by the majority of those within the Irish Republican Movement. It will assess the central role which the debates within the prisons played in the gradual dismantling of the traditional abstentionist policy,¹ and the eventual cessation of sustained paramilitary violence. The main concentration within the chapter is on the lead-up

¹ This refers to the traditional Irish republican policy whereby any Sinn Fein member elected to Dail Eireann, Stormont or Westminster would abstain from taking their seats on strategic and policy grounds as by their very nature these three houses were seen to promote the partition of Ireland.

to the 1986 split within Provisional Republicanism. This saw the formation of dissident groupings Republican Sinn Fein (RSF) and the Continuity IRA (CIRA). This is a split which ostensibly took place after the dropping of the abstentionist policy to Dail Eireann. It is the process in the lead-up to this split which laid the foundations for the ultimate, gradual, politicisation of the majority of the Republican Movement. By understanding this process one can begin to understand how the Provisional Irish Republican Movement ultimately ended their prolonged terrorist campaign.

Gradual Politicisation

One of the key elements of the successful politicisation was how the leadership gradually brought this about while retaining the armed strategy throughout. This ‘armalite and ballot box’ strategy succeeded in appeasing a number of potential detractors and resultantly weakened the position of the dissidents. The gradualism allowed the leadership to ease their membership into the organisational transition from a terrorist movement into the democratically political organisation they are today. The retention of the core membership throughout was vital to the success of the politicisation process, and therefore the constant engagement with and appreciation of the expectations of the base was essential to the successful implementation of change. A key element of this base was, and for many still is, the prison population.

This chapter is predominantly based on the analysis of the perceptions of leading and rank and file members of Irish republicanism, both those who spent time within prison and those who did not. This includes the views of individuals who stayed with Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA as well as those who left to form or join a dissident grouping. Similarly it also analyses the perspectives of some members who left organised Irish republicanism completely. By utilising these viewpoints one can see how they wish for this role to be portrayed, and the importance they place on the prisons in the overall history of Irish republicanism. This should not be considered as anything near a comprehensive commentary on the politicisation of Irish Republicanism, or on penology during the Troubles. Its aim is merely to introduce the reader to the centrality of the prisons in the process which eventually led to peaceful politics. Neither should it be regarded in any way as a justification for the ongoing terrorist activity of the Provisional IRA during this period. The work presented in this

chapter originated from my doctoral dissertation which analysed splits in Irish republicanism between 1969 and 1997 (Morrison, 2010). The quotations utilised, unless otherwise stated, derive from interviews carried out by the author during this doctoral research. These interviews took place between 2007 and 2010.

Throughout the 1970s a large proportion of Provisional republicans were either imprisoned or interned. The paramilitary prison populations ranged from national and local leadership figures down to ordinary rank and file members, to those with no organisational affiliation at all and the wrongfully imprisoned. Within the prisons the republican inmates organised as they would on the outside in an organisational command structure. At this time, especially from the mid-1970s onwards leadership figures within the prisons such as Gerry Adams were openly questioning the direction the movement was taking, and the long term strategies of the national leadership. This can be seen as the origins of the process which led to his ultimate takeover of the national leadership with his mainly northern affiliates. The external context of a weakening Republican Movement meant that the Republican community was more receptive to critical questioning of the long term strategy. Within this context prisoners were being asked to think not just militarily but also politically. They were advised to educate themselves on other revolutionary struggles, as well as the Irish one, and see how this could be applied to the situation in Northern Ireland. There was encouragement to look beyond a purely armed campaign and to develop their political thinking. Critical to this, and in stark contrast to the Goulding leadership of the 1960s,² was that the prison leadership was not calling for a complete move away from the armed struggle but that a continued armed campaign would be complemented by a strengthened political strategy. This important differentiation allowed this discussion to be more inclusive and did not isolate as many as the political discussions of the 1960s. Joe Doherty, a Provisional IRA prisoner at the time recalls the role which Adams played within the prison at this time, and the discussions which he led:

I remember Gerry Adams in the jail. We were all sitting there and he says 'you know the armed struggle is only a means to the end, not the end. Youse (sic) are politicians.' And people said 'we're not really, we're army'. 'No you have to develop your

² Cathal Goulding was Chief of Staff of the IRA at the time of the 1969/70 split which saw the birth of the Provisional IRA. In the lead up to the split Goulding and his supporters proposed to fully politicise the Republican Movement by dropping the traditional abstentionist policies to Dail Eireann, Stormont and Westminster and completely moving away from the utilisation of force to achieve their aims.

consciousness in here...Politics is important and the armed struggle is only a means to an end, and not the end.’ So everything I think we see now with Sinn Fein today, I think Adams and them people actually foreseen that. They probably knew that the armed struggle was outmoded, but you couldn’t do it because you would have been overthrown, the army would have turned against them.”

These discussions led to the gradual acceptance of the utility of the introduction of a political element to the republican struggle among the prison population. The prisons provided the time and the space for the republicans to actively discuss, argue and think about how this could add to or detract from the armed struggle. It provided the perfect platform for those in favour of a more political struggle to introduce to and convince others of the necessity of this political element while simultaneously questioning the present tactics of the movement.

Mitchell McLaughlin a leading Sinn Fein figure outlines this viewpoint:

“So I think out of the perhaps initial very violent background, and then people through internment and imprisonment, actually having the time. Because when you were in prison you were removed from that day to day almost kind of survival, or conflict. They began to reflect these arguments, began to examine whether the current kind of structures of republicanism was fit for purpose.”

An inevitable consequence of these discussions about the importance of a political element was the debate surrounding electoral politics. As in the lead up to the 1969/70 split which saw the formation of the Provisional IRA, there was an innate scepticism about republican participation in electoral politics and the potential consequences of members taking their seat upon election. However, within the confines of the prison environment the pros and cons of republican involvement were able to be discussed. There were those within the prisons who were strong advocates of electoral involvement and they utilised their time inside to discuss and open others up to the possibility. The debate was one which continued both within the prisons and externally within the republican community through the 1970s, 80s and 90s and even into the twenty-first century. The gradual and continuous process of the discussions went on to shape the strategic path taken by the movement.

These discussions over the long term strategy taking place within the prisons had an obvious influence on those who were present and taking part in the process. However, they also had

an external influence on the wider republican community. Within republican circles throughout the 1970s and 1980s the republican prison population were held in high regard. Their opinions and actions were listened to and appreciated. While many externally would not have been privy to the breadth of the internal discussions taking place there was the strategic utilisation by the prisoners of the republican publications to outline their critical analysis of the ‘republican struggle.’ The most prominent example of this is the series of articles believed to be penned by Gerry Adams but published under the pen name ‘Brownie’ which appeared in the northern Republican newspaper *Republican News* between August 1975 and February 1977. While detailing his experiences of prison life the articles also provided a vehicle for ‘Brownie’ to be critical of national leadership while also putting forward the recommendation of placing a stronger emphasis on the political element of the struggle. These articles proved significantly influential within the republican population as they introduced the wider community to the debates and discussions which were taking place within the prisons at the time. ‘Brownie’ was one of the methods utilised to gradually introduce this debate into the wider republican population (e.g. Brownie, 1975).

Those who stayed with the Provisionals after the 1986 split look to these political debates within the prisons as a positive and necessary step in the process of modern day Irish Republicanism. However, those who exited to form the Continuity IRA and Republican Sinn Fein regard this in a negative manner. They deem it as the start of the downfall of the ‘true’ Irish republicanism. The influence of these debates, both within and outside of the prisons, are seen by them as moving the focus away from the armed campaign and towards a corrupt and illegitimate political process. An obvious divide was forming between the northern and the southern leadership and within the prison the northern influence is blamed for the ultimate acceptance of Dail Eireann. The blame is laid at their door for not fully understanding the significance of dropping the abstentionist policy to the Dail. In their eyes this was an ‘illegitimate’ prospect, one that could not be supported in the eyes of those who eventually moved away from the Provisionals in 1986.

“I have a suspicion that that [the discussion to drop abstentionism to the Dail] originated probably in Long Kesh camp in the 1970s and again it is people looking for a shortcut to an all-Ireland Republic and I have a suspicion that it was... Well inevitably it was in Long Kesh, it was mostly Northern people. I do feel that

unfortunately within the north there is this kind of foolish attitude towards the twenty-six county state.”³

The obvious influence of these prison debates came with the impact the prisoners had after their release. Many of the leaders of the discussions within the prisons acquired prominent positions within the national and local leadership of the IRA and Sinn Fein. There were great expectations that leaders such as Gerry Adams who while introducing the political element to the campaign would also lead the Provisionals in a sustained armed resistance against the British presence in Northern Ireland.

“I think in Adams people had a great expectation of him. I think in many ways Adams was trying to influence the debate out there with the Brownie columns and influence Seamus Twomey, who was Chief of Staff of the IRA.”⁴

Within their leadership roles they extended the discussions which had taken place and introduced the issues to the wider population. They did this through internal local discussions but also through public speeches and addresses.

“I remember at Bodinstown, maybe about 1978 or thereabouts, or in some keynote interview or speech, it might not have been Bodinstown, saying that there could be no military victory for any side that the problem in the north was a political problem and it needed a political solution. That caused all sorts of controversy in a certain generation of republican leaders, and for me it was just so obvious.”⁵

Even though this process did eventually result in a split within the movement it was a minimal division of the organisation. The actions and preparation taken by the Adams/[Martin] McGuinness leadership throughout the process significantly contributed to minimising the effect of the split. The gradual introduction of a critical voice to the debate on republican strategy was one of the most significant factors at play. The similarities between the intentions the Goulding leadership and the achievements of the Adams/McGuinness leadership are unmistakable. Goulding wished to fully politicise the movement and bring it

³ Sean O’Bradaigh

⁴ Anthony McIntyre

⁵ Gerry Adams

away from the armed campaign, but failed. However, it was the Adams/McGuinness leadership who gradually achieved this with the Provisionals. The critical difference between the two situations is that the Goulding leadership attempted to change too much too soon. In contrast the Provisional leadership of the late 70s and early 80s gradually introduced the idea of a strengthened political arm to the movement while stating that they wished to maintain the armed struggle. This showed a connection between the dissenting voices and the membership and wider republican population. However, in order to successfully make these changes the young leadership firstly had to get themselves into positions of power within the movement, without gaining too many internal enemies in the process. Similar to the politicisation process, prison provided a forum both to question the current leadership, and to put forward the argument for the necessity for change in the national leadership. Again this was a gradual process, one which many of those who later joined the Continuity IRA and/or Republican Sinn Fein in '86 once again trace back to the mid-1970s, and particularly the ceasefire of 1974/75.

1974/75 ceasefires

The cessation referred to was initiated in December 1974 after a meeting between leading Republicans and Protestant clergymen⁶ in Feakle, Co. Clare. In the aftermath of the Feakle talks discussions continued between the Provisionals and intermediaries about the possibility of a December ceasefire. The Provisionals announced a ten day cessation on December 20th 1974. This was extended to last until January 17th, while the Provisionals negotiated with Northern Ireland Office (NIO) officials. However, the Republicans brought it to an end as their demands had not been met. The end of the ceasefire was marked by continued bombings and attacks in both England and Northern Ireland. The following month on February 9th the Provisionals announced an indefinite ceasefire and again entered into negotiations with the British. Key to their demands was the construction of a plan for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. These talks and ceasefire eventually came to a close with no development on the Provisionals demands (Bew and Gillespie, 1999; Bowyer Bell, 1989). The ceasefire officially ended in November 1975. However, during the period of the ceasefire there was growing unrest within the Provisional movement about the handling of

⁶ Members of this group were in contact with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO)

the talks by the leadership. A number of members broke the ceasefire, often times claiming their actions under names other than the Provisional IRA. This discontent was evident not only within the communities but also among the Republican prisoners and internees. The talks were led on the Republican side by Ruairi O’Bradaigh and Daithi O’Conail who are characterised by many as principal members of the old southern leadership of the time, both of whom would ultimately lead members in the newly formed Republican Sinn Fein and Continuity IRA in 1986. These negotiations have been much maligned by the Provisionals as having a detrimental effect on the movement. However, O’Bradaigh defends his and the leadership’s position of entering into and continuing with the negotiations:

“The invitation was from the British government to ‘discuss structures of British disengagement from Ireland.’ Now how could one refuse that? Except that they were being deceitful, but how could one refuse that?”

His position is that the Republican negotiators were led to believe that there was a possibility of achieving British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. However, there was a failure to agree on the proposed timeline, and that the British would not publicly announce their intention for withdrawal. The ceasefire and the protracted negotiations have been criticised both during and in the years after their existence. In both instances criticisms have principally, but not exclusively, come from the newly emerging northern leadership of the time. The accusation is that the lengthy nature of the combined cessation and talks, which resulted in no real benefits for Republicanism, led to a sense of disillusionment among the membership and supporters. There was a growing belief that the Provisional leadership of the time had effectively run its course. They no longer knew how to move the Republican movement forward and it was therefore time for a new leadership to take over.

“I think it [1975 ceasefire] had a big effect. If you like the then, and I stress then, young leadership would have seen that period as a time where the old days, it was totally out-manoeuvred by the British in terms of how they were dealing with them, what was on offer and the reality of it. After that had run its phase it was time to move on.”⁷

⁷ Pat Doherty

The viewpoint expressed is that the leadership of the time were politically naïve and consequently unable to pragmatically deal with the British. They had brought the movement as far as they possibly could, and therefore it was time for a change, both in personnel and policy.

“In terms of the ceasefire, this is without being overly critical, I think the leadership was military as opposed to political. That doesn’t mean you can’t be military and political or that you can’t have military thoughts when you are political, but really I think it was politically naïve. I mean the Brits were saying things like they were going to leave, but they weren’t. They were saying that there was an economic argument that it was inevitable to leave. But all of that was frankly a bit of bullshit to try and prolong the ceasefire and make it harder for them to go back to armed struggle, to all of those things.”⁸

Throughout the negotiations there were critical voices coming out especially from the prisons about the way the national leadership was handling the situation and questioning the benefits which the talks and ceasefire had for the Republican cause. The criticisms were chiefly coming from leading northern republicans, such as Gerry Adams and Ivor Bell. These individuals had a significant influence on the prison population, as well as on republicans external to the prison.

“People who were in jail, like Adams and Ivor Bell and other people who were querying what was going on and their influence would have been felt amongst the prison population, some of whom were coming out of jail and also in late August 1975 Adams started to write for Republican News...So there was a big lot disillusioned about what was going on in ’75. And also it had been felt that the IRA had lost its way.”⁹

The longer the negotiations went on without any significant benefits for the republican cause the more demoralising it became for the membership. The newly emerging leadership used

⁸ Gerry Kelly

⁹ Danny Morrison

this demoralisation as an opportunity to begin their gradual takeover of the movement both politically and militarily.

“To be quite critical I think that there wasn’t a particularly strong view of British objectives at the time, and the ceasefire then created tensions. I suppose then at that point you have a new...the other side of the ceasefire in late 1975/76 you begin to see a new leadership emerge, a leadership that has brought the movement right along to where we are today.”¹⁰

The members of this new leadership, which gradually came into position in the late 1970s and early 1980s, look upon this as an essential transition which was carried out for the good of republicanism. While not arguing with the point that it was these negotiations which laid the foundations necessary for the new leadership to take over, a number of interviewees during my research were still critical of the move to acquire power. They specify that individuals within this newly emerging leadership were using the situation for their own personal and selfish benefits. It was not necessarily the case that they were opposed to the actions of the O’Bradaigh leadership at the time. However, they saw this as an opportunity to utilise the disillusionment within republicanism not only to acquire positions of power but to also isolate certain leadership members.

“I think it was probably called for the best reasons, but I think it was used by certain individuals within the Provisional Movement to enhance their status.”¹¹

Those republicans who exited in 1986 believe that the criticism of the 1975 leadership was mainly utilised in the years subsequent to the events as opposed to at the time. Some of these emerging leaders were already in positions of power at the time of the ceasefire and negotiations, yet failed to speak out against them at the time. However, in later years they utilised the situation to critically assess the old leadership. They wished to frame this as a failed leadership, one which had significantly damaged the republican cause. They believe that there was not necessarily a purely negative sentiment among the rank and file at the time.

¹⁰ Tom Hartley

¹¹ Anonymous current member of the 32 County Sovereignty Movement and former member of the Provisional IRA

Many saw the benefits of the extended ceasefire as it allowed for those on the run to return home and for the PIRA to re-organise where necessary.

“There seemed to be developments only in terms of entering into truces, we didn’t see these truces in the way Adams and [Martin] McGuinness would later, you also have to bear in mind McGuinness was seen by us as a key leader and he wasn’t making his opposition to the truce known then in the way that he would later.”¹²

The poor handling of the 1975 ceasefire and negotiations became a prominent aspect in the subsequent years of the negative portrayal of the ‘old southern’ leadership by their new northern counterparts. It was utilised to illustrate how they were out of touch and were unable to move republicanism forward. However, it most notably provided the catalyst for a more focused discussion to take place about the utility of a more dominant political strategy to work alongside the armed campaign.

Beyond ‘86

As the years and decades after show, the leadership only introduced significant changes when they believed that they had the support of the majority of members. As with the lead up to 1986 a key element of this support was that of the prison population. In 1994 major inroads were made in a burgeoning peace process. In February of that year Gerry Adams was granted a forty-eight hour visa to the United States by President Bill Clinton, a gesture which showed America’s expectation that Adams would be able to deliver a move for the Republican Movement away from armed struggle. Similarly the Irish government removed the broadcasting ban on Sinn Fein members. These actions can be regarded as a show of faith in the possibility of the Sinn Fein leadership bringing about a cessation of violence. From early to mid-1994 the possibility of such a ceasefire was being discussed at leadership levels within the Provisional Movement. The topic was first broached in discussions about the possibility for a short exploratory cessation. While talks had collapsed between Republicans and the British they continued between Republicans and the SDLP and the Irish government, and therefore shifted from targeting British withdrawal to the establishment of a pan-nationalist

¹² Anthony McIntyre

front. These talks developed a blueprint for future Republican strategies and actions. However, what the Republican leadership was telling their membership was different to what they were telling the other negotiators. While negotiations were often times fraught eventually on August 31st 1994 the Army Council of the Provisional IRA announced a four month ceasefire, which was later extended. This announcement was in the acceptance of a fourteen point proposal issued by Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds. This cessation was greeted with celebrations across the whole island of Ireland as well as in Great Britain.

In order to ensure organisational support for the cessation the leadership had been preparing all levels of membership and support for a significant period prior to the actual declaration. This was highlighted both in the external Republican community and within the Republican prison communities. The leadership met with their communities to discuss the potential for a cessation and to gauge the levels of support or resistance within these communities to the proposals, and the entire politicisation process. They were also preparing members for what they could realistically expect from the process and how this would benefit the entire process seeking to achieve their ultimate and immediate goals.

“That’s what was good about coming up to the ceasefire I think Adams and the people went out into all the Sinn Fein Cumanns. And in the prison [Martin] McGuinness and Gerry Kelly was almost in there every other week, the British allowed them to come in. Everybody went into the canteen, McGuinness was there asking questions and taking questions preparing everybody for ‘you know the reality is we’re going to enter negotiations, we might not get a united Ireland. Be realistic look at the bigger picture.’”¹³

It was this persistent preparation and engagement with all levels of membership which allowed the leadership to gauge the sentiment within the movement and as a result they were aware when the timing for change, in this case a cessation of IRA violence, was right. This preparation prior to each change, not just the 1994 ceasefire, allowed them to gauge the levels of support and the potential for splits within the movement. Therefore they were able to pursue their desired course at the most opportune time when their leadership was not being challenged and also when the opposition to the proposed change was at its weakest point.

¹³ Joe Doherty

Therefore the more control the leadership had over the context in which the changes were implemented the more potential they had for success. However, the leadership does not always have control of the external context in which the change is being made. Therefore the most opportune time for change is when external events have as minimal impact on the internal changes as possible.

“Clearly you didn’t bring all people with you. But one of the accomplishments of the leadership of both Oglaiġ na hEireann and Sinn Fein is that they brought by far the majority of their members with them into the process, through the process and out the other side of the process. I don’t think it was humanly possible to avoid some of the disaffections.”¹⁴

Conclusion

From the origins of Irish Republicanism right up to the today the role and authority of the republican prisoners has been both influential and respected by the external membership. They have at times played a significant role in altering the course of the ‘struggle’ while also shifting the external perception of the movement. The most cited and analysed example of this is clearly that of Bobby Sands and his fellow hunger strikers in 1981. However, this issue has been covered by a number of authors, and does not require any further analysis (e.g. O’Rawe, 2005; Beresford, 1987). What the present chapter has aimed to do is to show that even beyond the high profile hunger strikes that the role of the republican prisoners played a significant role in the evolution and politicisation of the movement. It has aimed to give readers an understanding of how Irish republicans, both mainstream and dissident, perceive the role which the prisons and prisoners played. The time spent incarcerated provided the inmates with an opportunity to assess the future of the Republican Movement, and their position within it. It allowed them the opportunity, either intentionally or unintentionally, to influence the future of the movement and for them to, at times, manoeuvre their way to the top. In essence it provided them with a time to think, a time to talk.

¹⁴ Mitchell McLaughlin

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