

Ireland's Political Evolution

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Britain ruled Ireland for seven hundred years, much to the dissatisfaction of the majority of the Irish. In 1918 the nationalist Sinn Féin political party, led by Eamon de Valera, campaigned for a united and independent Ireland and won a majority of the Irish seats in the British Parliament. The next year, Sinn Féin members of Parliament met in Dublin's Mansion House and declared themselves the new Parliament of an Irish Republic, setting up a provisional government to rival Ireland's British administration. This led to the Irish War of Independence, with fighting between the British and Irish forces (called the Irish Republican Army). The conflict reached a stalemate and The War of Independence in Ireland ended with a truce 11 July 1921.

In December 1921 members of the Dáil Éireann (the Irish Parliament) and the British government reach an agreement and signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Representatives from Sinn Féin negotiated the Anglo-Irish Treaty, most notably Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, and Lloyd George and Winston Churchill on the British side. The treaty did not grant Ireland full independence, however. Twenty-six of the thirty-two counties of Ireland became the Irish Free State, which would hold dominion status within the British empire; the remaining six counties, referred to as Northern Ireland, continued to be part of the United Kingdom. In January 1922, the Dáil voted to approve the treaty by a vote of 64 to 57, causing de Valera to resign in protest. Subsequently, Sinn Féin was split into two factions; one group, the free staters, supported the treaty under the leadership of Collins, and the other group, the republicans, opposed the treaty under de Valera.

Michael Collins headed a provisional government set up to ease the transition of power from the British to the Irish. The British Government supported the pro-treaty Irish government by supplying arms and munitions. In April 1922, however, republican forces took over the Four Courts building in Dublin. Collins, whose pro-treaty allies had just won a majority of seats in the first elections in the Free State, ordered an attack in June on the Four Courts. This was the start of the civil war.

The Civil War was a conflict that took place in Ireland from 1922 – 1923 between those in favor of and those against the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Irish leaders who opposed all terms but complete independence from Britain clashed with the Irish leaders who readily accepted the end of bloodshed with Britain for limited independence. These two forces turned upon each other, brother against brother, creating a civil war that led to more than 1,000 deaths.

At the start of the civil war, the republican forces had more armed men, but had difficulty organizing and developing a plan for defeating the supporters of the treaty. The Free State government was able to build up its own army and take control of cities and large towns. The republicans, who employed guerrilla tactics, were the strongest in parts of the counties of Cork, Kerry, Wexford, Mayo, and Sligo.

In August 1922 Michael Collins, who had given up the leadership of the provisional government in mid-July to assume command of the army to defeat the republican insurgency, was shot to death by anti-treaty forces in an ambush in west Cork. Although the Free State army had lost its most able leader, the pro-treaty side still had the support of most of the Irish people. The fighting between the pro- and anti-treaty groups continued off and on for several more months before a cease-fire was issued in April 1923.

After the war, de Valera continued to be active in Irish politics, resigning from Sinn Féin and forming a political party called Fianna Fáil (Fee-uh-nuh Foyl). Fianna Fáil won enough seats in 1932 to become the government of Ireland. Supporters of Michael Collins and the Irish Free

State formed an opposition party, called Fine Gael (Fin-uh-Gayl), in 1933. These two new political parties split from Sinn Féin and decimated its ranks. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are historical adversaries and are still active in Ireland today. Their political perspectives are centered right politics whereas the average voter today in Ireland is left of center of the political spectrum. Although these parties might differ on the border solution, both parties are pro-European Union. When two researchers asked voters in recent exit polls, they found that 39 % of Fine Gael members had no policy difference than Fianna Fáil. That these parties were going after the same market. This was a pattern not expected to be found in any other European country. The researchers also found that the Irish people tended to vote for the party that their parents voted for. So much so the party activists, particularly, in rural areas, could actually tell which household voted which way.

The two dominant parties in Ireland for the past century see themselves differently. Fine Gael members see themselves as the party most loyal to the state, the party of law and order. Fianna Fáil members see themselves as a national movement covering all sections of society and the real labor party winning huge working-class support and the support of businesspeople. They claimed that they were better in government and politics than Fine Gael until the economic crash destroyed its reputation for competence.

Currently, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the smaller Green Party share a coalition that will govern under a power-sharing arrangement. Micheál Martin, the leader of Fianna Fáil, will stand down after two years to be replaced either by Leo Varadkar or by whoever is then the leader of Fine Gael. But there's a party of the past that has had little influence in the politics of southern Ireland over the past century. The reemergence of Sinn Féin has hit a chord with the Irish people. Poll after poll puts support for Sinn Féin at 35%. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are at 20% apiece. "It is not a question of if, it's when Sinn Féin will be in power," said one prominent businessman who did not want to be named. The party's remarkable growth south of the border partly is due to the transformational powers of its leader, Mary Lou McDonald, who has no connection with the Troubles era and is perceived as a radical break with its past. Sinn Féin's emergence, as head of the opposition, potentially allied with several smaller left and center-left parties, could help propel a long-term realignment of Irish politics along a more conventional left right divide. Sinn Féin's appeal is also down to a change in tactics, putting issues as housing, the economy and health care ahead of a united Ireland. That is seen as extending its appeal beyond the working class.

Sinn Féin has emerged as a majority party in Northern Ireland as well. It may take years but perhaps that will help with the united Ireland question.