

Northern Ireland: Frogs' Legs and Lobster Thermidor or the A, B, C of republican 'strategy'.

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As a young man, I listened to a speech by Bernadette McAliskey the year before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement - the pinnacle of what became known as the 'peace process'. McAliskey did not object to peace, she had notoriously been subtitled by the BBC in a 1992 interview, when she said: 'No sane human being supports violence. We are often inevitably cornered into it by powerlessness, by lack of democracy, by lack of willingness of people to listen to our problems. We don't choose political violence, the powerful force it on us.' (quoted in Curtis, 1998:297) By the time I heard her speak in 1997, the powerful had arrested her pregnant daughter, Róisín, with the intent to extradite her to Germany. By 2000, the powerful admitted that Róisín, who had never been charged, had no case to answer as there was 'not a realistic prospect of convicting Miss McAliskey for any offence.' (Guardian, 20 July 2000). What struck me at the time, was that the powerful had a vendetta against a woman and her family because she had stood up for socialist republican principles for thirty years at that stage. Last month, fifty-five years after the Burntollet march and her subsequent election as the then youngest female Westminster MP ever, McAliskey gave the main oration at the solidarity march in Dublin, where she told the crowd that 'Palestine is the litmus test of our humanity' and then urged those present not to vote for any politician who would legitimise the Biden administration, which was 'enabling genocide', by attending the St Patrick's Day events in the White House (Irish News, 14 January 2024).

McAliskey's speech from all those years ago stuck in my mind because in the questions afterwards she was asked about the peace process and used a powerful analogy that I hadn't heard before at that stage, but I have heard and used myself on numerous occasions since. She welcomed an end to violence but warned that the provisional movement appeared to be going down a well-worn reformist path that would eventually denude it of any revolutionary potential. She compared the republican movement to a frog, which if placed in a pot of boiling water, will immediately sense the danger, and jump out to save itself, but, if immersed in tepid water brought slowly to the boil so that the change in temperature remains gradual, the frog does not realise it's boiling to death. In line with their - soon to be - new mates in New Labour, Sinn Féin had swallowed TINA - there is no alternative. Plan A - armed struggle has failed, now we try Plan B. In Sinn Féin's case, this meant the long march through the institutions, acceptance of the principle of consent and parliamentary reformism on the classical constitutional nationalist model. McAliskey had the temerity to ask for a Plan C, which might mean retaining socialist republican principles and challenging the powerful rather than getting into bed with them.

The curious thing is that almost at the very same time, the powerful used a similar analogy and proposed the peace process as a way of luring Sinn Féin like lobsters into a pot during negotiations for the second ceasefire. Recently released papers acknowledged that Sinn Féin would have to bring

the movement with them by remaining 'faithful to the republican myth'. Quentin Thomas, linkman for the powerful, compiled a 1996 confidential report entitled: 'The Next Ceasefire: Toasted Feet, the Lobster Pot and Parity of Esteem', which sought to 'defeat terrorism' and 'co-opt' Sinn Féin. Thomas viewed Sinn Féin as 'authoritarian, absolutist, conspiratorial and intransigent' and recognised that it must 'maintain fidelity to its past' and to the 'republican myth, of which it claims guardianship in this and future generations.' Thomas concluded that 'nobody volunteers to have his feet held to the fire... but lobsters can be lured into the pot' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 26 January 2024).

Thomas spoke about the 'peace process' or as republicans in the 1990s came to know it the 'strategy' as an 'orderly retreat' by a movement which accepted that it could not achieve its objectives militarily. We might reflect on a near parallel acceptance by the ANC in South Africa and the PLO in Palestine that with the 'end of history' came the realisation that peace would be sought and achieved on the terms of the global hegemon - the USA. In South Africa, this led to the end of political apartheid but the entrenchment of racial inequality and neo-liberal capital. In Palestine, it led to the Versailles of Oslo and Arafat's death in a bunker in Ramallah and, ultimately, today's genocide in Gaza. In Ireland, it heralded a generation of political stasis, where the working-class community that backboneed the republican struggle could arguably to be said to be in a worse position today than twenty years ago.

The 'strategy's' apparent high point arrived last week, the election of a woman who calls herself a republican to the joint-equal leadership of a glorified county council, with no discernible power. Indeed, a dark shadow was cast on the recent proceedings at Stormont by the news that our monarch is suffering for cancer - thankfully it was caught early by excellent highly-paid private doctors while NHS cancer waiting times here break new records each quarter. The typical SF response is that it is better to be inside Stormont helping to solve these problems than outside shouting in. Yet, this ignores that the 'powerful' twenty-five years ago, still hold all the power today. We are still under British rule and the 'strategy' is to beg the British for more money to pay for services in an economy ravaged by British austerity that our glorious institutions administered on Britain's behalf. The border poll will be called at the whim of the British Secretary of State since the conditions have never been nailed down. A procession of unaccountable secretaries of state has unilaterally broken elements of the Good Friday Agreement since Peter Mandelson's tenure twenty years ago - and Jeff Epstein's buddy will have a big say in the next British government if the polls are to be believed.

There are several reasons why Sinn Féin more than any other party should be taken to task for this. The first is that attacking the SDLP would be like harpooning a corpse. Sinn Féin, to all intents and purposes, cannibalised the SDLP - they are a northern constitutional nationalist party with pretensions to government in the South. This reflects the second reason, Sinn Féin's, currently waning, popularity in the Free State is not based on the 1990's 'strategy' but represents the political outworking of the 2008 financial crash and the popular outrage at the resuscitated broken social model that the political establishment reassembled after the 60 billion+ bank bail outs. Sinn Féin's support emerges from a sizeable section of society locked out of the Celtic Tiger's irretrievable social contract which is demanding an overhaul of Irish society based on social equality and democratic accountability. Great say my friends in Sinn Féin, and I do have some, we will fix this as we govern north and south as part of the transition to a New Ireland. This represents the third reason for taking Sinn Féin to task - their *modus operandi* or Third Way triangulation, opportunism and *real politick* is incapable of delivering the necessary transformation because they are beholden to the 'powerful'.

When Gerry Adams recently claimed that Sinn Féin must go the White House and that anyone ever engaged in real serious struggle would understand why, he was claiming 'guardianship' of the republican struggle. Other Sinn Féin members called those who opposed their decision Trots.

Indeed, the unequal political rivalry between Sinn Féin and People Before Profit often serves as a stick to beat anyone who questions SF's position on Palestine or indeed the economy or Stormont. Yet, Sinn Féin have performed several *volte face* in the recent past, such as the decision before Christmas to call for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador. I have no doubt PBP are using Palestine and other matters as wedge issues to generate support, but they only tend to gain any traction if PBP's position resonates with wider left-wing sentiment.

In October, when PBP and others called Sinn Féin out on the Israeli ambassador's expulsion, Pat Sheehan sardonically tweeted 'I stand in absolute awe of their revolutionary credentials' ([Twitter, 28 October 2023](#)). Pat courageously took part in the 1981 hungerstrike, forty-three years ago. More recently, last summer in fact, he put down three rental properties on [Stormont's register of member's interests](#). In the intervening period, Pat has transformed from IRA hunger striker to revolutionary private landlord. But this is not a personal attack on Pat, whom I do not know, or his colleague Colm Gildernew who three days ago [tweeted](#) a picture of his mother participating in the 1968 Caledon squat which led to the first ever Civil Rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon. To be fair to Colm he only receives rental income on one property. The point is that a party which brandishes revolutionary credentials and claims guardianship over the republican legacy can't have elected members as landlords and then claim that it seeks to overturn the inequitable property system in Ireland. It can't pretend to be a socialist party and then stand up for the interests of private property - although to be fair to SF they're not on their own there!

Sinn Féin are going to Washington to raise funds amongst wealthy Irish Americans who are fully ensconced in the global hegemon's empire. They are happy to validate Joe Biden because they sense that US support will facilitate their border poll - they might be less fortunate if Trump wins in the autumn, which looks increasingly likely. In 2015, the then Prince Charles visited St Patrick's chapel in Belfast, outside of which Orange thugs routinely played the Famine Song and similar sectarian thrash. Martin McGuinness was inside as Deputy-First Minister while Gerry Kelly stood outside supporting the families of the Ballymurphy Massacre victims. Sinn Féin wants to be inside and outside the tent at once, but as one of my favourite radical humanists of all time once said: No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both the Irish working class and their exploiters - the powerful. You cannot build a society based on republican ethics like, civic virtue, democracy and accountability on hypocrisy, double speak and backroom deals with the powerful. I'd say that when they land for the Paddy's Day party the menu will have a distinctly French theme - frogs' legs and Lobster Thermidor!

While operating as an emissary for the Irish Republic after the Easter Rising, Liam Mellows quickly identified the USA as an unworthy ally for Irish republicanism, since it 'has been the grave of the Irish race', where journalism had descended to accounts of fiction and English airgead ran like water. In November 1917, he wrote to his brother that 'the sooner the people of Ireland turn their eyes away from and give up hope of securing their independence through this tír the better. It is all cant, hypocrisy and big talk-bluff from start to finish and can at present be only compared to Russia previous to Revolution.' Mellows identified the domination of 'Trusts and capitalists who have through their large English interests bulldozed this tír into the War. The trusts and capitalists run politics here. The whole system - commercial, financial, legal and social is built on graft [corruption]. Honesty is an unknown quantity. The bigger the bluff, the greater the man. The greater the rogue, the wealthier respected and protected'(Liam Mellows to Barney Mellows, 4 Nov. 1917).

I know a lot of people involved in Sinn Féin and they are sincere and genuine republicans and mostly socialists. I am delighted that a working-class woman from East Tyrone has achieved the highest electoral office, even if I would take greater delight in converting that monolith to Orange supremacy into carpark or better still free-at-the -point-of-care a nursing home. Mine is a structural

argument that ironically (given SF's discourse) partially mirrors Trotsky's criticism of Stalinism to portray Sinn Fein as a bureaucracy, unresponsive to internal democracy which deploys former revolutionary prestige as an ideological stick to beat dissent from the left. A prominent SF politician once whispered to me excitedly that Sinn Fein isn't a party it's like an army - that's the problem.

We have been here before. Fianna Fail emerged from an army that realised that it could not be militarily successful and then pursued the constitutional road carrying much of the Irish working class in its populist train. After the Great Depression, Dev came to power on a radical manifesto and attempted to develop a domestic market to sustain the workforce and small farmers, without harming the larger farmers and Seoinín interest - an impossibility. All of this was based on de Valera's cross-class nationalism, and we should be mindful that Sinn Féin will not do the same when Mary Lou is Taoiseach. Without class struggle, Dev's finance minister, Belfast man and renowned misogynist, Sean McEntee left credit and investment under the auspices of private banks ensuring that they invested in London's financial market rather than at home. Both Irish banks and the Department of Finance vigorously opposed the alternative - affordable credit to boost indigenous growth but a weaker Irish pound. (McCabe, 2014: 142). Fianna Fail did, however, build houses and in the process ensured their dynasty. Between 1932-9, Dublin Corporation built 6,019 cottages, half of them in Crumlin. In total, local councils built 100,000 homes in Ireland between 1898 and 1948, and 80,000 were built privately with the help of the state - 65% under the Dev regime (McCabe, 2014:26). After meeting with Eoin Ó Broin, Sinn Fein's potential minister for housing last year, one of the biggest private construction firms in the South told the media:

I don't believe Sinn Féin have this magic wand that homes are going to become affordable if they get into power. They will potentially increase the state's resources in housing, But again, if you look at the Housing for All strategy by the government, that's what they're trying to do...If Sinn Féin get into power, there will be more state involvement in housing investment. We're a delivery vehicle for homes. If Sinn Féin's policy is that we want to bring more affordable homes, we're happy to play our part in that." (Business Post, 2 July 2023)

Fianna Fail did not tackle vested interests but rather Lemass, another misogynist of note, found a way to increase the South's industrial base without increasing the tax base through foreign direct investment (FDI). Yet FDI did not return wealth to the country's economy, rather the banks and property developers made their profits from servicing those FDI companies (McCabe, 2014:99). In addition, under Lemass, Irish people paid twice for the same house, once with the grants and exemption to make private housing "affordable" and then the taxpayer had to get a mortgage priced higher because of government support for the developer! (McCabe, 2014:33). The Southern economy is still based on the servicing of FDI and building property.

The PAYE system, which was first introduced in the late 1950s, became a cash flow for the government. The income generated by the direct taxation of ordinary workers was syphoned to speculators and foreign investors through tax havens. Construction, finance, land and law stood as the four pillars of Lemass's economy and the tide was certainly high if you sat on any of these boats (McCabe, 2014:248) The two largest Irish companies (both linked to construction) merged in 1970 under the chairmanship - believe it or not - of Seán Lemass. Desmond Traynor (Charlie Haughey's banker) was one of the directors. (McCabe, 2014:109) In February 1967, Charlie Haughey established Taca in Dublin as a Fianna Fáil funding group whose offices were on Amiens Street, in the same building as Charlies' accountancy firm. Desmond Traynor joined them afterwards. For Fianna Fail to criticise Sinn Fein for its funding model is a bit rich from the party which forged the Golden Circle out of vice and naked self-interest (McCabe, 2014: 113). Yet , this is where Plan B invariably takes populist nationalist movements.

As a result, Ireland has suffered a series of speculative property bubbles since, but, in the late 1980s, Haughey also opened the doors to an international Tax Haven along the Docks in Dublin. The Finance, Insurance and Real Estate jobs created to service these tax dodgers and the expansion of the pre-2008 property boom did mean that 'a real economic miracle occurred in Ireland, with very rapid employment and productivity growth during the years 1984 to 2000 (McCann, 2011:197) In the second phase of the Tiger, however, a quarter of the southern Irish economy was made up of a baseless property market that relied on debt. Inflation under Charlie McCreevy rose at twice the rate of Ireland's European partners. Prices in Ireland in 2004 were 28% higher than they were when McCreevy took office in 1997; corresponding figure for the EU stood at 14% (McCann, 2011: 205-6). In 2002, the 400 southerners with the highest incomes [not the greatest amount of wealth] were surveyed. Six of them managed not to pay a penny of tax at all. 43 owed less than 5%. 79 paid less than 15%. Conversely, only 83 paid more than 40%, indeed no one paid more than 45%. The largest rate of tax for PAYE workers in the same year was 42% (McCann, 2011: 209). There is no indication that Sinn Fein intends to systematically overhaul the tax system, properly regulate the property market or close tax loopholes. After their surprise success in the 202 election, Pearse Doherty, the prospective Finance Minister, publicly stated that 'Big business and investors know Sinn Féin won't go after them' (*Irish Independent*, 10 October 2021).

Sinn Fein appears to be triangulating towards a position of tinkering with welfare provision and using the process of reunification to rule from the centre, while maintaining its base. In autumn 2008, the FF/Green coalition pledged all the state's resources as collateral to 6 private banks. The country was now liable for approximately €400 billion in loans, amid a recession in the aftermath of the property bubble explosion (McCabe, 2014: 194) The Irish government then committed €64.1 billion to the banks and a further €31.6 billion on bad loans in NAMA. A year later, the state had to take a €67.5 billion "bailout" from the Troika because of fears in Brussels and Berlin that the Irish economic disease would spread through the entire European Union (McCabe, 2014:215). Fine Gael who has always stood up for wealth have no issue with this. Fianna Fáil's position appears less secure, however. A populist party with a strong grassroots labour vote, but one funded by banking interests and property developers. FF could not rescue its financial supporters while retaining its working-class vote. After several punts on Labour, and the Greens the working class appears to have settled on Sinn Féin. This explains Micheal Martin's hatred for the Shinners. He describes this as the contrast between his own party and Sinn Féin's socialism which challenges the entrepreneurial basis of the Irish economy. But there is no such system, the economic elite in the South are as grey and boring as their professions: stockbrokers, accountants, bankers and lawyers (*Irish Times*, 11 September 2023). Yet, there does not appear to any such socialist threat either.

Sinn Féin's *modus operandi* claims that they can build a new Ireland without a class struggle. Yet, they owe their political position to working class discontent. In the North, their strategy appears to be to boost the subvention from Westminster and use access to the EU single market to generate growth, specifically in FDI. Few now remember Peter Robinson, perhaps his title in the Lords will have something to do with the Isle of Mann, and Martin McGuinness petitioning George Osborne, the creature who imposed austerity, for a reduction in the North's corporation tax rate in 2011. Osborne agreed if he could cut the block grant by £385 million a year (*Belfast Telegraph*, 17 June 2011). The Stormont parties are now entering negotiations with Whitehall to raise the fiscal floor, i.e. increase the ratio of government spending per head in the North due to the area's location as the most deprived part of the UK. The British are talking about £124 while the Stormont parties are pushing for between £127-130 compared to every £100 spent in [England](#). We can anticipate pay rises from the £3 billion bribe that brought the executive back and then, hopefully, the announcement of a long-term budget in health and education on the transitional models outlined in the now decade old Bengoa report and the more recent apocalyptic educational report which came out before Christmas. Only a fully funded transition will mean that these reforms can be achieved

without exacerbating the existing social crisis.

The observant reader will note that the Stormont executive returned in large part due to pressure from trade unions, both in 2024 and 2020. They might also note that issues such as the Irish Language Act and other equality issues were forced through in large part because of popular democratic pressure. Added to this, as the prospective party of government North and South, we can see that across a range of issues, from Palestine to the Irish Language, to Water Charges and even their initial abstentions on the bank bailouts, Sinn Fein, while not internally democratic, is amenable to democratic pressure. The reality of politics in a liberal democratic framework is that there is a massive democratic deficit. Vested class interests occupy the high political ground and dictate the course of policy - the banking crisis made this clear to all. Yet, anyone who considers themselves a socialist or even a republican for that matter realises that only radical change and real democracy can address the underlying causes of social problems - all inextricably linked to Capital. For all the grovelling to monarchs or partying with imperialists, this democratic reality persists - as Mellows stated, the Republic 'stands not for an Ireland within the British Empire, not for the acceptance of doles from the British government, not for a so-called freedom tied up in Imperial swaddling clothes, but it does stand for an Ireland free and independent from sea to sea, unshackled, unfettered, as the good God made it... The Irish people are a force in the world today, a force for good, a force for democracy, for Ireland at this moment presents the spectacle of being one of the most democratic countries in the world'.

This is the Plan C - popular democratic struggle as witnessed across the North and indeed Britain since this cost-of-living crisis kicked in. Every political party operates some form of democratic centralism, Sinn Fein or PBP get hammered for it because of their left-wing orientation. What matters is who controls the purse strings and who calls the shots. The Plan A of impotent militarism cannot create a democratic future, although the powerful have forced it on the Irish people across our history. The Plan B of constitutional reformism resembles the hamster on the historical wheel, turning but making little forward progress. Plan C opens a democratic path of mobilisation and participation, building political consciousness across solid democratic, republican and socialist principles in co-operation where possible but in conflict where necessary with vested interests represented by the state. The nature of this island is changing and the powerful wish to manage the project. History suggests that Sinn Fein will perform the function of elite proxy, but the contradictions in their own position and the genuine socialism and anti-imperialism of their own members leaves room for manoeuvre. For socialists and republicans in the tradition of Liam Mellows, the path is clear any new Ireland must tackle the capitalist class interests that dominate our own country and wreak imperial havoc across the globe.

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