

THE SPLIT

FOR many years, and particularly in the early 'seventies, people could not be blamed for having a simplistic attitude towards the split. Attitudes prevailing then were: the Provos are nationalistic militarists while the Sticks are much more politically conscious radicals; or even more simplistically: the Provos are prepared to fight while the Sticks are not.

As the time and the struggle has gone on, however, it can be seen that such superficial arguments, particularly the first one, do not bear up under close scrutiny. It is the purpose of this lecture therefore to examine not only the events which led to the split but also the factors and the major political differences which existed — even in 1969 — between the two factions.

The Republican Movement has always had three tendencies: a militarist and fairly apolitical tendency; a revolutionary tendency; and a constitutional tendency. These terms, as used here, are relative to the conditions, the circumstances and the historical background against which the Movement functions. Throughout the history of the Movement one or other of the tendencies has periodically been in the ascendancy. Since the growth of both partitionist states at no time has a tendency capable of exploiting the contemporary conditions under which the Irish people suffer, been in control.

Conditions

Only today, with the protracted politicisation of the Movement, and the people, is there really a potentially pre-revolutionary period which, if used properly, could lead to the success of the struggle. These conditions coinciding with the growth of a militarily proficient IRA and a Movement becoming increasingly politicised did not exist at any other period. They most certainly did not exist in 1969 when many would argue, incorrectly, that we had that pre-revolutionary situation. They did not exist because, though the conditions were favourable the Republican Movement was not ready or capable of exploiting the situation.

The major effect that the events of 1969 had on the Movement was to quicken the process of the split and to confuse to some degree the reasons for it. That there would have been a split anyway will become clear as we examine the ideological differences. That it would have been less harmful, less confused and much less acrimonious but for the events of '69, will also become evident.

The split found its roots in the post-1950s campaign when those involved commenced a process of examination and reorganisation. It was felt that the national struggle had become isolated from the people and that republicans needed to involve themselves in the everyday struggles of ordinary people in order to secure the leadership of these struggles and to show the relationship between the national question and conditions under which Irish people live. This,

of course, was and is the correct revolutionary position provided that the process is aimed at raising national and social consciousness and provided that one's attitude to the national question is the correct one. Unfortunately, the leadership's attitude at that time, towards the national question, was a completely incorrect one and from this incorrect attitude the slide of one faction of the Movement into reformism and constitutionalism was a matter of course.

Civil rights

The most obvious illustration of this incorrect position can be found in the civil rights struggle of the mid and late 'sixties. The Republican Movement, fairly weak numerically, became deeply involved in NICRA. There were two different attitudes between those involved. One attitude was that of the leadership which felt that the struggle for civil rights was a process by which the six-county state could be democratised. Given the 'democratisation of the state', the Movement could then freely and legally engage in the social and economic struggles which affected both the unionist and anti-unionist working class. From republican involvement in these struggles would emerge a united working class, supportive of the republican position.

In pursuance of this objective and in the process of democratisation the republican position on the national question would, however, have to become subordinate to the feelings of the unionist working class and furthermore, in order to allay unionist fears and because the process was necessarily a lengthy one, the Movement was to be demilitarised. The contrary attitude, held mainly by those who were deeply involved in civil rights and other agitational activity, was increasingly one which held that the six-county state could not be democratised, that by its very nature it was irreformable and that the major effect of civil rights struggle would be to show clearly the contradictions within the state, the colonial nature of its very existence and the clear responsibility which the British government has for the situation there. Furthermore, the onus of that responsibility could be shifted from the unionist regime to the British government in order to counteract the imperial projection of the Irish struggle as an internal dispute with the British government as the 'honest broker'.

Commission

These two classically different approaches, based on totally different attitudes to the national question, are an illustration of differences within the Movement itself between what we have called the 'revolutionary' and 'constitutional' tendencies. There was little disagreement between them, however, on the need for agitational work to show the relationship between the national question and the conditions under which Irish people live. Thus republicans had correctly become involved not only in agitation in the six counties but also in struggles for housing, employment, fishing rights and land issues in the twenty-six counties. The Ard fheis of January 1969 had in fact appointed a commission made up of representatives of both senior wings of the Movement to examine and recommend the way forward.

This commission carried out its work, seemingly oblivious of the increased tension, activity and limited pre-revolutionary potential of the Northern issue and recommended a largely reformist approach in its submission. In August '69 meantime, the tension and contradictions within the Northern statelet came to a head following a month of sporadic street fighting in different parts of the six counties, the 'Battle of the Bogside' and, more seriously, the Belfast pogroms.

Criticism

Capable only of supplying a limited defence the IRA came in for concerted criticism, some of it unjustified, from many Belfast republicans who flocked back to the Movement after, in some cases, a lengthy absence. That the IRA leadership had been well-warned of the inevitability of the August pogroms is well chronicled elsewhere and is a matter of fact, as is the policy of

demilitarisation. However, there was justifiable resentment that some of the most strident criticism came from those who had left the Movement. The, by now, greatly strengthened (numerically) IRA had an added element — Volunteers who were out of step (and in some cases out of sympathy) with the politicisation which had taken place in their absence. Many of these returned Volunteers represented the militaristic tendency. They were deeply resentful of the Army's lack of preparedness for the August pogroms and its failure to supply weapons, or even a proper attitude to what was happening around them, after the pogroms.

This feeling was shared by many Volunteers who had been active during the politicisation period and who were, though committed to political revolutionary action, opposed to the conclusions of the commission and indeed opposed even to the idea of a commission continuing while the potential of the six-county situation and its effects on the whole thirty-two counties was not being politically exploited with a view to commencing armed struggle when the Army was politically and militarily ready to do so.

It was not on this issue, however, that the split was to be initially formalised. In Belfast those opposed to the IRA's handling of the '69 pogrom forced a breach with GHQ, passed a vote of no confidence in and severed the link with the Army Council, and boycotted the forthcoming convention (to deal with the commission's findings) unless and until the weapons scarcity was rectified. Although the Belfast O/C maintained a contact with GHQ (against the wishes of the Belfast Staff) a majority influential section of the Movement in Belfast had effectively split from the reformist leadership. The timing of the split was dictated by the August pogroms.

Convention

Meantime arrangements for the extraordinary general Army convention went ahead and was held in December 1969. There were complaints that delegates had not been picked up and the convention got off to an acrimonious start.

The major contentious issue was the commission's recommendations that the IRA's abstentionist policy should cease. Opposition to this was on two major bases. Firstly, upon the principle that both partitionist statelets are illegal, that the First Dail was the only legal governmental authority to be elected by the Irish people acting as a single unit and that members of the Dail had handed to the Army Council of the IRA governmental authority. To abandon the abstentionist policy was to recognise as legitimate Stormont and Leinster House parliaments and to deny the historical de jure authority of the Army Council. Secondly, strategically, such a move formalised the reformist constitutionalist idea that the national question could be resolved by parliamentary means and that both states could be reformed into a thirty-two county socialist republic. This is patently an absurd idea.

However, the convention voted by over two thirds for the scrapping of the abstentionist policy. Most of those who had voted against this withdrew from the convention.

Provisional

They convened a separate convention, feeling that those who voted for recognition of Stormont, Leinster House and Westminster, had abandoned all rights to call themselves the IRA. A provisional, or temporary, Army Council was elected with a mandate to summon a full Army convention, to rectify the organisational problems of the Army and to ensure adequate protection for those beleaguered in the six counties.

On December 29th 1969, the first statement of this Army Council appeared in newspapers. The job of rebuilding the IRA commenced. Meanwhile, on January 10th 1970, the Sinn Fein ard fheis convened at the Intercontinental Hotel in Dublin. The first major debate was on the 'National Liberation Front' proposal contained in the 'Ireland today' document compiled by the commission. This resolution added up to formal recognition and acceptance of trends already visible in Movement policies, such as joining with other radical groups for the attain-

ment of certain objectives. The 'NLF' concept was passed by the ard fheis.

The motion to abandon the abstentionist policy was, however, a much more critical debate because, leaving everything else aside, the Sinn Fein constitution stipulated that candidates standing on an attendance basis for any of the partitionist assemblies constituted "an act of treason". To promote it then as a resolution was unconstitutional and required firstly a two-thirds majority in order to change the constitution.

The first clause in the resolution read "that all embargoes on political participation in parliament be removed from the constitution and rules". The motion was defeated by 9 votes. Sinn Fein had rejected reformist policies, if only by a small majority margin.

Formalised

At that point, a resolution pledging confidence in the IRA was proposed from the body of the hall. A delegate then took the microphone and pledged allegiance to the Provisional Army Council. Delegates and visitors opposed to the reformist policies left the ard fheis and met in the Kevin Barry Hall in Parnell Square. There they elected a caretaker executive for Sinn Fein. The split was formalised.

Within a year an Army convention was summoned. The provisional council was dissolved and a proper Army Council was elected. Similarly a Sinn Fein ard fheis elected a proper ard comhairle.

Since then the Movement has proceeded, in relation to the national question, along proper lines and becoming increasingly aware of the need to link the everyday struggles of the people to the national struggle. The demise of 'SFWP' was inevitable because of their incorrect line on the national struggle.

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