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Sinn Fein Without the IRA: Legitimacy or Loss of Popular Support

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Sinn Fein originally came into political prominence in Northern Ireland as the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), yet in the last decade Sinn Fein has become recognized as a legitimate political party. As Sinn Fein joined the mainstream political process, however, the Unionists, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and even Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern questioned its continued affiliation with the IRA and demanded the IRA and Republicans resort to entirely peaceful, democratic means to their political ends. In July 2005, the IRA acceded to this demand, "formally order[ing] an end to the armed campaign" and instructing all Volunteers to use "exclusively peaceful means" ("IRA Statement," 2005). In August, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning verified that the IRA had put all weapons beyond use.

Given its origins, can Sinn Fein remain a viable political party without an active IRA supporting it? Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams has insisted that "There would be no peace process if it were not for the IRA" (Adams as cited in Maillot, 2005, p. 85). Yet, it is also Adams who pressured the IRA to pursue peaceful, political means. We argue that, in fact, Sinn Fein has grown beyond it origins and can function as a viable political party without the support of an active IRA. This case study uses a three-part analysis to make this argument. First, following an exploration of the reasons Northern Ireland Republicans resorted to violence, we assert that many of these reasons no longer hold true and, thus, there is no reason for terrorism or an active IRA. Second, we examine the shifts in Sinn Fein's core beliefs and political priorities. Finally, we consider the attitudes of Catholics in Northern Ireland toward IRA decommissioning and disbandment. All three point to changed circumstances in the Catholic community in Northern Ireland that imbue Sinn Fein with political legitimacy among Republicans and Nationalists[1] despite – or perhaps because of – the recently inactive IRA.

Although there is no agreed-upon definition of terrorism, the scholarly literature provides numerous precipitating factors and reasons that might propel a group such as the IRA to terrorism. Rarely is it a single motivating factor that causes an organization to turn to violence. Instead, it is often a combination of historical, political, economic, social, strategic, and ethnic/nationalist factors that prompt terrorism (Gross, 1969; Harmon, 2000; Kegley, 2000; Simonsen & Spindlove, 2000; Howard, 2004). All of these factors are related and intertwined with one another. Of these many factors, those specifically pertinent to Republicans in Northern Ireland are: history of violence, use of terrorism as a last resort, discrimination, lack of political voice and legitimacy, and desire for publicity.

We use these pertinent factors to examine the sociopolitical climate in Northern Ireland prior to and after the 1990s peace process which culminated in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. We choose the 1990s peace process as a line of demarcation because it is during the peace process that Sinn Fein comes to be recognized as a mainstream political party and because the

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[1] The usage of the terms Catholics and Protestants to identify the two communities in Northern Ireland is common but imprecise. Those on the Catholic side are generally *Nationalists*, seeking reunification with Ireland using constitutional means. With the category of Nationalists we also find *Republicans*, a term used to describe those who seek immediate reunification and are willing to use unconstitutional means – violence – to achieve it. This paper focuses on Republicans. On the Protestant side, *Unionists* seek to remain a part of the United Kingdom; *Loyalists* are those Unionists so strongly committed to union that they will also use violence to achieve their purpose.

IRA begins to trust political means enough to enter ceasefire. By applying these reasons for terrorism to Northern Ireland in two time periods, we establish that there was previously a perceived need for terrorist IRA violence[2] but that, entering and after the 1990s, there is much less of a perceived need for violence on the part of Republicans.

We focus on the Irish Republican Army or IRA as the predominant Republican paramilitary organization as well as the one most closely associated with Sinn Fein. The IRA is considered one of the best-organized terrorist organizations of modern times (Simonsen & Spindlove, 2000). The main goals of the IRA are and always have been to remove British rule from all of Ireland and the creation of a sovereign thirty-two county Irish Republic. The IRA that, until recently, operated in Ireland is officially known as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, having split in the 1970s from what was known as the Official IRA. Any mention of the IRA in this paper refers only to the Provisional IRA. There were and are, of course, other Republican paramilitaries, including the Real IRA. We deal with those only insofar as they relate to our research question; the literature on Northern Ireland's paramilitaries is already well-developed.

Any group that has an historical past that condones the use of violence may be more amenable to resorting to the use of terrorism. When a group has used force in the past, particularly if it has achieved some measure of success through violence, that group is more likely to embrace the use or threat of violence to achieve its goals (Kegley, 2000). The roots of the IRA can be found in the turbulent and violent history of Ireland.

From the Norman invasion in 1169 to the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 to Wolfe Tone and the 1798 rebellion to the Easter Uprising of 1916, there has been armed Irish resistance to the British presence in Ireland.

At times successful and at times not, this long history of violence between the Irish and British throws its shadow upon the Northern Ireland conflict today. The history of the IRA itself traces back to earlier militias including the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Irish Volunteers, with its formal founding in 1919 (Tonge, 2002). The 1919 – 1921 War of Independence marked success for the IRA, as Ireland gained independence from Britain. This successful past strongly influences the 1960s-1990s IRA campaigns in Northern Ireland, giving the organization hope and sense of romantic nostalgia.

However, the result of the Anglo-Irish Treaty was the partition of Ireland in 1921 when the twenty-six counties in the South became the Irish Free State and the six counties in the North, which were predominantly Protestant, remained under British rule. The IRA continued to fight partition, but with little success or even support between the 1920s and 1960s. In fact, one IRA campaign against the British in Northern Ireland from 1956 – 1962 faded out due to lack of popular support and the IRA in Northern Ireland all but ceased to operate (McKittrick & McVea, 2002).

Partition is, of course, a direct precipitating cause of the Troubles in Northern Ireland from the 1960s to 1990s. The late 1960s civil rights movement by Catholics in Northern Ireland sought moderate political and economic reforms to end discrimination – not reunification with the South (Stohl, 1983). Catholic Nationalist protesters marched in the streets of Belfast, Londonderry, and other cities in an attempt to bring attention to their plight. But these marches were met with violence by Unionist extremists and police (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). Because the Protestant Unionist majority controlled the government and police, the Catholic Nationalists felt helpless and vulnerable. This feeling was magnified when, in the late 1960s, Loyalist crowds burned down entire streets of houses in Catholic sectors, displacing some 1,500 Catholic families (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). While some accuse the IRA of using

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[2] We argue that Republicans in Northern Ireland believed terrorism was necessary; we do not condone terrorism ourselves.

the civil rights marches as cover for violence or even fronting the movement (Tonge, 2002), others insist the organization was basically disorganized and unarmed at this point in time. Following the burnings is when "the bitter phrase 'IRA – I ran away' is famously said to have appeared on a wall in the Falls Road area, reflecting the feelings of the working-class nationalists in west and north Belfast that the IRA had failed them." In *Making Sense of the Troubles*, McKittrick and McVea (2002) argue that:

> the practical reality was that the majority of Catholics did not support the IRA, and looked to them only in times of high tension. In such times, and August 1969 was one of them, the IRA was supposed to protect areas such as the Falls and Ardoyne against attack. . . . The consensus in the Catholic ghetto backstreets was that an effective defence force was needed, and so a new IRA came into being. This new group may have emerged to defend the ghettos, but it would before long develop into an aggressive killing machine. (p. 59-60)

On January 31, 1972, known as Bloody Sunday, a peaceful civil rights march turned violent when the British army fired on the crowd and 13 demonstrators were killed (a 14th died later as a result of his injuries). The march had been called to protest internment, the imprisonment without trial of thousands of Catholic men as suspected IRA members. In retaliation, the IRA shot and killed thirteen British army troops (McKittrick & McVea, 2002; Tonge, 2002). This was a turning point for the IRA. Internment and Bloody Sunday were perceived as oppression that specifically targeted the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland (Maillot, 2005). Disillusioned by their failure to achieve change through peaceful civil protest and political pressure, many Nationalists grew more amenable to the IRA's use of terrorist violence to force political change.

Terrorism is commonly the option of last resort. When other means to effect change have failed, frustration and anger sometimes lead groups to perform a cost/benefit analysis that results in the use of violence to force an issue. Often a group has attempted to effect change through political means or through peaceful protest, and when these efforts are ineffective a group might explore the use of terrorism (Howard, 2004). As the civil rights movement disintegrated and Bloody Sunday further inflamed the Nationalist community, the disillusionment and desperation of many Catholic Nationalists in Northern Ireland made violence the only option remaining. IRA recruitment during this period grew enormously.

The portion of the Catholic Nationalist community in Northern Ireland that considers itself Republican shares a long history of armed struggle. In the centuries since the Norman invasion, the Irish Catholics have fought many armed battles with the Protestants, thereby creating a tradition of violence. The IRA represents this history of armed resistance and defiance. Combined with the long and failed battle against inequality in Northern Ireland, it thus seems almost inevitable that some Republicans would see the use of force as the only avenue for change.

The failed Catholic civil rights movement sought to end discrimination in Northern Ireland. Discrimination is frequently a key factor in causing a group to contemplate the use of terrorism, especially minority groups. Discrimination can take many forms: lack of housing, unemployment, discrimination by the police and/or the state, political oppression and lack of self-determination (Kegley, 2000). A group, particularly a minority group, that is unable to have its perceived grievances of discrimination addressed may opt to use force or the threat of force in order to achieve a measure of equality. In particular, if a group believes that the police discriminate against it, the group may feel unprotected and vulnerable and this might drive the group to resort to the use of force to counterbalance the

feeling of weakness. If a social movement bands together to fight discrimination, but the majority either refuses to deal with the issues or perhaps does not even think that the minority has any valid issues that require attention, then terrorism may be used by an extremist portion of the movement (Kegley, 2000). Those who are weak relative to the government become impatient from a lack of action achieved by the peaceful movement, and use terrorism as a tool to bring their concerns to the forefront and force change onto the majority's political agenda.

Discrimination against Irish Catholics in (Northern) Ireland also has a long history, dating back to the Penal Laws of the 1600s and 1700s. Through laws restricting education, land distribution, and practice of religion among others, Catholics were stripped of legal, social, political, and economic power (Stohl, 1983). The Penal Laws were repealed over time, but left a lingering perception of discrimination and victimization among the Catholics that was inflamed by more modern periods and forms of discrimination. While some Unionists may deny that discrimination occurred in Northern Ireland, there is general scholarly agreement that it did (Tonge, 2002). As well, even Unionist-sympathetic British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher admitted that "There was no getting away from the fact that . . . the long years of Unionist rule were associated with discrimination against Catholics" (quoted in McKittrick & McVea, 2002, p. 156).

In the 1960s, Catholics suffered discrimination in three main areas: housing, employment, and elections. In Belfast, where the population of Catholics had risen, the Nationalists faced poverty and many lived in slums. After World War II there was a surge in the building of new housing in Northern Ireland, but even though the Catholics lived in the poorest sections, much of the new housing was allotted to the Protestant population (Tonge, 2002). The Protestants held most of the positions in the city councils and were the ones who determined the distribution of the new housing, therefore granting Catholics proportionately less housing than the

Protestants (McKenna, 2005). The most blatant acts of discrimination in the distribution of new housing occurred when single Protestants were given opportunities for new housing before Catholic families were. There also existed discrepancies in the condition of the housing for each community. In 1971, only 63 percent of Catholic homes in Northern Ireland had hot water or a private indoor bathroom, while 72 percent of the Protestant homes did (McKenna, 2005).

Catholics were also victims of discrimination in regards to employment. In *Northern Ireland: Conflict and Change*, Jonathan Tonge (2002) argues that there was discrimination in three main areas: location, employment, and access to civil service position. First, Catholics were disadvantaged when new industry was located in predominantly Protestant areas of the region. "Areas with Catholic majorities received only three-quarters of the amount of employment location awards enjoyed by Protestants between 1949 –1963" (p. 22). Second, unemployment rates were twice as high among Catholic workers as among Protestant workers (Tonge, 2002). "In the private sector, many large firms, and indeed whole industries, commonly had workforces that were more than 90 percent Protestant . . . Moreover, there were, at times of high tension, periodic purges in which Catholic workers were forcibly expelled from some of the big companies" (McKittrick & McVea, 2002, p. 11-12).

Third, Catholics were excluded from the higher positions in both the public and private sector. Catholics accounted for only 10 percent of the jobs in the civil service, and virtually none of these jobs were in the higher ranks. A 1943 survey illustrated that there were "no Catholics in the 55 most senior jobs and only 37 Catholics in 600 middle-ranking posts" (McKittrick and McVea, 2002, p. 11). In the private sector, most of the jobs held by Catholics were unskilled labor and lower paying jobs such as factory workers, while Protestants occupied higher paying jobs in industries such as shipbuilding. In general in all types of professions, Catholics tended to

occupy the lowest ranks. For example, in the white-collar industries Catholics held the clerical positions while Protestants held the managerial positions (Hancock, 1998; McKittrick & McVea, 2002; Tonge, 2002).

The Catholics were also subject to discrimination in the electoral process. According to the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, elections in Northern Ireland were to be conducted under proportional representation, which was designed to include representation of the Nationalist minority. However, by 1922, the Unionist government abandoned this system and implemented a "first-past-the-post" system in local elections. This system ensured an enduring single-party Unionist government (Tonge, 2002). In addition, only local home-owning ratepayers were allowed to vote. Since the majority of Catholics did not own homes, many could not participate in local elections, ensuring Unionist dominance in local government. And, to complete the circle, those Unionists elected to local councils determined the future distribution of housing – and, therefore, votes.

Gerrymandering, the practice of manipulating electoral boundaries, also further disenfranchised the Catholics. Voting districts were created to ensure a Unionist majority, even in predominantly Nationalist areas. In 1922, "as a result of the changes Nationalists lost their majorities in thirteen of the twenty-four councils they had originally controlled." The city of Londonderry had a firm Nationalist majority, but gerrymandering allowed Unionist control of the city council: "7,500 Unionist voters returned twelve councilors while 10,000 Nationalist voters returned only eight" (McKittrick & McVea, 2002, p. 8).

Through such political discrimination and purposeful political structural changes, the Catholics were left virtually without a voice in the political system of Northern Ireland. This lack of political influence was compounded when the civil rights movement was outlawed and destroyed by the Northern Ireland government at Stormont. When the concerns of a group have gone largely ignored, a group may decide to use terrorism in order to force the government and other entities to take notice (Harmon, 2000). Terrorism is used to expose the state as discriminatory, oppressive, and illegitimate (Kegley, 2000). "Insurgent groups use terror to undermine the status quo and to achieve some political power" (Harmon, 2000, p. 45). When terrorism is used to force political change on the agenda, a government that had chosen to reject to the goals of a political movement cannot ignore the actions of that now-terrorist group (Howard, 2004).

Terrorism is also used to gain recognition, attention and/or publicity. A group that feels disenfranchised and without a political voice may use terrorism to publicize its cause and to force its opponent and also its allies to take it seriously. Quite often, after a terrorist organization has taken violent action, a public announcement will follow in which it takes responsibility for and outlines its justifications for that act. Terrorism is utilized to bring attention to the terrorists' ideology by causing an act that is shocking and forces the public to take notice (Simonsen and Spindlove, 2000). Terrorists use the media to gain the most attention possible.

In addition to being denied a political voice through electoral discrimination, the Republicans in Northern Ireland were denied a public voice. Both the Republic of Ireland and United Kingdom censored the Republican media. For almost twenty years Sinn Fein was banned from the state-owned media in the Republic of Ireland (Maillot, 2005). Section 31 of the 1960 Broadcasting Act gave the Irish Minister for Post and Telegraphs the authority to ban broadcasts of any organization that promotes the use of violence. Sinn Fein's connection to the IRA was the basis of this proclamation, and therefore any interviews with Sinn Fein party members were not allowed to be broadcast on state television or radio. In 1988, British Secretary of State Douglas Hurd stated that there would be 'restrictions' on electronic media coverage of Sinn Fein (Welsh, 2005, p.2). The British government's restrictions were not as severe as those of the Republic, as Sinn Fein was allowed coverage during

elections. However, the censorship by both governments increased perceptions of oppression among Republicans as well as unfair reporting of Republican events and the dissemination of misinformation.

By closing legitimate channels of publicity and communication for Sinn Fein, the British and Irish governments inadvertently accelerated the IRA's use of violence. Terrorism was perceived by many to be the only way to draw attention to the plight of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. In conducting a well-organized campaign of terrorism, the IRA achieved success in focusing world attention on its cause. While the worldview was not always sympathetic towards the Republicans, the IRA's acts of terrorism did ultimately serve to gain publicity and recognition for the Republicans (Harmon, 2000).

A combination of history, desperation, discrimination, and lack of political and public voice contributed to the IRA's use of terrorism during the Troubles. According to Gross (1969), conditions contributing to political terrorism include: "the perception of sociopolitical conditions of oppression" and "the presence of active personality types who are willing to make a political choice and respond with direct action and violence to conditions of oppression" (p. 120). These conditions were present in Northern Ireland from the 1960s until the 1990s; therefore, terrorism was present in Northern Ireland from the 1960s until the 1990s.

But conditions in Northern Ireland slowly changed through the 1980s and into the 1990s. The pertinent factors that prompted terrorism earlier in the Troubles began to decrease or even disappear. The long history of Republican violence certainly did not change, but the much more recent violent history of the Troubles did. According to former US Senator George Mitchell (1999), the independent chairman of the peace talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement, as the 1980s turned into the 1990s, "families began to long for a more normal life, one not dominated by fear and hatred." Even among Republicans, "the people long for peace. They

are sick of war, weary of anxiety and fear. They still have differences, but they want to settle them through democratic dialogue" (p. xii, 19). The history of violence that made terrorism acceptable was superseded by war weariness.

There were, of course, attempts at peace over the years; only rarely did those attempts include Sinn Fein as the political representatives of the Republicans and the IRA. Republicans, roughly 30-40% of the Nationalist community, still had no political voice and, thus, still perceived the need to resort to violence to gain a voice. But when the Hume-Adams talks and "back channel" between the British and Sinn Fein bore political fruit in the early 1990s and, more importantly, Sinn Fein was allowed into peace negotiations in the mid-1990s, the Republicans again had a political voice. Moderate Catholic Nationalists had long since regained a political role, making violence no longer necessary as a last resort in their view. As Republicans' own policies evolved from violence only to the "ballot box and armalite," they began to regain their political voice. As the British and Irish governments and the Nationalists began to hear that voice, and began to recognize Sinn Fein as a legitimate political party, Republicans such as Gerry Adams used that voice and increasingly sought political means to their ends. Republican concerns were no longer going unheard and violence was no longer their only perceived means for achieving their goals.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Irish Catholic minority in Northern Ireland also saw a decrease in discrimination. Once the British established direct rule from London, they began policy initiatives that reduced discrimination in housing, employment, and politics. By 1972, local councils dominated by Protestant Unionists no longer controlled allocation of housing; the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was a regional government body that solved the "problem of systematic unfair housing allocation" (Darby, 1997, p. 80). According to John Darby (1997), *Scorpions in a Bottle*, by the 1990s, "Catholics and Protestants

occup[ied] houses of similar quality . . . On balance, housing is a rare example of a major grievance which has been virtually removed from the political agenda through changes in government policy and practice" (p. 80). The 1973 Northern Ireland Constitution Act also established the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights to evaluate whether the laws against discrimination were being upheld (Fitzduff, n.d.). In 1998, the Equality Commission was established under the Good Friday Agreement. It monitors and investigates any charges of discrimination in housing or employment (Equality Commission, n.d.).

The British government strengthened its fair employment legislation in 1976 and again in 1989 in an effort to mitigate employment discrimination against Catholics. Since this legislation went into effect, the proportion of Catholic men and women has increased in virtually every occupational group (Bew, Patterson, Teague, 1997). Unemployment remains disproportionately greater for Catholics than Protestants. According to the British government, in 2003 the unemployment rate for Catholic men was 9 percent compared with 5 percent for Protestant men. Among women, the unemployment rates were 6 percent for Catholics compared with 3 percent for Protestants ("Northern Ireland Labour Market" 2004). Still, this is better than before the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. For example, statistics furnished by the Continuous Household Survey in 1983 states that the male unemployment rate for Catholics was around 35 percent, while the rate for Protestants was 15 percent (Rawthorn and Wayne, 1988). This illustrates a dramatic improvement in the proportion of unemployment figures, and the Good Friday Agreement has provisions to further reduce the disparities.

Like housing discrimination, unfair electoral practices ended with direct rule. "Paradoxically, the removal of local democracy in Northern Ireland may have accelerated the systematic removal of minority inequalities." During the early 1970s, the British government enacted voting reform legislation that ended gerrymandering, unequal franchise rights tied to home ownership, and other unfair voting practices in local elections. "Electoral grievances were effectively removed from the political agenda" (Darby, 1997, p. 60, 80).

The British government has been withdrawing its troops from Northern Ireland. Efforts were also made to change the make-up of the mostly Protestant police force, by actively recruiting Catholics and changing its name from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) to the more benign sounding Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). These changes in legislation and organization reduce structural discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland, which in turn helps create an atmosphere less conducive to terrorism.

State-sponsored censorship has also ended. Both the Irish and British governments have lifted bans on Sinn Fein interviews and publicity. Sinn Fein is free to publicize its cause in the media, and does so. Gerry Adams is very vocal, and gives speeches and interviews on a daily basis. The Republicans also publish their own newspaper, *An Phoblacht*. No longer is there a need to draw attention to Republican issues through means of spectacular violence. In the global political climate since the terrorist acts on September 11, 2001, the use of terrorism is abhorred and unlikely to draw sympathetic support from the international community. In fact, the use of terrorism by the IRA could have the opposite effect; it would most likely repulse the public and alienate the international community. It is definitely to the advantage of Republicans to utilize their restored political and public voices rather than violence.

In Gross' (1969) terms, then, the "perceptions of sociopolitical conditions of oppression" have diminished among Northern Irish Republicans to the extent that they no longer feel terrorism is their only option. As well, we can take Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams as an example of an "active personality type . . . willing to make a political choice and respond with direct action" – but no longer willing to have that

action be violent. Adams' rhetoric has changed over the years, from overtly supporting the armed struggle to a firmer stance against using violent methods to achieve Sinn Fein's goals. In a speech directed to the IRA on April 6, 2005, he acknowledged the IRA's role in the struggle for a united Ireland, but also urged them to consider purely political means:

> In the past, I have defended the right of the IRA to engage in armed struggle…Now there is an alternative. I have clearly set out my view of what that alternative is. The way forward is by building political support for republican and democratic objectives across Ireland and by winning support for these goals internationally. (Adams, 2005, para. 19)

Just as the overall situation in Northern Ireland has changed, under Gerry Adams' leadership Sinn Fein itself has changed. As Jonathan Tonge (2002) argues in *Northern Ireland: Conflict and Change*, Sinn Fein has grown beyond its status as the "political wing of the IRA" and shifted some of its core beliefs and political positions. Although Sinn Fein as a political party predates partition, the incarnation that we know today began as "little more than a flag of convenience for the IRA" (McKittrick & McVea, 2002, p. 158). Its main ideological and political goals emphasized a united Ireland, the end of British colonial control of Northern Ireland, the existence of a unique Irish culture and nation, and the historical right to use force to achieve these goals (Tonge, 2002). During the height of IRA activity in the 1970s, few Republicans accepted the use of political tactics to achieve these goals. Republicans, including Gerry Adams at the time, were afraid that "what they pejoratively referred to as 'electoralism' . . . would blunt the IRA's revolutionary edge" (McKittrick & McVea, 2002, p. 158).

In the 1980s, however, the military stalemate, war-weariness, and the IRA hunger strikes brought Sinn Fein and political

methods to the forefront of the Republican campaign. The decision was made to utilize both political and military means to achieve Republican goals. This decision sets the stage for later developments such as the Hume-Adams talks, the 1990s IRA ceasefire, and, ultimately, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Tonge, 2002).

As these developments unfolded, Sinn Fein asserted its independence of the IRA[3] and altered it core beliefs and political positions, both subtly and dramatically. While the unification of Ireland remains a core belief, Sinn Fein has accepted the existence of Northern Ireland, the (at least temporary) legitimacy of the British government to rule Northern Ireland, and the principle of consent for both Nationalists and Unionists. There also began to be a desire to move from "a tactically unarmed strategy . . . [to] a totally unarmed strategy," which fundamentally shifts the core Sinn Fein position of militarism (Tonge, 2002, p. 148).

Tonge (2002) further argues that those who believe this shift is dramatic also believe that "the softening of approach heralds the death of republicanism" (p. 150) – the end of violence and strict adherence to the historic goals of the party. This conclusion was obviously reached before the IRA ended its campaign, but it emphasizes the fact that, in moving away from its own core beliefs, Sinn Fein moved into the realm of "a mere Nationalist party" or mainstream minority party (Tonge, 2002, p. 150). It is perhaps a minority party within the entire Northern Ireland context, but Sinn Fein is now the majority Nationalist party, gaining more votes than the Social Democratic and Labour Party, which represents moderate Nationalists. Sinn Fein is also the only Northern Ireland party active in the south as well as the north.

Today, Sinn Fein enjoys greater voter backing in both the Republic of Ireland and in

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[3] There is, of course, still considerable debate as to *how* independent Sinn Fein is of the IRA. For the purposes of this paper, we accept the party's line that the two organizations no longer share leadership; therefore, we accept that their insistence that there is no longer an "organic" relationship.

Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein support has slowly increased in the Republic over the last ten years (Maillot, 2005). In the May United Kingdom General Election, Sinn Fein won an additional seat, making them now the second most popular political party in Northern Ireland (behind the Democratic Unionist Party), and the largest Nationalist party in Northern Ireland ("Sinn Fein Win Newry," 2005). Gerry Adams took seventy percent of the vote in his Belfast West constituency in the recent 2005 General Election (Adams and Paisley retain Ulster seats, 2005).

In March 2005, the Belfast Telegraph commissioned Millward Brown Ulster to conduct a sweeping public opinion poll in Northern Ireland. According to this poll, forty-four percent of Sinn Fein voters believe that the IRA should disband and almost sixty percent of Sinn Fein supporters say that the IRA should disarm. Forty-eight percent of all Sinn Fein voters responded that Gerry Adams performed "very well" as party leader; although this does represent a slight drop from 2003, it is the highest approval rating among all party leaders in Northern Ireland. The poll also indicated the highest percentage of female Sinn Fein voters in 15 years, at 48 percent ("What Ulster Thinks Now," 2005). The literature has always explained away the low percentage of women Sinn Fein voters based on that gender's distaste for violence (Malliot, 2005). These statistics indicate that Sinn Fein voters no longer require backing from the IRA to go hand-in-hand with their political party and that Sinn Fein is attracting more women voters as they seek primarily political means.

The above elections results and opinion polls pre-date the announced end of the IRA campaign and decommissioning. Yet the polls and election results do indicate that Sinn Fein gained in voters and positive public opinion as it shifted its political ideals and distanced itself from the IRA. This indicates a strong likelihood it can survive and even thrive without an active IRA.

It is, however, important to note that not all Republicans have been pleased with Sinn Fein's gradual shift away from its origins as the political wing of the IRA and its core beliefs. For example, Sinn Fein's 1986 decision to enter the Irish Dail after decades of abstentionism angered many Republicans, some of whom split off and formed Republican Sinn Fein (Tonge, 2002, p. 144), a dissident party still active today. Sinn Fein's involvement in the 1990s peace process further fractured its Republican support, with a small but visible group of dissidents creating the Thirty-Two County Sovereignty Committee in 1997. Dissidents formed not only rival political parties, but also rival paramilitary organizations. The now-defunct Real IRA (rIRA) opposed the IRA ceasefire and the 1990s peace process; they were responsible for the infamous 1998 Omagh bombing. The Continuity IRA (CIRA), which is believed to still be active, also opposes the IRA ceasefire and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). During September and October 2005, several news sources made general references to "republican dissidents" attacking police and attempting bombings. Such dissident parties and paramilitary groups oppose Sinn Fein's current policies and, in some cases, the emphasis on peaceful means to end the conflict.

Sinn Fein recognizes the need for support from the IRA's members and other traditional Republicans. As Mark Harrington (2005) reports in "New hope, and unease, in N. Ireland," some Republicans are very nervous about IRA decommissioning, with one interviewee responding, "Who's going to protect us now?" As noted above, many Republicans expect IRA protection in dangerous times; decommissioning and the end to IRA campaign introduces insecurities into Catholic neighborhoods – at the very time that Protestant Loyalist feuds are exploding into violent riots. Harrington (2005) also points out that Gerry Adams has acknowledged the need to unite factions within the party, quoting from an earlier Adams speech: "There's a big job of leadership to be done, because many Republicans are only now absorbing the impact of the IRA disarmament . . . But it is

up to us to make sure that everybody stays united" (n.p.) Former BBC Ireland Correspondent Mark Simpson (2005), gives Sinn Fein leaders considerable credit for having kept Republicans united thus far: "There have been minor defections along the way, but Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness have steered the IRA through a period of dramatic change without a major split – and without being killed. . . . It is a remarkable political success story, albeit after 30 years of death and destruction" (n.p.).

While militarism may have ended, Sinn Fein promises to remain activist. The perceived romanticism of the Republican movement included a strong community commitment to the cause. For those Republicans unwillingly to engage in violence during the Troubles, Sinn Fein served as an alternative form of participation. Membership figures, both past and present, are difficult to obtain, though the party claims to be "the fastest growing party in Ireland." However many there are, Sinn Fein has always expected and continues to expect a high level of commitment from its members, requiring them to volunteer their time to sell newspapers, hand out leaflets, and participate in fundraising and publicity events. The party puts special emphasis on the young, and has had appeal among them due to its strong involvement in local communities and anti-drug campaigns (Maillot, 2005). A grassroots-based organization and active membership helps integrate Sinn Fein into the communities of both Northern Ireland and the Republic; this allows it to become ingrained in communities and provides a firm base of support for the party.

It could be an oversimplification to insist that Sinn Fein would continue to gain support now that the IRA has ended its campaign and decommissioned. The polls and election results do indicate that Sinn Fein has gained in voters and positive public opinion as it has ever so slowly shifted its ideals and distanced itself from the IRA. However, it has been eight years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed and it has yet to be fully implemented. The fact also remains that

Northern Ireland is still under direct rule from London with no firm estimate of when devolved government will return. Even more importantly, while Sinn Fein seems willing to accept an interim arrangement in a power-sharing executive with the Unionists, it is vital to remember that the ultimate goal is a united Ireland. Recent political history in Northern Ireland has shown us that success in the peace process did not translate into lasting electoral or political success for either the Nationalist SDLP or Ulster Unionist Party; their respective inabilities to deliver upon promises related to the Good Friday Agreement and the interrelated failure of the new Northern Ireland government led to the very increase in Sinn Fein support we herald here. If Sinn Fein is unable to meet its political goals and keep its promises, it could face a similar loss of popular support. These are, however, the challenges faced by any mainstream political party – they do not stem from the absence of an active IRA.

It is also important to note that there remain important avenues for further research relative to Sinn Fein's legitimacy. We focus primarily on the party's ability to maintain legitimacy within its own community; other players in the Northern Irish political game must also grant it legitimacy. While the British and Irish governments and non-violent Catholic Nationalists seem to have done so, the Unionists – especially the extremist Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party – have no faith or trust in the end of the IRA's campaign or Sinn Fein's insistence upon solely political efforts to manage and resolve the conflict.

The future of Northern Ireland remains to be written, but the region seems to be at a very promising crossroads. Changing sociopolitical conditions, popular support, and internal politics have led Sinn Fein to a position of political legitimacy and prominence that allows it to represent the interests of a majority of the Catholic community. It no longer must rely on IRA violence to gain political attention. The IRA ceasefire – and, very recently, end to the IRA campaign – gave Sinn Fein the chance to

prove that political means can achieve Republican ends. Two important overarching obstacles remain for Sinn Fein: achieving its political goals in a timely fashion so as to maintain popular support and convincing the Unionists that it is a legitimate political party. Both will be difficult – particularly the ultimate goal of reunification – but we feel confident that Sinn Fein currently has the legitimacy and popular support to take on the task on behalf of its voters.

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