

Sinn Féin is democratically centralised



FF was controlled by developers and FG tends to the will of property-owners but SF's backroom regime is even more powerful than those in other big parties.

By Anton McCabe

IT WAS interesting to see the recent standoff between former Minister for Justice Michael McDowell, and former Dublin correspondent of the *Guardian* Joe Joyce on the one hand, and Sinn Féin TD Claire Kerrane on the other, in the often anti-Sinn Féin *Irish Times*.

McDowell's repeating theme for a generation now has been as he put it that "Sinn Féin is not, and will not be, a conventional democratic political or parliamentary party". Kerrane replied that "Sinn Féin is not "controlled from Belfast" [but] an open and democratic political party whose leadership – Ard Comhairle – is elected annually at our Ard Fheis".

The truth is that its backroom leadership runs Sinn Féin in the style of Stalin's interpretation of democratic centralism. Real power lies in the Coiste Seasta, and in advisors who have no formal standing. Power has moved to them from a withering IRA Army Council, without transition to internal democracy.

Formally in Sinn Féin the Ard Fheis is the supreme body, the Ard Comhairle supreme between Ard Fheiseanna. This has 48 members, making it unwieldy. In the *Irish Times* Joyce and McDowell both refer at some length to the existence of a party business committee, the Coiste Seasta, which manages Sinn Féin departments such as finance, training and HR; and where they claimed real power resides.

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Kerrane replied that "Despite attempts to endow a rather mundane committee with wide-ranging powers, the reality is that this is an administrative sub-committee, with no policy role and subject to the Ard Comhairle on all matters".

In fact most real power *does* lie with the Coiste Seasta of eight. Five are Northern based. Only Assembly member Declan Kearney is an elected representative.

Other figures, unelected even within Sinn Féin, wield equally disproportionate power. This was established during the inquiry into the North's Renewable Heat Incentive scandal. During the crisis in the Executive December 2017-January 2018, emails that were disclosed showed Finance Minister Máirtín Ó Muilleoir taking guidance from Pauric Wilson, Martin Lynch and, particularly, Ted Howell.

In an email to Howell, Ó Muilleoir wrote "there is no further reason for me to hold up signing this business plan...would you be content if I were to sign off the business plan on Wednesday afternoon?".

This was a complex decision, worth hundreds of millions of pounds. The Assembly had already passed the legislation, but Ó Muilleoir had to sign off.

Wilson was IRA commander in the Maze prison. Lynch has been named as a member of the IRA Army Council. Howell holds no elected position, even within Sinn Féin. He is one of the least-known among Ireland's most powerful. Howell was Gerry Adams' most trusted advisor. He is secretive, and even opponents concede he is a deep thinker and personable.

In the Dáil, Sinn Féin plays the parliamentary game well. However, there are differences to other parties. The party apparatus, not the TDs, recruits its staff. There are arguments for this: other parties have used it too frequently to create jobs for family members. However, this power grants powers of patronage to the unaccountable.

The backroom leadership also takes decisions



regarding the Oireachtas group. That would include appointing government ministers if Sinn Féin goes into government. There has to be concern if such decisions are taken by an apparatus that is not open to scrutiny or real democratic accountability.

All parties have unelected bodies and individuals wielding disproportionate powers. You might argue that Fianna Fáil was controlled by developers or that Fine Gael often tends to the will of businesspeople and property-owners. However, Sinn Féin claims a different and radically progressive vision of society, though its backroom regime is even more powerful than those in other big parties.

That can be seen in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Twelve of Sinn Féin's current 27 members were co-opted. They include Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey. In both Foyle and West Tyrone, co-opted Sinn Féin members were replaced by further co-options. In Foyle, neither Sinn Féin member elected in 2017 is now an Assembly member.

When the Assembly was established, co-option was introduced to protect minorities. If a member from a minority party died or had to step down, it ensured that party kept constituency representation.

So Sinn Féin is acting within the rules. All parties have used co-option, but Sinn Féin much more than any other. That is despite none of its Assembly members having died. Voters have elected representatives; found themselves with different representatives; and, in two cases, found themselves with different representatives again.

The problem is that the process of choosing co-optees is not transparent.

The co-options reflect a strategy of replacing those associated with the IRA so as to widen the party's electoral appeal. In the first Northern Assembly elected in 1998, eight of 18 Sinn Féin members were former Republican prisoners. They included Gerry Adams, who has always denied ever being an IRA member).

Of 27 current members, five are former Republican prisoners. Since the last Assembly election in 2017, five former prisoners have stood down. In Northern Ireland councils too there has been a replacement of the IRA generation. Paradoxically, some Unionist councillors find the replacements more difficult to deal with.

In the Republic, Sinn Féin follows a similar trajectory. In Sinn Féin's first electoral breakthrough in 2002, two of five TDs were former IRA prisoners. Only one of the current 37 TDs is a former prisoner. Most are too young to have been involved in the IRA.

Sinn Féin is now mostly of a post-IRA generation. Partly this is due to former IRA fighters ageing.

And to be fair, the IRA Army Council no longer plays the role it did because IRA structures have withered. It is 25 years since the second and final ceasefire. Significant recruitment ended some time after that, in the mid-noughties.

Slamming the party because the IRA Army Council controls Sinn Féin is electorally useful for its opponents in the Republic. In reality the IRA Army Council were the moderates, decisive in driving Sinn Féin towards the centre. The IRA delivered the ceasefire, decommissioning, and support for police. Opposition



mostly came from non-IRA members of Sinn Féin. IRA structures were used to isolate them, and frequently force them out.

Sinn Féin support for the Special Criminal Court indicates that the IRA is withering. The leadership obviously does not fear any significant number of party members appearing in the Court. It's clever policy. In blighted working-class areas the new stance has populist appeal. To the middle-class and business, it proves Sinn Féin has changed.

The two-thirds victory at the party's Ard Fheis for abandoning that traditional policy raises questions. There are 74 TDs, Senators, Assembly members and MPs. Not a single one expressed disagreement with a fundamental reversal of policy.

That indicates the backroom leadership's control. This is assisted by the big reduction in the party's activist layer.

The general reduction in political activism partly explains this. In the past, collecting for prisoners and selling weekly party paper *An Phoblacht* required activism. There are no longer any prisoners. *An Phoblacht* went from weekly to monthly to online. Party representative, though disciplined enough not to drink in the Dáil bar, have stopped taking only the average industrial wage as salary.

Perceived dissenters have been culled. Aontú's founder Peadar Tóibín's dissent on abortion led to his exit from the party. Twice suspended, he said "restrictions imposed on him by the party over his views on abortion had prevented me from fully representing my constituents".

While the party is tightly unified on an All-Ireland basis, the perception is the Northerners are stronger on organisation, the Southerners on policy development.

Its presence in two states puts the party structure under conflicting pressures: in the North it presents as a fiscally responsible party of government, in the Republic as an embodiment of left-wing protest. According to the rules, parliamentarians are not allowed public disagreement. Even opponents concede this has advantages: you might not like it, but you know what you get.

The difficulty is that rules cannot make disagreement disappear, nor prevent it exploding destructively. A post-IRA Sinn Féin is sailing into uncharted waters. Differing views are inevitable. Whether Sinn Féin can adjust to their expression remains to be seen.

For this piece, *Village* has twice asked Sinn Féin's press office for a list of Coiste Seasta members. At time of going to press it has not been provided. 📌

Anton McCabe is an Omagh-based journalist, one of the Northern Ireland representatives for the National Union of Journalists and a member of Militant Left.



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