



ON THE WAY OUT: The ousting of veteran republican Martina Anderson from elected office sends a clear message as to where authority resides within Sinn Féin

# North has become Sinn Féin's electoral Achilles heel

IN THE late 1990s, the electoral battle within nationalism was hotting up. The ceasefire of 1994 had come at a time when the SDLP's dominance within nationalism had been confirmed following Joe Hendron's capture of the West Belfast parliamentary seat from Gerry Adams two years previously.

Thereafter, the peace process allowed Sinn Féin to attract support from tens of thousands of natural party voters for whom the violence of the IRA had been the solitary factor preventing them from putting an X or first preference next to party candidates in the polling booth.

Over the years that followed, as the Sinn Féin vote rose and ultimately eclipsed that of the SDLP, elected representatives of the latter party remained in denial, convincing themselves that votes lost to the republican party were merely being 'loaned' and would return at some point soon. I can recall the ever-prescient Ian Knox mocking the sentiment in a cartoon in this very paper at the time, a belief in which only served the purpose of allowing SDLP figures to avoid addressing their shortcomings until it was too late.

Political parties cannot afford to believe their own propaganda, nor to allow complacency and entitlement to conceal from them discontent amongst the wider electorate. Change sweeps through parties by one of two means: either ambitious, aspiring leaders dethrone their own colleagues once they've become vulnerable due to unpopularity with peers or the public, or the voters deliver a damning verdict at election time abruptly altering - quite literally - the faces of a party.

We've seen the latter happen many times across the jurisdictions we are most familiar with: the British public's withering dismissal of Labour in the last Westminster election a case in point, and in the south all major parties (Sinn Féin apart) have received electoral batterings triggering leadership changes over the past two decades.

Chris DONNELLY



Sinn Féin and the DUP both rose to the position of electoral dominance within nationalism and unionism respectively in the first few years of this century. Recent political manoeuvrings within both parties confirm that they have little intention of relinquishing their ascendant positions, though they are going about it differently.

The Sinn Féin leadership is asserting its authority in ways that we are not used to. Mary Lou McDonald is playing for high stakes. She wants to be the first female taoiseach, leading Sinn Féin into power in Dublin, a development that would be potentially transformative in terms of the drive towards unity. To aid this process, the party needs to sharpen its game in the north, which has become their Achilles heel. Whilst Mary Lou leads a Dáil-based party brimming with talent and potential, the northern wing of the party has become stale and blunted, requiring significant change in personnel to turn the

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This is the context within which the recent unprecedented move against the party's Foyle MLAs occurred. The logic is compelling, but the fact it has involved ousting from elected office a veteran republican in the form of Martina Anderson sends a clear message as to where authority today clearly resides within the party. Foyle may be first but it will not be the last constituency to herald personnel changes as Sinn Féin seeks to upskill at elected representative level hoping to address their glaring under-performance at Stormont and elsewhere.

The internal battle within the DUP is from a different place and time. After Arlene Foster's unceremonious dismissal - a process helpfully assisted by loyalist paramilitaries - a new leader is set to be announced this Friday.

Jeffrey Donaldson left the UUP because he could not stomach the Good Friday Agreement. He is apparently being endorsed by Gregory Campbell and Sammy Wilson, giving a lie to the idea that this is a battle between Edwin's traditionalism and Jeffrey's apparent moderation.

Edwin Poots has declared his desire "to silence and repel" supporters of Irish unity by maximising unionism whilst his opponent's team have been busy leaking their candidate's intention to obstruct the operation of the NI Protocol. Yet both candidates have demonstrated a capacity for pragmatism in the post-St Andrew's devolution era and are unlikely to embrace a strategy wilfully endangering the institutions.

There is no sign yet of a shift away from relying on fear and fury to rally the faithful in spite of the diminishing electoral returns for political unionism. Perhaps the winner will surprise us.

Party officers have insisted the campaign is a strictly behind closed doors process. The orange smoke that will signal a decision from this loyal conclave is unlikely to usher in a new visionary unionism. For now it is very much the case that tone, and not substance, is what separates the contenders. Fifty years later, unionism remains parked at that crossroads.

## ON THIS DAY

MAY 10 1971

### Loyalist's Mother Dies in Explosion

THREE men who spent all day assisting police with their investigation into a weekend Belfast explosion and fire in which an elderly woman died left Mountpottinger police station last night. They had been there since soon after the blast on Alberbridge Road demolished a ground floor shop and sent flames roaring through the flat above.

The woman who died was Mrs Isabella McKeague, mother of Mr John McKeague, the militant Protestant leader and chairman of Shankill Defence Committee. He shared the flat with his mother who was in her seventies but was away on a camping trip at the time of the explosion. The theory is not being discounted in the investigation in that the two-stick gelignite bomb, believed to have been placed or thrown against the front door of the shop, was put there in the belief that Mrs McKeague was also absent from home. There was speculation it was a 'grudge' attack on Mr McKeague's home by other Protestants. An RUC spokesman said: 'We believe that there is no sectarian significance in the incident'.

Mrs McKeague suffered from arthritis. When she appeared at the front window of the blazing flat neighbours urged her to jump to safety as they waited to catch her on the pavement. But because of her infirmity she refused.

#### Connolly's Son on 'Workers' Republic'

THE political situation in the 26 Counties was undergoing a transformation more complete than ever before. So said Mr Roddy Connolly, chairman of the Irish Labour Party, speaking as a fraternal delegate at the annual conference of the Northern Ireland Labour Party in Belfast.

Mr Connolly, son of the executed 1916 leader, said Fianna Fail for the first time in its history was torn by dissention and the present situation was pregnant with political possibilities. In his view, the Labour Party will continue to be the strongest democratic force south or north of the border.

The view of the party was that socialism in Ireland was indivisible. The working class, North and South had a common interest in the complete transformation of society politically as well as economically. In the ultimate analysis, no border could divide a Workers' State in the North from a similarly constituted state in the South.

John McKeague (1930-82) emerged as a leading Loyalist firebrand in 1969 when he admitted invading the Falls at the head of a mob. As editor of the viciously sectarian Loyalist News, he was prosecuted but acquitted under Stormont's Incitement to Hatred Act. He was assassinated by the INLA in 1982. Roddy Connolly had been in the GPO with his father in 1916.

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