

POLITICAL PROGRESS: Mary Lou McDonald speaking during the Sinn Féin ard fheis at the Helix in Dublin

Ard fheis shows just how far Sinn Féin has come



Deaglán DE BRÉADÚN

ON SATURDAY last, I fetched up at Dublin City University to collect my press pass and attend the Sinn Féin ard fheis.

The holding of the conference in the imposing Helix conference hall/theatre at DCU was yet another reflection of how much the party has grown and become mainstream.

I am racking my brains to recall at what point in my journalistic career I attended an SF party conference for the first time. Certainly, I was present at the Mansion House in Dublin on November 2 1986 when the game-changing decision was made to alter the abstentionist policy, so that SF candidates who were successful in a general election could take their seats in Leinster House.

Since a secret IRA convention shortly beforehand had taken a similar decision, the result of the Mansion House vote was no great surprise. There was a split afterwards of course and Republican Sinn Féin (RSF) was founded by those who couldn't stomach the Leinster House move.

I had raised the abstentionism issue with Gerry Adams in late September 1986 – at a time when interviews with the Sinn Féin leader were as rare as hen's teeth and he was banned from RTÉ under Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act.

He said it was a matter for the ard fheis to decide and that he didn't expect a split if the policy was changed. Six weeks later, a motion to that effect from the party's ard chomhairle (executive committee) was approved by 429 to 161 votes. In a speech to the conference, the late Martin McGuinness referred to the fact that the IRA army council had already approved the dropping of abstentionism

Last weekend's event also took a decision which was less dramatic than the 1986 move but still had considerable significance, namely to accept the establishment of non-jury courts in "exceptional circumstances". Like the proposal to drop abstentionism, this was a motion from the ard chomhairle but, on this occasion, there was no mention of the army council. Times have changed.

The non-jury Special Criminal Court was set up in 1972 on the basis that jurors were likely to be intimidated in certain types of cases. Opposition to it had been a feature of Sinn Féin policy for many years, based on the fact that persons accused of IRA-related activities could be brought before it and have jail sentences imposed on them. Now that the Provisional IRA is generally believed to have hung up its Armalite, Sinn Féin policy has changed. They still want the currently-constituted "Special Crim" abolished but are in favour of a situation where a judge can decide that a case should be heard in a non-jury court. This would apparently include cases where alleged members of dissident republican groups were being brought to trial.

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No doubt I'm not the only person who has a "pinch me, is it real?" reaction at SF's political progress. On a cautionary note, the final date by which a general election must be held in the south is February 20 2025. That's three years and almost four months away and the Shinners just might have run out of steam by then. On the other hand, the bandwagon could be rolling even more powerfully at that stage.

The latest poll figures at time of writing suggest that the party could win up to 60 seats if a general election took place soon. At least another 20 would be needed for a majority. That would mean trying to cut a deal with the smaller parties and independents or forming a coalition with either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. But here's the thing: SF got 24.5 per cent of first preference votes in the February 2020 general election and a RedC/Business Post survey on October 22 had them at 33 per cent. It's still a long way off an overall majority but a significant advance nevertheless. Can Fianna Fáil and/or Fine Gael reverse the trend? No sign of it at present.

The day after Saturday's ard fheis I observed the official unveiling of a statue to Kevin Barry, the legendary young republican activist hanged by the British in 1920. The ceremony took place in his home village of Rathvilly, Co Carlow, and the only senior politician I recognised in the crowd of several hundred was former Fianna Fáil taoiseach Bertie Ahern. Our leaders are out of touch.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 3 1921

Victory for Craig

IN THE House of Commons yesterday, Captain Charles Craig, leader of the Irish Unionist Party, complained that the Imperial Government had not transferred the necessary powers in order to make the Ulster Parliament a reality.

That Parliament was absolutely impotent and little more than a sham. The Government of NI was being conducted on money borrowed from the bank. The police in Belfast were under the control of an alien institution, Dublin Castle. The necessary power should be handed over to the Northern Parliament at the earliest possible moment. (Cheers.)

Sir Samuel Hoare [Coalition Unionist] said that the Conference should go on as long as there was a chance of success on three conditions: namely, no separation, allegiance to the Crown and no coercion of Ulster. Mr Lloyd George said that Captain Craig had stated: 'You set up a Parliament in Northern Ireland. There are certain powers which must be transferred to it before you can make it effective'. … I can quite see that that is paralysing the necessary activities of the Ulster Government. I think the position is intolerable to the Northern Parliament. Therefore, unless something happens in the course of the next few days, we shall either… confer the necessary powers upon the Northern Parliament …(Cheers.) It is unfair to set up a Parliament and deprive it of the only power that enables it to work creditably because that is giving an unfair advantage to its enemies. The anti-government resolution was defeated. The Press Association says: Mr Lloyd George's speech especially gratified the Ulster Unionist MPs whose demands were in every respect acceded to. They regard the PM's assurance as entirely satisfactory and anticipate that in a very short time the Parliament of NI will be functioning with adequate powers.

Carson Meets Lloyd George

THE London Evening Standard writes: A fine car drove up to Number Ten Downing Street, burnished in blue. I saw silhouetted against the background the tremendous features of Lord Carson. He was on his way for a meeting with the Prime Minister. I learn that Tyrone and Fermanagh came under discussion and they say that no-one alive has quite the influence over Mr Lloyd George which Lord Carson can exercise when he wants. **(By November 1921, to ensure the survival of his 'shaky coalition', Lloyd George struck a powerful blow at Sinn Féin's hopes of Irish unity by granting full executive powers to Craig's administration, including over security. Inexplicably, Griffith and Collins – despite warnings – seemed oblivious of the significance of Lloyd George's capitulation to pressure from Belfast. Meanwhile, Carson – now a law lord – used his influence in the shadows.)**

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