



Unit 6:

The Rise of Sinn Féin and the first Dáil

A Short History

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THE RISE OF SINN FÉIN AND THE FIRST DAIL

From the beginning, the 1916 Rising was referred to by the media and the authorities as 'the Sinn Féin Rebellion'. While some individual members of the Sinn Féin party took part, neither the organisation nor Griffith himself was involved in the Rising. This mistaken association catapulted the Sinn Féin party from relative obscurity to center stage in the pursuit of Irish independence.

ARTHUR GRIFFITH (1871-1922) AND THE ORIGINS OF SINN FÉIN

Journalist and politician, Arthur Griffith was born into a working-class Dublin family on 31 March 1871. He attended the Christian Brothers' schools in the north inner city, but left before he was thirteen to take up an apprenticeship with a Dublin printing firm. Working initially as a typesetter and copywriter with the *Nation* and the *Irish Daily Independent*, Griffith slowly carved out a career as a journalist. His hunger for personal development, led him into Dublin's literary and debating societies. Griffith was also active in the Gaelic League and a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) until 1910 when he rejected the use of physical force for political ends.



Following a period in South Africa, Griffith returned to Dublin in 1899 to take up the editorship of the new radical nationalist newspaper, the *United Irishman*. Writing under the pen name *Cuguan*, he frequently challenged the complacency of the Irish Parliamentary Party and used the newspaper to express what he called the 'urgent need' to deAnglicise Ireland. In September 1900 Arthur Griffith and William Rooney established Cumann na nGaedheal - an umbrella body designed to co-ordinate the activities of the various groups committed to counteracting the continuing anglicisation of the country. In the early years of the twentieth century Arthur Griffith envisioned a separate Irish state that would retain a tenuous link with Britain through a dual monarchy based on the Austro-Hungarian model. In a pamphlet entitled *The Resurrection of Hungary* published in 1904, Griffith argued that Irish MPs should follow the Hungarian example of the 1860s, withdraw from Westminster and establish an Irish parliament in Dublin. The idea of economic nationalism and the industrial development of the island were central to his political vision.

When the *United Irishman* folded in 1906, Griffith began editing his influential daily newspaper *Sinn Féin*. Its name became synonymous with his separatist politics, and was adopted by the new political party created in 1907. The Sinn Féin League represented an amalgamation of the National Council (established in 1903 to protest the visit of King Edward VII to Ireland), the Dungannon clubs, Inghinidhe na hÉireann and Cumann na nGaedheal. Sinn Féin policy was one of national economic, cultural and political self-reliance. The party drew its membership from the ranks of cultural nationalism and the IRB. Despite growth in branch numbers - 1906 (21), 1907 (57) and 1909 (132) - the party remained on the fringes of nationalist politics and had all but disappeared by 1914.

A POLITICAL REVOLUTION: SINN FÉIN AFTER THE 1916 RISING

The Rising succeeded in transforming the Irish political landscape - over the next two or three years, events both in Ireland and internationally would end any prospect of a moderate Home Rule-style solution. The actions of the British government in Ireland and the continuing decline of the Home Rule Party after the 1916 Rising paved the way for the growth of more extreme nationalism represented by two organisations – the revived Irish Volunteers and a new Sinn Féin.

HARSH PUNISHMENT

Within weeks of the Rising, Lieutenant General Maxwell had extended martial law, overseen the executions of the leaders and supervised the round-up and deportation of thousands of 'Sinn Féiners'. Many who had previously been hostile to the 'Sinn Féin Rebellion' became sympathisers with the rebels. Dublin shops were full of 'Rising memorabilia: postcards, Mass cards, song sheets, badges, flags and pamphlets. Many of these items were mass produced by Sinn Féin. The executed rebel leaders were recast as martyrs and memorial masses attracted crowds of people who applauded the relatives as they came out of the churches. The trial and execution of Roger Casement in Pentonville prison in August 1916 increased the sense of public outrage, as did the publication of a report of inquiry into the execution of pacifist journalist Francis Sheehy Skeffington during Easter Week.

WIDESPREAD ARRESTS

Over 3,400 people were arrested - many wrongfully - for their part in what was called the 'Sinn Féin Rebellion'. Although some were released, almost 2,000 were sent to internment camps such as Frongoch in Wales. The remote Welsh prison camp - known as 'the University of Revolution' - was

a training ground for many who would go on to play important roles in the War of Independence.

Organisations such as Irish National Aid Society and the Irish Volunteers Dependents Fund helped to financially support the families of the prisoners and aroused public sympathy and interest. These organisations also maintained the links between the IRB and the Volunteers who had avoided arrest and gone underground after the Rising.



[Source: National Library of Ireland, Ke 125]

In December 1916, new Prime Minister, David Lloyd George ordered the release over 1,800 internees - including Arthur Griffith - who had not been put on trial. The returning prisoners were greeted by great public demonstrations.

Griffith remained as leader of the newly popular Sinn Féin through many successful by-elections in the months ahead. The party was swelled by an influx of recently released young radicals - many of whom were also members of the revived Irish Volunteers.

Éamon de Valera in Volunteer uniform addressing Sinn Féin supporters from the steps of Ennis Court House Co. Clare, 11 July 1917.



[Photo: National Library of Ireland, Ke 131]

1917 BY-ELECTIONS

In early 1917 a group of separatists in north Roscommon under the leadership of Fr Michael O'Flanagan decided to challenge the Home Rule party in an upcoming by-election. Their candidate was Count George Noble Plunkett, former director of the National Museum of Ireland and the father of executed rebel leader Joseph Plunkett. His campaign encouraged the various separatist elements (such as the old Sinn Féin, the IRB, Cumann na mBan, the Gaelic League and the Volunteers) to come together for the purposes of electioneering.

The discipline, energy and enthusiasm of the election campaign led to a resounding victory for Plunkett who received 3,022 of the 5,403 votes cast - more than the other two candidates, Jasper Tully (Independent) and T.J. Devine (Home Rule party), combined. Although he stood as an Independent candidate, Plunkett was the first elected representative to implement the Sinn Féin policy by refusing to take his seat at Westminster (abstention).

The Sinn Féin party spread rapidly throughout the country benefiting from its association with the 1916 Rising, the Volunteers, Count Plunkett's victory and Arthur Griffith's journalism.

When another by-election campaign took place in South Longford in May 1917, the separatists felt sufficiently confident to select a more radical candidate, Joe McGuinness, who was still in prison for his

role in the 1916 Rising. McGuinness' victory (by thirty-seven votes) further energised the Sinn Féin party which continued to expand. It was supported by young people in particular who were attracted to the youthful and dynamic party.

In June 1917 all the remaining prisoners were released from English jails and soon afterwards Éamon de Valera - the sole surviving commandant of the 1916 Rising - was chosen to contest the next parliamentary vacancy in East Clare. De Valera benefited from the support of the Catholic Church and was portrayed as one of the "Easter heroes" during the election campaign. The result was an overwhelming, two-to-one victory on 10 July 1917. This was followed by yet another triumph when W.T. Cosgrave - another 1916 veteran - was elected for the urban seat of Kilkenny in August.

The by-elections proved that politics could produce results and that in the new circumstances created by the 1916 Rising and its aftermath - the Home Rule party could be defeated. The election contests also trained young men in the skills of politics and provided the revived Sinn Féin party with much-needed publicity and an air of excitement. In the months that followed branches of Sinn Féin were formed in almost every town and village in nationalist Ireland. By the end of 1917 Sinn Féin's rapid expansion was reflected in its membership of c. 120,000.



THE IRISH CONVENTION 1917-1918

In July 1917 Lloyd George convened the Irish Convention in an attempt to introduce Home Rule on the basis of agreement between nationalists and unionists. The Prime Minister's priority that summer was to find a solution to the Irish question in order to satisfy public opinion in America - Britain's ally against Germany since April - and focus entirely on the war effort. In keeping with Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of self-determination, the convention provided a forum for all of the Irish political groups.

Over one hundred delegates representing various strands of Irish society met in Dublin between 25 July 1917 and 5 April 1918 to devise a future form of government for Ireland. The Labour Party and Sinn Féin, however, boycotted the Convention chaired by Sir Horace Plunkett. John Redmond made strenuous efforts to reach an agreement, but Edward Carson and the Ulster Unionists would not compromise on the permanent exclusion of six counties from Home Rule. Redmond died in March 1918, and John Dillon succeeded him as leader of the IPP. The Irish Convention broke up in the following month without reaching an agreement. This further weakened the prestige of the Irish party and strengthened the position of Sinn Féin which benefited from not being associated with the failed conference.

THE DEATH OF THOMAS ASHE

The Unionist *Irish Times* published 'a very encouraging report on the progress of the Irish Convention' on the same day as an article appeared announcing the death of Thomas Ashe in Mountjoy Jail. The veteran commander of the Volunteers at Ashbourne in 1916, Ashe was released under the General Amnesty in June 1917. Tall and charismatic with a reputation as the only successful leader of the 1916 Rising, Ashe travelled to East Clare

to campaign for de Valera and recruit for the Volunteers. Rearrested in August 1917 for making seditious speeches, Ashe was charged under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) and imprisoned in Mountjoy jail. He joined a hunger strike by republican prisoners seeking 'political status' and was mortally injured during forcible feeding in September 1917.

Ashe's death caused national uproar and sparked protests and demonstrations across the country. Thirty thousand mourners filed through City Hall where Ashe lay in state, and his funeral on 30 September was the largest in Dublin since that of Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa two years before. Despite the fact that the government had banned civilians from wearing non-official military uniforms in August 1917, thousands of Irish Volunteers flooded into Dublin, wearing Volunteer uniforms and marching in military formation to Glasnevin Cemetery. The highly publicised funeral led to an increase in recruitment to the Volunteers.

"The circumstances of Ashe's death and funeral have made 100,000 Sinn Féiners out of 100,000 constitutional nationalists."

- The Daily Express, Sept 1917 -

Following Ashe's death, republicans used a transcript of the inquest proceedings as a powerful propaganda tool. The document undermined the British administration, outraged public opinion and further galvanized the independence movement. As a result, prison officials were discouraged from further force feeding of republican prisoners. Ashe's body became the emblem of a new public solidarity between the various strands of Irish nationalism, already coming together under the Sinn Féin banner



ORGANISATION AT NATIONAL LEVEL THE SINN FEIN ARD-FHEIS 1917

Two thousand delegates of vastly differing views attended the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis on 26 October 1917. The purpose of the convention was to achieve unity among the moderate and extreme republicans. The Clare election led to the emergence of Eamon de Valera as a capable and intelligent leader. Prior to the convention he devised a formula to satisfy both determined republicans such as Cathal Brugha, and moderates such as Arthur Griffith. The new Sinn Féin Constitution stated that the aim of the organisation was to secure the international recognition of Ireland as an independent Irish Republic' and 'having achieved that status, the Irish people may by referendum freely choose their own form of government.' Arthur Griffith stood down as president in favour of de Valera and his monarchical programme was replaced by the objective of a republic.

THE VOLUNTEER CONVENTION 1917

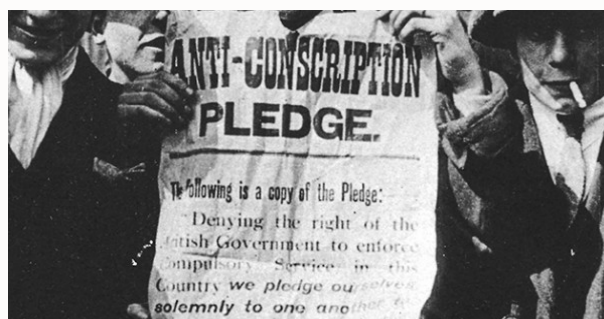
On 27 October 1917 representatives of Volunteers units from across the county gathered for a secret convention in Dublin. Many had attended the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis the previous evening, reflecting the strong overlap between the political and paramilitary wings of the republican movement. A national Volunteer Executive was elected with Éamon de Valera as president. Administrative control of the Irish Volunteers rested with the newly formed 'resident executive' in Dublin, with Michael Collins, Richard Mulcahy and Dick McKee taking top posts. This group became the nucleus of Volunteer General Headquarters (GHQ) staff formed in March 1918, which managed the Irish Volunteers during the War of Independence. Over two days in October 1917, the political movement had consolidated and acquired a military wing under the same leader.

Following Ashe's death, republicans used a transcript of the inquest proceedings as a powerful propaganda tool. The results of the inquest fueled the political controversy and ultimately discouraged

prison officials from further force-feeding of republican prisoners.

THE CONSCRIPTION CRISIS

The collapse of the Irish Convention in April 1918 coincided with the last great German offensive on the Western Front. Faced with alarming reports from France, the British War cabinet proposed extending conscription to Ireland. When the Military Service Act was passed in the House of Commons on 16 April 1918, Sinn Féiners, Volunteers, the Irish Labour Party, and Home Rulers were united in a campaign of resistance. At an all-party conference at the Mansion House in Dublin on 18 April a pledge was adopted 'Denying the right of the British Government to enforce compulsory service in this country,' and promising 'to resist conscription by the most effective means at our disposal'. The Catholic Church wholeheartedly endorsed the resistance movement and the Labour Party and the Trade Union Movement called a general strike on 23 April. On Sunday 21 April almost two million people signed the anti-conscription pledge outside church gates.



The Conscription Crisis was a landmark event for all concerned. The Irish Volunteers, Sinn Féin and Cumann an mBan experienced an influx of new recruits during the conscription crisis and Volunteer units intensified secret night-time drilling and the number of raids for arms and ammunition rose sharply. While the Conscription Crisis cemented the rise of Sinn Féin, the Irish Party under John Dillon was criticised for failing to defeat the Bill in Parliament in the first place.



THE GERMAN PLOT 1918

Despite very flimsy evidence of conspiring with Germany, seventy-three leading Sinn Féiners, including elected MPs Eamon de Valera, Arthur Griffith, Count Plunkett, Joseph McGuinness and William T. Cosgrave, were arrested on the night of 17–18 May 1918. These arrests in the wake of the government's failure to impose conscription led many to the conclusion that Sinn Féin could claim credit for the victory over Lloyd George's government. While in prison, Arthur Griffith's won the hotly-contested East Cavan by-election in June 1918, suggesting that the Irish Parliamentary Party was losing its dominant position in Ireland. De Valera famously escaped from Lincoln Jail in February 1919, and the remainder of the 'German Plot' prisoners were released in March 1919.

THE 1918 GENERAL ELECTION

The electorate had expanded hugely since the previous election in 1910. All men over twenty-one and women over thirty now had the right to vote. The number of voters in Ireland had almost trebled (1,931,588 in 1918 compared to 698,098 in 1910), and approximately two out of three of those on the register were first-time voters. The total poll on 14 December 1918 was 1,011,248. The Sinn Féin party won 46.9 per cent of the vote - seventy-three of the 105 seats across the island. Unionists secured 28.5 per cent (twenty-six seats) and the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) won six seats with 21.7 per cent of the votes.

Labour stood aside to allow Sinn Féin a clear run and Sinn Féin candidates were returned unopposed in twenty-five constituencies where its support was strongest. Unionists secured twenty-three of the thirty-seven Ulster seats, and gained the Dublin district of Rathmines. The IPP won four seats in constituencies where Sinn Féin candidates withdrew in order to prevent a unionist victory. It defeated Sinn Féin only in Belfast Falls and Waterford City,

and lost to it in forty-three other constituencies. Its leader, John Dillon, was defeated by de Valera in East Mayo. Constance Markievicz of Sinn Féin, one of only two female candidates was the first-ever woman elected to the UK parliament. Sinn Féin's victory was so decisive that its MPs could now plausibly claim the right to establish a Dublin-based parliament and government.

THE FIRST DÁIL 21 JANUARY 1919

On 21 January 1919 twenty-eight men who had been elected as Sinn Féin Members of Parliament in the general election of December 1918, met in public session in Dublin's Mansion House to proclaim Dáil Éireann as a legislative assembly for Ireland. Eamon de Valera was elected President of the Dáil, the symbolic head of the Irish Republic and the recognised public face of the independence movement. Like many of the sixty-eight Sinn Féin MPs – or *Teachtaí Dála* (TDs) – elected in 1918, de Valera was in prison in January 1919 and Cathal Brugha acted on his behalf. Other notable absentees included Michael Collins and Harry Boland, who were in England organising de Valera's escape from Lincoln prison.



By the end of the session, the members had approved a short, provisional constitution, appointed three delegates to the post-war peace conference, and issued a Declaration of Independence, a message to the Free Nations of the World, and a Democratic Programme.



THE CABINET

Eamon de Valera escaped from Lincoln Jail on 3 February 1919 and when the remaining 'German Plot' prisoners were released in March, the President of the Dáil was able to return to Ireland without danger of arrest. He presided at the second meeting of the Dáil on 1 April at which Ministers were appointed to the Departments established since January 1919.

Arthur Griffith	- Minister for Home Affairs
Count Plunkett	- Minister for Foreign Affairs
Cathal Brugha	- Minister for Defence
Eoin MacNeill	- Minister for Industry
Countess Markievicz	- Minister for Labour
W.T. Cosgrave	- Minister for Local Government
Michael Collins	- Minister for Finance

A Distinct Department of Publicity was created in March 1919. The first Minister for publicity was Laurence Ginnell, replaced following his imprisonment by Desmond Fitzgerald. A veteran of 1916, Fitzgerald was successful in making contact with foreign journalists and encouraging them to publicise the work of the Dáil and later, during the war of Independence, the 'acts of aggression by the police and military in Ireland.

Other than W.T. Cosgrave who had served on Dublin Corporation since 1908, few of the Ministers had any serious political experience. The constant harassment of the Dáil and its members, particularly after it was suppressed in September 1919, also hampered its ability to work coherently. Many of its members had other civilian and revolutionary commitments. The survival and continuity of the revolutionary Dáil owed much to the ability of its few permanent civil servants such as Diarmuid O'Hegarty, the secretary to the Dáil cabinet and clerk of the Dáil. He was responsible for taking the minutes of the Dáil sittings, organising its secret meetings and facilitating correspondence between the ministers.

THE DÁIL LOAN

To finance Dáil Éireann and its ambitious foreign policy, government departments, republicans raised a national loan, whereby citizens could purchase bonds payable to be redeemed later by the newly-declared Irish Republic. Organised by Minister of Finance Michael Collins, the Dáil Loan sought to raise both badly-needed funds and public consciousness on behalf of the independence movement. Republicans launched a modern media campaign, incorporating slick newspaper advertisements, imaginative public events, door-to-door canvases, and even a short propaganda film covertly shown in Dublin cinemas. A bond drive was also launched in the US in January 1920. Collins hid the money and bonds in banks where the managers were sympathetic to the republican cause. From 1920 when the War of Independence intensified, most of the Dáil's budget was sent on the Department of Defence.

THE DÁIL COURTS

The fear that social unrest would detract from the national question led Sinn Féin to set up a system of arbitration courts. First suggested by Arthur Griffith in 1906, Sinn Féin began to set up arbitration courts in 1917 to settle land disputes. In 1919 they were brought under the jurisdiction of the Dáil and extended beyond land to deal with all legal matters in an effort to replace the existing crown courts. The establishment of the Dáil courts coincided with the decline of the RIC as an effective police force as a result of the IRA campaign of intimidation and assault. At the end of 1919 the RIC closed many of the small rural barracks and became increasingly unable to prosecute crimes or enforce judgements. The republican courts played an important role in maintaining law and order and made the Dáil a reality in the minds of many proving itself capable of effectively governing the country.



THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

The post-war Paris Peace Conference was convened at Versailles in January 1919 to redraw international borders and settle questions of national sovereignty at the end of the First World War. Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh and George Gavan Duffy served as the Irish Republic's uninvited representatives at the Palace of Versailles. They hoped to gain international recognition of Ireland's right to her Independence and her right to join the League of Nations as a constituent member.

US President, Woodrow Wilson, made it clear that the issue of an Irish republic was a British concern and not an international one. The conference refused to admit the republicans. Ireland's claim was only one of several unsuccessful national appeals rejected by the conference, as questions of global power trumped principles of self-determination. Failure at the Paris Peace Conference removed the likelihood of a peaceful resolution to Irish independence aspirations.

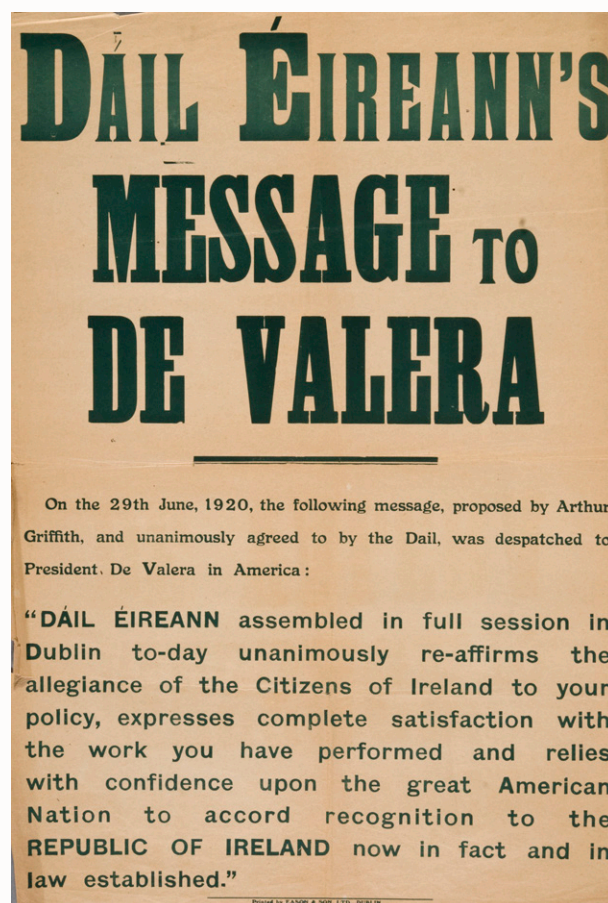
DE VALERA IN AMERICA: June 1919 - Dec 1920.

After the failure to gain a hearing in Paris, the focus of the Dáil's foreign policy shifted to America. In June 1919- four months after his escape from jail, de Valera travelled to the United States to gain support for Irish self-determination and to raise funds to bankroll the revolutionary government at home. Arthur Griffith was appointed acting president of Sinn Féin and the Dáil in de Valera's absence, and Minister for Defence, Cathal Brugha, was acting president of the IRA.

De Valera's arrival in the US was followed by a highly-publicised fund-raising campaign which lasted eighteen months and collected a publicly-subscribed \$5.5m 'loan' for the cause.

Criss-crossing the country he addressed a series of mass rallies, met with public officials, and was

received as a visiting dignitary at multiple state legislatures. He filled major venues such as Madison Square Garden (New York), Fenway Park (Boston) and Wrigley Field (Chicago, but also visited less obvious Irish communities of the period, such as Scranton, Savannah, New Orleans, Kansas City, Montana, and San Francisco.



[Source: National Library of Ireland, EPH F237]

Poster issued by Dáil Éireann declaring support for de Valera's work in the United States and endorsing Griffith's stance with regard to Irish-American attacks on de Valera's authority as President of the Irish Republic.