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Language, discourse and dialogue: Sinn Fein and the Irish peace process

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ABSTRACT. In what ways can we denote changes in Irish republican thinking? This paper is an attempt to answer this question through examining the shift in republican strategy in recent years. First, we describe the more militaristic approaches undertaken by Sinn Fein and the Provisional Irish Republican Army prior to the 1994 cease-fire. Second, we analyse the new alliances Sinn Fein forged during a period of self-identified political pragmatism. Third, we acknowledge and explain the re-definition not only of discourse but also language and imagery which has been used in recent years to form a vocabulary for peace and national reconciliation. Although, the cease-fire has been broken, as indicated by the Canary Wharf and Manchester bombings, much of what was achieved in terms of political re-direction is still popular within republican circles. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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Introduction

Twenty-five years of sustained sociopolitical violence in Northern Ireland has created considerable scepticism about the possibility of procuring a fastened and endurable cessation of political violence. The consequence of sectarianised cultural affiliation, the continued spatial and ideological segregation of the population by religious affiliation and the failure of cross-community political groups to obtain widespread electoral support has ensured that the politics of Northern Ireland are still nourished by the binary opposition between the pro-Irish unification and pro-British union sections of the population. This is not unexpected given the effect violence had upon the resolve of both communities to affirm sectarianised affiliations during the period of conflict. The actual process of peace building and the politics of the cease-fire has been centred upon internal political re-thinking and re-formulation as opposed to mutual agreement between the two predominant political blocs. The most significant developments have

been the emergence of new Anglo-Irish relationships and the cessation of violence, in 1994, undertaken by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and other Loyalist paramilitary groups.

There is no doubting that the immediate strategies being employed by Provisional Sinn Fein (SF) and the IRA have undergone a transition, not in terms of aspiration or motivation, but in terms of procedure and political operation (Bean, 1995). This has been accepted throughout Northern Ireland's political camps including pro-union academics such as Hazelkorn and Patterson (1995) and Aughey (1995) who have expressed the opinion that SF have been active agents in the momentum for a peace process. Confirmation of an alteration in SF's political deliberations also emanates from representatives of the more fervent republican groups, such as Republican Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Socialist Party, both of whom have condemned SF for a continued and unwavering erosion of republican principles (O'Bradaigh, 1996).

Prominent Republicans, such as Bernadette McAliskey, have argued critically that the SF leadership is moving towards the advocation of a nationalist consensus which plays down the republican ethos of ending partition completely. Certainly, a proportion of SF's supporters will be expecting outcomes in traditional terms such as a British declaration to withdraw. Although, it is now clear that this aspiration is being conditioned by the need for medium to short term pragmatism, open dialogue and a cessation of violence (if only temporary).

Within this paper we chart the logic of SF's political transition through examining the evolution of new political relationships between SF, the majority pro-Irish unification party in Northern Ireland the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Government of the Republic of Ireland. In so doing we argue that SF is involved in a new contestation for political legitimacy which is being conducted through re-inventing the vocabulary of 'Peace' and the abstraction of nationalist unity. We maintain that recent developments in SF's strategy is not based upon a radical shift in ideology or a departure from the goal of national independence but instead is centred upon a transition which is underpinned by a range of internal and external influences, political impediments and new alliances founded upon a form of self-identified political pragmatism (Ryan, 1995). The research undertaken is based upon interviews with prominent SF members whose opinions and viewpoints are used in this paper as examples of the political shifts undertaken in recent years.

Identity securing strategies

A central feature of our analysis is to attend to the significance of identity securing strategies in the reproduction of and challenge to dominatory relations of power (Tuathail, 1986; Varenne, 1993). In highlighting the relevance of this identity dimension, in relation to dominatory modes of socio-cultural and political activity, we argue that the Republican community's attempts to distance and protect themselves from their 'powerlessness' has an important consequence in respect of the reproduction of asymmetrical relations of power. Linked to this overall aim is an examination of how the use of language in the production and replication of identity securing strategies is employed. As has been argued by Stedman-Jones (1983) any interpretation of sociocultural conflict should not rest upon the assumption that conflictual groups possess a rational linguistic expression such that there is a direct reflection in language of their essential interests. But instead it should be acknowledged that:

> Language disrupts any simple notion of the determination of consciousness by social being because it is itself part of social being. We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest itself. (1983, pp. 21-22).

Clearly, the Stedman-Jones definition of how interests are produced and reproduced is identifiable within a society in which markedly different interpretations of the political situation and how it is defined leads to crisis itself. Evidently, it is the constitution of these different discursive structures that makes for the political problem. It is not a reflection of its cause but is the cause itself, and as noted in the example presented here of Sinn Fein this political movement constructs the interests which it then represents. Acknowledging this, in any arena of conflict, results in a displacement of our fascination with the socio-historical roots and class dimensions of sectarian division as it permits a concern with how politics itself fashions the cognition and understanding of interests centred around an inflexible knowledge of community conformity and devotion (Morrill, 1996). Moreover, language, its definition and use, creates chains of equivalence which enclose subjects within not only a sectarian but at times entirely self-referential and self-sustained notion of identity and communal dedication. Crucially, Republican (as is the case with Loyalist, Nationalist, and Unionist), discourse attempts to constitute itself as embodying the very identity of the movement of the mass itself, of the community whose interests it represents.

The incisive point to be comprehended is the constitutive nature of such discursive processes. The work of Foucault (1973) work has been efficacious in explicating the vinculum between the construction of the social world and discursivity. For Foucault, discourse analysis is concerned with the variable 'discursive formations' which permit specific assertions and remarks to be made while others are excluded. A discursive formation is 'a set of rules'; that is to say the code by which objects, subject positions and strategies are moulded, forged and created. Foucault is not merely concerned with written or spoken words but with discourse in its most extensive sense and with the articulatory social practice of discourse. As noted by Foucault:

> These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of vocabulary, but the ordering of objects. 'Words and things' is the entirely serious title of a problem; it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data, and reveals, at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of not—of no longer—treating discourse as groups of signs-...but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak (1972, p. 49).

As recognised by Foucault discourse constitutes the objects and subjects of the social world in constrained and constraining ways. A process of entrapment between communities which in Northern Ireland are products of different imaginings of community. These allegories and mythic representation are themselves the outcome of discursively fabricated classifications of belonging. That is to say they are the outcome of political processes rather than, as is usually accepted, the root of political processes in Northern Ireland. As such the analysis presented here upholds Foucault's concern with the analysis of localised power relations and the feasibility of resistance toward those specific power relations. Moreover, the critique presented assesses how modes of resistance and domination operate in terms of political shifts, sustenance and limitations.

Armalites and ballot boxes

Formed during the tension and upsurge in sectarian violence in the early 1970s the PIRA and SF had, initially, little in the way of a developed political strategy, other than the immediacy of armed opposition and a short-term war strategy aimed at dislodging the British State from Northern Ireland (Bishop and Mallie, 1988). The failure to force disengagement coupled with shifts in counter-insurgency tactics and increased militarisation, led in the late 1970s to the 'long war' strategy. The 'long war' evolved as a conflict of attrition, aimed especially at the economic infrastructure of Northern Ireland. SF remained very much the junior partner to the PIRA, and was in the main a propaganda machine which provided ideological support for the ongoing military campaign (Arthur, 1989; Clarke, 1987; McThomas, 1992).

By the late 1970s a number of young republican adherents (including Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Tom Hartley and Danny Morrison) acknowledged that the corroboration of a long term military campaign required at least the passive support of an expressive section of the nationalist community. It was similarly argued that such support would have to be gathered through direct and intensive political activity. As the balance of power within SF shifted towards this more Northern Irish-based, urban and highly-politicised group, such thinking came increasingly to the fore. Carried along on the upsurge of support for republicanism, produced by the 1981 hunger strikes, the 'armalite and ballot box' strategy was adopted.

The 'armalite and ballot box' strategy had two central aims. First, the use of electoral politics was designed to make SF a consequential (if not the dominant) voice within northern nationalism, through replacing and undermining the dominance of the SDLP. Moreover, it was reasoned that a more substantial demonstration of political support would provide a sense of legitimacy for the ongoing campaign of violence. At the same time, and in order to alleviate any notion that the SF leadership was displaying signs of pusillanimity the PIRA intensified their campaign of violence, and in so doing fastened a more politicised strategy onto the ongoing campaign of conflict (Rolston, 1989).

Initially this more politicised strategy was relatively successful. SF made very meaningful electoral gains in the early 1980s, reaching a high point in the 1983 Westminster elections when the party gained 43 percent of the nationalist vote in Northern Ireland and as such opened up the prospect of becoming the predominant voice of northern-based Irish nationalism. However, in the longer term the ability of SF to move beyond its ghettoised urban working class support base proved limited and unsustainable and although it regularly demonstrated an ability to galvanise and hold onto a core of between 10–13 percent of votes cast, inroads into the wider northern nationalist community proved difficult to sustain (Patterson, 1989). Even more devastating for the party's overall political strategy was the attempt in the 1980s to win a widespread electoral mandate in the Republic of Ireland, and to mobilise what was believed to be a previously untapped reservoir of potential SF support. This move toward 'quasi-constitutional' politics, signalled by the ending of abstentionism in the Republic of Ireland in 1986, also underwrote a gradual change in SF's perspective (Arthur, 1995; Clarke, 1987).

In part the problem for SF and the PIRA's 'armalite and ballot box' strategy resulted from the built-in contradiction between political representation and armed conflict. In electoral terms PIRA violence was largely counter-productive, particularly if such violence was viewed as either 'excessive' or 'illegitimate' (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995).

Furthermore, the assassination of 13 party workers by loyalist paramilitaries in the late 1980s as well as an increase in loyalist violence against the Catholic community, emphasised

that this political battle was part and parcel of augmented sectarian violence. Ultimately, individuals within SF realised that the prospect for further political expansion, given the prevailing level of violence was unachievable (Shirlow, 1995).

The political achievements of SF in the early 1980s and the growing knowledge that the PIRA could not be defeated militarily did, however, force a decisive shift in British and Irish government policy. The Anglo-Irish Agreement, signed in 1985, had a range of policy objectives, one of which was to marginalise SF and win the 'battle for hearts and minds' within the northern nationalist community in favour of the SDLP. This was to be achieved through the adoption of cross-state negotiation structures which indicated that political representatives of constitutional parties would be partners for statutory mediation. In crude terms those who did not renounce violence would not command the same status of political representation.

Initially, SF contended that the Agreement 'copper-fastened' partition and indicated no movement on the part of the British State to disengage. However, this analysis proved difficult to sustain and became a decisive point of disputation both within the SF/PIRA, movement and in its contacts with other nationalists parties. Similarly, the intergovernmental strategy implicit in the Agreement presented SF with a potential opportunity to discover new avenues for pursuing their long term objectives through negotiation with the regime in the Republic of Ireland. Combined with the stagnation of both the PIRA's military and SF's political campaigns by the late 1980s, events began to push SF toward a new political discourse (Munck, 1992).

The use of violence prior to the cease-fire was centred upon forcing the British State to concede that they could not govern Northern Ireland in a legitimate or stable manner. The initial assumption that an increase in PIRA violence would convince the British State that the increasing political and financial burdens propagated through conflict were unendurable proved naive. Although the British State was to acknowledge reservations about its future administrative capacity and bureaucratic role its foremost commitment was conditioned by consensus and majoritarianism. No immediate disengagement from Northern Ireland would result from increased PIRA violence.

The reality that the British State had more resolve and commitment than at first envisaged was of course problematic for SF as was the growing recognition that the pro-union community was as much a bar to Irish unification as the British State. Moreover, the notion that unionism was merely based upon a material link with the UK was also shown to be invalid due to a hardening of unionist opinion and cultural identity/affiliation during 25 years of violence (Todd, 1990). The upsurge in Loyalist paramilitarianism, emanating from communities, which in many instances, endured similar levels of socioeconomic marginalisation as in Republican neighbourhoods, indicated increasingly the significance of emotionally driven cultural and political factors as opposed to merely economic-based considerations.

The realisation that violence did not dilute the resolve of Unionists to support continued links with Britain, whether they were motivated by economic, cultural or political interests, became increasingly palpable. Continued violence hardened the determination of the Unionist communities to reject Irish unification and had in turn provided succour and nourishment to the notion of Britishness and/or Unionist identity. Moreover, the fact that over 90 percent of those murdered were not British army personnel, but mostly civilians, locally recruited security personnel and paramilitaries, indicated in SF quarters that they were increasingly involved in a pattern of civil war as opposed to an anti-imperialist struggle (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995). These realities combined with the British State's insistence that it would support Irish unification through consent indicated to some

members of SF that it could possibly arrogate the politics of Irish re-unification by persuasion. As such the possibility of persuading Unionists into a united Ireland through the absence of PIRA violence came increasingly to the fore (Munck, 1992).

Another central problem for SF and the PIRA was the failure to gain authority from the wider nationalist community to openly wage war. Authority and just cause was not forthcoming and this was reflected, throughout elections in the 1980s, in a general rejection of SF who received less than 6 percent, of the vote nationally, also among those who supported SF there was an ever increasing membership who were uncomfortable with the use of violence. This uneasiness was accompanied by a realisation, among SF activists, that the declared 'long war' strategy, which concluded that violence must continue until the withdrawal of the British State, meant that the PIRA made itself a cause of war (Sluka, 1989). In a sense the 'long war' strategy was not going to provide peace or promote other stated objectives. It was similarly acknowledged that it was doing little more than alienating sections of both communities whose consent, as envisaged by the British and more importantly the Irish State, was essential in order to advance Irish unification (McClelland and Dowd, 1992).

Not only was violence counter-productive, in that it provided sustenance to Unionist intransigence, but it also engendered Irish State opposition to republicanism, blocked the utility of socioeconomic provision, prevented much needed investment in deprived areas and encouraged Loyalist retaliation (McDonald, 1995). New political strategies emerging within the wider nationalist community reflected other political shifts including support for joint authority as a form of self-determination and a conscious acceptance, as stated by John Hume leader of the SDLP, that the British State was no longer the central obstacle to Irish unity. These factors reflected ideological flexibility and sociopolitical shifts which recognised more pluralist nationalist interests and aspirations. Even more fundamental was the analysis pursued by the constitutional nationalist parties that violence was a causal and increasingly significant factor which maintained militarisation and prevented all-party dialogue.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s the British State's preparedness to constitute a united Ireland through consent displayed a willingness to alter territorial arrangements. This British preparedness questioned the republican argument that Britain had belligerent or imperialistic motives in its desire to maintain a Unionist veto over Northern Ireland's constitutional future. Other factors, internal to the sociopolitical and cultural composition of Northern Irish society, reinforced the reality of political stalemate and cultural modification. One of the most important of these factors was the ascendancy and growth of a Catholic middle class whose emphasis was being placed upon material as opposed to immediate nationalist/ideological interests. This trend certainly weakened communal solidarity amongst nationalists and reduced the acceptance of SF's political strategies.

A battle for fresh allies

The first confirmation of a shift in SF strategy and the transition towards a termination of PIRA-motivated conflict emerged in the mid-1980s. The difficulty in adopting a new political strategy was centred around the avoidance of political fragmentation and the development of inter-republican feuding which had such a devastating effect upon the cohesiveness of republicanism in the 1970s. Certainly, the latter remained a central priority for SF's leadership and accounted for both the slow pace and character of their developing strategy (Bean, 1995).

A split, within the SF/PIRA movement, did occur in 1986 over the issue of abstentionism within the Republic of Ireland. Divisions within the movement were crystallised in the

debate over the development and eventual acceptance of an electoral strategy, in the Republic of Ireland, which rejected the principle of non-recognition of that state, and subsequently led to pro-abstention dissenters forming Republican Sinn Fein. The recognition of the legitimacy of the regime in the Republic allowed the SF leadership to embark upon a peace initiative in which they could now consult and negotiate openly with the Irish State.

The importance of these new circumstances and support for the construction of new political alliances were clearly defined by Gerry Adams, President of SF, in his book *A Scenario for Peace* (Adams, 1989). His argument emphasised the potential of exploring links with various national and international bodies in order to terminate conflict and secure peace. This strategy incorporated and envisaged a national and international effort to enlist support for Irish unification as well as utilising the inter-governmental structure of the Anglo-Irish Agreement as a framework within which to locate central and shared policy objectives. This 'battle for fresh allies' led to the formation of what has been called the 'pan-nationalist front'; a broad and loose alliance of pro-nationalist groups and parties including SF, the SDLP, the Irish government and the significant Irish-American lobby (Todd, 1990). SF thus became linked into a much wider pro-Irish unification community even though many of its constituent members had different viewpoints of what could constitute a united Ireland and varying arguments about the acceptable means by which it might be brought about.

The most obvious group from which SF could enlist support for unification was the SDLP. Although, these two parties had fundamentally different political and ideological frameworks for unification the common denominator of aspiration ensured that dialogue between the two could be undertaken. SF's militaristic analysis that the British State had to be forced to disengage was a critical dividing point during the initial dialogue between the parties in 1988, as was their relationship with Unionist parties and the perceived means by which Unionist support for an all-Ireland settlement could be achieved. However, the potential of a broad nationalist position did begin to emerge, centering on the acceptance by both SF and the SDLP that the principle of national self-determination was essential to any peace process. In order to maintain this new alliance SF had to also dilute its social radicalism, revolutionary rhetoric and traditional and open hostility to the SDLP.

Dialogue between Adams and Hume continued through the following years, and from 1991 protracted secret negotiations between SF/PIRA and the British government took place. While suspicion and distrust continued to characterise these contacts the SF/PIRA leadership gradually became convinced that the resolve of the British State to remain in Northern Ireland was sufficiently inconclusive to suggest that gradual disengagement could be achieved; but only if the PIRA halted their campaign of violence. Public statements by the British State that it no longer upheld any integral or economic interest in Northern Ireland aided the general perception, already held by the SDLP, that British disengagement could be achieved through constitutional means. The important factor at this time was SF's gradual acceptance that the British State had altered its ideological commitment to Northern Ireland and as noted by Joe Austen, a Sinn Fein councillor for North Belfast, the SF/PIRA leadership had to respond to alterations in British government policy:

> They (the British Government) said that they could convince us (SF) that British policy in Ireland had changed dramatically, that they wished to disengage. The problem for them was that they could not be seen to disengage because of IRA activity and that they needed a breathing space to convince those sceptics within the Tory party that disengagement was obviously the way forward. (Interview: November, 1995)

It was perhaps the conviction that the British State might indeed be seeking ways to disengage, combined with the changing socioeconomic and political environment in which SF found itself, both at home and internationally, that was central to the emergence of the concept of 'unarmed struggle'. The shape which this 'unarmed struggle' might take was laid out with clarity in *Towards a Lasting Peace*, the Sinn Fein discussion document published in 1992, and which contains the clearest exposition of SF's 'Peace Strategy'. As Adams recently re-iterated in *Free Ireland* (Adams, 1995) the strategy of *Towards a Lasting Peace* rested on essential propositions, all notable for their concentration on the actions and attitudes of the London and Dublin governments. For example, the British State was called upon to recognise the right to self-determination of the Irish people and, as a consequence 'to change its current policy to one of ending partition' (1995, p. 2). Similarly because 'the future of Unionists lies in this [All-Ireland] context... the British government has a responsibility to influence unionist attitudes' (1995, p. 14). Britain should, in other words, 'join the ranks of the persuaders' (1995, p. 21). The intergovernmental model of conflict management established by the Anglo-Irish Agreement should also, it was argued be employed as a mechanism of conflict resolution by pursuing the policy objective of ending partition and thereby obtaining the maximum national, international and popular support for the peace process (Porter and O'Hearn, 1995).

Several key elements of SF's re-formulation were evident in *Towards a Lasting Peace* and in the peace strategy more generally. Different conceptions of the roles of both the British and Irish governments were very much to the fore, as was a re-evaluation of the roots of Unionist politics and identity, the recognition of a relatively independent dynamic to Protestant-Catholic relationships and the need to engage in a process of national reconciliation (Bean, 1995). Much of the re-appraisal of the roles of the two governments and other interested parties (most notably the Irish-American lobby) was the result of changing circumstances and the sense that a new political environment dictated the need to forge new political alignments, as Joe Austen commented:

> The British thrust up till then [early 1990s] was a policy of containment...they were involved in a campaign and a political strategy to isolate Sinn Fein. The battle that was looming was a battle of fresh allies. Who can bring in who? (Interview: December, 1995).

A central plank within SF's commitment to the peace process rested upon the belief that the British State needs and intends to disengage and that it could be achieved without the use of military strategies. This shift in policy by SF maintained an anti-colonial analysis but strategy was to be based upon dialogue as opposed to open violent conflict. This change of policy in no way accepted the legitimacy of the British State but it was in essence a tactical shift based upon engaging in alternative procedures due to the failure of the 'long war' and other tactics (Ryan, 1995).

A changing discourse thus emerged reflecting different tactical approaches. This strategic shift has centred on the imperatives of alternative avenues of political pressure and a re-orientation of SF ideology as a form of 'mobilised social consciousness' within Northern Ireland. The process also saw the reformation of a broad nationalist agenda and the symbolic re-integration of the ideologically ghettoised republican communities of Northern Ireland into the wider Irish 'nation'.

Peace and the dynamics of Irish nationalism

The formation of links between SF, the SDLP and other pro-unification bodies provided the major impetus behind the Peace Process. As far as SF was concerned these new alliances

were centred upon shared concepts of nation, community and justice. 'Justice' (economic, political and legal) has been one of the key concepts in republican rhetoric and continues to be expressed not in terms of a liberal-individualist vision but one concerned with community and power. For any political accommodation or lasting settlement to work Joe Austen argued that:

> the starting point has got to be equality and a recognition of it, it's got to be justice and a recognition of that. (Interview: December, 1995).

Of particular importance to SF is the interaction between community and nation, of the identity of locality and the 'imagined community' of the Irish people in the process of designing new political strategies and activities (Anderson, 1983). The emphasis upon the national and local is also tied to removing political isolationism and self-imposed territorial strictures of containment and the re-integration of the 'lost' Republican communities of Northern Ireland into the wider 'family' of a 'reinvigorated' nation. The 'Irish nation' provides the overall framework as the 'imagined community' of both republican and nationalist ideology.

The strategic demands of the 'unarmed struggle' are such that emphasis upon the republican heartland's of Northern Ireland as the preservers of true nationalism has had to give way to a more widespread mobilisation of pro-unification based opinion. Central to nationalist/republican coherence is the demand SF has made upon the Dublin government to uptake its historic and national responsibility. As noted by Adams:

> public opinion all over Ireland, but particularly in the Twenty Six counties (the Republic of Ireland), encourages the government in Dublin to give wholehearted support for the democratic cause (1994, p. 70).

The central role given to the Dublin government in SF's new strategy reflected a significant alteration in the traditionally hostile nonrecognition of the Southern regime. Such a shift required the ending of isolationism and the presentation of strategies which would, it was perceived, achieve much wider support and sympathy nationally. For SF, the erosion of previously defended principles was a price worth paying if such shifts consolidated national sentiment and utilised the influence of the 'Irish Diaspora'.

The roots of such thinking can be found in the realpolitik requirements of political strategy and in many ways involves a logical extension of the desire to expand SF's electoral base in the Republic of Ireland. This 'wider strategy' did not remove the emphasis that SF placed upon local community ties. The symbols of the 'nation' have under the new strategy continued as the means used to 'mythologise' the necessarily tight knit 'resistance community', and help maintainpolitical and cultural cohesion (Hillyard, 1993). Despite the wider strategy a celebration and utilisation of localised identity, solidarity and networks are intrinsic to republicanism in Northern Ireland. SF spokespersons continually emphasise the process of consultation and discussion within the wider 'republican family' set in its territorial base. In his description of the 'Peace Process' Adams took care to reflect on the importance of ongoing community solidarity:

> Nationalists, and more particularly republican communities or those which were deemed to be so, were equally subjected to insults (by responses to the Hume/Adams Initiative). Nationalist West Belfast had long been a target for such odium; however it was also a community which refused to take things lying down. The community was enjoying its own local revitalisation process, and the creativity, resilience and aspirations of its people were reflected in a thriving range of enterprises (1994, p. 41).

In SF's re-constitution of nationalism and in the shift toward peace by persuasion the interaction of community remained a fundamental process (O'Connor, 1993). The process of de-ghettoisation of republicanism is heralding a slow thaw in the sense of separation that such differences bore witness to. On the one hand, the 'wayward sheep' of the heartland's of republicanism are being allowed back into the nationalist fold, on the other, the 'anaemic green' of Southern nationalism is being forgiven, if not entirely forgotten. For this process to take place, however, it was first necessary to establish a discourse which could re-combine community and nation and relate both to the new 'unarmed strategy'. This need to break out of isolation therefore implied a form of semiotic struggle; to re-define the political agenda, and the role of republicans in it (Porter and O'Hearn, 1995). To win the 'battle for fresh allies' it was necessary to replace the perception of republicans as the generators of conflict with an alternative perception of republicans as 'peace mongers'.

The language of peace

In the move towards a peaceful strategy a first priority of SF was to question and undermine the legitimacy of British counter-insurgency strategies employed in Northern Ireland. Most significantly this priority involved a confrontation over the use of language. The construction of political discourse and the ideological definition of social action became central to the conflict in Northern Ireland. Debates over the terminology to be employed to describe actors, contexts or events (Protestant/unionist, Catholic/nationalist, six counties/Ulster, terrorist/freedom fighter, security forces/crown forces, civil strife/war) have always symbolised more than a contest over semantics. Taking possession of the language of peace in order to re-define the meaning of the conflict was central to the new strategy and opened up a new communicative dimension. The adoption of the word 'peace', in 1987, by SF was deliberate and was seen as the means to break out of the containment strategy undertaken by the British and Irish States. When interviewed Mitchel McLaughlin, national chairperson of SF commented on the roots of the peace process through accenting the symbolic significance of language:

> We reviewed our strategy at that time (1986) and actually decided that we were going to take the word 'Peace' back because 'Peace' had become, as a word, fashioned into a counter insurgency weapon. The people who were saying 'Peace' were the people who were in charge of the SAS and who were in charge of the RUC Special Branch and who were conducting shoot-to-kill operations and they had used the word 'Peace' as a counter-insurgency policy. So, in 1987, and this was the start of the Peace Process, we introduced the phrase 'Freedom, Justice and Peace' (Interview, November 1995).

This statement is fundamental in a number of respects. It recognises the clear and conscious understanding of the use of language as a method of counter-insurgency. It then establishes the importance that SF gave to the struggle to possess and use the language of peace. McLaughlin's argument was echoed by Adams:

> For too long Republicans had permitted others to hijack the word 'Peace'...They needed to be confronted on their stance... This required republican political initiative and a Sinn Fein offensive in the battle of ideas (1994, p. 31).

The roots of legitimacy of the conflict became embedded in the language of insurgency and counter-insurgency waged and used in the propaganda war between SF/PIRA and the British and Irish States. In one of the first studies of state terrorism Walter (1969) argued

that the conditions necessary for the state to employ a 'regime of terror' included a shared ideology that justifies violence, dissociation of the agents of violence and of the victims from ordinary life. The exercising of power as 'legitimate' authority rests upon what Foucault (1979) has termed 'regimes of truth' arguing that there is no power relation without the associated constitution of a field of understanding. Discourses become weapons of attack and defence in the relations of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1979).

The ability to establish a dominant discourse, a 'truth', which marginalises the 'truths' and de legitimises the actions of others is a vital means by which the modern state operates as a major loci of power (Feldman, 1991; Giddens, 1985; Walter, 1969). Establishing a 'truth' as 'the truth' means taking possession of certain discourses central to political identity through establishing a Prevalent conviction that the system conforms to the rectitude of equity, equivalence and autonomy (Burton and Carlen, 1979; Held, 1989). In its emerging analysis SF recognised that discourses become weapons of attack and defence in the relations of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1979).

In developing a peace discourse SF also had to recognise that the British policy of containment had a variety of dimensions and operated at a variety of levels (O'Dowd *et al.*, 1980). It was designed to limit the impact of the conflict by restricting it geographically to certain urban working class and border area. By employing 'low intensity operations' it was able to establish an 'acceptable level' of violence. Containment also operated at the ideological level through the official discourse which 'criminalised' the 'terrorist' (Foucault, 1984; Fyffe, 1992).

In this discourse armed opposition to the state, or incidence of political violence were denuded of their political context and were defined rather as 'criminal' acts. This was facilitated by the establishment of a system of 'prohibited words' (Foucault, 1979). 'Peace' was one such prohibited word which could never be used legitimately by SF/PIRA. The control of language provided the British State and media with the opportunity to define 'republican', and to a lesser extent 'loyalist' communities, as deviant, criminal and outside the bounds of the normative values which governed wider society (McDonald, 1995). This process not only legitimised the use of force against deviant individuals and communities but it was designed to undermine the collective psychological and ontological security of such communities and their desire to resist. This process alternatively identified by Burton (1978) as 'felon-setting' ultimately removed the use of certain ideas, discourses and even words from people within those communities. This is the logic underlying Adams' comment that the word peace had been 'hijacked'. It is similarly reflected in the words of O'Hara, a leading SF Councillor in Derry, who stated that:

> There was a feeling in 1986, when people started talking about 'peace'. Republicans experience of 'peace' up until that point had been the Peace People, and that was viewed as pro-British, anti-republican... Peace had been used against us, we'd lost control of the word.

O'Hara also described the psychological problems presented by the process of felon-setting for republicans, in that they internalised the struggles over definitions of their own actions:

> It took republicans some soul-searching, for people who had been involved in a conflict and had been at the receiving end of a lot of propaganda. Some people had actually internalised the fact that, even though they knew that their case was right there was a perception out there that they were definitely wrong, or evil. So coming to terms with using the word peace was problematic. I think that they had got themselves into a mode where they were in struggle with the

> British government and then to talk about peace would have been a bit contrary to that. Being in a protracted struggle requires a mode of thinking and self-conditioning (Interview: December, 1995).

SF in this new initiative set out to develop in republican communities a reactive psychology which would off-set 'felon-setting' and provided a community-based rationale permitting the continuation of opposition to the State. While this entailed the creation of what has been termed a supportive 'resistance community' on the downside it also helped to reinforce the closed ideological system, and the conspiratorial tendency, evident within certain strains of militant nationalism and republicanism (Munck, 1992). It was precisely to escape from the ghettoisation, both physical and political, imposed upon 'republican' communities that the word 'peace', along with 'freedom' and 'justice' were taken up and expounded in a deliberate policy by SF from the late-1980s onward to repossess certain discourses which had become synonymous with the British State. It reflected a change in direction on the part of the movement in that the aim was no longer simply to hold on to the support of those within, to maintain the hegemony of SF in the areas where they held sway, but to expand beyond, to combat containment by establishing links with groups and other bodies of opinion.

The peace strategy and the use of language eased forging of links with other elements of Irish nationalism, including the Irish government and the Irish-American lobby. Yet it was still necessary to maintain a fine balance between the use of language—a balance which could at one and the same time provide little offence to one tradition ('theological' republicanism) while opening the door to other interpretations and strategies. One route out of isolation and containment, a means of winning the 'battle for fresh allies' was the gradual shift in language and discourse in the re-possession of word 'peace'.

Post-cease-fire: realities and symbols

Among SF activists there is a general acceptance that new political avenues could only be explored through maintaining a communal solidarity which was devoted to a more politicised strategy. The problem for SF activists was to convince their supporters that the cease-fire did not equate with surrender or political oblivion. Instead the cease-fire was to be portrayed as a political coup which indicated the potency and durability of the republican cause. The symbols which portrayed the importance of these procedural shifts were centred around the notion that republicanism was a politically influential discourse which truly represented secularism, egalitarianism and ultimately democracy.

SF activists have striven to delineate the cease-fire as a decisive political shift which warranted a future in which SF would have a fundamental impact upon Irish politics. As many SF activists have stated privately post-cease-fire rhetoric is grounded in a realisation that SF voters must continually be reminded that their political perspective is going to be taken seriously in impending negotiations. This has been achieved through SF's obvious elevation since the cease-fire and has been symbolised by Adam's shaking hands with the, then, Taoiseach Albert Reynolds and John Hume on the steps of the Irish parliament. A visible representation of the nationalist family unified and politically harmonious, and with SF as a senior and considered partner. Similarly, Adam's rendezvous with Bill Clinton on the Falls Road provided further evidence that a community which perceived itself as oppressed and alienated had achieved an international significance never previously commanded.

An equally important act of symbolic unity has been the re-drawing of Republican wall

murals. The visible representation that wall murals provide is linked to a sense of communal devotion and coherence. In recent years these wall murals have slowly, although not absolutely, shifted away from more militaristic themes. The decline in militaristic themes has been paralleled by murals which depict a more communal republicanism which is non-violent. Such murals include themes which examine issues such as unemployment, gender, equality and the environment. More general Irish themes have involved Gaelic sports the Irish language and murals dedicated to communal solidarity.

In order to enforce the relevance of non-violent means certain murals depict international conflicts which have been resolved through de-militarisation. The murals depicting the struggles on the Palestinian West Bank and the African National Congress in South Africa have been used to provide an international context in which SF's present strategy has a certain and shared relevance (Rolston, 1996). However, the most striking wall murals, painted recently, have been dedicated to the culture of resistance that permeated republican communities during the conflict. The depiction of 'Bloody Sunday', internment and the hunger strikes has allowed SF to draw upon an anti-British perspective which does not invoke or celebrate the activities of the PIRA. Symbolically it represents the present strategy which is tied to the right to resist without necessarily summoning up the principals of a more violent revolutionary tradition.

In order to advance the non-violent strategy *An Phoblacht*, the most prominent republican newspaper, has deployed less offensive terms toward non-republican communities. The Royal Ulster Constabulary, for example, are no longer referred to as the 'Crown Forces' or as sectarian bullies or dupes. The paper also carries news on unionist communities especially with regard to shared working class experiences of unemployment and public sector provision. *An Phoblacht* is also increasingly devoted to socio-economic, health, gender and traveller right themes. It is also less likely to openly criticise the SDLP. As a prominent SF activist, who wished to remain anonymous stated:

> Shortly after the cease-fire it was decided that we must get people off the violence thing. It was decided to get our teeth into unemployment and women's issues and most of all to start talking positively about the other community. We had to influence the way people thought.
>
> It was still a republican paper but the movement has got to talk to the others and we have to give people, like unionists, a more sympathetic understanding. It's hard to swallow but we had to depict our enemies in a clearer and more positive light (Interview; May 1996).

New relationships also include the British state and representatives of unionism. Since the cease-fire has been called there have been a host of external funds and peace dividends organised by the Clinton administration and the European Union. These 'peace funds' are being indirectly administered through District Council 'Partnership Boards', community groups and ad hoc government agencies. Prior to the cease-fire organisations with republican or loyalist relationships were openly vetted and in many instances excluded from government funding, a policy which has been relinquished more recently. At present SF councillors and community activists are openly engaged in the indirect distribution, investment and use of such funds. This involves consulting with British government agencies who are the overall fund distributors. The gesture of SF working with British state representatives and unionist councillors further indicates a political shift which testifies to a general softening of political attitudes. As a prominent SF activist, who wished to remain anonymous, stated:

> We are involved in the Partnership Boards. This is a territory controlled by the enemy. But we represent a people who will not be fed on bullets or redundant traditionalism. We will have our new Ireland but we have to be realistic and work towards our goal more carefully. If we have to work with the 'Brits' to create jobs then so be it. We are confined in the six counties and we don't like it, but we must act as political representatives. We can no longer abstain (Interview: December 1995).

Such sentiments feed into an overall perception that the role of the British State is more ambiguous and ad hoc than traditionally accepted. Earlier republican responses were framed by the position that Britain's influence in Ireland was conditioned by economic motives, a strategic purpose in which Northern Ireland was a laboratory of repression and political motives centred upon maintaining the territorial cohesiveness of the UK. The argument that British occupation is no longer coherently strategic has been evident in *An Phoblacht* and in the speeches of McLaughlin and to a lesser extent Adams, all of whom have called for a more fluid republican and less 'necessatarian' analysis which understands that the British states has an ambiguous relationship with Northern Ireland. The clearest definition of this viewpoint has been SFs continuing assertion that the British State must try to persuade the pro-union community to accept a re-united Ireland.

Conclusion

In replacing the policy of armalites and ballot boxes with a process toward peace, persuasion and an unarmed struggle SF have clearly set out to create wider political relationships, and encourage the PIRA to pursue a cease-fire. The general reaction from the Unionist and pro-union population is still conditioned by extreme hostility. Although SF has undertaken much soul-searching, deliberation and political adaptation, its primary instructive arguments and unwavering aspiration remains a re-united Ireland. Moreover the recognition that politics can be framed through alliances with past foes is probably one of the most significant developments in the body politic of Ireland since the present conflict began.

The removal of violence provides the possibility for open-ended dialogue, even though such dialogue has not taken place publicly, evidence is now emerging that links between republicans and representatives of the pro-British union community have been undertaken. The need to convince the SF electorate to support new political relationships has been paralleled by the removal of open hostility toward other communities and the British State. In effect the next stage is open dialogue in which negotiation and compromise will form a further strand of SF activity.

Postscript: This paper was written prior to the PIRA's bombing campaign in London. The Canary Wharf bombing, in particular, indicates that a section of the PIRA are still committed to militant republicanism against what they perceive as the intransigence of British policy-making.

It is now evident that certain splits have occurred over future procedures and the form of political activity to be undertaken in the next stage of proposed negotiation. For many of the more politicised members there is still a desire to commit republicans to dialogue and negotiation while for others, and particularly the PIRA, a sense of frustration and possible betrayal by the British State still has an emotive energy and direction. However, since the bombing campaign and the relatively high level of support given to SF in the 1997 General Election, the SF leadership according to additional interviews undertaken by the authors have convinced more frustrated republicans not to return to a more

universal campaign of violence. The ideological split between those who unreservedly supported the bombing campaign and the majority who did not, within SF's ranks, may provide further insight into the dynamic for alternative strategies and discourses.

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