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AN IRISH REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT AND THE DILEMMAS OF POLITICAL CHANGE: 'OFFICIAL' REPUBLICANISM, THE WORKERS' PARTY AND DEMOCRATIC LEFT*

Abstract: This article analyses the historical treatment of a neglected subject. The 'other' strand of the Irish Republican movement derived from the split of 1969-70, the 'Officials', comprising both the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) and Official *Sinn Féin* (OSF), which later became *Sinn Féin* the Workers' Party (SFWP) in 1977, then simply Workers' Party in 1982 and suffered a subsequent split with the formation of Democratic Left (DL) in 1992, has received nothing approaching the attention devoted to the Provisionals. Yet, for a full understanding of the development of late twentieth-century Irish Republicanism, and particularly its ambiguous relationship to socialist politics, this strand of Republican thought and activity is an absolutely necessary component of any balanced historiographical reckoning.
Keywords: *Irish Republicanism, 'Official' IRA, 'Official' Sinn Féin, Irish Workers' Party, Democratic Left, socialism, memory politics.*

I DILEMMI DELLE MUTAZIONI POLITICHE DI UN MOVIMENTO RIVOLUZIONARIO IRLANDESE: IL REPUBBLICANESIMO DEGLI *'OFFICIALS'*, LO *WORKERS' PARTY* E *DEMOCRATIC LEFT*

Abstract: Questo articolo analizza il modo in cui la storiografia ha trattato un argomento assai trascurato. La corrente 'altra' del movimento repubblicano irlandese derivante dalla spaccatura del 1969-79, i cosiddetti *'Officials'*, comprendenti la *Official Irish Republican Army* (OIRA) e *Official Sinn Féin* (OSF), successivamente diventati nel 1977 *Sinn Féin the Workers' Party* (SFWP) e nel 1982 semplicemente *Workers' Party*, prima di subire un'ulteriore scissione con il formarsi della *Democratic Left* (DL) nel 1992. Tali sviluppi hanno attirato ben poca dell'attenzione riservata invece ai *Provisionals*. Eppure, per comprendere appieno lo sviluppo del repubblicanesimo irlandese tardonovecentesco, e in particolare il suo rapporto ambiguo con il socialismo, questa corrente repubblicana per pensiero e azione rappresenta una componente inaggirabile di qualsiasi valutazione storiografica aspiri a un certo equilibrio.
Parole chiave: *repubblicanesimo irlandese, 'Official' IRA, Irish Workers' Party*; '*Official' Sinn Féin, Democratic Left*; *socialismo*; *politiche della memoria.*

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Introduction

This article briefly introduces the reader to the contemporary position with regard to the significant role of the Provisional strand within Irish Republicanism in both jurisdictions in Ireland. It then moves on to analyse the trajectory of the Official Republican movement and its offshoots, from the 1970s through until 1999, since when it has largely faded from contemporary political life, both North and South. The question of the movement's relationship with paramilitarism is addressed, alongside the movement's partial adoption of a Marxist-Leninist ideological and organisational model in the period from 1977-1992. In 1977, Official *Sinn Féin* (OSF) changed its name to Sinn Féin the Workers' Party (SFWP) and then in 1982, in a symbolic distancing from traditional Irish republican norms, it become simply the Workers' Party (WP). Finally, the article will examine the memory politics associated with Official Republicanism in the early twenty-first century. Broadly, this is characterised by occasional shards of memory which come to light in contemporary political discourse, but it is more often the case that the movement has only a ghostly presence in Irish political life. It is argued that this is, in part, due to the absence of clear mnemonic ownership of the movement's past; the WP is now simply too marginal and ineffective as a political party to aspire to bring these memories into the public domain. Whilst the WP continues to exist and very occasionally contests elections (its website lists three candidates who stood unsuccessfully in the Republic of Ireland's local elections in 2024), it currently has no elected representatives anywhere in Ireland.[1] One observer compared the current WP to an «old comrades' association» (cited in Rekawek 2011: 97). Moreover, the majority of the WP's members and public representatives abandoned the party to form Democratic Left in 1992, which went on to merge into the Irish Labour Party in 1999. Those who took this route generally appear to have little desire to resurrect what are sometimes painful memories of their former political lives. It is also the case, of course, that many of the main protagonists of the political generation (to use Mannheim's suggestive concept) which was forged in the political maelstrom of the mid-late 1960s, are now beginning to leave the stage.

Of course, it is perfectly justified that studies of the Provisional IRA (PIRA) and Sinn Féin (PSF) dominate the historical writing and contemporary debates concerning Irish Republicanism, given that this movement was responsible for almost half of the approximately 3,700 deaths directly attributed to the violent conflict (known euphemistically as the 'Troubles') in Northern Ireland from 1969-1998 (McKittrick *et al.* 1999: 1482). Moreover, in the wake of PIRA's ceasefires in 1994 and 1997, as well as the definitive end to its campaign of 'armed struggle' in 2005, the erstwhile 'political wing' of the Provisional republican movement has increased its support significantly, regularly winning between 25-29% of the popular vote in

[1] Since a split in the WP in 2021, there have been two parties claiming the name Workers' Party, one led by Ted Tynan and the other by Michael McCorry (*Belfast Telegraph*, 27-IV-2021).

Northern Ireland. PSF became the largest party at the Northern Ireland Assembly election in 2022, with 29% of first-preference votes, comfortably ahead of its unionist rival and power-sharing 'partner', the Democratic Unionist Party. Michelle O'Neill (PSF's vice-president) currently occupies the post of First Minister in the devolved Executive. The party has won 7 (out of 18) seats in each of the last 3 Westminster elections (2017, 2019 and 2024), although it continues to abstain from taking those seats, arguing that it is an illegitimate parliament in Northern Ireland (Lynn 2002).

In recent general elections in the Republic of Ireland PSF achieved 24.5% of first-preference votes in the 2020 *Dáil Eireann* election (the lower house of the Republic of Ireland's parliament in Dublin); this was more than any other party, although not sufficient to enable the party to enter government. In the 2024 election, this figure was reduced somewhat, with PSF gaining 19%, although more candidates and a better distribution of the vote saw the party increase its seats from 37 to 39 (still well short of the 88 required for a majority in the 174-seat parliament). It remains the primary party of opposition to the coalition government of *Fianna Fáil* (FF) and *Fine Gael* (FG). These two parties trace their roots to the Irish Civil War of 1922-23, fought between different elements within the wider Republican movement, over the terms of the Treaty with the United Kingdom which saw most of the territory of Ireland gain its effective independence. FF generally appealed to more «Republican» elements in the new state, but also had a social base in the more popular classes (small and tenant farmers, for example) (Dunphy 1995). FF governed alone until the 1980s, when a decline in its core vote meant that it required external support. FG was a more classical bourgeois party, but it was constrained to go into government with the Irish Labour Party (LP), which was always a junior coalition partner. Since the 2007-08 financial crash, this structure «has been wrenched completely out of shape, and a stable pattern has yet to emerge» (Finn 2018: 36).

The radical left has often been characterised as weak in the Republic of Ireland and it is certainly the case that parties that could plausibly be included in this category have made little impression as parties of government (Hopkins 2020). The inclusion of DL, a party formed out of the WP in 1992, as a junior coalition party in the *Fine Gael*, Labour and DL 'rainbow' government of 1994-97, provides the only example of a party with its roots in the radical left occupying cabinet posts in the last half-century. PSF has often been characterised by its ambivalent relationship to the radical left, with «social Republicanism» forming only one strand in an ideologically diverse movement (see Finn 2019; Ó Broin 2009; English 2003 and Patterson 1997).

PSF's 2 European Parliament MEPs sit with the Left group after the 2024 European election (previously known as the Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left). However, the party clearly has a distinct ideological heritage compared to the bulk of the (ex-) Communist parties which founded this formation out of the older Communist and Allies group. For instance, the party is not a member of the European Left transnational party (Dunphy - March 2020). Although PSF has, at times, proven capable of exploiting the strength

of anti-austerity sentiment in the Republic's working-class after 2011, according to Byers (2019: 489) «the party's radical rhetoric should not be conflated with a principled anti-capitalism». Finn (2018: 38) makes the point that PSF has «more in common» with the Scottish National Party or Catalonia's Republican Left than it does with the non-nationalist (or even *anti*-nationalist) radical left in other European states. He argues that the «closest analogy» is probably the *abertzale* Left in the Basque country, which also had «long-standing ties to an armed insurgency».

In the case of PSF, the party needs to be understood, at least until recently, as an integral part of a political *movement*; one in which paramilitary organisation and a clandestine or conspiratorial political culture has prevailed, rather than one which is fully transparent and democratic (Moloney 2002; English 2003). Notwithstanding its recent growth, PSF's close, in truth subordinate, relationship to PIRA during the course of the 'Troubles' bedevilled its efforts to convince the Republic's voters that it should be viewed as a responsible potential party of government. PSF has both the advantages and limitations of operating across the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland: in Northern Ireland, which had been its primary political support base during the violent conflict, the movement's electoral appeal has been predicated on its capacity to represent the interests of the Catholic Irish nationalist population. Since 2003, it has been the clear winner in the contest with the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) for this segment of the electorate in an ethno-nationally divided society; its appeal has not been based primarily on class identity or socio-economic policy, but rather on religio-political mobilisation, in short, a communal appeal. In the Republic, by contrast, a «left-wing platform was central to its electoral growth» from the mid-1990s (Finn 2018: 38), but PSF's primary motivation remained the traditional Irish nationalist objective of ending partition and creating a unitary all-Ireland state by removing Northern Ireland from the UK. It is by no means clear that such a motivation is at the top of voters' agenda or can win majority support in the Republic of Ireland.

Official Republicanism and the Era of Socialist Republicanism

In Dublin in 2005, Seán Garland, then President of the WP, addressed a rally organised to campaign against his extradition to the United States, where he had been indicted on charges relating to the alleged «superdollar» conspiracy, a sophisticated network for the distribution of large sums of forged US dollars, emanating in North Korea (Hanley - Millar 2009: ix-xiii; 600-601. See also Young 2015). Although he was, ultimately, not extradited for trial, this episode (which rumbled on for several years) represented a microcosm of some of the contradictions at the heart of the trajectory of Official Republicanism post-1970. Garland (1934-2018), had joined the IRA in 1953, and was badly injured in the IRA's Border Campaign (Operation

Harvest) during a raid against a Co. Fermanagh Royal Ulster Constabulary police barracks in 1957; this action has become an integral part of the modern folklore of the Republican movement, ending as it did with the deaths of two young IRA «martyrs», Sean South and Fergal O'Hanlon, who have been immortalised in storytelling and balladry (Flynn 2009). Garland subsequently became a key figure in the left-wing reorientation of the traditional, socially conservative movement during the 1960s, and he was to become a convinced pro-Soviet revolutionary socialist from the early 1970s onwards (Hanley 2018)[2]. This trajectory was sealed in 1973, when Garland, Tomás Mac Giolla and a Northern leader, Des O'Hagan, visited the World Congress of Peace Forces in Moscow.[3] From this point, the Officials became progressively more closely integrated into the pro-Soviet orbit, and for this triumvirate the Leninist conviction even survived the collapse of the international communist movement in 1989-1991. Garland's personal trajectory, in many important respects, mirrored the evolution of this strand of Irish Republican thought, and indeed Garland, above almost all other individuals who played leadership roles in Official Republicanism, was responsible for shaping the fundamental character and line of march of the Officials. He had a «reputation for toughness, both physical and ideological» (Finn 2019: 31).

Hanley and Millar's *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers Party* (2009) provided an exhaustive historical narrative of the movement, from its inception after the split with the Provisionals in 1969-70, to its (modest) rise to prominence in electoral terms in the Republic during the 1980s and its vertiginous decline after the split with DL in 1992. This article does not seek to replicate the detailed oral history of the movement, which is covered in admirable depth by Hanley and Millar, but instead attempts to explain how this movement has, to a large extent, been 'written out' of the memory politics of Irish Republicanism in recent decades. It is one of the real strengths of *The Lost Revolution* that oral testimonies from many of the leading protagonists in this story have been painstakingly collected and collated, permitting the discerning reader to form nuanced judgments concerning the often labyrinthine internal dynamics and personal inter-relationships of the movement. Of course, as with any oral evidence, the reader also needs to be aware of the fallibility of memory, the self-justifying stance of many of the interviewees, the temptation to settle old scores, and the necessity to treat the claims and counter-claims of erstwhile comrades, who sometimes became bitter foes, with due caution (Hopkins 2013: 10-16). However, given that much of the political and organisational work of the movement, and certainly all of the paramilitary activity, was clandestine and conspiratorial in nature, it is probably inevitable that researchers must rely largely upon these oral sources. As an erstwhile protagonist in the Official Republican

[2] Hanley B., «Seán Garland 1934-2018», *Jacobin* blog, I-2019 <https://jacobin.com/2019/01/sean-garland-oira-republican-workers-party> (last access 15-IV-2026).

[3] Mac Giolla was President of OSF from 1962-1977 and then SFWP, 1977-1982 and finally the WP itself, 1982-88; Mac Giolla was also a TD [*teachta dála*, member of the Republic of Ireland's Parliament, *Dáil Eireann*] from 1982-1992; he died, aged 86, in February 2010 (Hanley 2016).

movement put it: «as with the history of Irish Republicanism generally, the oral tradition is crucial because this is a history of the defeated» (Yeates 2010).

This article follows Hanley and Millar in arguing for the significance of the Official Republican movement to the wider history of both Republicanism and socialism in Ireland, and its importance to the political history of modern Ireland, both North and South. It therefore rejects the double marginalisation of the movement: both in terms of the conventional historical understanding of Irish Republicanism, and the alleged lack of influence of socialist theory and practice in Ireland. The story «encompasses armed insurrection, several bitter splits, and the development of the most successful radical political grouping in the Republic of Ireland in recent decades…» (Hanley - Millar, 2009: xiii). Perhaps of even greater significance, those who developed their political ideology out of the Official Republican movement were, during the late 1970s and through the 1980s, at the forefront of attempts to undermine irredentist ideology in the South. They also worked tirelessly, in an extremely dangerous environment, in an attempt to tackle, if not eradicate, the sectarian divisions of Protestants and Catholics in the working-class of Northern Ireland. In a certain sense, although they were ultimately unsuccessful in this endeavour, as sectarianism remains firmly rooted in Northern Irish society, and has been institutionalised in the post-1998 era of power-sharing devolution, nonetheless the contemporary dispensation owes a good deal to the willingness of anti-sectarians in civil society and the WP to stand up to the remorseless logic of communal conflict (Hopkins - Parr 2025). This may still be true, even if the WP has been rendered largely irrelevant to contemporary political life in both Northern Ireland and the Republic (Finn 2019: 168-169).

Even some commentators who were by no means sympathetic to the revolutionary politics of the Officials, nonetheless recognised that the movement did manage to get some things right, at least in terms of its critique of Provisional Republican violence and its counter-productive character[4]. Several of those who played important roles in the movement during the 1970s and 1980s in the South, have since gone on to establish themselves as key parliamentary figures in the *Dáil*: leaders such as Pat Rabbitte and Eamon Gilmore (both subsequently leaders of the Irish Labour Party, after they left the WP in 1992), as well as the veteran Proinsias De Rossa, became integrated into the mainstream of Irish politics[5]. In Northern Ireland, the movement has left fewer obvious traces, but some of its prominent ex-members, such as Lord Paul Bew, a historian and senior advisor to former Ulster Unionist

[4] Hayes M., «Peeling Back the Truth about the Stickies», *Irish Independent*, 10-X-2009.

[5] De Rossa had joined the IRA as a 16 year-old in 1956 and he was interned during the Border Campaign. He was elected as SFWP TD for Dublin North-West in 1982 and held the seat, for the WP, DL and LP until 2002. He was WP President from 1988-1992 and leader of DL from 1992-99. He was elected as WP MEP for Dublin in 1989 and served until 1992. He was subsequently elected as LP MEP from 1999-2012, serving as chair of the European Parliament's delegation for relations with the Palestinian Legislative Council.

leader David Trimble, have played significant roles in the political evolution of the province into the twenty-first century (Finn 2019: 128).

Hanley and Millar begin their chronological account with another biographical sketch, this time of Cathal Goulding (1923-1998), who became the IRA's Chief of Staff in 1962 after the ignominious defeat of the Border Campaign (codenamed Operation Harvest), which had begun in 1956 (Treacy 2014). Goulding went on to be the OIRA's Chief of Staff and remained highly influential in the movement during the 1970s (White 2009). Like Mac Giolla, he remained with the WP after the split with DL. It is telling that whilst there have been numerous analyses of the split in the Republican movement in 1969-1970 (see *inter alia* English 2003: 81-119; Moloney 2002: 52-92), and some of the key leaders on the Provisional side of this bitter dispute have been the subject of full-length biographies, or have published well-nown autobiographies/memoirs, none of the key figures in the story of Official Republicanism have been the subject of such auto/biographical treatment.[6] This is one dimension of the comparative neglect of the historical record of this movement[7]. One of the key questions that has attracted debate in the existing literature is the extent to which socialist and/or communist ideas and activists influenced the direction of the movement in the 1960s (Swan 2007; Mulqueen 2019). After the ignominious failure of the «Border Campaign», the very survival of the movement was at stake in these years, but the gradual adoption of leftist rhetoric was by no means universally popular within the movement. Several of those more 'traditional' Republicans, sceptical if not downright hostile to the «social Republicanism» enshrined by Goulding (who borrowed liberally from the Republican Congress experiment of the 1930s), dropped out of active involvement, and only returned to the movement after the explosion of violence in Northern Ireland during 1968-9. Some of these individuals, like Billy McKee, Jimmy Steele and Joe Cahill from Belfast, were instrumental in the split, and the formation of the Provisionals, and they were committed to a socially conservative movement, reliant upon the communal solidarity of the Catholic nationalist enclaves, both rural and urban, of Northern Ireland (Finn 2019: 32).

Although the Republican movement made some modest gains in the post-1966 period, it was with the civil rights agitation in Northern Ireland that the movement hit upon a strategy that would lead to an authentic sea-change in the movement's fortunes. Unfortunately, this growth was predicated upon the resurgence in sectarian confrontation in Northern Ireland, for which the Republican movement must take its share of the historical responsibility. The events of summer 1969 have been carved into the historical psyche of the Ulster population, both

[6] For example, there are several biographies of former PSF President (1983-2018) Gerry Adams: O'Doherty (2017), Sharrock and Devenport (1997) and Keena (1990), as well as several volumes of memoir by Adams himself (1996; 2003); for analysis of this writing, see Hopkins (2018). There is also a wide range of other biographies of leading Provisionals, such as Martin McGuinness (Clarke - Johnston 2001), Joe Cahill (Anderson 2002) and Martin Ferris (Barrett 2006). For scholarly analysis of these works see Hopkins (2013: 17-61) and McBride (2016: 235-247).

[7] For a partial exception, see the biography of long-time OSF activist in Dublin, Máirín De Burca (Kenny 2023)

Protestant and Catholic, but Hanley and Millar demonstrate convincingly that the prevailing narrative (associated with the Provisionals) that the IRA was hardly present, and left Catholic districts undefended while a Loyalist pogrom unfolded, is a conscious distortion of the facts. Nonetheless, the Goulding leadership's insistence on their desire to reach out to the Protestant working-class could not mask the contradictions of the movement's position. New recruits flooded into the movement, and some of the older traditionalists returned, seizing their opportunity to act as a thorn in the flesh of the Dublin leadership group, and prepare the ground for the eventual split in December 1969. But, many of these recruits were explicit in their motivation: they wished to defend their areas from attack by Loyalists, but also to retaliate against the Protestants. This outcome was precisely the opposite of that intended by Goulding and the other genuine anti-sectarians, but they had no capacity to engineer a new emphasis upon working-class unity[8]. Although Hanley and Millar do not argue this case, we can perhaps speculate that in the crucible of sectarian violence in August 1969, it was inevitable that the universalism of the movement's rhetoric would be found wanting. The arrival and continuing presence of the British Army on the streets only served to reinforce the (anti-)colonial prism through which events were interpreted, to disastrous effect for all concerned. The respective views articulated by the Officials and the Provisionals with regard to the Protestant working-class in Northern Ireland remained a critical point of distinction between these movements into the post-Good Friday Agreement era (see below).

As the Goulding/Mac Giolla/Garland leadership groped towards a more coherent direction from the mid to late 1960s on, socialist politics appeared as the 'coming wave', at least in the international arena, and even in Ireland it was possible to see a strategy taking shape that stressed the *revolutionary* credentials of the movement, as opposed to the traditional continuities. In its early stages, this leftism was certainly not Marxist or pro-Soviet as such, but found expression in support for the indigenous elements of «social Republicanism», as well as anti-colonial liberation struggles in Africa and Latin America. Goulding was critical of the militaristic elitism that had characterised Irish Republicanism over the post-civil war decades, but this was a trend that had very deep historical roots, stretching back at least as far as the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (O'Beirne Ranelagh 2024; Foy 2023). Arguably, the effort required to undertake a root-and-branch upheaval of this conspiratorial/elitist mindset was under-estimated in the movement, and it was not fully completed until the 1990s (Dunphy 1997). However, although the movement was increasingly disdainful of the aloof position adopted by previous generations, it is a mistake to believe that the 'physical force' tradition was in the process of withering away. In the initial stages, at least, it was not militarism *per se* that the leadership argued was inhibiting the development of the movement, but its self-imposed distance from the daily struggles of the 'people'. The conception of the

[8] For a study of Goulding's efforts to ground the evolution of Republican thinking in the 1960s upon the philosophy of denominational unity articulated in the 1790s by Theobald Wolfe Tone, see Gillen (2016: 212-222).

OIRA/OSF in the period from 1970-77 was that united working-class action for democratic reform in Northern Ireland could contribute to an all-Ireland anti-imperialist front; the role for the IRA in this scenario was to «defend the people's gains» and maintain the integrity of the «national liberation» struggle. Whilst this was ultimately to prove an unrealistic objective, it did permit the movement to develop a trajectory of partial «Leninisation» in the 1970s. Initially, this involved a politics akin to developing-world anti-colonial ideas, but by the mid-1980s, it was closer to a European conception of reform-minded communist parties, backed up with a revolutionary rhetoric and a firm identification with the Soviet bloc (Dunphy - Hopkins 1992).

Official *Sinn Féin*, which had not enjoyed an autonomous or powerful position within the movement hitherto, became of more significance after 1970. The aim was to build a «political, national and social revolutionary organisation with an open membership and legal existence» (Hanley - Millar 2009: 59) Although the paramilitary wing had largely observed its ceasefire after 1972, the culture of the movement would remain «rigidly hierarchical, with power concentrated in the hands of the OIRA's Army Council»; it would maintain the upper hand with the public in the movement, however, with «army» figures placed in strategic posts within the OSF organisation (Finn 2019: 122). Ultimately, the Republican movement would remain under the firm control of its illegal and clandestine military leadership, and the transparency afforded by the open activity of OSF was strictly limited in application. In ideological terms, throughout the 1970s, as Patterson argued (1989: 135), for «all its undoubted struggle to modernise its politics and ideology, Official Republicanism still suffered from that congenital nationalist belief in an unchanging sub-stratum of British interest in Ireland». By stressing its credentials as the inheritors of the 'true' Republican tradition (against the 'sectarian bigots' and 'Catholic defenders' of the Provisional movement), the Officials had provided continuity for its members and activists. There was inevitably a tension between the sincerely held desire to put the movement much more closely in touch with the popular struggles of the day, and the ongoing commitment to maintain a self-perpetuating vanguardist elite, responsible for overseeing the movement's strategic direction, often unbeknownst to many of the foot soldiers and ordinary party workers. As Dunphy has argued (1997: 124), «the movement was caught in the throes of a clear contradiction: acknowledging the futility of militarism and emphasising the need for mass struggle, but retaining the political and organizational subordination of Sinn Fein to the IRA».

The core leadership in this phase sought to graft onto the Jacobin-conspiratorial and militaristic organisation, a new ideological vocabulary, based upon Leninism and the international communist movement. Initially, this entailed an effort to develop close relations with the tiny Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), but after the mid-1970s these relations soured, as there was competition for the support and privileged access to resources from the USSR (Sheehan 2019: 171). Mulqueen (2019: 5) concurs that the Republic's two pro-Moscow parties (CPI and SFWP) were «competing with each other for the attention of the Soviet Embassy in Dublin». By 1983, the WP had demonstrated that it could, unlike the CPI, win electoral

support and public representation; Garland acknowledged that formal «fraternal relations» with the USSR had been established by this time (Mulqueen 2019: 10). In the mid-1970s, the internal discourse of the movement was couched in the terminology of 1930s communism - «Stalinism» and «Trotskyism» were terms of praise and condemnation; «there was a correct line on all questions and anathema sit upon all deviations from it». The prevailing mood within the Officials during this era was «heresy-hunting mistrust» (Sheehan 2019: 173-174). These tensions were ultimately at the heart of the struggle over the direction of the movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The literature on Irish Republicanism has dealt in detail with the complexity of the Official/Provisional split, in its ideological, geographical and generational dimensions (Kelley 1988; Bishop - Mallie, 1988). In many rural areas, it was some time before the split was formalised, whereas in Belfast and Derry, there were swift recriminations and confrontations. Decisions were often made on the basis of a complicated mixture of personal loyalties, ideological convictions and strategic judgments. In the end, the formation of the Provisionals ultimately permitted the Officials to develop a principled anti-sectarian politics in Northern Ireland, but not before the latter had «stumbled into an armed campaign» against the British (and on occasion those Unionists who were members of the «Crown forces») in the spring of 1971 (Hanley - Millar 2009: 164). After approximately 50 deaths caused by the Officials (and 20 killed from within their ranks), the movement called an open-ended ceasefire in May 1972. However, the Official IRA continued to operate, partly as a retaliatory armed wing involved in periodic feuding with the Provisionals and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA – a splinter group from the Officials created by Séamus Costello, who was expelled from the Official movement in 1974 and killed in 1977 by the OIRA as part of a vicious feud; Ó Siochrú 2009), and partly as a 'fundraising' unit engaged in armed robbery, extortion and other illegal activity. The INLA (and its political 'wing', the Irish Republican Socialist Party) accused the Officials of adopting a reformist agenda and neglecting the national question in Ireland in favour of an exclusive concentration upon the class question. The INLA/IRSP remained a small, volatile organisation, beset by internal disputes, often murderous, and feuding with other Republican organisations (Holland - McDonald 1994; Dunphy 1997: 126-127; Finn 2019: 121-126).

Patterson (1989: 151) argued that «if the break with militarism was not a clean one, it was decisive for all that. It was followed by increasing evidence of a substantial ideological break with the main tenets of republican ideology as well». Perhaps the most significant role played by the Official IRA (also known internally as «Group B») in the post-1977 era was as a «party within a party», attempting to ensure the «revolutionary spirit» of the movement was not adulterated. This revolutionary elitism and vanguardist approach sat easily with the cultural and organisational antecedents of the new avowedly class-based socialist movement, and it also chimed closely with the Leninist concept of 'democratic centralism', which increasingly came

to dominate inner-party organisation. By the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the distinctively Republican heritage of the movement was giving way to a party model that resembled an orthodox communist party much more closely. What the two models had in common was a deep-rooted suspicion, in truth hostility, towards parliamentary 'opportunism' or electoralism. The standing and health of the movement was not to be judged in terms of voting support or elected representatives, but rather in terms of ideological 'purity'. An emphasis upon winning broad support for the WP's policies was judged by hardliners to be a slippery slope towards compromise or even betrayal. This chimed perfectly with the prevailing traditional view of the Republican movement from the mid-1920s until the mid-1960s: the strength of the movement depended on its self-declared legitimacy, inherited from its fidelity to the «living Republic» declared in 1916 and reasserted by the Second *Dáil* in 1921 (Towshend 2014; Hanley 2003). This solipsistic attitude ran very deep in both the Official and Provisional incarnations of Irish Republican thinking (English 1993); there was an enduring belief that the 'purity' of the movement's ideals must ensure its victory in the end, whatever the parlous state of the movement's popularity at any given moment. As Gillan argued (1997: 154), «For almost two centuries republicanism has never lost sight of the republic even if it is a Republic that exists only in dreams». It was relatively straightforward to transfer this mindset to the language of Leninism.

Prospective members of SFWP and the WP were required to undergo party education classes in the history and ideology of the movement; they also served a probationary period of six months (Dunphy - Hopkins, 1992: 98-100; Rekawek, 2011: 83; Kenny, 2023: 206-208). With the zeal of the convert, some early SFWP views on party membership were actively disdainful of the idea of constructing a mass party: Rene Prendergast, writing in the SFWP theoretical journal, *Teoiric*, argued that it would be «a grave mistake to confuse the party with mass support and the mass party as such […] We know from experience that by throwing our party open to allcomers, we will destroy our party and do a disservice to the Irish people». (cited in Dunphy - Hopkins, 1992: 99). As with Bolshevik 'professional revolutionaries', members were expected to devote themselves to the movement wholeheartedly, sometimes at the expense of careers, family and private lives. Education classes were held at a house the party had acquired in Mornington, Co. Louth. Not all longstanding members of the Republican movement were persuaded by this emphasis upon the indoctrination of recruits; de Burca managed to get Mac Giolla's support to vote down a proposal for probationary members to undergo an exam at the end of their studies (Kenny 2023: 207). Whilst the commitment of members provoked some jealousy amongst activists from other Irish parties, notably Labour (Rekawek 2011: 83), nevertheless it has been noted that such demands on the membership could lead to «burnout» (Dunphy - Hopkins, 1992: 107).

De Burca was one such example, she resigned from the party in 1977, stating «I was just tired […] it was all-consuming […] I was a bit sad leaving, but I knew it was the right thing to do» (cited in Kenny 2023: 251). A party activist since the early 1950s, she had devoted her

adult life to the movement and had risen to the post of joint General Secretary, but she felt both exhausted by her incessant commitments (she was active in the Irish Women's Liberation movement, the Anti-Apartheid campaign, prisoners' rights and anti-war movements), and unhappy with the increasing influence of shadowy «secret groups, or cadres, springing up in the party» (Kenny, 2023: 247-50). De Burca was perhaps unusual within OSF in her steadfast opposition to ongoing paramilitarism within the movement from 1970 onwards (*ibid.*: 107). She was concerned, as were a number of other SFWP members, that the Industrial Department (later renamed the Research Section of the Economic Affairs department; see below) were examining members' «every word, every gesture almost, were they Stalinist or weren't they; if they weren't they did their damnedest to get them out of the party» (cited in Hanley - Millar, 2009: 337). Some members, of course, continued to be subject to direct military discipline; «Group B» remained armed and sporadically active, mainly in terms of acting as a defensive shield for WP activists in Northern Ireland, as well as engaging in fund-raising criminal enterprises. Aiding this transition to becoming a «near-communist movement» (Mulqueen 2019: 75-106), which actually maintained many elements of organisational continuity with past practice, was the close relationship cultivated by WP leaders with the USSR and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and its position within the international communist movement.

Thus, the WP, whilst remaining relatively small in terms of its membership base (probably counting fewer than 2,000 active members and perhaps as few as 1,000), had good claims to be considered the most dynamic party in the Republic during the late 1980s (Dunphy - Hopkins, 1992: 118). Modest electoral growth reached a peak of 5% of first preference votes in 1989, with seven TDs elected (six of these in Dublin, where the party won 11.4%, overtaking the Labour Party), as well as the WP's only MEP, Proinsias de Rossa (later replaced by Dublin trade unionist, Des Geraghty). The tension between a conspiratorial Leninist core group, basing its politics on secretive manoeuvring behind the scenes, and a more transparent parliamentary presence, basing its activities upon reformist constituency work, was becoming ever more difficult to manage. One of the elements which brought this debate over the future of the WP into the open came about through the publication, under the auspices of the party, of a pamphlet by Eoghan Harris, entitled *The Necessity of Social Democracy* (Gillan 1997: 140-141). This intervention, supported by the previously influential Economic Research Department of the WP (led by Eamon Smullen), was prompted in the autumn of 1989 by the crisis of the international communist movement and the fall of the Berlin Wall. But, it was also an opportunity for Harris and Smullen to seek to revitalise the role of the Research Section, which had been responsible for many of the WP's theoretical innovations over the previous decade.

The Research Section had played a significant role in SFWP/WP from the mid-1970s (Finn 2019: 128). It is perhaps remembered best for the booklet, *The Irish Industrial Revolution* (SFWP 1977), which was a thoroughgoing critique of the traditional Irish nationalist account

of the travails of the Irish economy (Perry 2013: 49-51; 2010; Hanley - Millar, 2009: 336-347). Instead of laying all of the blame for under-development at the door of the British state, the IIR took aim at the failings of the indigenous Irish bourgeoisie, the «gombeen men» who had kept Ireland backward for so long. The book's prescription was statist and primarily concerned with the growth of the public sector, industrialisation through inward investment and urbanisation to boost the political weight of the working-class. Irish unity was downplayed; in truth, it was hardly seen as a secondary objective (Dunphy - Hopkins, 1992: 97; Rekawek 2011: 84-5). For Richard Dunphy, an academic and WP activist, the Research Section brought «a real sense of excitement at breaking with the deadweight of bourgeois Catholic nationalism. They were ultra-iconoclastic when the Irish left (and the movement/party) needed a strong dose of iconoclasm» (cited in Rekawek 2011: 85). However, by the late 1980s, the Research Section's star was no longer in the ascendancy; in a similar fashion to the OIRA, it had come to be viewed as a «party within the party» by some, including the new WP President (Rafter 2011: 68). De Rossa, and the enlarged parliamentary group were moving towards a fully transparent, open model of party organisation, one that had no place for either the machinations of «Group B» or the secretive, behind-the-scenes manoeuvring of the Research Section, with its associated infiltration of trade unions and other organisations by undeclared WP activists. One interpretation of *The Necessity of Social Democracy* was that «just as the party had de-republicanised itself in the 1970s, so in the 1990s the Party should clearly disassociate itself from a socialist identity» (Perry 2010: 466). However, many WP members continued to view non-Soviet and revisionist socialism as both an achievable goal and the movement's *raison d'être*: as the editorial in WP journal, *Making Sense*, pointed out, «socialism is certainly dead for those who identified it with Stalinism». It went on to accuse Harris of proposing a «sudden and dramatic change of direction […] with the intention of pre-empting dialogue and debate» (cited in Perry 2010: 467; Dunphy - Hopkins 1992: 110; Gillan 1997: 141). After increasingly fractious internal debate, Harris resigned, Smullen was disciplined and these fissures within the party came to the fore in the annual delegate conferences of 1990 and 1991. In 1992, De Rossa (and WP vice-President Seamus Lynch from Belfast) put forward a motion seeking the «reconstitution» of the party, but this motion narrowly failed to receive the two-thirds vote in favour which would have enabled the WP to potentially remain intact. Yet another bitter split was now inevitable (Gillan 1997; Rafter 2011).

The Ghostly Presence of Official Republicanism and the Workers' Party

Six of the seven TDs took the decision to leave the WP in 1992, creating the Democratic Left (DL). Only Mac Giolla remained with the WP, and he subsequently lost his seat in the general election later that year. Rafter (2011: 75) explained the split in terms of three primary dimensions: first, the rise of a strong parliamentary group in the *Dáil*, which was not in thrall

to the party apparatus; second, under the pressures of international developments, there was a growing sense among many, though not all, WP members that a new ideological and organisational model was required. As with many West European communist parties (such as the Italian, the Spanish and the British), many in the WP believed that the period 1989-1991 marked the closing of a historical era (opened by the Russian revolution in 1917); for instance, Liz McManus (a DL TD elected in 1992, she became a Minister of state in the rainbow government after 1994) at the founding conference of DL, argued unequivocally that «the Soviet model was corrupt and dictatorial […]» (cited in Rafter 2011: 42). A new 'post-communist' departure was envisaged, but it remained highly opaque in terms of party ideology and organisation. Third, there were persistent allegations that the OIRA had been instrumental in efforts by some hardliners (particularly amongst Northern Irish delegates) to derail the WP's new Programme for Democratic Socialism at the Annual Delegate conferences of 1990 and 1991 (Dunphy - Hopkins 1992: 111; Gillan 1997: 148-152). A BBC *Spotlight* documentary in Northern Ireland (entitled *Sticking to their Guns*) had been broadcast on the same day as local elections in the Republic in June 1991; it alleged ongoing links between the WP and the OIRA (Hanley - Millar, 2009: 569-571; Gillan 1997: 145-146; Rafter 2011: 78-84). Henry Patterson, a professor of politics at Ulster University, a leading authority on the history of Irish Republicanism and its often difficult relationship with left-wing thought, and a former WP member, agreed that these were the key fault-lines (cited in Rekawek 2011: 94).

As so often in the past, the split was accompanied by bitter recrimination, but this time significant violence was averted, even if it was threatened on occasion. A critical difference between the split of 1992 and those of 1974 or 1969-70, is that one of the factions thus created had definitively renounced paramilitary organisation; DL would have no armed presence at all. However, allegations persisted into the new century that the OIRA continued to exist and to have an opaque relationship with the rump WP; indeed another split was reported in the media in 1997, after a number of WP members were expelled in Newry, Co. Down (*Irish News*, 1-IV-1997). In 2009, it was reported in the Belfast media that some elements previously associated with the OIRA had begun talks with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) regarding putting some weapons beyond use (*Irish News*, 10-X-2009). Another way of thinking about this parting of the ways is that «the split was different from those which had come before in the sense that it was not essentially a split *within* republicanism. It was, instead, a split *from* republicanism» (Dunphy 1997: 133, my emphasis).

Nevertheless, the personal costs of this bitterness were played out over the next decade, arguably distracting energies for both successor groups. De Rossa and Mac Giolla had been in jail together in the 1950s; the 1992 split replicated the tragic personal consequences of lifetime friendships being sundered in 1970 or, indeed, for an earlier generation in the Civil War of 1922-23. Even if the scale of this WP/DL division was less epic than previous splits, and no blood was shed, still in terms of individual costs there was a similar sense of pain and hurt. De

Rossa attended the funeral of his long-time comrade, Cathal Goulding, in late 1998, shortly after DL had announced its intention to merge with the Labour Party; according to Sheehan (2023: 142), «several WP members came up to him and told him he was unwelcome and even spit on him». De Rossa refused to leave. In Seán Garland's funeral eulogy, he claimed Goulding despised treachery from wherever it came: «whether from the sectarian nationalist bigots [a reference to the Provisionals], ultra-leftists [a reference to Costello and the INLA/IRSP], or the opportunists of Democratic Left. He hated the hypocrisy under which these particular traitors, of the now dissolved DL, sought to hide their betrayal […]» (*Irish Times*, 1/2-I-1999).

Ultimately, the DL project was short-lived, lasting only until the merger with the Labour Party in early 1999. For some commentators, like Rafter (2011: 49) the merger was viewed as a «natural evolution»; there was simply no ideological or electoral space to the left of the LP's mild social democracy. Optimists felt that DL could tap into what Pat Rabbitte described as a «broad constituency that has never been captured by the Left» (cited in Rafter 2011: 93). However, it is also instructive that Rabbitte was one of those who met with LP leader Dick Spring in 1992, in the ultimately abortive hope that the WP's reformers might bypass the stage of setting up a new party. For another critic of DL's experiment in 'post-communist' politics, it was «not so much a party as a platform for a few talented politicians, it moved towards an inoffensive social democracy […]» (Finn 2010: 39). If it is undeniable that DL failed to find «a consistent and coherent voice» (Rafter 2011: 338), it is also true that much of the European Left in the 1990s (and beyond) has found itself in a similar ideological predicament. The merger, when it came, was not driven by the party's meagre membership, but it was a top-down exercise; still, the vote in favour was overwhelming (171 delegate votes to 21).

In Northern Ireland, the WP (and DL through the 1990s) found themselves increasingly marginal, winning very few votes, but steadfastly refusing to abandon their principled anti-sectarian message, even in the face of opprobrium from almost all quarters. Mulqueen argues that the Officials had always displayed an «ideological blindness» to what was happening on the ground in Northern Ireland (2019: 138). During the tumultuous period of the hunger strikes in 1980/1981, SFWP vehemently opposed the campaign for «political status» which was the ostensible cause of the strikes (this despite the fact that some of the OIRA's prisoners remained in jail). For Mulqueen, this stance marginalised the Official movement, earning the lasting hatred of not just the Provisionals and their erstwhile comrades in the INLA, but also the disdain of many «constitutional» nationalists. Ironically, the SFWP stance was not shared by the Soviet Union either, which viewed the hunger strikes and the Provisionals' 'anti-imperialism' as an opportunity to discomfit the UK state. Mulqueen cites Olivia O'Leary's comment that the movement «began digging a hole for itself [...] and kept digging» (2019: 202). He argues that supporting the «criminalisation» policy of successive British governments «proved to be a monumental tactical error» (*ibid.*: 205). But the point here is that the SFWP position was not a tactic, but a principled rejection of the Provisionals' violent campaign, its

deeply sectarian effects and the hammer blow it dealt to the potential for working-class unity. That it received little or no thanks for this stance does not make it inherently incorrect. In a certain sense, although sectarianism remains firmly rooted in Northern Irish society, and has been institutionalised in the post-1998 era of «power-sharing» devolution, nonetheless the contemporary dispensation owes a good deal to the willingness of anti-sectarians in the WP, DL (and among other civil society groups, such as the trade unions) to stand up to the remorseless logic of communal conflict. The WP was engaged in significant initiatives from within civil society which attempted to break the logjam of apparently endless paramilitary violence; in the late 1980s, one such was the Peace Train, which sought to expose and embarrass the Provisionals for their disruption through bombing the main Dublin-Belfast railway line (Parr and Hopkins 2025). This was valuable work, even if the WP was rendered largely irrelevant to contemporary electoral politics in Northern Ireland.

It is an irony not lost on former activists in the Officials that the basic stance of the movement towards the politics of Northern Ireland in the 1970s/80s was increasingly replicated in the Provisional discourse of the 2000s/2010s, even if the authenticity of the latter's manoeuvring is questioned. Henry McDonald (2008: 71), a journalist and former supporter of the Official movement from Belfast, argued that this can be understood in the attitude of different Republicans to the Protestant unionist population in Northern Ireland: «while the Workers' Party [in the 1980s] preached workers unity and had already begun an outreach programme to Protestants in the North, *Sinn Féin* and the Provisionals needed to portray the unionist/loyalist community as irreformable reactionaries and the immovable allies of British imperialism». In the last two decades, PSF leaders have made significant rhetorical overtures towards this same policy of «outreach», attending and laying wreaths at war memorials for the British (and unionist) dead of the world wars, for example. As McDonald (2008: 97) recognised, «what were once 'sticky [Official Republican] heresies' during the Eighties» have now become crucial in the effort to 'persuade' Protestants that their histories, cultures and memories will be respected in the coming era, which will nonetheless, in PSF's unchanged teleological vision, lead inexorably to a united Ireland. This PSF campaign has not, it must be said, been any more successful than the earlier OSF/SFWP/WP version: twenty-five more years, after 1972, of PIRA killing of Protestant RUC and Ulster Defence Regiment officers might well have made such a task even more problematic.

Conclusion

This article has sought to provide a rebalancing of the historiographical record with regard to the wider history of Irish Republicanism and socialism. There is no doubt that for many who came through the Official Republican movement from the 1970s onwards, whether they

stayed with the WP or joined the 'post-Republican' DL, there is a sense of embittered frustration when contemplating the twenty-first century successes of the Provisional Republican movement. Perhaps a little unfairly, Hanley (2018: 52) argued that «for the Workers' Party, hatred of the Provisionals became almost their *raison d'être* […]». Jim Smyth argued a similar point, comparing the Officials and their «emotional» critique of the Provisionals as akin to a «stridently anti-communist ex-communist» (cited in Mulqueen 2019: 203). Hanley and Millar end their account by pointing out the various groups and movements that have a vested interest in either drawing a veil over the past or attempting to rewrite the history of the Officials, including some who remain within the remnants of the WP and some who have moved into the political mainstream within the Irish Labour Party.

Elisabeth Jelin (2003) has argued that for political movements, especially perhaps those that were clandestine or illegal, what is required to put their memories and experiences into the contemporary political domain are «memory entrepreneurs»; individuals or social agents who mobilise their supporters and rally them to the cause of propagating certain historical narratives. As we have noted, however, there have been relatively few memoirs or autobiographies written by (former) members of the Officials, as well as a dearth of biographical writing. Des Geraghty (2021), one-time WP General Secretary and MEP for DL, has written an interesting memoir of his family, cultural and political background in Dublin, but it is instructive that the chapter on Republicanism concentrates upon the 1930s and there is no detailed treatment of the more recent (and more painful?) trajectory of the movement. For the Provisionals, who have marched painfully slowly along much of the road travelled by the Officials, shedding blood liberally along the way, the parallels with the historical trajectory of their bitter rivals are all too evident, although many would prefer to ignore them (McIntyre 2008). Just as since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, there is a small group of 'dissidents' from the Provisionals, some of whom in fact remain wedded to orthodox Republican principles of the 1950s, there is an even smaller band of 'socialist Republicans' in the remnants of the WP and the survivors of the INLA/IRSP who continue to cleave to their respective versions and visions of the «living Republic». Nothing in this article is likely to change their view that the Irish Revolution remains «unfinished» and that they are the Last True Republicans (McGlinchey 2019; Hopkins 2023).

There is certainly no shortage of commemoration in Irish Republican and leftist circles (Brown 2023; Hopkins 2022), but much of this is consciously distorted for perceived political gain. One final example will suffice: on New Year's Day in 2007, the then PSF President, Gerry Adams, addressed the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the IRA's Brookeborough RUC barracks attack, in which Seán South and Fergal O'Hanlon were killed and Seán Garland was badly wounded. The Provisional movement organised a historical re-enactment, in which a lorry-load of 'Volunteers', dressed in 1950s-style IRA uniforms and carrying de-activated but real Lee Enfield rifles, crossed the border into Co. Fermanagh and re-staged the raid on the barracks (McDonald 2008: 124). Ironies abounded, both historical and contemporary. Adams

remarked that he was «very aware of the irony of his position», but saw «no contradiction» in honouring these two dead IRA men at precisely the moment when the Provisional movement was asking its members to agree to co-operate with and recognise the legitimacy of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (the reformed RUC). Others were not so sure. (Viggiani 2014: 197; Hopkins 2022: 230). What was certain was that Adams would not mention the most prominent of the living survivors of this action, Garland (in 2007, he was President of the rump WP). He did not get an invitation to the commemoration and he would not have accepted one from Adams, who did not offer one. But, as we noted at the start of this article, in any event, had he crossed the border in 2007, he would have risked re-arrest on the outstanding US charges of involvement in the «superdollar» North Korean conspiracy, as well as skipping bail. In December 2020, the WP website published «A first-hand account of the IRA Border Campaign», looking back on the Brookeborough raid, written by Garland himself. Unsurprisingly, unlike the Adams speech in 2007, this memorial fragment received no wider publicity and provoked no public debate, a metaphor for the fate of the memory politics of the Official Republican movement.

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