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Understanding Sinn Féin's Abstention from the UK Parliament

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CONOR KELLY, AUG 19 2019

Irish Republican abstentionism from the British Parliament has a long and complicated history. Arguably, the last few decades since the Good Friday Agreement have been some of the least consequential or controversial since the practise began. The 2017 election, the DUP's entry into a confidence & supply agreement with the Conservative Party, and the backdrop of a Parliament unable to act upon the result of the Brexit referendum, has renewed interest in it. Sinn Féin's decision not to take their seven seats in Westminster is causing consternation, particularly from those who wish to see the party enter Parliament and derail a no-deal or 'hard' Brexit. While debating the merits of abstentionism is an argument as old as the practise itself, it is worth understanding the context of why Sinn Féin do not take their seats, and why it is incredibly unlikely that they will do so any time soon.

The modern Sinn Féin party (Gaeilge for 'Ourselves Alone') take their name and political legacy (with considerable dispute from other parties in Ireland) from the party formed by Arthur Griffith in 1905. This Sinn Féin acted as a vanguard movement for Republican aspirations in the 1918 general election. The Republican leadership of the time stood on a unified platform pledging to not take their seats were they to be successfully elected to Westminster in order to dislodge the more moderate Irish Parliamentary Party. In the wake of the First World War and the failed 1916 Easter revolution, Sinn Féin secured an enormous endorsement from the electorate winning 73 of the 105 seats. Crucially, this was tied with the pledge to set up an alternative Irish Parliament in Dublin, which of course they duly did, leading to the Irish War of Independence and subsequent creation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

The long and troubled history of Ireland and Northern Ireland is too complex to get into here, but the relative success of the abstentionist policy ensured a Republican commitment to it, not just in Westminster, but for many decades in the partitioned Irish Parliaments in both Dublin and Belfast. At the height of the Northern Irish Troubles, the tactic received enormous attention again during the early 1980s. In 1981 Republican prisoners Bobby Sands and Kieran Doherty were elected to the London and Dublin Parliaments from prison on an abstentionist platform shortly before dying of hunger strike. These elections are crucial to understanding modern Sinn Féin's commitment to abstentionism on an emotional and practical level, as it was in this period that they began to become an electoral force. The successes led to shift in focus by Sinn Féin and an attempt to integrate practical politics with the physical force campaign against the state being waged by the Provisional IRA. This became notoriously known as the 'armalite and ballot box strategy' but cleared a path for the party to enter into the political mainstream.

Subsequent years saw Sinn Féin win seats in four Parliamentary bodies (Dublin, Belfast, Brussels and London), and drop the policy of abstentionism to all but Westminster. As the peace process played out in the late 1980s and 1990s Sinn Féin were able to reconcile their Republican principles with the Irish Parliament in Dublin and newly formed Northern Irish Assembly. By taking their seats, the Sinn Féin leadership recognised the legitimacy of these institutions and more importantly their ability to be political avenues to address the Republican cause without the need for violence. Their intransigent position on The House of Commons remained, however, due to their refusal to swear or affirm allegiance to a British monarch (which remains a prerequisite to taking a seat in Parliament). However, this refusal to take their seats has its roots in opposition to British rule in Ireland at the very base level. Abstentionism's continuation at Westminster serves as an ideological link between Republicans today, and those who opposed taking their seats in a British Parliament over the past 100 years.

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Fast forward to the current Parliament and all things Brexit. The last election was the biggest seat return the modern Sinn Féin party has ever received to Westminster, as it successfully took three SDLP (moderate Irish Nationalist) seats. What is important to remember is that the SDLP's platform explicitly makes the argument that they would be an Irish Nationalist voice at Westminster, willing to take their seats in order to better represent their constituents. There are a variety of issues at play in these elections, but this choice between active participation through the SDLP or abstentionism with Sinn Féin provides the latter with a strong electoral mandate for their position. The shift towards Sinn Féin within the Northern Irish Nationalist electorate reflects the polarisation of Northern Irish party politics over the last 20 years and was also seen on the Unionist benches. The more moderate UUP lost all of its representation to the DUP, who of course then found themselves as power brokers for Theresa May's slim parliamentary majority.

'Perfect timing to take their seats surely?'

For Sinn Féin, '**no**'.

The Brexit context is completely coincidental to the voting arithmetic of Northern Irish seats in Parliament. Their pairing does have interesting parallels to the 19th-century alliances which formed between the Liberal/Conservative parties and the Irish Nationalist/Unionists respectively. Then, the two leading British Parties relied on support from the Irish Parliamentary Nationalist or Unionist benches in order to govern. The major point of contention between these alliances were the 'Home Rule' bills for an Irish Parliament in Dublin. The failure to pass (and later enact) this legislation contributed to the Republican rejection of Westminster route, a revolution, and the policy of abstentionism itself. Post-partition in the 20th century, there have been substantial periods when British Conservative Party has been in formal and informal alliances with UUP with little attention in Britain. Ultimately, however, it is worth remembering that it has been decades since Northern Irish members of Parliament of any persuasion have held the balance of power, and it has not been lost on Sinn Féin (or the DUP) that it may be decades before that happens again.

This is the wider context which has been lost by those calling for Sinn Féin to take their seats to thwart Brexit. The debate on the legitimacy of the Westminster Parliament legislating on Irish interests predates Brexit and the backstop by several hundred years. There is a considerable amount of counter-arguments against the politics of abstentionism that are timeless, but Sinn Féin is committed to it with regards to Westminster precisely because of its successes in the past and their aims for the future. The mandate from the electorate that they receive is an abstentionist one, and Brexit only serves to underline their claims that Westminster is not able to deal appropriately with an Irish electorate's interests. The inability to recognise Northern Ireland's 'remain' vote in the referendum, or to pass legislation providing an acceptable solution to the border issue, reinforces Sinn Féin's argument that this is a body indifferent to Ireland's welfare. This is not an attempt to defend Sinn Féin's politics or abstentionist practises, but it is a fact of life that Sinn Féin's political priority is a re-unification border poll. Getting one relies on access to power in Dublin and opposing the British political system on a much more fundamental level than their 7 seats in a single Parliament would ever allow. It could even be cynically argued that Sinn Féin's vision of a United Ireland would be at its most persuasive in the aftermath of a chaotic no deal Brexit.

Asking Sinn Féin to take or forfeit their seats to stop Brexit does not go to the heart of *why* they are abstentionists in the first place.

Further Reading

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