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RESEARCH ARTICLE



‘Progress will not occur if we continually adopt positions of principle’:¹ Irish republican prisoners and strategic reorientation, c.1976–1998

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Abstract

Examining the writings of more than 150 IRA prisoners, this article explains why a majority of jailed republicans supported the movement’s strategic reorientation between the anti-criminalisation protests of the late 1970s and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. First, it argues, experiences of prison protests, culminating in the hunger strike of 1981, inclined prisoners to endorse electoral interventions to counter their isolation. Sinn Féin’s subsequent successes impelled prisoners to back electoralism more constructively, envisioning an all-Ireland ‘pan-nationalist’ front. By the end of the 1980s, many republican prisoners regarded tactical eclecticism as vital for their campaign’s advance.

Second, the article contends, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, prisoners pragmatically approved new methods as open-ended experiments. Electoralism, pan-nationalism, and, in the 1990s, peace talks were supposed to aggregate and strengthen the struggle. Tactics were dispensable, and worthwhile only insofar as they enhanced the perceived prospects of victory. By the Good Friday Agreement, prisoners espousing a transitional, constitutional route to Irish unification regarded even the IRA’s ‘armed struggle’ as suspensible. Woven through prisoners’ voluminous acclaim for tactical adaptability, traditions of intra-movement discipline and unity cohered the bulk of the IRA’s prison population.

KEYWORDS Northern Ireland conflict; Irish republicanism; prisoners; strategy; revolutionary politics; electoralism; pan-nationalism; peace process

Introduction

By 1980, Irish republican prisoners had been protesting for four years against a prison regime which categorised them as criminals. Wearing only blankets, protesting prisoners demanded free association, education, and recreation; one visit, one letter, and one parcel per week; and exemption from

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wearing prison uniform and undertaking prison work. Republican prisoners in Armagh and Long Kesh commenced a hunger strike for their 'five demands' in October 1980. Some eight weeks later, senior IRA prisoner Brendan 'Bik' McFarlane was given reason to believe that a deal could be brokered, and the strike was called off.

When the prisoners' demands remained unmet, a second hunger strike was planned. On 1 March 1981, five years after the Labour government had removed special-category status for politically-motivated prisoners, the IRA's Officer Commanding (OC) Bobby Sands refused food. Sands would become the first of ten republicans – comprising seven IRA volunteers and three members of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) – to die on hunger strike that year.

Sands was four days into his hunger strike when Frank Maguire, the independent republican Member of Parliament for Fermanagh-South Tyrone, suffered a fatal heart attack. To raise the hunger strikers' public profile, the Provisional republican leadership nominated Sands as a candidate in the by-election scheduled for 9 April 1981. Sands's subsequent victory, thanks to 30,493 votes, would have major ramifications for the movement. As the hunger strike continued, the Provisionals trialled elections further: including Sands, seven IRA prisoners won 64,985 votes and three parliamentary seats. Standing not as Sinn Féin candidates per se, but on an 'Anti H-Block/Armagh Political Prisoner' ticket, these election campaigns explicitly targeted the criminalisation policy. At Sinn Féin's *ard fheis* (annual conference) in October 1981, a majority voted to extend electoral involvement. By the time Gerry Adams became Sinn Féin's president in November 1983, he had won West Belfast's parliamentary seat.

Alongside the IRA's ongoing 'armed struggle', electoralism became an increasingly important strand of the republican campaign through the 1980s and 1990s. At an historic *ard fheis* in 1986, the required two-thirds majority voted for Sinn Féin to drop its abstentionist policy in the Dublin parliament. Meanwhile, initiating a 'pan-nationalist' movement, the party's *ard comhairle* (national executive) commenced talks with John Hume's constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in March 1988. Sinn Féin's conference of January 1989 ratified the leadership's plans to establish a pan-nationalist consensus on 'self-determination'.

By the early 1990s, Sinn Féin's leadership had broadly redefined republican strategy. Although the IRA campaign continued, the *ard comhairle's* keynote document *Towards a lasting peace in Ireland* (1992) indicated that the movement no longer envisaged expelling the British singularly, or even primarily, through a guerrilla campaign. Instead, the Provisionals would construct an all-Ireland pan-nationalist movement, while inviting the United Nations (UN) and European Economic Community (EEC) to arbitrate on British rule in Ireland. The traditional republican doctrine concerning Ireland's 'right to sovereignty and nationhood' was recast explicitly as a 'European issue' and a matter of 'international law' (Sinn Féin, 1992).

When the IRA declared a ceasefire in August 1994, Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams rallied the ‘undefeated’ nationalist community for a new phase of struggle (*Ireland Information Fact File*, October 1994). Although the cessation broke down in February 1996, the Provisionals restored their ceasefire in July 1997. An extraordinary IRA convention in County Donegal three months later granted Sinn Féin special dispensation to join multi-party peace talks with the British and Irish governments. Signing the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, party negotiators committed to exclusively constitutional politics and power-sharing within Northern Ireland. After the Agreement passed popular referenda in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the *ard comhairle* bullishly heralded a new republican epoch: ‘our struggle goes on’ (sinnfein.org/ardfheis/98ardfheis/retlp.html).

Throughout two decades of strategic reorientation, the Provisional IRA’s prisoners constituted a substantial and politically significant section of the republican movement. According to ex-prisoners’ organisation Coiste na nIarchimí, as many as 25,000 people were jailed for IRA activity during the Northern Ireland conflict (niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/official-reports/finance_personnel/2012-2013/121128_civilservicespecialadvisersbillcoistenanlarchimitaristeach.pdf). Determined to counter the isolation inherent in incarceration, republican prisoners forged a cohesive community (Rolston, 2013). As several leading scholars of the conflict have noted, the vast majority of prisoners devoted considerable energy to debating their movement’s direction and prospects (Shirlow, Tonge, McAuley, & McGlynn, 2010, p. 15, 91).

Prisoners’ strategic, pedagogical, and recreational activities have provided fertile historiographical terrain. Lachlan Whalen (2006) and Dieter Reinisch (2020) have examined how, in the 1970s, incarcerated republicans urged their leaders to marry socialist politics with mass grassroots mobilisation. Uncovering prisoners’ sporting activities, Reinisch (2018) has argued that Gaelic cultural practices embedded a defiant shared identity among the prison population. Rogelio Alonso’s (2007, p. 4, 43, 67) comprehensive oral history account contended that education complexified prisoners’ initially inchoate politics.

Ruán O’Donnell’s (2012, 2015) monumental two-volume study of IRA prisoners in English jails delineated their multifarious campaigns against repression, and solidarities with British radicals. Throughout the conflict, contacts between republican prisoners and British radicals took two contrasting forms: solidarity campaigns lobbying authorities around specific prison conditions; and more acute tactical and strategic debates. Broad-based campaigns against, for example, strip-searches in jail drew general support from a wide range of British leftists, and from republican prisoners and propagandists. Through the late 1980s, for instance, an array of radicals, feminists, students, trades unionists, and Irish diaspora organisations

corresponded with the IRA prisoners incarcerated in Durham Jail, and coordinated demonstrations in the city against strip-searching (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 12 January, 1989; *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 16 March, 1989; Olive, 18 June 1987). By contrast, more technical discussions about the republican campaign's relationship with international revolutionary politics were confined to a minority of left-wing prisoners. In Long Kesh, for example, radicals who resigned from the Provisional movement to form the League of Communist Republicans corresponded with the British left press to elucidate their proposals for a 'popular mass struggle on a Thirty-two County basis' (League of Communist Republicans, 1987).

The republican prison protests between 1976 and 1981, and the movement's subsequent transformation, have received several substantive journalistic treatments (Coogan, 1980; Flynn, 2011; McCafferty, 1981). Accessing prisoners' secret 'comms' – messages and memoranda smuggled in and out of the jail – David Beresford (1987) reconstructed the tactical dilemmas facing prisoners and the movement leadership outside during the hunger strike of 1981. Rachel Oppenheimer (2014) demonstrated how the protests galvanised the movement inside and outside jail, while F. Stuart Ross's *Smashing H-block* (2011) is the pre-eminent book-length study of mass anti-criminalisation mobilisation. Employing a Foucauldian lens, Begoña Aretxaga (1995) and Mary Corcoran (2006) assessed how prisoners challenged carceral authority.

Ex-prisoners have produced some of the most perceptive insights into their social and strategic dynamics. In their vast oral history account *Nor meekly serve my time* (1994), Brian Campbell, Laurence McKeown, and Felim O'Hagan illuminated how jailed IRA volunteers navigated factionalism and organised their educational and cultural environment. Drawing upon extensive interviews with twenty-five ex-prisoners, McKeown's trailblazing *Out of time* (2001) documented how internal networks and power dynamics informed prisoners' education and strategic perspectives. Comprising excerpts from prison diaries between 1990 and 1995, former Sinn Féin Director of Publicity Danny Morrison's *Then the walls came down* (1999) portrayed a resilient movement committed to strategic innovation to transcend a military and political impasse.

Lionising prisoners' historical struggles, activist memoirs sympathetic to Sinn Féin's contemporary constitutional strategy today position the party as the legitimate continuant of the formative prison protests of the late 1970s and early 1980s (McGlinchey, 2019, p. 54).² Former Armagh OC Síle Darragh (2011), for example, has recalled the anti-criminalisation campaign as an essentially unifying experience. In a similar vein, Gerry Kelly's (2013) account of thirty-eight IRA prisoners' escape from Long Kesh in 1983 accentuated the movement's cohesion, discipline, and operational prowess. Prisoners' solidarities and grassroots affinities form the predominant

themes of an anthology co-authored by ex-prisoners from Cavan, Fermanagh, and Monaghan (Fáilte Cluain Eois, 2015).

Since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the movement's strategic transformation has generated considerable controversy, within and without republicanism. Ed Moloney's *A secret history of the IRA* (2002) conveyed and catalysed significant intra-republican disagreement. According to Moloney, the Provisional leadership under Gerry Adams determined in the early 1980s to steer the movement from guerrilla warfare towards electoralism and constitutional politics. Prisoners' historical subjectivities in relation to this reorientation have been the subject of particular contention, especially in the analyses of republican critics of Sinn Féin such as Anthony McIntyre and Richard O'Rawe. McIntyre (2008) contended that through the 1980s and early 1990s, the Provisional leadership deceived IRA prisoners into accepting profound strategic reorientation. O'Rawe's incendiary books *Blanketmen* (2005, pp. 172–191, 206–215) and *Afterlives* (2010) accused Adams and his allies of manipulating and prolonging the hunger strike of 1981 to maximise the movement's political gains.

Scholars have further illuminated ex-prisoners' contested memories of the republican movement's trajectory. Stephen Hopkins's (2014) forensic study of contemporary intra-republican contention elucidated how historical prison struggles became contested ideological terrain. Assessing ex-prisoners' retrospective subjectivities, Marisa McGlinchey (2019, p. 198) and Dieter Reinisch (2016, p. 254; 2020, p. 56, 69) have illustrated the diachronic complexity of schisms within the movement during its strategic realignment. Extending the focus beyond republican prisoners in Northern Ireland, Reinisch's recent works on Portlaoise in the 1970s and early 1980s have insightfully shown how prisoners demanding 'political status' resisted criminalisation in the Republic of Ireland (Reinisch, 2021a). Forensically reconstructing strategic debates among the Portlaoise prisoners, Reinisch (2021b) has demonstrated the contentiousness of Sinn Féin leadership initiatives, such as proposals in the mid-1980s to modify the traditional position on abstentionism. There was particular controversy among jailed republicans who claimed that Sinn Féin's hierarchy paid greater attention to the larger prison populations in the north.

Academic inquiries and intra-republican polemics alike indicate the historical salience of prisoners' engagements with the movement's reorientation through the 1980s and 1990s. Highlighting republicans' 'general consensus' in favour of peace talks in the 1990s, Thomas Leahy's important recent book has signalled attention to combatants' subjectivities (2020, pp. 199–200). As Peter Shirlow and colleagues have adroitly observed (Shirlow et al, p. 92), scholarly focus on elite intergovernmental discourse during the peace process has often occluded a more detailed analysis of how combatants interpreted, responded to, and shaped conflict transformation.

Since Sinn Féin formally committed to exclusively constitutional politics in 1998, dissenting republicans have charged the movement's leadership with conspiring to transform republican strategy during the peace process (Bean & Hayes, 2001, pp. 107–131). These retrospective subjectivities often imply that the hierarchy of an acutely stratified movement misled the rank-and-file into profoundly moderating their methods and objectives (Hepworth, 2020). Tactical initiatives did indeed cascade from the leadership, and traditions of intra-movement discipline centralised the movement's political authority. But the fact remains that the majority of activists, prisoners included, supported the Provisional movement's reorientation throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Excavating a wide range of hitherto untapped activist literature, internal discussion documents, and prisoners' correspondence in the mainstream, republican, and left-wing press, this article analyses *why* the majority of prisoners endorsed the movement's strategic reorientation between 1976 and 1998. Interrogating the internal, processual dynamics of prison milieux, it examines the words and writings of more than 150 IRA prisoners.

It argues, first, that prisoners' experiences of the anti-criminalisation protests, culminating in the hunger strike of 1981, impelled their backing for tactical experimentation. Prisoners endorsed electoral participation to overcome political isolation and to extend the movement's constituency beyond its traditional militant confines. Initially, in 1981 and 1982, incarcerated volunteers championed electoral interventions solely to undermine British statecraft and hostile propaganda: elections were considered apposite to publicise the prison protests, and not as a pathway for overarching strategic change. Subsequently, prisoners identified tactical eclecticism as vital for the movement's advance. From the later 1980s, when Sinn Féin's leadership aspired to build their movement in the Republic of Ireland and to lead a pan-nationalist front, prisoners acclaimed constructive initiatives to represent a broad 'nationalist community' in negotiations with the Westminster and Dublin governments.

Second, the article contends, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, prisoners backed the movement's new departures as non-binding experiments. Rather than perceiving irreversible strategic transformation, prisoners supported electoralism, pan-nationalism, and peace talks as iterative trials. These ad hoc measures, prisoners maintained, could aggregate the struggle without compromising its revolutionary vitality. Tactics were dispensable, and worthwhile only insofar as they enhanced the movement's prospects of victory.³ By the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, prisoners envisioning a transitional path to Irish unity regarded the IRA's armed struggle as suspensible.

The article comprises two chronological sections. It begins by elucidating why, after the hunger strike of 1981, prisoners endorsed new tactics to counter hostile propaganda and expand their base. It proceeds to explain why, from the mid-1980s, prisoners identified modifications as vital to their

struggle's success. Beginning with Sinn Féin's pan-nationalist initiative of the late 1980s, the second section analyses why prisoners understood adaptations as essentially speculative and tactical. It assesses how prisoners increasingly considered the IRA campaign suspensible through the nascent peace process of the 1990s, culminating in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

I . From the prison protests to pan-nationalism, c.1976–1988

In the 1970s, as in previous phases of Irish republican insurgency, imprisonment was the intra-movement imprimatur of commitment. As John F. Morrison's (2013) oral histories have shown, republican prisoners debating tactics and strategies were conscious of their kudos within the movement. Writing from Leicester Prison in 1976, the radical republican Noel Jenkinson declared that seeing 'imperialism in its naked state' endowed prisoners with 'a positive contribution to make to the formulation of policy for the Republican movement' (*The Irish Prisoner*, 2, no date [1979]). Forcibly removed from their guerrilla campaign, jailed republicans were determined to overcome the isolating effects of imprisonment. Writing in 1973, internees stressed the importance of smuggling messages out of the compound at Long Kesh: to counteract 'the sophisticated British propaganda machine', it was incumbent upon republicans to maximise their 'limited' chances of 'gaining publicity' (*Free the people*, [1973]).

As a corollary of their intra-movement kudos and determination to engage with the ongoing struggle, prisoners consistently debated their movement's direction. When the republican movement reviewed its strategy during the 1980s, prisoners asserted a consultative role (McKeown, 2001, pp. 160–161).⁴ Similarly, when IRA prisoners in Long Kesh launched their journal *Iris Bheag* in 1987, three prominent Provisionals hailed a 'long overdue' forum for internal political discussion (McKeown, Lynch, & McMullan, January 1988).

For four years from March 1976, when the Labour government ended special-category status for politically-motivated prisoners, protesters 'on the blanket' experienced profound isolation. Without a mass popular campaign against criminalisation, inmates languished in notorious conditions which Archbishop Tomás Ó Fiaich famously likened to 'sewer pipes in the slums of Calcutta' (*Ulster Herald*, 12 August, 1978). Meanwhile, in marked contrast from earlier prophesies of imminent military victory, in 1978 the IRA leadership forecast 'a long term war' (*Republican News*, 9 December, 1978).

Through the late 1970s, protesting prisoners pleaded with their comrades outside to intensify their anti-criminalisation campaign. From 1976, prisoners' families mobilised in Relatives Action Committees to campaign for political status. But as F. Stuart Ross's synoptic analysis has shown, Sinn Féin leaders were reluctant to prioritise these 'semi-autonomous' campaigns, lest they

divert attention and resources from the republican offensive (Ross, 2011, pp. 23–24). After nearly two years ‘on the blanket’, prisoners in two H-blocks wrote to the Provisionals’ weekly northern newspaper in 1978, highlighting the ‘torture’ 250 inmates experienced daily (*Republican News*, 11 February, 1978).

Prisoners’ relatives remained at the forefront of grassroots campaigns against criminalisation (Ross, 2011, p. 22). Employing the language of maternity, republican women especially highlighted their relatives’ plight. Calling activists’ attention to the isolated prisoners, one ‘H-block mother’ asked ‘how much more can these men take? ... The most frightening thought is that they are so completely cut off from all who love and care for them’ (*Republican News*, 1 April, 1978). Provisional propagandists in Belfast later admitted that it had taken the movement ‘about three years’, until the winter of 1979, to dispel a ‘very negative attitude’ and initiate a ‘mass’ anti-criminalisation movement (*The Irish Prisoner*, July–August, 1981).

Prisoners attempted to draw international attention to their adversity. When the IRA’s first ‘blanketman’, Kieran Nugent, was released from Long Kesh in May 1979, he implored a hastily-convened press conference to ‘let the world know’ about the growing anti-criminalisation campaign (*An Pho-blacht/Republican News*, 19 May, 1979). Later that year, blanket protesters desperately pleaded with British trades unionists for assistance: ‘We are dying here. Please help us!’ (*The Irish Prisoner*, December, 1979–January 1980). Some 370 prisoners were now on the blanket. In a candid statement to Sinn Féin’s *ard fheis* of January 1980, IRA prisoners admitted that their morale could not sustain indefinitely, and implored Sinn Féin to redouble its efforts (*Irish Press*, 21 January, 1980).

Once Sinn Féin eventually galvanised wider sympathy for the protesting prisoners, republican strategists seized upon the radicalising potential of a broad front organisation. Formed in October 1979 by prisoners’ relatives and comrades, the National H-Block/Armagh Committee (NHBAC) invited activists across the political spectrum to join a ‘peaceful single issue campaign’ to pressurise Thatcher’s government to grant the prisoners’ five demands (Ó Dúill, 1981). Crucially, as Sinn Féin representative Owen Carron told a national television audience, support for the IRA’s armed struggle was not a requirement of NHBAC activism (*Nationwide*, 1981). By the end of 1980, some 242 NHBAC action groups across Ireland were cohering republicans, constitutional nationalists, civil rights campaigners, trades unionists, liberals, and pacifists. Addressing the NHBAC conference in January 1981, senior Provisional Joe Cahill indicated that republicans would seek to replicate the committee’s mass mobilisation on manifestations of British rule:

There are other broader issues that we can unite on. We’ve had such success, and Sinn Féin would be very hopeful that we will unite and come together,

and work together on broader issues in the future (*H-Block/Armagh Campaign News Sheet*, February 1981).

After the hunger strike of 1980 ended in confusion, without the five demands being met, prisoners embarking on a second hunger strike in March 1981 steeled themselves for increased hardship. On the eve of the strike, IRA prisoner Philip Rooney confided in a comrade:

everybody seems to be deliberately trying to avoid any reference to h[unger]/s [trike] ... I think everybody is of the same opinion that only death awaits the strikers and discussing things like that isn't nice, so nobody bothers ... We all know before there's going to be any settlement somebody's going to have to pay the price (Short Strand 1980–81 Committee, 2001, no pagination).

Amid a harrowing hunger strike, exhausted by years of all-consuming protests, many prisoners seized eagerly upon the electoral experiments in 1981. From the profound nadir of their comrades' deaths, prisoners identified elections as an opportunity to counter British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's claim that the Provisionals had 'put the Catholic community on the rack' (margaretthatcher.org/document/104657). Especially for those who had endured years on the blanket, electoral propaganda constituted a remarkable fillip. Writing from Long Kesh a day after Bobby Sands won the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election in April 1981, INLA prisoner Tony O'Hara revelled in the

jubilant felt here this evening. With the result of the election there is a feeling here tonight which has not been here in a very long time ... and the screws are visibly shattered – it's just great! (Hegarty, 2006, p. 50).

After seven IRA prisoners yielded 64,985 votes and won three parliamentary seats across the island in 1981,⁵ inmates in Long Kesh's H-block 6 moved Sinn Féin's annual conference to contest elections to Northern Ireland's councils and the Dublin parliament (H6 resolutions for the Sinn Féin ard-fheis, 8 October, 1981).

At this juncture, prisoners endorsed electoral interventions primarily as a destructive mechanism to stymie British policies in Ireland. Mobilising demonstrable grassroots opposition to British rule, the argument ran, would prevent Westminster from normalising Northern Ireland's politics. When Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Prior, instituted a new devolved assembly in 1982, IRA women in Armagh Jail implored the 'Nationalist community' to vote for Sinn Féin's abstentionist candidates and undermine Prior's attempt to 'reinstate the Unionist regime of old'. Writing from Magilligan, seven County Tyrone prisoners hailed republican candidacies which would 'boycott this farcical British Assembly' (*Ulster Herald*, 16 October, 1982). After Sinn Féin won 64,191 votes and five seats, the prisoners' public relations officer in Long Kesh celebrated the party's 'principled abstention' for

sabotaging British devolution (H-block prison comm from PRO for the 1983 hunger strike commemoration, 1983).

As far as prisoners were concerned, elections in 1981 and 1982 represented opportunities to combat isolation and hostile propaganda. But early successes generated publicity coups and morale boosts, fostering an inchoate sense among some prisoners that election campaigns might aid the movement's political development. Writing from Leicester Prison, senior Provisional Brian Keenan suggested that the Assembly elections facilitated republican claims to represent 'the oppressed' (Keenan, 1982). When soon-to-be Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams won the parliamentary seat of West Belfast in 1983, defeating SDLP candidate Joe Hendron by 2,221 votes, Bill Meehan in Long Kesh claimed that Sinn Féin was 'rapidly overtaking the SDLP as the voice of the Nationalist people here in the north-eastern counties' (Meehan, 1984). Meehan's forecast proved over-optimistic – in Northern Ireland's local elections of 1985, Sinn Féin won fifty-nine seats to the SDLP's 102 – but conveyed the prevailing sense of momentum in the ranks.

The nascent hope that electoralism might play a more enduring, formative role in the movement's political development chimed with the views of Sinn Féin's foremost strategist and Director of Publicity, Danny Morrison. In June 1984, the Fermanagh IRA prisoners had welcomed Morrison's candidacy in the EEC election as a destructive mechanism to 'expose [British] repression ... on an international platform' (*Fermanagh Herald*, 9 June, 1984). But after Sinn Féin failed to win a seat in the European Parliament, Morrison asserted that electoral victories were imperative, especially in the Republic of Ireland:⁶

The policy of abstentionism obviously handicaps our potential for gathering votes ... I quite honestly don't know how we're going to overcome the problem, but I just know that as revolutionaries, as republicans, who have the responsibility to plot a political way forward ... I think that we will do it, but we'll do it by degrees (Kerrigan, 1984).

Concurring with Morrison, prisoners increasingly imagined electoralism as a means of expanding the movement's base. Simultaneously, suggesting that a growing nationalist constituency backed the republican campaign, electoral support assuaged prisoners' deep-seated fears of isolation. In 1985, when Sinn Féin won 75,686 votes and fifty-nine council seats in Northern Ireland, County Kerry's IRA prisoners claimed that nationalists who had formerly believed 'sincerely' in exclusively constitutional politics now 'endorsed ... the Republican struggle for national liberation' (*Kerryman*, 14 June, 1985).

From the mid-1980s, prisoners especially lauded gambits which they considered germane to developing an all-Ireland republican movement. The urgency of augmenting the base trumped organisational orthodoxies. In 1985, Sinn Féin's *ard fheis* debated abstentionism in relation to the Dublin

parliament, Leinster House. Implicitly seconding Morrison's view that abstentionism inhibited the movement's development in the south, several IRA prisoners in England enjoined the conference to regard abstentionism as a dispensable tactic (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 7 November, 1985). When Sinn Féin's *ard comhairle* moved the following year's *ard fheis* to drop abstentionism, high-profile republicans in Leicester, including Brian Keenan and Patrick Magee, supported efforts to develop the movement in the Republic 'through the ballot box' (Ford, 1986). When the required two-thirds conference majority voted to drop abstentionism, former Provisional leader Ruairí Ó Brádaigh left in protest, forming Republican Sinn Féin (RSF).

After the *ard fheis* of 1986, doctrinaire prisoners who prioritised republican orthodoxies were in a distinct minority. Only twelve prisoners sent greetings to RSF in 1987 (*Saoirse: Irish Freedom*, October, 1987). Earlier that year, three H-block prisoners had aligned with Ó Brádaigh's faction, although not without qualification:

While some of us would not identify totally with your politics we do identify with your sincerity and acknowledge your collective right to stand by the principles of what we believe to be 'Republicanism of the Fenian Variety' (*Republican Bulletin: Iris Na Poblachta*, January-February, 1987).

Among the few prisoners who broke with the Provisionals over abstentionism, the schism was profoundly unsettling. Released from jail in 1992, some six years after the split, Dublin republican John Hayes, who aligned with RSF, still hoped for a reconciliation (*Saoirse: Irish Freedom*, April, 1992).

For its advocates, electoralism remained a dispensable experiment, valued only to the extent that it broadened the movement's base. Consequently, prisoners could welcome innovation without attaching great significance to any particular method. Anticipating the general election of June 1987, for example, Fermanagh Provisional Kevin Lynch (6 June 1987) called for public support for Sinn Féin candidates, while positioning elections as 'only one aspect' of the republican campaign: 'I make no grandiose claims as to the immediate effects of the election of Sinn Féin candidates', Lynch insisted.

The determination to politicise a mass movement was not confined to those prisoners who approved of Gerry Adams's Sinn Féin leadership. Prisoners of diverse ideological positions differed, however, in how they proposed to bolster the republican constituency. After the Sinn Féin *ard fheis* in November 1986, more than sixty IRA prisoners resigned from the movement and formed the League of Communist Republicans, a jail network around erstwhile Provisional education organiser Tommy McKearney. Charging the Provisionals with electoral opportunism and reformism, the group's associates contributed critical analyses of the republican movement to their journal, *Congress '86* (O'Ruairc, 2001; Hepworth, 2021, p. 86, 117–121). Emerging from radical pedagogy in Long Kesh, the League

of Communist Republicans argued that a mass movement necessitated a revolutionary working-class vanguard organising around a 'clear socialist programme' (McKearney, 20 June 1988). In this schema, Sinn Féin's 'pan-nationalism' jettisoned radical republicanism for a minimal reformist programme appealing to 'just about anyone capable of humming "The Rising of the Moon"' (Tierney & Byrne, 1987).

Some critical prisoners who remained within the Provisional movement advocated a pan-nationalist plan precisely *because* they considered the struggle to have reached a stalemate. Writing in 1987, one leftist prisoner simultaneously urged the movement to formalise 'theoretical grounding in the Marxist tradition' while applauding Sinn Féin's tactical electoralism (*Marxist Forum: Official Journal of the Socialist Revolutionary Group of Ireland*, Spring, 1990). Similarly, lamenting how 'for the most part, Republican strategy has failed substantially to alter the factors pertaining to Britain remaining in Ireland', Anthony McIntyre and Micky McMullan (1987) exhorted republicans to forge a 'new and *genuine* 32 county Nationalism'.

li . From pan-nationalism to the Good Friday Agreement, c.1988–1998

Sinn Féin's 'pan-nationalist' initiative originated in the spring of 1988, when the party executive invited John Hume's SDLP to establish an 'overall political strategy' for Irish unification. The Provisionals disdained the SDLP's constitutionalist gradualism; Hume repudiated the IRA campaign. Nevertheless, the two parties agreed to seek 'common ground' on wide-ranging issues spanning policing, the judicial and penal systems, unemployment, economic austerity, and cultural rights (Sinn Féin Publicity Department, 1989). Collapsing distinctions between republicans and the SDLP, Adams publicly coined a broad 'non-unionist' political category (Horgan, 1988). Meeting in January 1989, Sinn Féin's *ard fheis* passed by an overwhelming majority a leadership motion to develop an 'all-Ireland mass movement' around the core demand for 'national self-determination' (*Iris Bheag*, January, 1989).⁷

Through the late 1980s, IRA prisoners hailed pan-nationalism as an exploratory attempt to fuse and lead a wider political constituency. Prisoners who opposed British jurisdiction in Ireland outright increasingly called for Sinn Féin to connect with heterogeneous critics of, inter alia, economic, cultural, or judicial *manifestations* of British rule. When the Adams-Hume talks commenced in 1988, one H-block wing urged Sinn Féin to engage further with the labour movement and, more capaciously still, with everybody 'struggling against lack of economic and political rights' (*Iris Bheag*, August, 1988).

Since tactics were dispensable and reversible, prisoners iteratively approved mechanisms which they considered apt for attracting sympathisers

without compromising the movement's singular objective of Irish unification. Jailed volunteers distinguished sharply between the tactical experiments they espoused and more profound strategic reorientation. Ardent republican critics of the SDLP could therefore acquiesce in pan-nationalist, single-issue campaigns around, for example, the MacBride Principles on employment rights.⁸ In H5, the IRA prisoners dismissed as 'impracticable' any wholesale 'alliance' with the SDLP leadership, but championed expedient campaigns on broad civil rights issues to 'win ... genuine moderate Nationalists' (POWs H-5, [June 1988](#)).

Prisoners endorsing pan-nationalism in the 1980s implicitly acknowledged that their campaign faced an impasse. It was now incumbent upon Sinn Féin, the argument ran, to suffuse widespread political alienation with a core nationalist agenda. Writing from Leicester Prison, Patrick Magee ([July 1989](#)) called for the movement to formulate a compelling 'economic and social case for self-determination', accessible to a wider all-Ireland community of the politically disenchanted. Magee's prescription recalled how the anti-criminalisation campaign had expanded a decade earlier. In 1980, republicans had reframed the prison protests as a fundamentally humanitarian issue. Almost a decade later, eschewing its more doctrinaire orthodoxies, Sinn Féin presented British rule in Ireland as a multifaceted incursion on democratic rights, which precipitated a host of economic, cultural, and social injustices. By the general election of 1987, Fermanagh Provisional Seán Lynch framed Sinn Féin broadly as 'the oppressed people's choice' (Lynch, [1987](#)).

By the end of the 1980s, positioning electoralism and pan-nationalism as dynamic forces – in implicit contrast to the IRA's enduring but more attritional campaign – supportive prisoners considered tactical innovation vital for their struggle's advancement. Summarising the Portlaoise prisoners' discussions during the *ard fheis* which mandated the pan-nationalist initiative in 1989, Dublin Provisional Sean Hick ([February 1989](#)) reported 'universal acceptance within the jail of the need to broaden the struggle ... Sinn Féin must be prepared to work with other groups'. Especially after Sinn Féin's *ard fheis* ratified *Towards a lasting peace in Ireland* in February 1992, prisoners considered their movement capable of leading a broad 'nationalist community'. Anticipating the general election in April 1992, for example, the Tyrone IRA prisoners opined that votes for Sinn Féin would boldly assert 'National identity and civil rights' (Tyrone P.O.W.'s, H. Blocks, [1992](#)).

Refusing to meet the pre-condition of renouncing the IRA, Sinn Féin was excluded from multi-party talks with Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Brooke at Stormont in April 1991. Within the movement, constructive electoralism posited that a demonstrable mandate would galvanise the party to overcome the obstacle and enter dialogue with the London and Dublin governments. Identifying the Sinn Féin hierarchy as the initiators of the peace process, Tyrone IRA prisoner Patrick Grimes ([9 April 1992](#)) extolled the

'party for change'. Commending Sinn Féin's representatives in the local elections of May 1993, Fermanagh Provisionals Seán Lynch, Barry Murray, and Gerard Maguire (1993) backed the party's 'new radical constructive initiative ... A vote for Sinn Féin is a vote for peace with justice, equality and democracy'. Positioning electoral successes as a prerequisite for negotiations, prisoners mirrored Adams's determination to secure the party's 'mandate' as 'the largest Nationalist party in Belfast' (*The Spirit of Freedom: The uncensored voice of West Belfast*, March, 1992).

When Adams lost West Belfast to the SDLP's Joe Hendron in 1992, Sinn Féin's response confirmed how party strategists valued elections as passports to peace negotiations. Director of Elections Jim Gibney immediately announced that the 'party machine' would review its performance so the seat could be 'reclaimed' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 16 April, 1992). Profiting from loyalists' tactical voting, Adams claimed, the SDLP 'stole the West Belfast seat from the nationalists of West Belfast' (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 23 April, 1992). Insisting that his party remained ascendant, Adams told the local electorate that Sinn Féin retained its 'mandate' to represent nationalists in prospective peace talks (*The Spirit of Freedom: The uncensored voice of West Belfast*, April 1992).

Through the mid-1990s, prisoners maintained that tactical eclecticism was propelling the movement towards achieving its central objective. When prisoners repudiated the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993,⁹ they evinced bemusement with the Westminster and Dublin governments' conservatism: had not the pan-nationalist initiative and Sinn Féin's electoral performance discredited the unionist veto? Rejecting the Declaration, Long Kesh OC Seán Lynch could reassert the traditional republican contempt for an internal solution to the Northern Ireland conflict: 'Exactly what do they mean, the British government mean: *two acts of self-determination*? It's not acceptable' (*Provos: The IRA and Sinn Féin*, 1997). In Long Kesh and Maghaberry, prisoners rejected the Declaration outright and rebuked John Major's government for vainly attempting to 'thwart' the republican advance (Republican POWs, H-Blocks, 1994).

Positioning their organisation as the initiators and authors of the nascent peace process, prisoners could dismiss what they perceived as Westminster's stalling. Ready to continue the 'long war' on transformed political terrain, Danny Morrison, incarcerated in Long Kesh, rejected the suggestion that the Declaration would force republicans to compromise:

I do not draw that conclusion ... The conclusion I draw is it's going to go on longer ... but at the end of it, Britain can go home proudly, saying we settled that honourably, or Britain can go home with its tail between its legs (*Provos: The IRA and Sinn Féin*, 1997).

In Portlaoise, veteran OC Martin Ferris declared that the peace process was a republican initiative (PRO Republican POWs, Portlaoise Prison, 1994). If, as

Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca suggests (2007, p. 297), the Provisionals could no longer sustain an intense guerrilla campaign, republicans' sense of ownership in the peace process outweighed military misgivings.

Gordon Clubb's (2016, pp. 622–623) formulation of the peace process as a republican 'disengagement frame ... constructed, tested and then diffused' in prisons helpfully signals attention to prisoners' close engagement with the peace initiative. Yet Clubb's paradigm risks obscuring the sense of strategic agency which imprisoned volunteers perceived. Rejecting the Downing Street Declaration on the grounds of established republican principle, IRA prisoners restated their longstanding pragmatism. Dismissing the Declaration, Sinn Féin's prison *cumann* (branch) in Long Kesh stipulated that the Major-Reynolds agreement was neither a 'golden opportunity' nor a 'last chance' for peace: republicans would fashion a 'better opportunity' (Republican POWs, H-Blocks, 1994). Several months after the IRA ceasefire of 1994, prisoners in Long Kesh praised their leaders' 'courageous initiative' and anticipated 'inevitable' British withdrawal (Sinn Féin H-block *cumann*, 1994). In Maghaberry, the IRA's prison leader Geraldine Ferrity (1995) acclaimed 'the great work and achievements of nationalist leaders' and rallied the 'nationalist people' en masse to demand all-party talks.

In line with the movement's tactical opportunism, prisoners regarded the IRA ceasefire of August 1994 as expedient to advance the campaign through negotiations. Welcoming the cessation as a step towards talks with the British government, eighteen Belfast prisoners lauded the IRA's 'courageous' advance and heralded their 'best opportunity' thus far to achieve Irish unity through 'peaceful negotiation' (S/Strand, Markets & L/Ormeau Rd Republican Prisoners statement, 1994). Subsequent frustration with perceived British stalling demonstrated that prisoners would back the ceasefire only to the extent that doing so prompted concessions from Westminster. Released from Long Kesh in 1994 after seventeen years in jail, Leo Green counterposed his initial 'optimism' about the ceasefire against his disappointment with the British government's subsequent inaction: 'They haven't indicated anything really that would satisfy nationalist aspirations' (*Saoirse Campaign USA*, December, 1994).

After the ceasefire, prisoners naturally had an interest in the question of amnesties. As Jonathan Tonge has argued, accentuating the possibility of early releases enabled Sinn Féin's leaders to court rank-and-file support for negotiations. In 1994, the party instituted a ginger group, *Saoirse*, to campaign specifically on the issue (Tonge, 2004, p. 674). Within months of the ceasefire, prisoners from Newry and south Armagh complained that Major's government had 'refused to address' the problem (S. Armagh/Newry Republican POW's, Long Kesh statement, 1995). Strikingly, however, prisoners overtly refused to allow their own situation to divert attention from the movement's enduring objective. As Kieran McEvoy has noted (2001,

p. 322), many jailed Provisionals insisted that their freedom was entirely secondary to the movement's historic objective. In 1995, repudiating the suggestion of conditional releases, County Tyrone's remand prisoners, many of whom could conceivably expect lengthy jail terms, asserted vociferously that they would settle for nothing less than 'permanent' British withdrawal (Tyrone (Remand) R.P.O.W.s., H-Blocks, Long Kesh, 1995).

For prisoners who understood the ceasefire as a trial for a non-military approach, it was possible to be sceptical about the cessation while remaining determined that the movement would ultimately achieve its objectives. Jailed volunteers could endorse a ceasefire without necessarily anticipating imminent advances. Such scepticism was especially pervasive among the IRA women in Maghaberry. Interviewed one year after the ceasefire, OC Rosa-leen McCorley questioned what republicans had gained. Ailish Carroll expressed 'admiration' for Sinn Féin's leaders, but doubted that the cessation would push Westminster to convene the 'inclusive talks' which republicans sought (Gallagher, 1995, pp. xviii, 43). Judging each method on its merits, prisoners who remained confident of long-term victory could question the ceasefire. In a statement issued in 1995, the small cohort of republican prisoners at Full Sutton Prison complained that the ceasefire had not benefited the movement, but reasserted that the British government would never defeat the IRA (Irish republican P.O.W.s, Full Sutton Prison, 1995).

Prisoners who doubted the ceasefire's efficacy found reassurance in the IRA's capacity to return to war. Consonant with the leadership's 'tactical use of armed struggle' (cain.ulster.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/tuas94.htm),¹⁰ sceptical volunteers stressed the ceasefire's contingency: if Major's government failed to convene inclusive talks, the IRA remained on standby. Writing to the movement's newspaper shortly after the eighteen-month ceasefire ended in 1996, one prisoner reminded his comrades that they retained 'an effective military force' (Ó Conghalaigh, 1996). Sinn Féin strategists reconfigured armed struggle as a tactic to be employed judiciously. After the Provisionals called another ceasefire in 1997, *ard comhairle* representative Francie Molloy reassured a party meeting in south Armagh that if the next round of talks did not 'succeed ... we simply go back to what we know best' (Shirlow et al., 2010, p. 103).

Interpreting the peace process as a republican initiative which by definition necessitated improvisation and ingenuity, prisoners subsumed misgivings about particular tactics. Jailed volunteers could acquiesce in tactical innovations, reassured in the belief that they would cumulatively yield an historic breakthrough. Anticipating elections to the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue in 1996, one group of west Belfast IRA prisoners admitted that they would have preferred a unified nationalist boycott, but the SDLP's participation compelled Sinn Féin candidates to stand. In a statement which typified tactical opportunism, the prisoners from St James's

candidly told their community that the election was 'meaningless', except to the extent that it enabled republicans to 'reinforce' their mandate ahead of prospective negotiations (*Sile na Gig: Nuacht Ceantar*, May, 1996).

As multi-party talks stuttered and started through 1997 and 1998, prisoners endorsed electoral interventions in a broader effort to aggregate the movement's variegated campaign. Alongside international diplomacy and the tactical use of armed struggle, Sinn Féin candidacies were understood as one of several mechanisms to strengthen party representatives in talks with the British and Irish governments. Castigating an intransigent government, the Fermanagh IRA prisoners exhorted activists to elect Sinn Féin candidates to pressurise Westminster to relinquish the unionist veto (*Fermanagh Herald*, 30 April, 1997). In a comparable spirit, anticipating a council by-election in west Tyrone in January 1998, that county's prisoners in Long Kesh and Maghaberry echoed senior Sinn Féin negotiator Gerry Kelly, who had told a local party meeting that a substantial Sinn Féin vote would expedite 'national self-determination' (Tyrone POWs, Long Kesh and Maghaberry, 8 January 1998).

Signing the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, Sinn Féin's negotiators committed the republican movement to exclusively constitutional politics and power-sharing in a devolved assembly in Northern Ireland. For the Provisional leadership, while the Agreement was not a solution in itself, it was expedient to develop all-Ireland political frameworks. Commending the Agreement to a seminal *ard fheis* in April 1998, Adams admitted Good Friday was 'not a settlement', but a 'pragmatic route to our ultimate goal ... We need to explore whether this is a possibility' (*An Phoblacht*, 23 April, 1998). Adams's experimentalism also characterised the IRA leadership's response: the Agreement's partitionist dimension did 'not constitute the exercise of national self-determination', but could represent a 'significant development' for republicans exerting political pressure on the London and Dublin governments (*An Phoblacht*, 30 April 1998).

Cautious support for Good Friday represented the zenith of republican prisoners' pragmatism. Acquiescing in the Agreement as a point of departure, not a terminus, prisoners imagined how cross-border institutions might generate all-Ireland democracy. Strabane IRA prisoners Nigel McDermott and John Brady (1998) were especially phlegmatic, committing to the Agreement as 'merely the first step in a long journey'. Championing Sinn Féin election candidates that summer, republican prisoners from west Tyrone suggested that the movement's long campaign had 'opened up for the nationalist people' the chance to pursue Irish unity 'through political means' (Lafferty & Hannigan, 1998). Accentuating the dynamic potential of constitutional politics enabled prisoners to overcome reservations about entering government in 'illegitimate' political institutions. In 1999, in his final editorial in the prisoners' internal magazine, *The Captive Voice*, Laurence McKeown admitted that

'Republican POW's' shared 'concerns' about the Agreement, but recognised that 'even with its design faults the vehicle for change has the potential for moving forward' (*The Captive Voice/An Glór Gafa*, 1999).

As Seán McConville has recently noted (2021), in the final volume of his comprehensive trilogy, senior Provisionals who endorsed Good Friday crucially galvanised movement unity. The cachet of veteran prisoners reassured the rank-and-file of constitutionalism's potential. From 1996, with his leadership cadre, the IRA's Long Kesh OC, Pádraic Wilson, visited every wing of the jail, reminding prisoners that the external leadership would continue to consult them (McKeown, 2001, pp. 206–207). The appearance of four of the IRA's longest-serving prisoners at the *ard fheis* of May 1998 – where the 'Balcombe Street four' received a ten-minute standing ovation from the floor – signalled militants' approval of the peace strategy. Sinn Féin's president hailed the four as 'our Nelson Mandelas' (*The Captive Voice/An Glór Gafa*, Summer 1998).

The international kudos of African National Congress (ANC) strategists further emboldened republican prisoners to support a negotiating strategy. In the summer of 1998, more than 100 republican prisoners in Long Kesh welcomed ANC Secretary-General Cyril Ramaphosa and chief negotiator Mathews Phosa. The South African veterans advised republicans to engage fully with ideological opponents, irrespective of misgivings. IRA prisoner Liam Gallen (1998) subsequently reported that the ANC's visit heartened and encouraged his comrades. The release of some 249 republican prisoners that year, under the Agreement's terms, further bolstered volunteers' confidence (Bryson, McEvoy, & Albert, 2021, pp. 86–87).

Perpetuating the movement's 'long war' mantra, republicans did not anticipate an instant breakthrough. Crucially, however, prisoners envisioned their movement's compositional and tactical breadth inexorably overcoming enemy statecraft. Counselling patience and determination among his comrades, Pádraic Wilson (1999) contrasted the 'confusion' and 'hype' which had attended the ceasefire of 1994, when volunteers 'thought that things would move quickly', from prisoners' more sober analysis of Good Friday. Now, Wilson argued, militants' 'feet were more firmly rooted to the ground', and 'unity of purpose' would 'strengthen and guide' the movement through this new phase.

Conclusion

Between the prison protests of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the republican movement profoundly reoriented its strategy. Over two decades, a movement which formerly executed a guerrilla campaign against the British state, committed to exclusively constitutional politics in a devolved Northern Ireland assembly. Explicating how

republican prisoners interpreted these processes in the 1980s and 1990s, this article has illuminated why jailed IRA volunteers broadly supported the movement's course.

In keeping with the Provisional movement's traditions, the hierarchy initiated and led tactical reviews. In 1977 and 1982, for example, party conferences agreed that it was for the *ard comhairle* to decide whether to contest elections to the European Parliament and the Dáil, respectively (*Irish Examiner*, 24 October, 1977; Mac Uaid, 1982). But prisoners' responses to leadership initiatives informed the pace and gradualism of strategic reorientation. Seeking to maintain unity at *ard fheiseanna*, the party executive invited the rank-and-file and prisoners to ratify initiatives such as dropping abstentionism or pursuing pan-nationalist talks. Prisoners welcomed the opportunity to discuss and respond to leadership proposals.

Initially, experiences of isolation during anti-criminalisation protests in the late 1970s and early 1980s inclined prisoners to endorse electoral interventions, seeking to undermine hostile British propaganda. Subsequently, in 1983 and 1985, for example, as Sinn Féin's notable victories boosted activist morale, prisoners envisioned electoralism assuming a more constructive role. Aspiring to build the movement from relative obscurity in the south, prisoners largely agreed with the *ard fheis* decision in 1986 to participate formally in the Dublin parliament. At the beginning of the 1980s, the anti-criminalisation movement had advanced by inviting support from diverse political positions, including those which disavowed the IRA campaign. In prisoners' collective memory, the motif of the anti-criminalisation movement reminded jailed republicans that widening the movement's base could stimulate progress. As Henry Patterson suggested, activists supported dropping abstentionism in 1986 to fulfil a hybrid 'long war', combining continual armed struggle in the north and political mobilisation across all-Ireland. Political processes, Adams's supporters insisted, neither undermined nor detracted from the armed struggle, but rather increased its impact (Patterson, 1990, p. 14, 18–19).

For many prisoners, by the time that Sinn Féin's *ard comhairle* proposed its pan-nationalist initiative in the late 1980s, methodological breadth was essential for the struggle to overcome political and military stalemate. From this perspective, the republican campaign comprised a mosaic of susceptible tactics spanning, inter alia, armed struggle, electoralism, and a host of single-issue campaigns geared broadly towards nationalists concerned with, for example, extradition, cultural rights, and the economy. Prisoners could regard electoralism and pan-nationalism as necessary tactical additions to an IRA campaign mired in attrition and subject to increasing popular opprobrium. Albeit from a very particular standpoint, radical prisoners who ultimately left the Provisionals in the late 1980s agreed that the movement could only advance by harnessing and directing a more substantial constituency of the politically disaffected.

Employed pragmatically, new tactics were consistently understood as dispensable, open-ended experiments. As Joost Augusteijn (2003, p. 8) has suggested, republican advocates for tactical experimentation did not constitute a fixed, moderate faction within the movement; rather, they espoused new methods at contingent moments when innovation appeared essential for overcoming impasse. The struggle's multifaceted forms were not considered to infringe republicanism's central contents. Electoralism and overtures to prospective international sympathisers in Irish-America, for example, were welcomed as ancillary repertoires of contention. Since tactics were contributory and suspensible, prisoners could sanction new methods speculatively and without particular enthusiasm. As Leahy has posited, prisoners were important advocates for the movement's modifications through the 1980s and 1990s. Crucially, however, rather than agreeing to redefine wholesale the movement's strategy, prisoners iteratively endorsed tactical innovation.

Assimilating the movement's 'long war' mantra from the late 1970s, tactical malleability enabled prisoners simultaneously to evince profound confidence in their movement's long-term prospects, while diagnosing temporary impasse. Experimentation acknowledged the objective obstacles which the movement faced, while reasserting the subjective belief that aggregating the campaign would pave the way to victory. Pan-nationalism, for example, could enhance the movement's standing among moderate nationalists who disavowed the IRA campaign. Methods which were not deemed to advance the campaign at a particular point in time could be suspended or jettisoned altogether. Prisoners found reassurance in the enduring belief that if constitutionalism did not advance republican demands, the movement could revert to its militarist traditions.

As Lorenzo Bosi has noted (2012, p. 348), historical precedent dictated that militarism held particular significance in republicanism's political ontology. By a partisan, and somewhat selective, reading of republican historiography – which posited that historical defeats resulted primarily from negotiation and compromise, rather than military inefficacy¹¹ – activists habitually identified the militarist method as the hallmark of radicalism (Hepworth, 2021, p. 207). Through armed struggle, republicans viscerally enacted a legitimist politics premised on what the IRA's training manual termed its 'moral ... right to resist foreign aggression ... tyranny[,] and oppression' (Coogan, 2002, p. 546). Simultaneously, republicans hailed militarism for distinguishing them from more moderate, constitutional nationalists who, by contrast, countenanced participating in 'British' institutions (Lynn, 2002, p. 74).

Until the mid-1980s, the Provisional leadership maintained what M. L. R. Smith (1995, pp. 11–15) has called its military vanguardism. When the movement deployed electoralism in the early 1980s, its strategists insisted that armed struggle remained the cardinal aspect of the republican campaign.

Writing pseudonymously in the Provisionals' newspaper in 1982, Danny Morrison stipulated that there could be no 'parliamentary road to a united Ireland', and electoralism did not usurp 'the primacy of armed struggle' (Arnalis, 16 September 1982). But when seeking to expand their pan-nationalist constituency in the later 1980s, republican leaders started to position the IRA campaign as one tactic among several. Interviewed by British radical Mick Hume in 1988, Gerry Adams said that there was 'no such thing as the primacy of armed struggle, it's the primacy of politics that's important' (*Living Marxism*, January 1989). The IRA campaign, Adams told the rank-and-file, could not succeed 'on its own', and needed to 'be enhanced' by complementary tactics in a 'popular anti-imperialist struggle' (Sinn Féin Publicity Department, 1988).

The armed struggle always retained its symbolic, even emotional, significance for IRA prisoners – not least since their incarceration reflected their participation. But by the 1990s, prisoners increasingly held that tactical complements besides militarism were capable of advancing their campaign (English, 2003, p. 250). From this perspective, ceasefires became not merely acceptable, but potentially germane to the movement's objectives: the IRA, the argument ran, had neither demobilised, surrendered, nor decommissioned. A conditional cessation to facilitate peace talks appeared to represent a potential advance.

In the 1990s, republicans were prepared to endorse IRA ceasefires as part of a wider set of measures to expedite much-vaunted peace negotiations. Military cessations were time-limited and conditional, and would only be maintained if they were deemed to advance the struggle. Moreover, in line with the 'tactical use of armed struggle', the sheer threat and capacity of a guerrilla army was sufficient to satisfy many activists that the moment retained the initiative and the leverage required in tortuous negotiations with state actors. A guerrilla army on reversible ceasefire could embolden militants as fervently as could a guerrilla army at war.

Throughout the movement's evolution, intra-movement traditions of discipline and loyalty cohered broad sections of the prison population. The cachet of veteran prisoners further reassured the rank-and-file that novel forms of struggle did not compromise the movement's vitality and capacity to achieve its objectives. Conversely, prisoners' connections to activists outside jail reinforced a sense of oneness across the movement's heterogeneous strands. When Sinn Féin's Brian McCaffrey stood in the Erne East by-election of May 1986, for instance, IRA prisoner Eamon McElroy's laudatory testimonial noted that McCaffrey had 'for several years kept in constant contact with us, the Fermanagh POWs' (*Fermanagh Herald*, 17 May, 1986).

As Clubb (2016) has noted, during the peace process, Sinn Féin strategists gauged prisoners' views to inform their own pace and priorities in negotiations with the British and Irish governments. But prisoners saw themselves

as critical contributors to the movement's internal discussions. When Sinn Féin founded its Saoirse campaign in 1994, seeking to maximise prisoners' support for the peace stratagem, many prisoners cautioned party negotiators against allowing prison amnesties to distract from their overarching objective.

There is some merit in the assertion of Kevin Bean and Mark Hayes (2009, p. 128) that the movement's leadership in the 1990s 'managed internal "debates"' by which volunteers 'were gradually drawn away from a commitment to armed struggle'. The IRA's reported Chief of Staff Kevin McKenna, for example, volubly sanctioned the ceasefire of 1994 and implored the rank-and-file to back Sinn Féin's leaders (Young, 26 June 2019). Crucially, however, Bean's and Hayes's retrospective observation differs sharply from how prisoners understood the ceasefire at the time. By 1994, many jailed volunteers regarded a ceasefire less as a concession than as a shrewd and courageous move to facilitate the negotiations with Westminster by which the Provisionals envisaged progress. Reconciling to a gradualist path to Irish unity in the 1990s allowed prisoners to suspend strategic concerns and back their leadership's initiatives, sometimes on a distinctly speculative basis. By 1998, prisoners' cautious support for the Good Friday Agreement was premised on an understanding that the Agreement was not a settlement, but a potentiality.

Notes

1. Sinn Féin H-Block *cumann*, Long Kesh, 'Mitchell Principles' (June 1996). Copy in author's possession.
2. As Marisa McGlinchey has noted, the allegiance of republican prisoners remains integral to intra-movement struggles for legitimacy. Since August 2016, prisoners' magazine *Scairt Amach* has issued online statements, claiming to inherit the republican tradition. Repudiating Sinn Féin's current constitutional strategy, *Scairt Amach* is the official publication of the Irish Republican Prisoners Welfare Association, which represents republican prisoners in Roe 4 Maghaberry, E3 E4 Portlaoise, the female prisoners in Hydebank, and IRA or New IRA prisoners.
3. Following social movement analyst Charles Tilly, this article distinguishes closely between *tactics*, as the sub-mechanisms and forms of action a movement employs, and *strategy*, which represents a movement's proposed route to achieve its overarching objectives. Tilly, 1995, p. 41.
4. Hereafter, 'the republican movement' signifies the Provisional republican movement, comprising the IRA and Sinn Féin. Representatives of several republican organisations, including the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), were imprisoned during the Northern Ireland conflict, but the Provisional movement is the focus of this article.
5. After Sands's victory on 9 April, Kieran Doherty (9,121) and Paddy Agnew (8,368) won Cavan-Monaghan and Louth respectively on 11 June.
6. In the Northern Ireland constituency, Morrison won 91,476 first-preference votes, or 13.3 percent, to John Hume's 151,399, or 22.1 percent. Sinn Féin's

candidates in the Republic of Ireland's constituencies performed more poorly. In the Connacht-Ulster constituency, the three Sinn Féin candidates accumulated just 6.7 percent of first-preference votes, while in Leinster the three candidates combined won 4.2 percent. In Dublin and Munster, respectively, John Noonan and republican veteran Richard Behal won just 5.1 and 3.7 percent of first-preference votes.

7. The *ard comhairle* motion proposed that the broad front's 'agitational demands' on, inter alia, education, healthcare, housing, the environment, national sovereignty, and fiscal policy, would connect republicans with diverse social movements campaigning on 'human rights, the standard of living, the right to employment in our country, [...] Womens' [sic] rights, our language and our culture'.
8. Proposed in 1984 by Seán MacBride, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and former Irish Minister for External Affairs, the Principles formed a code of practice for US companies conducting business in Northern Ireland. Codifying fair employment practice, the Principles became a campaigning focus for a panoply of activists in Ireland in the 1980s, spanning civil rights campaigners, left-wing radicals, constitutional nationalists, and militant republicans.
9. Agreed between the London and Dublin governments in December 1993, the Downing Street Declaration reaffirmed that Northern Ireland's constitutional status could change only by internal majority votes in both of Ireland's jurisdictions. Concomitantly, British Prime Minister John Major and Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds retained what republicans had perennially disdained as a 'unionist veto' on Irish unification.
10. In a secret internal document in 1994, the Provisional leadership espoused the 'tactical use of armed struggle' to advance pragmatically Sinn Féin's attempts to 'construct an Irish nationalist consensus with international support'. Suspending the armed campaign, the argument ran, would enable the movement to broaden its support among moderate nationalists and strengthen its diplomatic ties with Irish-America. As Henry Patterson has aptly argued, the 'tactical use of armed struggle' implied to volunteers that the IRA could resume its campaign if a cessation did not advance republican objectives. Patterson, 2007, p. 327.
11. The widespread conviction within republicanism that reverses stemmed from negotiation and compromise, rather than from the limitations of militarism, overlooked, for example, the failure of the IRA's Operation Harvest in 1962, when the republican leadership terminated the armed campaign, citing a lack of popular support.

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