

The Third Sinn Féin Party: 1923-1926

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*II: Factors contributing to collapse**

THE Republican party that was organized under the name "Sinn Féin" after the end of the civil war, while initially relatively successful, failed to obtain the majority support essential, not only for the implementation of its policies, but for its survival as a major political force. Suddenly and unexpectedly, within a year of its foundation, the party began to decline. Membership dropped, funds became increasingly scarce and party successes in by-elections and local elections were few. The more realistic and pragmatic Sinn Féin leaders gradually realized what was happening and saw the necessity for making modifications in policy if the party were to survive as a potential alternative government. This course proved unacceptable to a majority of the delegates at the special *Ard-Fheis* of March, 1926, for whom policy had been elevated to the status of dogma. The available evidence suggests that this division, which split and ultimately destroyed the Third Sinn Féin party, was based more on temperament than on any other factor. The question that now remains to be answered is: why did the party decline so rapidly between 1924 and 1926? There were at least two reasons. First, parliamentary abstentionism was an outmoded policy in the circumstances of post-independence Ireland. Secondly, the Republican party, though it had a recognizable social and geographical profile, by concentrating almost exclusively on constitutional issues, and by neglecting social and economic policy during a period of economic recession, alienated its members and supporters.

A policy of parliamentary abstentionism, pursued by the various Sinn Féin parties for a total period of over sixty years, received majority support on only two occasions, in the general elections of 1918 and 1921. How could the Second Sinn Féin party have been successful while other parties with the same policy were unsuccessful? In other words, what are the necessary conditions for the success of an abstentionist party?

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In order to answer this question it is necessary to consider the nature of abstentionism. Abstentionism is basically a rejection of the normal political process. An abstentionist party is, in a sense, a revolutionary party, for it refuses to participate in the game of parliamentary politics, and proposes to change the system on its own terms. For such a party to gain power three preconditions seem essential. In the first place, there must be grave dissatisfaction with normal parliamentary methods. During its early years, the First Sinn Féin party was relatively successful because the people were dissatisfied with parliamentarianism, and with the performance of the Irish party at Westminster. This situation changed about 1909, with the prospect of an alliance between the Irish party and the Liberal party in the House of Commons. This alliance, becoming a reality from 1910 on, led to increased backing for the Parliamentary party, with the result that support for Sinn Féin declined steeply. About 1914, the chain of circumstances began which was to lead to the return of a Sinn Féin government. The Great War broke out, and the Parliamentary party failed to secure the practical implementation of Home Rule. The 1916 Rebellion, the subsequent execution of its leaders, and the threat of conscription, led to a new mood in the country. A majority of the electorate, disillusioned with parliamentary life, felt that the Irish party had abused its position; and they were in consequence prepared to reject the previous system in favour of the untried policy of abstention.

The second precondition for the success of an abstentionist party consists of a goal in the pursuit of which most of the people can unite, and has reasonable prospects of early attainment. The aim of the First Sinn Féin party, the establishment of a Dual Monarchy, had seemed overly ambitious when contrasted with Home Rule status, whose attainment, from 1909 onwards, appeared a far more practical proposition. In the years after 1917, with the country in the grip of a war psychosis, complete independence from England no longer appeared illusory and it was felt by many that almost any goal could be achieved provided the people remained united and determined in its pursuit.

Since the practical implementation of abstentionism presupposes the establishment of an entirely new legislative and administrative system, the abstentionist party must have the means to defend this from the existing systems naturally seeking to destroy their new rival. If the usurping abstentionist administration is to survive, it must be linked with an organized group of militants who, by acting in military and police capacities, can enforce the writ of the abstentionist government and disrupt the functioning of its rival. An abstentionist administration might also survive with a well supported campaign of passive resistance. In 1919, the first Sinn Féin government was formed, but it was unlikely that it could have operated to the limited extent that it did without the support of the physical force policy of the IRA. Two rival administrations in a State cannot co-exist peacefully. The attempts of both to assert their authority must lead to conflict and the eventual domination of the weaker by the stronger.

In short, a successful abstentionist party must be able to count on widespread disillusionment with the existing parliamentary system; it must have an objective

that appears to be realizable within a reasonable period of time, and it must be able to defend itself, by physical means if necessary, from the inevitable onslaught of the pre-existing institutions. These three preconditions existed simultaneously in Ireland only between 1917 and 1921; and thus, while the Second Sinn Féin party was returned to power, its successor, though adopting the same policy and a similar programme, declined and eventually collapsed.

The Irish people, on the whole, have always been constitutionally-minded. Forced by circumstances to depart from orthodox political methods after 1916, the majority of them, once independence had been achieved, were content to return to a normal constitutional course of action. After the civil war, most voters felt that the Free State parliament should be the forum for political debate and that abstentionism was no longer necessary as a means of resolving political and constitutional disputes. Had Free State institutions fallen into serious disrepute in the early, vulnerable years of the State, it was possible that a majority might have become dissatisfied with orthodox political methods, as had happened a few years previously. The Free State, however, became more firmly entrenched with the passage of time, and its policy of democratic parliamentarianism increasingly won respect at home and abroad.

While the aim of the Third Sinn Féin party, the establishment of a thirty-two county Republic, was undoubtedly popular with a large section of the electorate, nevertheless many felt that this was not an objective that could be easily or speedily attained by the Republican party. Britain had threatened war if Dominion status had not been accepted in December, 1921. The electorate, tired of bloodshed and eager for peace after four years of warfare, were not overly enthusiastic about a party whose policy and objectives might well lead to a further round of hostilities. Besides, the other major parties at this time were committed to achieving an independent thirty-two county State by strictly constitutional means. A further reason for the failure of the Sinn Féin party was the fact that, though it had its own parliament and government issuing proclamations and making decrees, these could never be more than "paper bullets" because the IRA, the only authority capable of enforcing them, had been militarily crushed by the Free State forces in the civil war.

The Republican policy of abstaining from the Free State Dáil dates from September, 1922, when de Valera decided that this was the only issue on which he could hold his party together.¹ The bitterness engendered by the civil war, and the fact that the Free State Constitution made the taking of an oath of allegiance mandatory for all elected representatives who wished to take their seats, made the Republican leaders all the more determined to keep their party outside Leinster House. The leaders of the Third Sinn Féin party, imbued with attitudes that had been current in the Nationalist Sinn Féin party, made no effort to re-think these policies in the light of the totally different circumstances brought

1. Dail Eireann, Stationery Office, *Correspondence of Mr. Eamon de Valera and others*. Dublin, 1922, p. 8.

about by the attainment of independence. Speaking in the summer of 1923, de Valera saw no need to adapt the methods and policies of the Nationalist Sinn Féin party to the changed circumstances that then existed. "Sinn Féin's objective has not changed, and its methods are as potent to achieve that objective now as they were in 1917."² Even after his release from prison in July, 1924, the president of Sinn Féin preferred to turn back the clock to 1917 when he stated that his party had no new policies to offer the country:

"There are a number of press men here today waiting to hear, I suppose, some new policy. We need no new policy. The policy of 1917, the policy of 1918, the policy of 1921, is still good."³

As late as January, 1925, the party's leader complained that he was tired of telling the people that the policy of Sinn Féin was precisely the same policy as in 1919.⁴

What the Sinn Féin leaders failed to see was that the party, after failing to secure a majority in the 1923 general election, had become a minority opposition party cut off, by its abstentionist policy, from the mainstream of parliamentary politics, having no reasonable expectation of taking office unless one or other of the two special sets of circumstances were to prevail. Had the Free State government, and the institutions of the new State, proved unable to function adequately, and had they fallen into disrepute in the critical years after the civil war, the Republican shadow administration might have been able to take control. This did not occur. The only other road to power was that of awaiting the next general election in the hope of winning a majority. There was no necessity for a general election for four years after 1923, and the party was in the meantime tied to what the electorate and many party members increasingly came to regard as a barren and anachronistic policy. As support for the party dropped inexorably, the more pragmatic of its leaders gradually came to terms with the realities of political life in the Free State.

The Irish electorate has traditionally sought to employ its elected deputies as constituency errand boys, rather than as national legislators. This tendency was increased by the competitiveness engendered among the deputies of the same constituency by the adoption of proportional representation.⁵ There has always been a tendency for the Irish voter to seek the support of some influential person before approaching authority. This tendency, apparently deeply rooted in the national psychology, perhaps stems from the oligarchic British administration, which led Irish people to view government as a source of help, jobs, or favours, provided one knew how to tap it. A recent analysis of the functions of Dáil deputies revealed "the dominance of welfare work on behalf of the individual

2. *Éire*, 23.6.1923.

3. *Sinn Féin*, 23.8.1924.

4. *Irish Independent*, 29.1.1925.

5. Professor B. Chubb, Going about persecuting civil servants: The role of the Irish parliamentary representative, *Political Studies*. XI, No. 3, 1963.

constituent in the deputy's working life. . . . It is obvious . . . that the side of their work which preoccupies deputies is their function as settler of the individual problems in regard to official bodies."⁶

The Sinn Féin deputies elected in 1923 were unable to fulfil this traditional function because the Republican government, which was the only government recognized by them, exercised no real power, meeting as it did outside Leinster House, and having no control over the administration machinery. In such circumstances, it was only to be expected that dissatisfied electors in search of help and advice would tend to approach a T.D. of some other party who had taken his seat. Whether they were seeking some grant, benefit or right, or the granting of a favour, people expected T.D.'s to be at their service. Because the Republican deputies were unable to help individual constituents to the extent that deputies inside the Dáil could, support for Sinn Féin declined, and with it the chances of the party's deputies being re-elected.⁷ This factor undoubtedly impressed upon the party's president and his associates the necessity for abandoning a policy of rigid parliamentary abstentionism.

A further reason for the decline of Sinn Féin was that it was a mass party, and thus in need of tangible achievements.

Masses are in need of visible rewards. If they cannot reap the fruit now—or at least have reasonable expectation of doing so in the near future—they will leave the ranks. . . . A mass party cannot survive without foreseeable success. Its final fate becomes a race against time.⁸

The founding of the party after the civil war had briefly harnessed all the energies of the Republican movement, and for a while there was great enthusiasm and optimism in the ranks of the organization. During 1924 and 1925, Sinn Féin's hopes of securing a quick overall parliamentary majority dwindled. The pursuit of an abstentionist policy prevented it from entering the political arena where it could provide its followers with some tangible signs of success. Normally, a party in parliamentary opposition will gain support because the electorate's interest is sustained by what is happening in the legislature; but Sinn Féin had no way of making its supporters feel they were partaking in the political game.

Towards the end of 1925, the more realistic of its leaders realized the need to provide the party with a practical objective which would produce immediate results and supply immediate work for the members. The party weekly, *An Phoblacht*, stated in an editorial:

6. John Whyte, *Dail Deputies: their work; its difficulties; possible remedies*, Tuairim Pamphlet No. 15 (Dublin: n.d.), pp. 9, 12.

7. It is interesting to note that only five of the fifteen abstentionist deputies of the fourth Sinn Féin party who contested the June, 1927, general election were re-elected.

8. S. Neuman, *Modern Political Parties: Approaches to Comparative Politics*. Chicago, 1962, pp. 399-400.

A national organization cannot live save on work which will produce quick results. Thus, a party in parliamentary opposition will gain support, because from day to day interest is maintained by the game of politics. . . . Sinn Féin is debarred from that game by the oath of allegiance . . . we must find an alternative way not of merely interesting the people in a political game but of really serving the interests of the people. . . .⁹

A boycott of English goods was first decided on as a programme which would arouse the enthusiasm of party members. Such a campaign, however, proved too negative to generate widespread support. Moreover, it did not tackle the root cause of the party's decline, the policy of parliamentary abstention. Less than four weeks after the campaign had begun, the party was forced to appeal for funds to enable it to continue.¹⁰ By January, 1926, the boycott campaign had collapsed, and Sean Lemass was advocating that the party should decide on a new political objective "capable of realization within a reasonable period of time", the attainment of which would stimulate party members and supporters to greater efforts.¹¹ The decisions to mount a campaign to abolish the oath of allegiance, following which the party would enter Leinster House, had the effect of splitting the organization, ironically hastening that very process of decay within Sinn Féin which it was meant to arrest.

The policy of parliamentary abstention was not the only factor responsible for the decline of Sinn Féin. There is evidence also of a connection between the social groups who voted Republican in 1923, and the lack of support for the party after 1924. There is a number of difficulties facing any attempt to determine objectively (at a remove of more than 40 years) from what rung of the socio-economic ladder the Republican party drew most support. The principal source of information regarding party support and party strength comes from general election and by-election results. Under the provisions of the 1923 Electoral Act, the constituency is the smallest geographical unit for which the breakdown of election figures, in terms of party support, is available. The student of the Irish political scene is therefore at a disadvantage, compared with his fellow workers in countries where detailed electoral statistics at the individual polling district level are available. In studying the voting patterns of the 1923 election, one has to deal with voting units ranging from 35,000 voters (Kildare) to over 106,000 voters (Galway). To add to the difficulty, a study of the support given to the Third Sinn Féin party has to be confined to the results of only one general election. While four general elections took place between 1922 and 1927, only that of August, 1923, was contested by the Republican Sinn Féin party. However, the other elections are useful in providing some information on long-term electoral trends.

The paucity of detailed electoral statistics is almost equally matched by a scarcity of information on social, demographic and economic matters. The first Free

9. 2.10.1925.

10. *An Phoblacht*, 30.10.1925.

11. *Ibid.*, 29.1.1926.

State census was taken in 1926, three years after the general election with which our investigation is primarily concerned. The earlier census of 1911 had dealt with the country as a thirty-two county unit. In attempting a socio-economic analysis of party support between 1923 and 1926, we are therefore usually obliged to use statistics which are not contemporary with the political events described. There is the additional problem of defining "class" in an Irish context. There is no substantial investigation yet published on this topic; and no fundamental sociological investigation can be made until class structure is clearly known. The methodology we employ here consists of correlating the support given to the two major parties in every constituency in 1923, with a variety of local economic, social and historical factors. A coefficient of correlation was obtained in each case, as a means of determining whether there exists any relationship between these factors and party support. While voting behaviour is influenced by a bewildering complexity of variables, economic, social and psychological, this study is restricted to those variables on which data are readily available and quantifiable. The coefficients of correlation that we give here are merely tentative indications of possible links between party support and social, economic and historical factors. We are not suggesting, in making use of this, that individual variables operating *in vacuo* were responsible for support of a particular party. Taken individually, these correlations can prove little: it is only by the extensive use of the method that a clear picture may emerge. The analysis which follows represents only a preliminary, exploratory step in this direction.

In 1923, support for the Sinn Féin party was strongest in the western section of the country and weakest in the east. Forty-one per cent of the party's seats came from the western area, compared with 30 per cent of the *Cumann na nGaedheal* seats. A study of the percentage poll obtained by the anti-Treaty parties in the general elections of 1922 and 1927 lends additional support to the theory that Republican political strength was western-oriented. An analysis of the Sinn Féin first preference votes in the 1923 general election discloses not only the western bias of the party, but also its rural proclivity. The only constituencies where the party obtained one-third or more of the poll were the five Connacht constituencies, and the two Munster constituencies of Clare and Kerry. In all of these, the percentage of the population living in urban areas was far below the national average. There seems to have been a tendency for the Sinn Féin vote to increase as the urban population decreased. The party's percentage poll in the only four counties with cities of 20,000 or more (Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Waterford) was below its national average. There is possibly a link between this tendency and the fact that in areas where the density of rural population was high, *Cumann na nGaedheal* tended to get more votes than Sinn Féin, indicating that Republicans did best in thinly populated rural areas (Table 1).

A study of the voting figures in the borough constituencies of Dublin and Cork, between 1922 and 1927, confirms the superiority of the Treaty party over their Republican opponents in these densely populated areas. On every occasion, with one exception, the percentage poll secured by the pro-Treaty party was higher

than that obtained by the anti-Treaty party (whether Coalition Republican, Sinn Féin or Fianna Fáil). In these urban constituencies, the *Cumann na nGaedheal* percentage poll was generally above its national average, while the Republican poll was usually below average. Because of the poor support received by the Labour party in Dublin and Cork, it seems that the city workers were more interested in national than in social issues. It is not easy to discover the side they supported in the Treaty split because, properly speaking, there were no workers' constituencies. However, the voting figures suggest that the popularly-held view that the urban proletariat favoured the Republican party is incorrect, and that in fact that the reverse was true.

While it is true that the Third Sinn Féin party was strongest in western and south-western Ireland, but relatively weak in the cities, and that the poorest land and the smallest farms tended to lie in the western half of the country, we cannot assume that these factors must be interrelated. More than a geographical analysis of party support is required to disclose which sections of the electorate voted for Sinn Féin, and their reasons for doing so.

Over half of the working population of the Free State was engaged in some form of agriculture in 1926. There appears to have been a connection between the agricultural industry and support for the Republican party. Wherever there was a high percentage of workers making their living on the land, or in associated occupations, there was, in general, a relatively high volume of support for the Republican party¹² (Table 2). The percentage of workers engaged in non-agricultural industries at this time was small (approximately 15 per cent), most being concentrated in or near the main urban centres. Because non-agricultural workers were so relatively small a proportion of the working population in most constituencies, correlations between this factor and party percentage polls can provide only a very tentative indication of party loyalties. Bearing this reservation in mind, we see nevertheless that Sinn Féin appeared to receive little support in constituencies with a high proportion of industrial workers (Table 3). This finding reinforces the theory that the Republican party was supported, to a considerable extent, by rural, agricultural interests, while leaving open to doubt the commonly held view that, along with the poorer farmers, the industrial workers formed the backbone of resistance to the Treaty.¹³

Because such a large proportion of the people was engaged in agriculture, farm size and valuation can be used as approximate, but useful, indices of class structure in the various constituencies. It is widely accepted that the Republican Sinn Féin party was supported to a considerable extent by the small farmers of the country. Correlations between farm size up to 50 acres, and the Republican

12. This finding conforms with the tendency for members of isolated occupations such as agriculture, who live in communities predominantly inhabited by others in the same occupation and who have a more homogeneous political environment than those employed in urban occupations, to support radical political parties. See S. M. Lipset, *Political Man*, London, 1963, pp. 87-88.

13. For the view that industrial workers favoured Republicanism see Brian O'Neill, *The War for the land in Ireland*, London, 1933, pp. 14, 106.

percentage poll, do bear out this supposition however. In fact, in each of the three categories of small farms examined there proved to be a higher correlation between the *Cumann na nGaedheal* poll and small farm size (Table 4). What attitude did the big farmers and the cattle ranchers adopt towards the Sinn Féin party? The chief difficulty in determining the political allegiance of this group arises from its small size. Only 16 per cent of all farms in the Free State, at this period, were of more than 200 acres. The comparison between large-scale farming and the Sinn Féin poll, therefore, must be very tentative. It was not in the interest of the larger farmers, depending heavily for their livelihood on the cattle export trade, to upset the *status quo* after the civil war. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in the four counties with the largest farms (Meath, Kildare, Dublin and Wicklow) the Sinn Féin party secured below average support.

Statistics dealing with farm size, particularly those relating to small farms (as in Table 4), are not very sensitive indicators of agricultural productivity, or of income and class. Farm size reveals nothing about the fertility of the soil, or the efficiency and initiative of the farmer. A small farmer with good land, by hard work and economical management, might well enjoy a higher standard of living than the owner of a much larger farm with poor, or badly farmed, land. Farm valuation, which was not based on size alone, but took other related factors into consideration, is a more accurate index of class than farm size.¹⁴ Correlations between farm valuation and party allegiance indicate that, where valuation was low, farmers tended to vote for Sinn Féin rather than for *Cumann na nGaedheal*. Table 5 suggests that a certain relationship did exist at this period between lower social position and support for "radical" politics. Many political scientists hold such a relationship to be axiomatic. The heaviest rural communist vote in France, for example, comes from some of the most backward agricultural sections of the country.¹⁵

Housing conditions were bad in the early years of the Free State. In 1926, almost half the population was living in houses or apartments of three rooms or less. The situation was probably worse in 1923, after four years of warfare and the consequent widespread destruction of property. While conditions were grim in the principal urban areas, they were equally bad in some western and northern counties, where overcrowding was all too prevalent. The size of the dwelling occupied by the family was determined mainly by social status, not by the number in the family. It seems that overcrowded housing conditions, indicative of low social and economic status,¹⁶ may have played a role in determining the support given to the Republican party (Table 6).

14. Using farm valuation as an index of prosperity and class also has its drawbacks. Valuation was determined in the post-Famine period. The criteria involved in establishing the initial valuation, e.g. soil fertility, drainage, crop production, etc., gradually became outdated as conditions changed so that by the 1920s valuation was, at best, only a rough index of the worth of the land.

15. Neuman, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

16. Almost 90 per cent of the unemployed in 1926 lived in dwellings of four rooms or less. *Census of Population 1926*, Vol. X, p. 128.

The emigration rate from the various constituencies can be regarded as a reasonably accurate barometer of their economic prosperity. While a high emigration rate had existed in Ireland from the time of the Famine onwards, this rate varied considerably from county to county during the intercensal period 1911 to 1926. Generally speaking, emigration at this time was highest in the western parts of the country and lowest in the east. There appears to be a link between the rate of emigration and support for the Republican party. Where emigration was heavy, support for the Sinn Féin party tended to be high (Table 7). Emigration was closely related to socio-economic position in rural Ireland at this period. Farmers with small holdings tended to emigrate at a faster rate than those with larger farms.¹⁷ It seems possible, therefore, that the lower class voters, who were most affected by emigration, tended to vote against the party in power in favour of a more radical party which taught that all the economic ills of Irish society could be cured by the unilateral rejection of the Treaty and the setting up of an Irish Republic. Such voters had less to lose if a Sinn Féin government were returned to power than the better off sections of the community.

Education, particularly higher education in the Free State in the 1920s, was closely related to class and social-economic status. While no detailed analysis of the relationship between higher education and voting allegiance in the Free State has yet been attempted, an investigation into the voting in the National University constituencies between 1922 and 1927 provides some preliminary information on the matter. Under the 1923 Electoral Act, graduates of the NUI were entitled to elect, by postal vote, three representatives to the Dáil. The National University seats were contested in four general elections, and one by-election, between 1922 and 1927. An anti-Treaty candidate stood on each occasion. The Republican vote remained relatively stable, varying from 19 per cent to 25 per cent of the poll, until Fianna Fáil entered the Dáil in 1927, when it rose to almost 30 per cent. The fact that Sinn Féin secured less than a quarter of the votes in two contests in 1923, is a probable indicator of the level of support it received throughout the country at this period from the professional, administrative and commercial classes.¹⁸

It is difficult to determine the precise connection between religious affiliation and party allegiance in the Free State. In 1926 only 7.4 per cent of the population was non-Catholic. Of these a majority lived either in the Ulster counties of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan, or in Dublin and its environs. Because they constituted so minor a segment of Irish society, it would be wrong to attach too much

17. Between 1926-1936 the total manpower on farms of 1-15 acres in area declined by 20 per cent, and on farms of 15-30 acres by 5.6 per cent. T. W. Freeman, *Emigration and Rural Ireland*, Dublin, 1945, Table 1, p. 10.

18. These classes as a rule tended to support the government party. E. Rumpf, *Nationalismus und Sozialismus in Irland. Historisch-soziologischer Versuch über die irische Revolution seit 1918*, Meisenheim am Glan, 1959, pp. 59-60. Many of the outstanding young administrators and Ministers of the *Cumann na nGaedheal* government were N.U.I. graduates. D. R. Gwynn, *The Irish Free State 1922-1927*, London, 1928, pp. xiv-xv. The Republican press on several occasions appealed to university students for support. See *An Phoblacht*, 12.11.1926, 18.2.1927.

importance to the fact that the Republican vote varied inversely to the proportion of non-Catholics in each constituency (Table 8). But it seems possible that religion could have been an important factor, perhaps the major factor, in determining the pattern of party support in the three Ulster constituencies. A majority of the farms in these constituencies were of less than 50 acres, agriculture was the predominant occupation, emigration was high, and housing conditions were not good: yet in these constituencies the Sinn Féin party received considerably less support than in the Connacht constituencies, where social and economic conditions were similar. The explanation probably lies in the voting allegiance of the substantial minority of Protestants living in this part of the country. In the three Ulster constituencies Protestant farmer associations generally put up independent candidates in general elections between 1923 and 1927;¹⁹ and in these the independent poll was usually higher than the national average. While minority religious groups tend to support radical rather than conservative political parties,²⁰ this did not occur in the Free State for several reasons. The reserved attitude of the Catholic Church on the independence issue was an essential reason why Irish hatred of England did not turn into a hatred of non-Catholics, thus preserving the independence movement from denominational narrow-mindedness.²¹ The non-Catholic population was not subjected to discrimination by the *Cumann na nGaedheal* government, and they did not become politically alienated like the minority in the North. A considerable amount of property belonging to the Anglo-Irish had been damaged or destroyed by Republican forces during the civil war and, generally speaking, non-Catholics were repelled by Republicanism at this time. Whatever their socio-economic status, they identified themselves with the Protestant ascendancy forming the extreme right wing of the pro-Treaty party.

Because old people comprised only a small section of the total population (in 1926, 9.2 per cent were over 65), correlations between party support and old-age pensioners provides only a crude indication of the voting allegiance of this section of the community. There does seem to be a connection of some kind between the proportion of pensioners in a constituency and support for the Republican party (Table 9). This should not be primarily interpreted as a link between old age and anti-Treaty voting tendencies, but rather as indicating a tentative connection between low economic status and Republican support. In the Free State at this time, pensioners were a limited proportion of the aged population, because the non-contributory old age pension (the only kind then in existence) was subject to a means test.²² As a group pensioners are largely

19. B. Chubb, The independent member in Ireland, *Political Studies*, V, No. 2 1957, p. 134.

20. Lipset, *op. cit.*, pp. 242-248.

21. Rumpf, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

22. Only the poorer section of the aged with incomes of less than £49 17s. 6d. per annum were eligible for a pension and over 40,000 people aged 70 and over were not in receipt of an old age pension in 1923. Department of Social Welfare, *First Report 1947-1949*, Dublin, 1950, p. 89 and table 1, p. 183.

underprivileged and are especially dependent on the State. Because they rely, to a large extent, on fixed incomes, they are more exposed than most sections of the community to the effects of inflation and economic depression. Perhaps for these reasons, a tendency has been observed, in some countries, for older age groups to cooperate and identify with radical parties.²³

There may be another reason for the support given by old age pensioners to the Third Sinn Féin party. Some political scientists have suggested that the political climate of late adolescence and early maturity creates a "common frame of reference within which people of the same age group tend to view their subsequent political experiences." People are apt to retain the perspectives and loyalties of their youth.²⁴ Many of the old age pensioners who voted for Sinn Féin in the 1923 general election, growing to maturity in the difficult post-Famine years, would have early memories of radical agrarian and political organizations, of evictions, agrarian outrages and the Fenian rising. Many would have had their political outlook shaped by the struggle for land in the late 1870s and early 1880s; and they, in their turn, would have imbued the younger generation with their views of what had occurred. The part played by a tradition of national or social struggle is not to be underestimated. "The sons inherit the spirit of their fathers".²⁵ Any attempt to determine the influence of factors of this nature involves an analysis of the historical basis of Republican support.

Many of the constituencies in which the Republican party received substantial support were areas with a strong radical or extremist tradition. As early as the end of the eighteenth century, underground organizations fighting the landed proprietors were stronger in Munster and Connacht than in Leinster and Ulster. During the course of the nineteenth century, Connacht became more radical and turbulent than parts of Munster. The "No Rent" campaign of 1879 began in Mayo, while the less radical Tenants Defence Clubs and the Home Rule League were represented more strongly in Tipperary, Cork and Limerick.²⁶ In an endeavour to discover if there was any link between support for the Republican party in 1923 in the various constituencies, and events of historical significance which had taken place in these areas within the lifetime of many of those still living, correlations were made between historical occurrences of a "radical" or "extremist" nature and the Sinn Féin poll.

The first set of correlations concerned the incidence of Land League meetings and agrarian outrages during part of the land war (Table 10). There appears to be a connection between the areas in which the Land League (a radical agrarian organization) flourished in 1879-1880, and the areas where, over forty years later, Sinn Féin, a radical political organization, was strongly supported. The table suggests an even closer connection between those areas which were violently aggressive in their demands for land in the early 1880s, and those areas which,

23. Lipset, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

25. Rumpf, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

26. Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, pp. 15, 156 seq., 168.

in 1923, favoured having a Republican government even at the cost of possible further war with Britain.

More recent indications of a radical tradition in certain constituencies emerged in 1922 and 1923, with the attempts by some farmers illegally to take over land on which to graze their stock. During and after the civil war, the new administration attempted to put a stop to such activities by seizing and auctioning livestock which had been found to be trespassing. Free State troops made 76 seizures of stock between December, 1922, and July, 1923. It may be significant that the constituencies where Sinn Féin received its greatest electoral support in August, 1923, were those where most of the stock seizures had taken place. The party received less support where no seizures took place.²⁷ The illegal seizures of land can be regarded as one symptom of the crisis of legitimacy that existed in the State, from its foundation until the bulk of the Republicans entered the Dáil in 1927. No doubt many of those who had their cattle seized did not regard the Cosgrave government as the legitimate authority in the State.²⁸

Surprisingly enough, whether or not the IRA had been active against the British in a constituency seems to have made little difference to the way its electors voted in 1923. During the struggle for independence, British forces made many punitive attacks on Irish towns and villages, presumably as retaliatory measures. There appears to be a connection between a constituency's experience of these attacks and later support for the Republican party (Table 11). The different effect on the voting pattern produced by the IRA and British attacks may be accounted for on the grounds that, while the former were directed mainly against British installations and personnel, British raids were principally directed against the civilian population and civilian property. The effect of the raids may have been to produce a radicalization of attitudes, on the part of their victims, which conceivably led them to support the uncompromisingly anti-British Republican party.²⁹

We have attempted to sketch briefly the geographical, socio-economic and historical basis of support for the Third Sinn Féin party. We do not suggest that there was a causal relationship between the individual variables and party support. What does seem significant, however, is the tendency for the various correlations to reinforce one another and to point in much the same direction, indicating that the party had a recognizable geographical, historical and socio-economic profile. This profile had first begun to take shape when the Second Sinn Féin party split on the Treaty issue. Originally, the social divisions between the two principal

27. The relatively small number of seizures that took place limits the effectiveness of any comparison between them and party support. *Dail Debates*. Vol. IV (1923), cols. 8, 1291-1292, 1862.

28. "Legitimacy of any kind is derived from shared beliefs, that is, from a consensus as to what constitutes proper allegiance. Such a consensus develops slowly." Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. London, 1964, p. 16.

29. Those who had lost friends, relations or property during the independence struggle would, perhaps, be less likely to accept Dominion status than those who had more to lose if the war was renewed.

parties were more clear cut than they are today. It was not until the bulk of the Republican movement abandoned abstentionism and formulated a political and economic programme of such wide appeal that it rapidly became the largest party in the state, that the old divisions were notably weakened.

There can be little doubt that the division on the Treaty took place, to a certain extent, on sociological grounds, although other factors, such as temperament and loyalty to leaders, also played important and largely undefined roles. The Treaty was supported by ex-Unionists and non-Catholics, by the commercial and professional middle-classes and the better-off farmers, and by the Catholic Church. The Irish middle-class had always been moderate in their views. They had turned against Britain, not because of the Republican ideal, but because they believed in an independent Ireland and because of British clumsiness in delaying Home Rule and attempting to enforce conscription. Without them, the revolution could not have succeeded; but once a measure of independence had been achieved, they became anxious for peace so that their normal way of life could be re-established.³⁰

While the Treaty was opposed by people from every social level, the bulk of its opponents could be broadly described as lower middle class. Conscious social motives did play a role among some anti-Treatyites. For example, Mellowes, writing from his cell in Mountjoy three months before his execution, urged that the social programme embodied in the 1916 Declaration of Independence should be implemented. "Under the Republic all industry will be controlled by the State for the workers' and farmers' benefit."³¹ After the civil war had broken out, the "social revolution which Sinn Féin had kept within the narrow channels of a national struggle against England, was trying to find an outlet now that the English enemy had withdrawn".³² Agricultural disturbances were widespread, landlords' homes were destroyed and their estates sometimes taken over and divided among local small farmers. Incidents of this nature, occurring during the civil war, are evidence of the attempts of social aims to blend with Republicanism. The majority of the anti-Treaty leaders kept apart from such aims because they did not wish the Republican ideal to be confused by social issues. The anti-Treatyites, both physical-force men and politicians, neglected to develop a coherent social programme, and thus failed to secure the widespread public support which they needed to win the civil war.³³

While the Third Sinn Féin party, formed to represent the viewpoint of the anti-Treatyites, thus inherited a solid identification with one of the major economic interests in Irish society—the poorer farming class—it would be wrong to over-emphasize this factor. In contrast with many newly emergent countries, the Free State had a homogeneous population with a common language, a relatively similar religious background, and a common cultural and political tradition. Internal value cleavages which frustrate many new nations were of little signifi-

30. These should only be regarded as general tendencies and not as dogmatic generalizations.

31. *Cumann na mBan*, Publicity Department, *Liam Mellowes: His Life and Aims*. Dublin, 1933, p. 3.

32. E. Strauss, *Irish Nationalism and British Democracy*, London, 1951, pp. 270-271.

33. Eoin Neeson, *The Civil War in Ireland*. Cork, 1966, p. 50.

cance. In order to become a major party, Sinn Féin had to appeal to all strata of Irish society. As a result its support did not correspond too closely with any of the basic lines of social or economic cleavage. It drew supporters from all sections of society.

Furthermore, though many variables combine to affect voting, it is not possible to isolate them completely. A purely socio-economic interpretation of Republican support is not altogether satisfactory. Not all backward agricultural regions gave Sinn Féin a heavy vote. Memories of past abuses by the British administration may have been the determining factor in establishing anti-government voting reflexes in some areas. A vote for Sinn Féin may simply have been a transfer of the old habit of voting against the government, whatever it was, because the government was traditionally held responsible for low agricultural prices and increases in the cost-of-living. This protest vote should not be interpreted as a desire to see a Republican government installed in Dublin. Personal factors, such as family rivalries or the personality of a candidate, may have been more important than ideological considerations in determining voting habits. Seemingly irrational behaviour may often have had its source in the interpretation of Republicanism in the light of such rural values as property, tradition and the family.

Bearing these reservations in mind, we may nevertheless arrive at some legitimate if tentative generalizations, provided it is understood that they are subject to all the pitfalls of ecological analysis, particularly the danger of arguing unjustifiably from the voting of constituencies to the voting of individuals within these constituencies. The Third Sinn Féin party obtained much of its support from the west and the south-west, from rural areas with small urban populations, and from constituencies with a tradition of radicalism. It tended to be supported by the less well-off sections of the agricultural community, whose housing conditions were far from ideal and who were considerably affected by emigration. The classes furthest down the social pyramid believed that the establishment of a Gaelic nation State, completely cut off from the English sphere of influence, would help them to increased rights and improved conditions. Because of their economic backwardness they were apt to pay less attention to practical economic considerations, in forming their political opinion, than were the middle- and large-scale farmers and the urban classes.

It appears that the Third Sinn Féin party had little support from city dwellers, university graduates, non-Catholics and large farmers, for many of whom practical, matter-of-fact, economic considerations played a large part in determining their political consciousness. It was not strongly supported by the industrial proletariat, who were largely confined to the cities, nor by non-agricultural workers throughout the country. The landless labourers of the big farm counties had been organized into rural workers' unions, and these traditionally voted Labour rather than Sinn Féin.³⁴ Sinn Féin in 1923 was largely the party of the

34. Warner Moss, *Political Parties in the Irish Free State*, New York, 1933. p. 39.

rural lower-middle class, the party of the owner-occupiers and small shopkeepers and traders, the party of the people who were, perhaps, the most vulnerable to economic recession.

It was this which partially explains the decline of Sinn Féin from 1924 onwards. Any party relying on the support of these strata would possibly have been weakened by the economic recession affecting the country between 1924 and 1926, accompanied as it was by large-scale unemployment and heavy emigration. Also, as a party which represented the defeated side in a recent and violent civil war, and which did not fully subscribe to the ensemble of beliefs and values which formed the political culture of the new State, its members and supporters were to suffer discrimination at the hands of the government and members of the business and commercial classes, especially in matters of employment. Secondly, Sinn Féin erred in concentrating unduly on the constitutional issue of the Republic *versus* the Free State. Its social and economic policies had little to offer the classes which formed the backbone of the party, with the result that their support was gradually alienated.

Irish farmers and the Irish economy as a whole had benefited considerably by the war-time boom in agricultural prices. But such artificially-induced prosperity could not last forever. Livestock and agricultural prices reached a peak about 1920 and during the next few years a rapid decline in prices took place so that by 1924-1925 the index of agricultural prices had dropped to its 1916 level. Between 1920 and 1924, the annual average prices of livestock at fairs declined by almost half.³⁵ While prices dropped steeply, exports, particularly of cattle, dropped both in volume and in value. This was accompanied by a rise in the cost of living which, by January, 1925, reached its highest level in the decade 1922-1932.³⁶

The main reason for this recession was the collapse of markets following the end of the Great War. The savings of the small farmers, put by during the prosperous war-time years, were soon exhausted. Agricultural depression was accentuated by a bad harvest in 1924. The whole country suffered heavily; but the worst affected area was that along the Atlantic seaboard, where even at the best of times the majority of the population was doomed to live on the margin of subsistence. Wet weather made it impossible to save turf; it was reported that the plight of large communities in Connacht and Clare was more critical than it had been since the disastrous shortage of 1879.³⁷

The effects of the depression can best be gauged from the unemployment and emigration figures. In February, 1925, over 58,000 people were registered as out of work, the highest figure recorded in the period from 1923 to 1931.³⁸ Between 1924 and 1927, over 100,000 people left the Free State for the United States, Canada and Australia. The number who went to Britain in this period must also have been considerable, although no reliable statistics are available. The emigra-

35. Department of Industry and Commerce, *Statistical Abstract 1931*, pp. 162-166.

36. *Ibid.*, 1932, p. 158.

37. *Annual Register 1924*, p. 152.

38. *Statistical Abstract 1932*, p. 89.

tion rate was highest from the western seaboard counties, the area in which the Republican party had received its strongest support in 1923. The farming community, from which Sinn Féin drew the bulk of its votes, was probably harder hit by emigration than other occupational groups.³⁹

It was obvious that in a period of economic depression which especially affected the farming community, with consequent high rates of unemployment and emigration, Sinn Féin would suffer more than parties supported by classes of higher socio-economic status, particularly as the government and some private employers discriminated against Republicans in employment. The party's honorary secretaries admitted: "We are hampered by the fact that our people suffer from the present economic depression to a far larger degree than our opponents".⁴⁰ The government gave first preference in employment to ex-National Army soldiers, and urged private employers to do likewise.⁴¹ By the imposition of unacceptable oaths of allegiance as the prerequisite for public appointments, many of the best organizers and local leaders of the party were forced to leave the country. Some private employers, antagonistic towards Republicanism, refused to employ party members.⁴² It does not follow that, if Sinn Féin deputies had swallowed the oath in 1923 and entered Leinster House, the party's membership would have been immune from the effects of the recession. Nevertheless, united with the Labour Party, Sinn Féin would have been able to bring considerable pressure to bear on the government to introduce more radical legislative measures to deal with the prevailing distress. More important, by entering the Dáil, the Republican party would also have demonstrated its willingness to subscribe to the legitimacy of the State, and would largely have removed the motive for discrimination against Republicans in employment.

But the decline of the Third Sinn Féin party cannot be explained in economic terms alone. Not all Republicans emigrated. If they had, Fianna Fáil would have received little support in the general elections of 1927. In the 1923 general election, Sinn Féin received nearly 300,000 first preference votes. Yet in the June, 1927, general election, Fianna Fáil was to receive a similar number of votes despite heavy emigration during the intervening period; and in the September, 1927, election the Fianna Fáil vote rose to over 400,000. Undoubtedly, many former supporters of the pro-Treaty parties had switched their allegiance by 1927; but the basic pattern of Republican support had not changed since 1923. A study of the maps of the voting pattern reveals that Fianna Fáil was, to a very large extent, supported by former followers of the Third Sinn Féin party. Furthermore, economic conditions in the Free State between 1926 and 1932, though not as bad

39. Young farmers and labourers composed the bulk of the male emigrants. *Ibid.*, 1931, pp. 11-14.

40. *Sinn Féin*, 7.2.1925.

41. *Freeman's Journal*, 1.1.1924.

42. In 1924 the manager of the Great Northern Railway refused to receive a deputation from the party who wished to negotiate the re-employment of former Republican employees of the company. Sinn Féin Funds Case (S.F. F.C.), book 48, part 2, doc. no. 1578, p. 53.

as those that prevailed between 1924 and 1926, were still far from satisfactory. The Fianna Fáil party was supported by the same classes, and in the same areas, as the Sinn Féin party in 1923: yet instead of declining in strength, it was able to harness and employ for its own ends, all the discontent in the country, succeeding in almost doubling its first preference vote between 1927 and 1932.

It was not only economic depression, allied with anti-Republican discrimination in employment, that weakened the Third Sinn Féin party. During a period of discontent and hardship, at a time when the electorate was increasingly pre-occupied with bread and butter issues, the party virtually ignored the need to develop social and economic policies to provide the people with an alternative to the laissez-faire policies of the government. The party's failure in this respect dates back to the time of its formation after the civil war. The appropriation by the Republicans of the names and aims of the Nationalist Sinn Féin party was a shrewd political move; but where the leaders of the new party erred was in unreservedly adopting the methods and policies of the old party. Times had changed. The policy of abstentionism, coupled with concentration on political issues and the relative neglect of social ideals, which had worked so well between 1917 and 1921, was no longer applicable in totally altered circumstances.

The new Republican party brought out a very brief economic programme a few days before the 1923 general election. None of its proposals were very radical and it was soon forgotten. The reasons for the initial neglect of economic issues were connected with the internment of many of the Republican leaders and with their preoccupation with establishing a new organization and fighting a general election. However, the end of 1923 saw the appointment of a five-member group to draft a social and economic programme. Local branches were asked to send their views on this topic to party headquarters. A preliminary policy draft was attacked in the columns of the *Irish Statesman*, on the grounds that it was so vague and obscure that it "could be adopted by the most reactionary Tory. . . ."⁴³ The Republican economic programme was released in March, 1924. It was brief, incomplete and composed mainly of ill-defined generalizations. It was described, perhaps not without reason, as "a perfectly childish adaptation of the vague 'Democratic Programme' adopted by Dáil Éireann at its first meeting. . . ."⁴⁴ The party, apologizing for the programme's incompleteness, added that it would be expanded when the imprisoned political leaders had a chance of expressing their views.⁴⁵ However, when the leaders were released, they preferred to look to the past rather than the future. They continued to adhere to the tactics of the Nationalist Sinn Féin party of using purely political or constitutional issues as aggregating agents, relegating social problems to the background.

In July, 1925, an economic programme was drafted which was to be implemented by the Republican representatives elected to local government bodies. However, very few Sinn Féiners were elected, and little was subsequently heard

43. 9.2.1924.

44. J. D. Clarkson, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*, New York, 1925, p. 472.

45. *Sinn Féin*, 22.3.1924; *Éire*, 29.3.1924.

of this programme.⁴⁶ Towards the end of 1925, Art O'Connor, one of the few Republican leaders to attempt a formulation of detailed policies for the party, published a pamphlet entitled, *Notes on National Economy*. In this he reiterated Griffith's theory that the Irish economy would not progress until the country became as self-sufficient as possible in both agriculture and industry.⁴⁷ O'Connor's rather orthodox economic blueprint for the Republic was largely neglected in the controversy over the abstentionist issue, which became acute towards the end of 1925.

In October, 1925, a further attempt to draw up a constructive economic and social programme was made with the appointment of a seven-member committee "to draft in outline a national policy".⁴⁸ The policy committee submitted a draft document just before the *Ard-Fheis* that was to split the party in March, 1926. This programme, though longer and more radical than many of its predecessors, suffered from similar defect of vague and woolly generalization. It is, perhaps, symptomatic of the party's desire to play safe, and to avoid antagonizing any segment of the community, that no reference was made to the payment of land annuities, one of the burning issues of the day.⁴⁹ The special party convention that followed was too preoccupied with more crucial matters to devote time to this draft programme. The subsequent split in the organization made it largely irrelevant.

The Third Sinn Féin party was reluctant to come to any firm decisions, not only in formulating economic policy, but also in its handling of social and economic issues raised at party conventions. As a rule, controversial topics of this nature were referred by the *Ard-Fheis* to the Standing Committee for consideration, and were then quietly shelved without any decision being taken. For example, on the thorny question of the payment of land annuities to Britain, raised at the 1924 *Ard-Fheis*, the Standing Committee sidestepped a decision by announcing that the problem "would be considered when the proper time had come".⁵⁰

A number of reasons can be adduced for Sinn Féin's failure to develop a convincing economic programme and for its relegation of social issues to the background of policy discussion. In the first place, the new party was largely dominated by views and attitudes that had prevailed within the Nationalist Sinn Féin party in the years of the independence struggle. The leaders of the Republican party in the post-civil war era made the error of regarding their organization as a national party, in the sense that the previous Sinn Féin had been national, i.e., supported by a majority of all classes in all sections of the country outside the six north-eastern counties. Because the Second Sinn Féin party had been determined not to confuse the struggle for independence by becoming involved in

46. *An Phoblacht*, 17.7.1925, 24.7.1925.

47. Art O'Connor, *Notes on National Economy*, Dublin, 1925.

48. SFFC, book 24, minute 39.

49. *Irish Freedom*, March 1927.

50. SFFC, book 23, pp. 112-115.

any clash of social interests that might divide its heterogeneous supporters, the Republican leaders of the new party, anxious to emulate the success of the earlier organization, considered the placing of emphasis on social ideals as both unnecessary and a potential cause of division. The Third Sinn Féin party wanted all sections of Irish society to present an united front to secure independence. By so doing it believed that each stratum would be advancing its own basic interests. Nationalist leaders in many newly-emerging states "tend to conceive of themselves as shaping a new future for their societies and hence as representing the interests of all the people."⁵¹ The Sinn Féin leaders were no exception. Rather than articulate the current interests of the various segments of Irish society, they emphasised the idea that all groups would be taken care of in the Republic.

For the Sinn Féin party, national independence was the primal necessity, and once that had been achieved there would be social justice for all. While the Treaty remained, Ireland could never become prosperous.⁵² The best cure for Ireland's economic condition, according to Sinn Féin, was the solution of her political difficulties. For this reason, the party thought it unnecessary to formulate policies based on the economic conditions of the Free State. Free State problems would die with its constitution; the Irish economic situation would change once a Republic had been established.

The low state of Ireland's commerce and industry comes from the same cause as the low state of her literature, social life and manners. It comes from the humiliation of the nation by that black and evil surrender of December, 1921.⁵³

Between 1923 and 1926, Sinn Féin failed to recognize itself for what it was—a political party which had the support of less than a third of the electorate, and a recognizable social and geographical character. That Sinn Féin was something more, something superior to a mere political party, was repeatedly asserted throughout this period. "The Republican party is not an economic, social or religious party. . . . It is a national party. . . ."⁵⁴ "Sinn Féin is not merely a political organization for contesting elections. It is a national movement for the realization of the national ideal."⁵⁵ In an interview with an American press correspondent in October, 1924, the Sinn Féin president, stating that the party was a national and not a social or class organization, continued:

Our economic ideals and our policy for achieving these ideals are similarly national in outlook—devised to meet the peculiar needs and the special circumstances of the entire nation, not for the benefit of any one class within the nation. Our programme cannot, therefore, be properly classified under any of the recognized social or economic brands.⁵⁶

51. G. A. Almond and J. S. Coleman, *The Politics of the Developing Areas*. Princeton, New Jersey, 1960, p. 124.

52. *Irish Independent*, 8.9.1924; *Sinn Féin*, 9.8.1924, 11.10.1924.

53. *Sinn Féin*, 30.8.1924.

54. *Eire*, 6.9.1924; See also *Sinn Féin*, 23.8.1924, 8.11.1924.

55. SFPC, book 48, part 3, doc. no. 2470, p. 68.

56. *Sinn Féin*, 15.11.1924.

Regarding itself as a national party, Sinn Féin naturally wished to avoid alienating the sympathies of any class. The formulation of official policy on controversial issues might split the solidarity of the Republican ranks.⁵⁷ Hence, decisions were postponed. Policy proposals took the form of diffuse programmes selected more for their unifying symbolism than for their effectiveness in meeting demands emanating from Irish society. De Valera admitted in Carlow, in October, 1924: "If we start fighting with one another on internal questions while we have not got the fundamental thing, we are binding ourselves."⁵⁸ Mary MacSwiney admitted that all the Republican economic programmes had suffered from vagueness: "This vagueness has been largely due to the fact that while we were all united on the question of national freedom, the same unity might not be attained on matters of economic policy."⁵⁹ Members of the Republican party, as individuals, were permitted their own views on economic and social issues; and once complete independence had been achieved, they would be free to join different parties according to their opinions.⁶⁰ Sinn Féin refused to offer any opinion as to the rival merits of private enterprise or state ownership, but promised to judge every measure by the single test of "national interest."

Today Sinn Féin is the nation organized to secure its political independence. . . . A nation seeking to recover its country cannot act like a party having special theories. It can only act on lines on which the whole people is agreed. . . . Our aim is not socialism nor capitalism—it is nationality and freedom.⁶¹

There were other reasons for the party's unwillingness to draft detailed economic policies. The Sinn Féin leaders were untutored in the study of economics. Unlike the Cosgrave government, which could rely on the expertise of its civil servants,⁶² the Republican party had no trained economists to turn to for advice. Moreover, the party's radicalism, and its distance from power after the 1923 general election, made it an unlikely pressure group target. Because organized interest generally did not attempt to influence Republican policy, preferring to devote their attention to the government party and the opposition parties in the Dáil, the doctrinal Republicanism of Sinn Féin was reinforced. Without the pressure of specific interest groups, the Republican party had little incentive to make its programme more detailed and concrete.

It is also possible that the party's reluctance to come to grips with economic matters may be related to the social composition of its elected deputies.⁶³ A rough

57. *Eire*, 16.8.1924.

58. *Ibid.*, 11.10.1924.

59. *Irish Freedom*, June 1927.

60. *Eire*, 6.9.1924.

61. *Sinn Féin*, 30.8.1924.

62. The government's free trade policy was largely based on the advice given to it by the Fiscal Inquiry Committee. *Irish Independent*, 19.12.1923 and D. Gwynn *op. cit.*, pp. 235-244.

63. In Great Britain, for example, it has been asserted that there may be some connection between the rise of businessmen in the Conservative party and the tragic inadequacies of Conservative policy between the wars. Neuman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

analysis of the occupational structure of Republican *Teachta Dála* elected in August 1923, revealed that by far the largest proportion, 41 per cent, was engaged in the professions. A further 9 per cent was employed in commerce, finance or insurance. Of the remainder, the largest proportion, 23 per cent, was engaged in agriculture, 13 per cent in miscellaneous and 14 per cent in unknown occupations. If we omit the unknowns, the parliamentary party was therefore about evenly divided between white collar workers, belonging to the upper section of the social pyramid, and farmers and members of the working class at the lower end of the social scale. It is conceivable that the balance which prevailed within the bulk of the parliamentary group, between professional people and what can be loosely described as "blue collar" workers, may have contributed to the placing of emphasis on strictly constitutional issues, on which both sections could agree, and to the neglect of social and economic matters where there was the possibility of a wide divergence of views. Too much reliance cannot be placed on an analysis of this nature, however; the sample is small, and it is difficult to obtain precise occupational details at a remove of over forty years.⁶⁴ There may also be some truth in the statement that "It is not the social origin of leaders that matters, but the social tier from which their philosophy derives."⁶⁵

The failure of the Republican party to develop a detailed social and economic programme was a source of dissatisfaction both inside and outside the organization's ranks. The government party, by its day to day management of the country's affairs, focussed attention on practical economic and social matters. The Sinn Féin party, the party of the lower classes during a period of economic recession when its supporters were hard-hit by emigration and unemployment, had no clearly defined alternatives to *Cumann na nGaedheal's* laissez-faire policies. The Republican party was attacked by the press, and by many of its own members, for its opaque programme and its failure to draw up precise constructive policies.

Increasingly, criticism came from within the organization. The Republican weekly *An Phoblacht* admitted that there was far too little constructive thinking being done in the party.

As a creative policy Sinn Féin has made no progress since 1921. . . . Waiting for something to turn up and relying on the blunders that the Free State is making is pure laziness and mental dullness.⁶⁶

Party members became dissatisfied with the slipshod spirit of the movement, with the failure of Republican Ministers to do any effective ministering and with the party's economic programme.

The country is hungry for a constructive programme. The people are sick of such platitudes as the Sinn Féin economic programme. They want a real live fullblooded

64. Indeed it is a difficult task to assess the present day occupational structure of Irish party deputies. See Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

65. Peadar O'Donnell, *There Will Be Another Day*, Dublin, 1963, p. 12.

66. 9.10.1925.

constructive policy, with facts and figures, over which the Republican government will stand when it comes in to function.⁶⁷

Although formally committed to carrying out the social and economic objectives of the nationalist revolution, the conservative *Cumann na nGaedheal* party attempted to resist the institutional elaboration of these goals.⁶⁸ The economic policy of the government was adapted to agriculture as the natural complement to industrial England. Protective tariffs were established very cautiously, after a careful examination of the position. Over a hundred factories were allowed to close down between 1922 and 1932 because they were unable to withstand foreign competition.⁶⁹ The government's fiscal policy could be described as one of general retrenchment and deflation. It "aimed at restoring stability by adopting a conservative financial policy".⁷⁰ The Cabinet reduced old-age pensions, attempted to hold down the wages of government employees, and was slow to recognize the housing and educational needs of the country.

People resented the fact that little effort was made to put Griffith's policy of industrial self-sufficiency into operation, that social legislation fell woefully short of the needs of the community, that, in effect, the Cosgrave régime was as conservative in its policy and outlook as any Tory government in Britain. One of the basic conditions for the acquirement of legitimacy by the government of a new State is effectiveness, particularly in the economic sphere.⁷¹ The *Cumann na nGaedheal* administration failed to provide the people with rewards of a tangible nature in the social and economic field. The Sinn Féin party was thus offered many opportunities for attacking the government's social and economic programme. "Widespread unemployment, inadequate wages, unspeakable housing—these things were pressing on the working class throughout the infant Free State."⁷² By failing to define clearly its objectives in the social and economic spheres, and by concentrating on the single issue of political freedom, Sinn Féin was unable to utilize the grievances of the electorate for its own benefit.

Under the reign of the Nationalist Sinn Féin party the attainment of national self-determination seemed to be the first condition for the realization of social aims. The national oppressor was at the same time the economic exploiter. Obsessed by the need to obtain the symbol of complete independence, an Irish Republic, the Third Sinn Féin party concentrated mainly on national issues, to the detriment of economic and social ideas. In the years after the civil war this party failed to convince an apathetic electorate, tired of strife and constitutional issues, and preoccupied with economic and social problems, that an overriding

67. Letter to *Sinn Féin*, 21.3.1925.

68. Clarkson, *op. cit.*, p. 472, quotes a reference to the government as a "heavy-handed, heavy-taxed, capitalistic régime".

69. Rumpf, *op. cit.*, p. 97, and Liam C. Skinner, *Politicians by accident*, Dublin, 1946, p. 62.

70. N. Mansergh, *The Irish Free State: its government and politics*, London, 1934, p. 256.

71. Lipset, *The First New Nation*, p. 60.

72. Clarkson, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

national issue still existed to be solved. Thus the Sinn Féin party presented no attractive image to the people.

Although one reason for the decline of the Third Sinn Féin party was its failure to convince the voters of the overriding importance of the constitutional issue, it would be incorrect to conclude from this that social and economic policies were all-important to the Irish electorate at this period. Social and economic ideas which were not embedded closely in the national ideal met with little approval, even among the smallholders and the urban proletariat. Hence the Labour party remained unimportant. The Republican Sinn Féin party was never able to absorb the idea that social freedom was at least as important as political freedom. Unlike the Fianna Fáil party which largely superseded it after 1926, Sinn Féin failed to synthesize social and constitutional demands, and during its brief lifetime remained tied to the stake of unreality by the worn threads of an outdated form of republicanism.

No single factor can adequately explain the decline of Sinn Féin, from its position as the second largest party in the country to that of a very minor organization on the fringe of the political scene within the brief space of three years. All that can be stated with any degree of certainty is that a combination of causes produced the resultant of decline and decay. From its very beginning, the party was faced with the dilemma that was to eventually destroy it. A negative policy of parliamentary abstentionism was the only one on which all the anti-Treaty deputies could hold together as a party after the civil war; yet this policy was to cost Sinn Féin the support it needed to gain power. Any decision to abandon abstentionism would split the party; yet if this policy was not dropped, the organization would wither into insignificance.

The conditions necessary for the success of an abstentionist party were not present in the newly independent Free State. Once Sinn Féin failed to win a majority in the 1923 general election, all it could do was wait in the hope that fate would somehow sweep it into power. The new State was not seriously weakened by internal or external events, and no train of historical circumstances arose to push Sinn Féin to the forefront, as had happened to Griffith's party between 1913 and 1917. Because the party was isolated from the effective locus of power, Leinster House, the Sinn Féin *Teachta Dála* were unable to fill the role imposed on parliamentary representatives by the Irish electorate—that of acting as constituency ombudsmen. All majority-bent parties, that is, parties with a reasonable prospect of gaining power, need to retain and stimulate the interests of their members and supporters. In western-type democracies, the parliamentary forum is the usual focus of interest and the opposition can be seen occasionally to score off the government. Sinn Féin, however, was debarred from entering Leinster House and was thus unable to provide the visible rewards required by its membership and the electorate.

Although supported by all sections of the community, the Third Sinn Féin party did have a recognizable social and geographical character. It was to a large extent the party of the poorer farming class of the west and south-west, a section

of the community badly hit by the economic difficulties of the mid-1920s and by discrimination in employment. Many party members and supporters were forced to emigrate and this weakened the organization. By no means all Republicans left the country. Many remained, but they ceased to support the party because of its obsession with constitutional matters, and its neglect of bread and butter issues at a time when many Republicans were literally starving. The Labour Party made the opposite mistake of concentrating on social and economic matters at the expense of equally important constitutional issues. It was left to the new Republican party, Fianna Fáil, to demonstrate the electoral advantages of combining both constitutional and social issues in a realistic fashion in its party programme.

TABLE 1: *Coefficients of correlation between density of rural population (population outside towns of 200 persons or more per 1,000 acres of crops and pasture, 1926)¹ and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

Sinn Féin	·02
Cumann na nGaedheal	·48

1. Department of Industry and Commerce, *Agricultural Statistics 1847-1926. Report and tables.* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1928), Map 19, p. lix.

TABLE 2: *Coefficients of correlation between agricultural workers (persons at work in the agricultural industry expressed per 1,000 persons at work in all industries)¹ and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

Sinn Féin	·51
Cumann na nGaedheal	—·03

1. Department of Industry and Commerce, *Census of Population 1926* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1932), Vol. vii, table 4, p. 10.

TABLE 3: *Coefficients of correlation between non-agricultural workers (number of non-agricultural producers per 1,000 occupied persons in each constituency)¹ and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

Sinn Féin	—·42 ²
Cumann na nGaedheal	—·05

1. *Census of Population 1926*, Vol. x, pp. 32-33; Vol. ii, table 4 (a), p. 22.

2. The negative correlation indicates an inverse relationship e.g. as the proportion of industrial workers increased, the Sinn Féin percentage poll decreased.

TABLE 4: *Coefficients of correlation between farm size and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

	5-15 acres ¹	1-30 acres ²	1-50 acres ²
Sinn Féin	·21	·21	·31
Cumann na nGaedheal	·44	·46	·42

1. *Thom's Directory 1930* (Dublin: 1930), p. 585.

2. *Agricultural Statistics 1847-1926*, pp. xiii, 90-99.

TABLE 5: *Coefficients of correlation between farm valuation and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

	£4-£7 valuation ¹	£4-£10 valuation ²	average valuation of farms in each constituency ³
Sinn Féin	·54	·48	—·62
Cumann na nGaedheal	·39	·32	—·05

1. Department of Industry and Commerce, *Statistical Abstract 1931*, (Dublin: 1931), table 49, p. 37.

2. *Thom's Directory 1929*, p. 584.

3. *Thom's Almanac and Directory 1926*, p. 638.

TABLE 6: *Coefficients of correlation between poor housing conditions (percentage of people living in dwellings of 1-3 rooms)¹ and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

Sinn Féin	·42
Cumann na nGaedheal	·26

1. *Census of Population 1926*, Vol. iv, table 2A, p. 3.

TABLE 7: *Coefficients of correlation between emigration and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

	Emigration ¹ 1911-1926	Emigration ² 1921
Sinn Féin	·50	·75
Cumann na nGaedheal	—·09	·18

1. *Census of Population 1926. Preliminary Report*, table L, p. 13.

2. *Thom's Almanac and Directory 1926*, p. 642.

The higher Sinn Féin coefficient for 1921 can be accounted for by the fact that the emigration rate during the intercensal period (1911–1926) was distorted by the departure of British troops and their dependents along with a considerable number of civilians in the immediate post-Treaty period.

TABLE 8: *Coefficients of correlation between the percentage of non-Catholics in 1926¹ and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

Sinn Féin	—·62
Cumann na nGaedheal	·08

1. *Census of Population 1926*. Vol. iii, part I, table 10, p. 18.

TABLE 9: *Coefficients of correlation between old-age pensioners¹ and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

Sinn Féin	·63
Cumann na nGaedheal	·20

1. *Thom's Almanac and Directory 1926*, p. 640.

TABLE 10: *Coefficients of correlation between Land League meetings and agrarian outrages and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

	Land League meetings ¹ (1879–1880)	Agrarian outrages ² (1879–1882)
Sinn Féin	·53	·76
Cumann na nGaedheal	·28	—·10

1. *Parliamentary Papers 1881*, Vol. lxxvii.

2. *Ibid.* and Rumpf, *op. cit.*, map ix, p. 74.

TABLE 11: *Coefficients of correlation between incidents during the War of Independence and support for the Sinn Féin and Cumann na nGaedheal parties in the 1923 general election.*

	IRA attacks on British installations and personnel between 1.9.1919-30.6.1920 and 1.1.1921-30.4.1921 ¹	Raids by British forces which wholly or partly wrecked towns and villages between 9.9.1919-1.3.1921 ²
Sinn Féin	.22	.59
Cumann na nGaedheal	-.07	-.06

1. Rumpf, *op. cit.*, map ii, p. 63.

2. *Dáil Eireann: an address to the representatives of foreign nations. Adopted at the January session of Dáil Eireann, 1921* (Dublin: 1921), pp. 37-38.

TABLE 12: *Correlation between the Sinn Féin percentage poll in 1923 and the Fianna Fáil percentage poll in the general elections of 1927.*

Constituency	S.F. % Poll 1923	Constituency	F.F. % Poll June '27	Constituency	F.F. % Poll Sept. '27
Clare	47.4	Clare	39.8	Clare	52.8
Kerry	45.1	Mayo	35.6	Kerry	51.9
Roscommon	36.5	Galway	33.6	Mayo	46.5
Mayo	36.2	Kerry	33.2	Cavan	42.8
Sligo-Leitrim	36.1	Roscommon	31.3	Galway	42.7
Galway	33.5	Monaghan	30.7	Roscommon	42.6
Longford-Westmeath	31.2	Limerick	30.3	Waterford	37.9
Tipperary	29.5	Leix-Offaly	29.0	Longford-Westmeath	37.6
Leix-Offaly	27.4	Tipperary	28.5	Meath	37.2
Louth	27.1	Louth	28.3	Kildare	36.2
Wexford	27.1	Wexford	28.0	Limerick	34.8
Limerick	26.4	Meath	27.3	Sligo-Leitrim	34.7
Waterford	25.4	Longford-Westmeath	25.7	Tipperary	34.4
Carlow-Kilkenny	24.9	Donegal	25.7	Wexford	33.9
Donegal	24.8	Dublin	24.2	Leix-Offaly	33.3
Monaghan	22.4	Cavan	24.1	Monaghan	32.7
Cork	21.8	Carlow-Kilkenny	23.7	Louth	32.4
Kildare	21.3	Kildare	23.6	Carlow-Kilkenny	30.5
Wicklow	18.4	Sligo-Leitrim	23.1	Cork	30.2
Cavan	18.4	Wicklow	21.7	Donegal	29.6
Meath	16.9	Waterford	18.2	Dublin	26.5
Dublin	16.8	Cork	14.0	Wicklow	23.2

Coefficient of correlation between 1923 Sinn Féin percentage poll and June 1927 Fianna Fáil percentage poll: .67.

Coefficient of correlation between 1923 Sinn Féin percentage poll and September 1927 Fianna Fáil percentage poll: .79.

The high correlation coefficients indicate that the geographical basis of Republican support remained relatively unchanged during this period and that Fianna Fáil, by September 1927, had been successful in capturing the allegiance of a large proportion of former Sinn Féin voters.

TABLE 13: *A comparison between the Coalition Republican poll in the 1922 general election and the Sinn Féin poll in the 1923 general election*

1922		1923	
Constituency	C.R. % Poll	Constituency	S.F. % Poll
Sligo-Mayo E.	56.4	Sligo-Leitrim	36.5
Tipperary N., S., Mid.	40.2	Galway	33.1
Galway	32.2	Longford-Westmeath	31.1
Waterford-E. Tipp.	29.9	Tipperary	29.5
Cork ^a	27.7	Wexford	27.1
Wexford	26.9	Waterford	25.4
N.U.I.	25.2	Carlow-Kilkenny	24.9
Monaghan	24.6	Monaghan	22.4
Kildare-Wicklow	19.0	Louth-Meath ^a	22.1
Longford-Westmeath	17.5	Cork ^a	21.8
Louth-Meath	15.7	N.U.I.	19.7
Carlow-Kilkenny	14.3	Kildare-Wicklow	19.6
Dublin ^a	11.6	Dublin ^a	16.8

^aIn these cases where counties and constituencies do not coincide the figures given were calculated from available statistics.

The alteration of the boundaries of some constituencies by the 1923 Electoral Act makes an accurate comparison between the two polls impossible. However a certain similarity in the voting patterns in the two elections is discernible and with the exception of Longford-Westmeath and Carlow-Kilkenny no violent swing of the pendulum took place between 1922 and 1923.