

## 3.IRL Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition | Sample answer

### How did the Sinn Féin movement develop 1912-1923? (2018)

Sinn Féin did little to influence Irish affairs in its early years as a political movement. Having been founded in 1905 by Arthur Griffith, by only 1910 the party was in decline. Though it had over 100 branches nationwide by 1908 and was the first Irish political party that admitted women as full members, it was not until the years that followed the 1916 Rising that Sinn Féin made significant ripples in the Irish political sphere. Sinn Féin, in fact, had nothing to do with the planning of the Rising. Yet, it was mistakenly referred to the “Sinn Féin rebellion” and the participants were wrongly called “Sinn Féin Volunteers” by the British. Griffith too was wrongly interned as a result of the insurgency, but when released he capitalised on renewed interest in his party and began to reorganise it as vast numbers of Irish Volunteers and their supporters began to join Sinn Féin’s ranks.

Significant developments for Sinn Féin occurred throughout 1917. In February Count Plunkett, whose son Joseph was a signatory of the 1916 Proclamation and who was executed for his participation in the Rising, won a by-election in North Roscommon as a Sinn Féin candidate. In doing so he defeated the Home Rule Party candidate. In June Eamon de Valera was freed from prison and returned home to win a by-election in East Clare. At the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis in October de Valera replaced Griffith as party leader. The party now abandoned its the notion of a dual monarchy and appealed to a growing appetite among the public and became a fully republican party. This new outlook represented what became known as the Second Sinn Féin party until its split in 1922.

The new-look Sinn Féin that it was became closely allied with the Volunteers with many people being members of both organisations. De Valera was elected leader of the Volunteers now too. Sinn Féin’s primary goals were to replace the Home Rule Party and lead the line in Irish politics in search for independence. In 1918, two instances that helped Sinn Féin realise its ambitions were

the Irish Convention (to some extent) and the Conscription Crisis (to an even greater degree). British Prime Minister David Lloyd George attempted to introduce Home Rule and he set up the Irish Convention to try to achieve this aim. All political groups were invited but Sinn Féin boycotted it, and by doing so, undermined the Convention's legitimacy in that any decision resulting from talks could be questioned as the forum could not claim to have the widespread support of the Irish people. Sinn Féin's status took a boost from the affair further due to the Home Rule Party's failure to broker any agreement during the talks. John Redmond, leader of the Home Rule Party, died in March and this again copper-fastened Sinn Féin's position.

The Conscription Crisis that followed garnered Sinn Féin an even greater following. With World War One still being fought the British were in dire need for more troops. The Military Service Bill was passed by Westminster on April 16<sup>th</sup> offering home rule to Ireland once the condition of conscription was accepted. Nationalists in Ireland opposed this bill and Sinn Féin in particular profited by campaigning heavily against it throughout the country. As an example, de Valera and Griffith attended an anti-conscription meeting in the Mansion House in Dublin on April 18<sup>th</sup>, and on June 21<sup>st</sup> de Valera proclaimed: "we pledge ourselves solemnly to one another to resist conscription". The pledge was signed by 2 million people such was the scale of opposition to this bill. When the plan was shelved in July the public saw it as another victory for Sinn Féin. The "German Plot" incident had further served to increase Sinn Féin's popularity at this time too. On May 17<sup>th</sup> when leading Sinn Féin members were arrested (having been accused of attempting to acquire arms from the Germans to start another rebellion) the Irish public were not on the side of the British government. By banning organisations like the Gaelic League and the Volunteers along with Sinn Féin, they party only grew in approval.

As the Home Rule Party's mandate was dramatically weakened, Sinn Féin was in pole position to succeed. The People Act of 1918 gave a vote to all men over 21 and all women over 30 and their ideals proved popular with this demographic. With this as a base they were progressing steadily, their success helped even more by the fact that most of its candidates and members were young and motivated. The network of branches established throughout Ireland, support from the Volunteers and Cumann na nBan, the recent successes of the crises described above, along with claiming to be the ideological progeny of the 1916 martyrs, were all factors that both conveyed the party's development and assisted it. Moreover, the General Election of 1918 was proof of Sinn Féin's incredible progression overall. The election was a huge victory for the party and signalled

the end for the Home Rulers. In December with the votes fully counted, the rise of Sinn Féin was apparent, as they emerged with 73 seats compared to a mere 6 won by the Home Rule Party.

The next step for Sinn Féin was an historic development – setting up a parliament in Dublin. Continuing their policy of abstention, but now daring to form their own government, the First Dáil met in the Mansion House on January 21<sup>st</sup> 1919 in Dublin comprising 27 Sinn Féin MPs. This was an extremely significant moment as the Irish Republic can trace its existence back to here. As well as reading out the 1916 Proclamation, the First Dáil passed the Democratic Programme. De Valera, having missed the inaugural meeting as he was in prison on foot of the German Plot, attended on April 1<sup>st</sup> (having escaped) and replaced Cathal Brugha as President of the Dáil. MPs became known as TDs (Teachta Dála) and a Cabinet of ministers were appointed. The Dáil now operated with a backdrop of conflict as the War of Independence was waged against the British. The various departments established by the government (Finance, Industries, Agriculture, etc.) continued to function despite being faced with immense difficulty given the precarious context. Needless to say, the British did not accept the Dáil's legitimacy and was committed to ensure its disbandment.

Lloyd George was determined to crush Sinn Féin, Dáil Eireann and the Irish Republican Army (the new name of the Irish Volunteers and now the “official” Irish military). But Sinn Féin had other ideas. The party made successful use of media to highlight the atrocities committed by British forces in Ireland. Erskine Childers and Desmond Fitzgerald were in charge of the government's propaganda department and published the Irish Bulletin newspaper which wrote of such war crimes. But as the conflict wore on de Valera believed that peace negotiations should be negotiated with the British. Eventually, the Sinn Féin government agreed to a truce engaged in talks with the British around the question of Irish independence. This can be seen as a considerable achievement for the fledgling administration.

The well-known Anglo-Treaty Irish Treaty ultimately resulted in the fracturing of Sinn Féin. What had once been a fringe political party in the early 1900s that failed to exert change on national affairs ascended to triumph in the 1918 General Election and established the First Dáil in 1919. Though Sinn Féin represented the will of the people by defying the British and holding strong during the War of Independence, it was clear that by 1922 the public desired peace and stability.

The “Pro-Treaty” Sinn Féiners won 58 seats in the General Election of 1922 compared to 36 seats won by the “Anti-Treaty” side. The Anti-Treaty side (retaining the Sinn Féin title) were defeated in the 1923 General Election too, by 63 seats to 44, though they refused to take their seats in the Dáil. The de jure Free State was now run by Cumann na nGaedheal, a party with its DNA rooted in Sinn Féin. Interestingly, during the election campaign de Valera was arrested and imprisoned. It seems therefore, that during the period in question, the fortunes of one of Ireland’s most prominent politicians mirrored the fortunes of one of Ireland’s most prominent parties.