

Ireland Topic 3: The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition, 1912-1949 | Sample answer

What factors contributed to Sinn Fein's success in the 1918 election?

In the December 1910 elections, the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) won 73 of the 103 seats contested in Ireland. Sinn Fein did not run any candidate and, at the time, the party was struggling for membership and support. Just eight years later, of the 105 seats now up for grabs in Ireland, Sinn Fein carried 73. IPP won just six. The reasons for this upturn in fortunes are both numerous and complex. Here, I will examine the influence of the 1916 Easter Rising and its aftermath, the failings of IPP and the success of SF's leadership.

With the Rising well and truly crushed by British forces, the government in London, still focused on the Great War effort, mistook the incident as a stab in the back from Germany. Swift and thorough justice was ordered and executed. General Maxwell was effectively given a free reign to carry out whatever he saw fit. Approximately 170 people were court-martialled, 90 were sentenced to death. From the 3rd to the 12th of May, 15 of the leaders were shot dead by firing squad. The public were outraged by the speed and manner of their deaths. James Connolly was famously tied to a chair before he was killed while Joseph Plunkett died just hours after marrying his long-time fiancée. Herbert Asquith had foreseen the reaction and told Maxwell after the first spate of executions that continuing on this path would "sow the seeds of lasting trouble in Ireland". In fact, it would be Sinn Fein that would reap the rewards.

While the Rising was initially resented by the Dublin people, the executions turned the tide of public opinion and it was quickly seen as an act of heroism against the oppressive British crown. They were then presented with a group with which to thank and to aggressively support. Despite the fact party leader Arthur Griffith was completely opposed to armed insurrection and Sean MacDiarmada was the only leader who had links with the party, the British labelled it the "Sinn Fein Rising". The name stuck and SF got the credit from voters. By October of the following year, the party now boasted 150,000 members.

In May of 1918, the British government once again were the masters of their own downfall. A conspiracy stemming from Dublin Castle with the aim of justifying the internment of SF leaders by creating a link between the party and the German Empire further strengthened the position of the party. Eamon De Valera, now President of SF, Griffith and Constance Markievicz were

arrested but this only served as a propaganda victory for Sinn Fein. Furthermore, the party now fell into the hands of more hardline republicans who had evaded capture. Cathal Brugha now headed the party while Michael Collins was able to consolidate his control of the organisation and put it on a more focused military footing. The general public viewed this as proof that Britain feared SF and drove them further into their arms. Through all of these actions, the British government played a large part in the rise of Sinn Fein.

Another important factor in the organisation's ascension was, of course, the downfall of the IPP. In 1910, a vote for John Redmond's party was a vote for Home Rule, a movement that was at the forefront of Irish nationalism. By 1918, HR was no longer seen as enough and the electorate had largely been radicalised. Their failure to adapt to the changing mindset of their voters meant their drop in support was inevitable. When the enactment of HR was suspended for the war, Redmond's failure to challenge the decision was the start of their downfall. His continued support of WW1, even after it had gone on much longer than expected, further angered supporters. These are just some of the many incidents that showed a real lack of political savvy in the party and, in particular, from Redmond.

Among the most damaging of these mistakes was their response to the Rising. Although they were appalled by the British response, they had similar feelings to the rebellion itself and did not withdraw from Westminster. This was seen as cynical and opportunistic by the public. When they finally left the House of Commons, in response to the introduction of conscription, voters asked why it took so long to follow Sinn Fein's lead. IPP were seen as indecisive and ineffective. This was the nail in the coffin for the party. Sinn Fein were now the leaders in Irish republicanism and seemed to be aggressive, quick to act and effective. When the election came along, IPP continued to campaign on HR, an outdated idea. They won just 6 seats, all of which came in Ulster.

Finally, the skillfulness of the Sinn Fein leadership was obviously a massively important factor in their growth. Eamon de Valera's election to President at the 1917 Ard Fheis saw the party assume the role as the head of Irish republicanism. As leader of the Irish Volunteers, he could bring many separate groups in under the banner of SF, further strengthening them. De Valera was careful not to alienate home rulers by declaring that the Volunteers would fight for full independence. This move allowed many previous supporters of IPP to make the move across to Sinn Fein. When conscription in Ireland was shelved in July 1918 as the US entered the war, despite the Home Rule Party and several other institutions fighting for it, Sinn Fein managed to

steal credit for it. This added further to the sense that SF were a party of action and decisiveness.

By late 1918, with the election on the way, SF now looked an effective, youthful party whereas the Irish Parliamentary Party looked tired and outdated. Sinn Fein claimed almost 70% of the seats. Their rise from a struggling party lacking identity to the leader of Irish nationalism, both constitutional and militant, was complete. Sinn Fein set up Dáil Eireann and went on to lead the island through the War of Independence, the Treaty debates and the Civil War. Their rise was swift and immensely important. Through the failures of the IPP, the success of their leadership and the results of the 1916 Rising, Sinn Fein rose to power, a power that was crucial as the fight for independence progressed.