



The rise of Sinn Féin

Bobby Sands' election as an MP (and the election of another republican, Owen Carron, for the same seat after Sands' death) suggested to republicans that becoming involved in politics might help them achieve their objectives by other methods.

Therefore, in November 1981 Sinn Féin adopted the strategy of using both politics and violence to achieve its aims.

This approach was called the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy.

The Armalite was a rifle used by the PIRA at this time.

RISE OF SINN FEIN

Results of the hunger strike

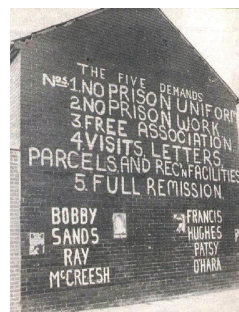
The 1981 Hunger Strike had a number of important results:

- A greater level of nationalist hostility towards the British Government.
- An increase in support for the PIRA.
- An increase in the levels of paramilitary violence.

As a result, Thatcher's government was coming under pressure from:

- Unionists, who believed that Thatcher was not doing enough to stop either the growth in PIRA membership or levels of violence.
- The Dublin Government, which believed that a new political solution was needed to bring the PIRA's campaign to an end.

RESULTS



SDLP Concerns

Sinn Féin's new approach soon seemed to be working.

It won seats and more votes in a number of elections. These included:

- Elections for a new Assembly, held in October 1982.
- The 1983 **General Election** (where party leader Gerry Adams was elected MP for West Belfast)
- **Local Government** elections, held in 1985.

The increase in Sinn Féin's electoral support concerned both the British and Irish governments and the SDLP.

Both governments were worried that Sinn Féin might become Northern Ireland's largest nationalist party if something was not done.

At the same time, the levels of violence - while lower than the 1970s - still gave considerable cause for concern.

On 6th December 1982, 17 people, 11 of whom were soldiers, died when an INLA bomb exploded in Ballykelly, Co. Derry/Londonderry.

The INLA had emerged in 1975 from a split in the Official IRA.



For the rest of the 1970s and the early 1980s, successive British governments attempted, without success, to solve the Northern Ireland problem.

At the same time, although the levels of violence lessened due to improved security measures, the PIRA launched a campaign of violence in Britain, exploding bombs in towns and cities such as Guildford and Birmingham.

During these years the Westminster Government introduced policies designed to defeat the paramilitary campaigns.

These new policies included:

- **Ulsterisation:** This meant increasing the size of the UDR and RUC while reducing the numbers the British Army troops on the streets of Northern Ireland.
- **Criminalisation:** This meant ending **special category status** for those convicted of terrorist crimes after March 1976. Anyone convicted after that date would be treated in the same way as other criminals. They would be sent to a new prison - consisting of H-shaped blocks - which had been built at the Maze outside Belfast.



The first hunger strike (1980)

Republican prisoners hated criminalisation.

They believed themselves to be "freedom fighters" rather than criminals.

In order to oppose criminalisation they:

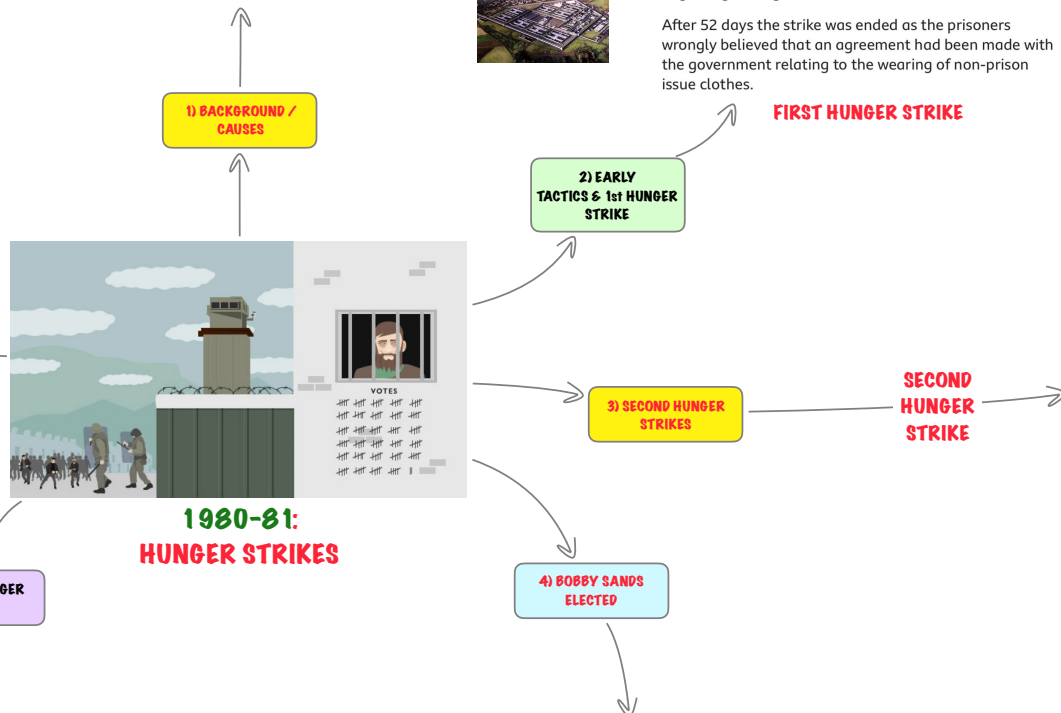
- Wore blankets rather than clothes provided by the prison.
- In 1978 they started to smear their excrement on the walls of their cells rather than **slop out**.

Neither action resulted in the end of criminalisation, even though by the end of 1980 nearly 40% of republican prisoners were involved.

Nor did public protests or attacks on prison guards fare any better in terms of getting special category status back.

On 27th October 1980 seven republican prisoners intensified the campaign against criminalisation by beginning a hunger strike.

After 52 days the strike was ended as the prisoners wrongly believed that an agreement had been made with the government relating to the wearing of non-prison issue clothes.



FIRST HUNGER STRIKE

SECOND HUNGER STRIKE

The second hunger strike (1981)

On 1st March 1981 the PIRA prisoners' Officer Commanding, Bobby Sands refused food.

Unlike the 1980 strike, this time only Sands began the strike; he was to be joined by a new hunger striker each week.

Sands believed that in this way the strike would lead to a prisoner dying each week, thus increasing the pressure on the British Government (now led by Margaret Thatcher) to end criminalisation.

Although the hunger strike gained huge publicity, it did not change government policy.

Then, on 5 March 1981, Frank Maguire, the MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone died.

Concessions granted

As time went on without any concessions being granted, the families of those men still on hunger strike began to intervene to stop further deaths.

On 3rd October the hunger strike was called off.

Within a few days of the strike's end, the British government announced that:

- Prisoners could wear their own clothes.
- More prison visits would be allowed.
- Prisoners would be allowed to spend more time together during the day.
- It would reinstate the 50% reduction in length of sentence. This concession had been lost by those prisoners involved in the protests against criminalisation.

These concessions resulted in the protests in favour of special category status all but ending by late October 1981.

Bobby Sands elected MP

At this time, there was no law precluding prisoners becoming an MP, so republicans saw their chance to increase pressure on the British and Bobby Sands was put forward as a republican candidate for the seat.

On the fortieth day of his strike, Sands, standing as an Anti-H Block candidate, was elected to Westminster.

The election campaign made news headlines across the world.

Even though Sands was now an MP the British government remained determined not to give the prisoners what they were demanding, despite huge amounts of international pressure.

On 5 May Sands died and over the next three and a half months nine other prisoners lost their lives through hunger strike.

In the same five-month period 61 people died as a result of the violence that broke out following each hunger striker's death.

Throughout this time no concessions were granted.

