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Teaching and learning in Brussels: Sinn Féin's strategic 'venue shopping' approach in the European Parliament

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Abstract

Sinn Féin was once staunchly Eurosceptic and has periodically campaigned against the ratification of European Union treaties in Ireland. Since the early 2000s, however, they have rejected the Eurosceptic label and self-described as 'critically engaged' with the European Union. This article explores how Sinn Féin have used their membership of the European Parliament and the European United Left/Nordic Green Left parliamentary group since their first Members of the European Parliament were elected in 2004, with a particular focus on the acrimonious post-Brexit referendum period. The article argues that the European Union forum is seen in terms of its utility by Sinn Féin, as a *venue* to teach and learn from their colleagues on their particular understanding of Irish history, nationalism and party strategy. It concludes by arguing that, in a process beginning before Brexit, the opportunities the European Union platform affords Sinn Féin have led to the adaptation of a particularly novel engagement strategy with European institutions.

Keywords

Brexit, European integration, European Union, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Sinn Féin, venue shopping

Introduction

Sinn Féin are an Irish Republican Party who contest elections on both sides of the Irish border. Since the 1970s, they have stood on a platform which is critical of the European Union (EU). However, during the 2016 Brexit referendum, Sinn Féin opted to campaign for Remain. This was despite having campaigned against the United Kingdom's membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1975 and against several EU treaty ratification amendments to the Republic of Ireland's constitution, including the Maastricht, Nice, Lisbon and Fiscal Compact Treaty referendums.

Before and after the 2016 referendum, the prospect of Brexit prompted a significant shift in the tone of Sinn Féin's public position on the EU. Since the decision of the United Kingdom to leave, Sinn Féin has mounted a vociferous campaign in favour of Northern Ireland having a 'special status' which would mitigate Brexit's worst effects, as they see them. The party, along with many others on the island of Ireland, points to the fact that Northern Ireland itself (56% in favour of Remain), and in particular its nationalist community (88% in favour of Remain), voted with a strong majority against leaving the EU (Garry, 2016: 2). They have also campaigned on the principle that Northern Ireland being forced to leave along with the rest of the United Kingdom is tantamount to a breach of the 1998 *Good Friday Agreement* (GFA), particularly its provisions on citizenship (Haughey and Pow, 2020: 35; McCord Judgement, 2016). In their election manifestos, Sinn Féin has had a marked shift from sporadic critical references to the EU to European integration being positioned as a cornerstone of their Irish unification aspirations, as well as a key instrument in facilitating the Northern Irish peace process in retrospect (Sinn Féin, 2019a: 3, 2019b: 3, 2020: 11). In elections since 2016, including to Westminster and the European Parliament, they have positioned themselves as the electorate's best option to prevent Northern Ireland leaving the EU against its will.

This article expands on what others (including Maillot, 2010) have shown by highlighting how Sinn Féin's position on the EU has evolved significantly since the advent of the European project. In the early 2000s, the party moved from outright Euroscepticism to what they called 'critical engagement'¹ with the EU. A key step in this process was its first elected Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) joining the European Parliamentary group² European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) in 2004. This political grouping was distinctly Eurosceptic, but only moderately so (Maillot, 2010). The article then takes a departure from others to explore how Sinn Féin has adopted a novel engagement strategy with the European Parliament and this Parliamentary group *since* 2004, in the crucial years before and after the Brexit referendum. The article utilises semi-structured interviews conducted with a wide range of politicians and officials from Sinn Féin (5 interviews), as well as their party rivals in Northern Ireland and staff from the European Parliament (a further 12 interviews). These interviews took place during the tumultuous Brexit period (2018–2020) in London, Brussels and Belfast, and through private phone calls.

The result is a new body of evidence which examines how Sinn Féin has engaged with the European institutions it is a member of. It argues that participation in Europe became crucial for Sinn Féin's wider political strategy before and after Brexit, as the European Parliament became a *venue* through which the party could *teach* and *learn* with their colleagues in Brussels. The article concludes by suggesting that Sinn Féin are irregular participants in the European Parliament with a unique relationship with Europe which prioritises the utility of the platform the EU affords them.

Sinn Féin and Europe: Critically engaged in GUE/NGL

Sinn Féin's blend of left-wing nationalism led them to an outright anti-EEC position in the 1970s. The party initially boycotted European elections. Along with Maillot (2010), many scholars have highlighted the move away from Euroscepticism to a policy of 'critical engagement' by Sinn Féin in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This position reversed the policy of withdrawal and pledged that the party would assess EU policies based on their individual merits. Their increased willingness to highlight the peace, reconciliation and cross-border funding the EU provides (Murray and Tonge, 2005: 248–249), and a growing internal awareness that the European Parliament elections present the party with a unique opportunity to mount a cross-border electoral campaign (Frampton, 2005: 235, 240–241), contributed to a softening of their stance in those decades. Murray and Tonge (2005: 248–249) have also noted that the change in policy constituted a 'narrowing of the differences' between them and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the other large nationalist party in Northern Ireland, particularly following Sinn Féin's decision to drop a policy of EU exit in 1999. The SDLP leader, John Hume, had held one of Northern Ireland's three MEP seats since 1979. Following his retirement at the 2004 election, Sinn Féin gained that seat and held it until Brexit removed Northern Irish representation at the Parliament in 2020.

The language of moderation and practical engagement, as opposed to dogmatic opposition, had indeed begun to emerge by the 1990s/early 2000s. This was also the period in which Sinn Féin began to staff a European office (Frampton, 2005: 248) and recognise that policy developments at the EU level had a wide all-Ireland impact (Spencer, 2006: 360–361). Frampton (2005), however, has said that much of this early activity was only public-facing and related to how party policy was articulated, rather than a purely ideological change. The more crucial change was the decision to join the GUE/NGL group in 2004. The research for this article has demonstrated that this decision, and the decision to adopt the policy stance of critical engagement, while perhaps not directly causal, are related and occurred in one key period. This was between the 2002 Irish General Election and the 2004 European Parliamentary Election, when the party underwent a reassessment of European policy.

Key changes originated with their team in the Irish Parliamentary buildings following the election of their first significant delegation of Teachta Dála (TDs) (from one to five seats) in 2002 and culminated in their first MEPs being elected to the European Parliament (two seats) in 2004. Several key players in this effort were relatively young members of the party who later went on to have senior roles at a national level. This included Aengus Ó Snodaigh, one of those new TDs elected in 2002 who took on the European brief in Leinster House; Shannonbrook Murphy who acted as an advisor to Ó Snodaigh and would later become Director of Policy; and Eoin Ó Broin who became the first Director of European Affairs and coordinated Sinn Féin's MEPs in the European Parliament from 2004 to 2007. He later became a frontbench TD. The change in EU position during this period is related to gaining representation in that 2002 election. One interviewee for this article (Interviewee E) argued that Ó Snodaigh's membership of an Oireachtas committee on EU affairs was crucial with respect to developing the critical engagement policy as (prior to their entry in the European Parliament) it was their 'first exposure to the nuts and bolts business' of the EU:

One of the aspects that informed the evolution of the critical engagement policy was the notion that we couldn't remain on the side-lines of debates of such importance when we had the opportunity to be directly involved and be directly involved in a critical way. (Interview E)

Also crucial is the fact that this 2002 delegation to the Dáil was elected after the end of the Troubles, the development of the peace process, and the signing of the GFA in 1998, when the party could dedicate more time to developing European policy:

[the change] reflected an acknowledgement that actually much of what was coming through, down to us from the EU was positive and progressive for the Irish people. Worthy and deserving of support. But not all of it. And the progressive things were not guaranteed and had to be fought for. And the regressive things fought against. And so, I think it was a more nuanced appreciation. (Interview E)

Arising from this new line of thinking on European engagement was a ‘policy review group’ led by some of the figures mentioned above. This group drafted the critical engagement stance which was subsequently adopted by Sinn Féin members at their 2003 Ard Fheis (Interview E; An Phoblacht, 2003).

Immediately prior to the 2003 European Parliamentary Election, the decision to join the GUE/NGL was then taken. The party did briefly consider alternative groups such as the Green/European Free Alliance and the Socialists and Democrats (Interviews B and E). There was no clear ‘natural fit’ among the groups, and Sinn Féin’s left-wing republican nationalism could have led them in another direction. The formal decision to join GUE/ NGL was not finalised until after the election; however, by the time of the election, it was clear that they would be joining GUE/NGL (Interview B). Members of GUE/NGL had already visited Dublin and Belfast in early 2004 for a ‘study day’ trip which included dinners with around 20 senior Sinn Féin staff and elected officials (Interviews B and E). Since joining, Sinn Féin have been enthusiastic members of GUE/NGL, but they are distinctively non-tribalist in Brussels and stress their open approach to working across party groups (Interviews B and E). Prior to the Brexit period, they retained one of Northern Ireland’s three MEP seats over three electoral cycles and had an MEP elected in each of Ireland’s three constituencies in 2014. Throughout this period, they continued to oppose the ratification of European treaties in Ireland; including the Nice, Lisbon and Fiscal Compact Treaties.

Developing a new framework of analysis

This section develops a new framework for analysing their time in the European Parliament since 2004, including the post-Brexit referendum period. Agnès Maillot (2010) argues that ‘Europe’ became a way for Sinn Féin to carve a place for itself in Irish politics, unrelated to the Troubles or peace process (Maillot, 2010: 149–150). She also highlights that Sinn Féin’s self-described ‘critical engagement’ policy was often more ‘critical’ than ‘engaged’ and the party remained quite ‘sound bite driven’ in its European policy pronouncements in the 2000s (Maillot, 2010: 151). Maillot’s conclusion is that Sinn Féin has only ‘partially Europeanised’. This research seeks to contribute to the examination of Sinn Féin’s engagement with the European project, with over a decade more exposure to Europeanisation effects of the Parliament to analyse than Maillot. The new paradigms created by Brexit require fresh examination beyond her analysis.

The following paragraphs discuss the theoretical basis for the ‘venue shopping’ hypothesis advanced in this article, which has been adapted from the analysis of interest groups in Europe and applied to Sinn Féin’s activities as a political party. Scholars examining European integration have identified what Hooghe and Marks (2003) described as a ‘multi-level’ form of governance. They explain the interplay between

traditional political arenas (local and national government) and new jurisdictions which have arisen above the national level where political decisions can be taken:

new forms of governance and dispersion of decision making away from central states – modern governance is and, according to many, should be dispersed across multiple centers of authority. (Hooghe and Marks, 2003: 233)

When examining this multi-stratified system of operating power and influence over decision making, others have examined the phenomenon of ‘venue shopping’ wherein interest groups ‘operate in a complex multi-layered political environment’. This theory suggests that actors attempt to exert influence over policy makers at levels which are optimal to them (Chaqués-Bonafont and Márquez, 2016b). Venue shopping essentially ‘refers to the activities of advocacy groups and policy makers who seek out a decision setting where they can air their grievances with current policy and present alternative policy proposals’ (Pralle, 2003).

Chaqués-Bonafont and Márquez (2016a) have also attempted to explain the link between interest group venue shopping and political parties in the parliamentary arena. In a working paper, they identify two approaches to understanding how policy makers can respond to interest group venue shopping:

- (a) information logic approach, where ‘policy-makers decide whether to invite interest organisations taking into account their capacity to provide high quality technical information about policy problems’.
- (b) persuasion approach, which ‘emphasizes policy-makers are especially willing to invite their allies, avoiding their enemies as a means to reinforce their negotiation capacity in the Parliamentary debate’.

Those authors found evidence which supports this persuasion approach, wherein policy makers engage interest groups that aid their own pre-existing position. This article puts forward a new, bespoke way of applying these concepts and theories to better explain how Sinn Féin utilise their membership of the European Parliament. It explores whether the party looks at the European Parliament in much the same ‘venue shopping’ terms others have identified in interest groups activities. This hypothesis examines how Sinn Féin has utilised its time and connections in Brussels as a means to *teach and learn* with their colleagues on a select number of key issues before and after Brexit, beginning with their entry to the European Parliament in 2004. This process was reinforced post-2016 as the European Parliament venue became particularly receptive to their unique understanding of history and Irish nationalism in the wake of Brexit.

Such an approach is not without precedent for Sinn Féin. Many scholars such as Whiting (2018) have explored their lobbying activities with powerful political figures in America during the Troubles, where they had a considerable amount of success in transmitting narratives to the Irish American diaspora and found a receptive audience in the highest echelons of US politics. Indeed O’Boyle (2011) has highlighted that, during this period, the republican leadership’s strategy was to begin building ‘an Irish nationalist consensus with international support’, involving the Irish government, the SDLP, the United States and (perhaps less prominently at that time) the EU (O’Boyle 2011: 601–602; Republican Movement, 1994). Crucially, this was a two-way exchange in America. In turn, Sinn Féin were influenced by US politicians who are seen as pivotal in moving the party away from armed conflict towards purely constitutional politics (Guelke, 1996; Whiting, 2018). This two-way exchange in the United States has therefore informed how

this article applies the concepts of both *teaching* and *learning* in Sinn Féin's venue shopping approach to the European Parliament.

The term 'teaching' is used here in reference to using the venue of the European Parliament to transmit or instil a particular understanding to others, specifically on Sinn Féin's understanding of Irish history and nationalism. This includes the peace process at the end of the Troubles and with respect to the politics of the Irish border. Similarly, the term 'learning' is used in reference to the venue of the European Parliament with regard to gaining information on strategy and policy from their parliamentary peers.

Sinn Féin's venue shopping approach to the European Parliament

The 'venue shopping teaching and learning' hypothesis is an adaptation of a theory created to analyse the activities of interest groups in multi-level systems of government. This hypothesis posits that Sinn Féin realised that the European Parliament was a new arena for them in transmitting (teaching) their unique understanding of Irish history and nationalism throughout the 2000s. In line with Chaqués-Bonafont and Márquez's (2016a) 'persuasion approach', Sinn Féin found a particularly receptive audience in Brussels in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, as new allies emerged in the ensuing political disagreements with the UK government. Since 2004, the European Parliament provided a new forum for the party to take lessons on strategy and develop new ideas as to how the EU arena can be most effectively used by parties seeking to disrupt the status quo of Europe's mainstream (learning). This process was taking place prior to Brexit, during key political junctures and crises that arose in the EU. However, it became a key dynamic after the 2016 referendum as Sinn Féin witnessed the practical limitations of Euroscepticism firsthand.

Sinn Féin are quite unique in the degree to which they have to actively take decisions on where is the appropriate venue to invest political capital in, given they have elected representatives in four legislatures (the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Irish Oireachtas, Westminster and the European Parliament). In the years after their 2004 entry into the European Parliament, Sinn Féin was no longer enjoying the same platform in America which had been afforded to them during the peace process. The ending of Clinton's term in office and the post-9/11 counter-terrorism agenda in Congress meant Northern Ireland became a peripheral interest in Washington (Whiting, 2018). During the post-Brexit period, Sinn Féin were also experiencing a brief electoral decline in the Republic of Ireland and were locked out of power in Northern Ireland following the collapse of the power-sharing institutions. Therefore, the prominent role their MEPs played in Brussels brought the European venue further to the forefront of party strategy.

This was evident throughout each of this article's interviews. The theme of using the European Parliament as a venue to *teach* colleagues of the nuances of Ireland's peace process, and laterally on the complexities of the border, continuously arose. Similarly, interviewees made frequent references to how they have *learned* from the experiences of others in Europe, be it from GUE/NGL colleagues battling the European Commission, or the limits of how one can pragmatically criticise the European project. Crucially, both these processes were occurring before Brexit but received a new impetus in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum. New allies in the Parliament emerged who were keen to hear Sinn Féin's position on the Irish border problem.

Learning – Lisbon, Syriza and Brexit

Early in their parliamentary experience, Sinn Féin undertook a key exercise which exemplifies the theme of using the European Parliament as a venue in which to *learn* from colleagues, namely, their Lisbon Treaty campaign. As Ireland is the only member state which regularly holds referendums to ratify European treaties, Sinn Féin were presented with an opportunity to criticise the future direction of the EU while also being the most visible party on the ‘No’ side of the domestic debate. Ireland’s referendum on Lisbon in 2008 failed in part due to Sinn Féin’s campaign but was later ratified in a second referendum in 2009. The Lisbon Treaty itself came about after the negative outcome of two referendums on the constitutional treaty in May and June 2005 in France and the Netherlands, respectively (europarl.europa.eu, 2020). Critics of the EU, including those in GUE/NGL, saw the treaty as a way to circumvent the democratic will of Europeans who had rejected further powers being transferred to Brussels via that constitution. On a practical level, Sinn Féin utilised their contacts with French and Dutch sister GUE/NGL parties, and other left-wing parties from those two countries in the Parliament, to gain knowledge in advance of Ireland’s referendums on campaigning techniques and key argumentation points against the changes being proposed in the treaty. This information was then fed back to the campaign team in Dublin:

That was useful . . . Learning from and liaising with the other relevant parties . . . Using the experience and the knowledge of other people in the group in a way that was helpful for us.
(Interview B)

The theme of learning can be seen elsewhere for the party, particularly with regard to one of their high-profile fellow members of GUE/NGL. Arguably, the most prominent member of the GUE/NGL group, and one of only two which has led a national government in recent years, is the Greek party Syriza. Syriza rose to prominence during the Greek debt crisis and gained a huge profile on the European stage for the novel and somewhat atypical coalition which created the party. They had grown quite rapidly during the financial crisis from a blend of previously sporadic left-wing networks into a centralised political party. Syriza contained a strong ‘traditional’ leftist element but also a younger ‘anti-globalisation’ wing, which stressed a new understanding of how left-wing global cooperation could combat international ‘neoliberalism’ and resolve the financial crisis (Chapman, 2015: 39–41).

The prominent position Syriza holds on the European left was demonstrated in this research. In interviews, Sinn Féin staff and elected officials frequently made reference to Syriza when discussing their relationship with GUE/NGL. That party’s public conflicts with the EU during their time in office gave Sinn Féin a high-profile ally, which they saw as epitomising what a ‘critically engaged’ relationship with the EU, falling short of campaigning to leave, looks like:

If you are asking us are we convinced that any change of the EU is necessary? Yes it is. Are we equally convinced that any change will only come from those who are inside the tent? Yes absolutely. And Yanis Varoufakis the former Finance Minister of Greece put it best when he said that it was delusional for some of the hard left, Trotskyite, Maoist parties who said they wanted an Irish exit. He said it is absolutely delusional that they think they are going to improve the lot of working people or the quality of life of working people on this island by exiting Europe. So Yanis Varoufakis, who is probably the most radical Finance Minister of our time,

with a very short-lived tenure in Greece, if that is his view, and if it is good enough for him, it is certainly good enough for me as well. (Interview A)

Syriza's engagement with the EU and Eurogroup during the sovereign debt crisis, as tempestuous as it was, was continuously supported by Sinn Féin:

Unfortunately, the Eurogroup and our own government decided to side with the strong instead of those that needed support and solidarity. Of course [we stand with Tsipras and the Syriza leadership]. (Pearse Doherty TD 2015, *The Journal.ie*, 2015)

However, beyond solidarity, the theme of learning directly from Syriza is most evident when the conversation turns to what Sinn Féin's relationship with the EU will be in the future, rather than the past. Sinn Féin's election results in the Republic of Ireland have been on an upward trajectory since the peace process at the end of the 1990s. Either as part of a coalition or indeed as the main party leading a coalition, Sinn Féin has serious aspirations to enter government in the Republic within the next few electoral cycles. Doing so will provide the party with a seat on the European Council and/or the Council of Ministers, and thus provide a more direct channel to the upper echelons of EU power. It is at this level, rather than the Parliament, where Sinn Féin is learning from the experience of Syriza on how a party can use its increased prominence in Brussels, alongside domestic political power, to influence the EU. It is clear that while Sinn Féin stand with their party group colleagues, Syriza's experience in power is not one to be wholly emulated. In an interview, this topic arose after a question from the author on whether a Sinn Féin government would ever campaign to leave the EU:

I wouldn't say never. But this wouldn't be something that you would want to jump to very quickly. Because we would have looked at things like what happened in Greece. What happened to the Syriza government and how disgraceful the left-wing government of Greece was treated. We want to have learned from that . . . I think our approach would be to avoid the notion of getting out of the EU. Because we are too entangled as a country economically and socially . . . I think what we would probably do though, and this is where it might be different than Syriza, is that we would look at what we want to achieve with our policies and figure out where there might be difficulties in terms of EU policy or treaties. But be conscious of that difficulty or difference, and be aware that we are going to get into a conflict with the European Commission . . . Unlike when the Syriza government in Greece went into an all-out, for the first 6 months, full-spectrum attack on the EU [through] Varoufakis and his economic policy. We were kind of looking at that and saying 'what the hell are they up to?'. Our approach would be much more to say 'these are the things we want to achieve' and then to be [more] conscious. (Interview B)

The crucial point with Syriza, and other parties in GUE/NGL with a realistic chance of entering government, is that Sinn Féin feel they have foreseen a conflict with the EU which others did not and which Sinn Féin can mitigate. It is not a criticism of those parties' policies, rather the tactical error they took. Should they enter government, Sinn Féin plan on thinking more strategically about how to pursue policies at odds with the EU, and avoid getting into the sort of tumultuous battles Syriza found themselves in during the Euro crisis, or indeed the United Kingdom has over Brexit:

And you are aware that you are maybe coming into a conflict. But you go into that conflict eyes wide open. But not with a view to bringing it to a crisis or a rupture. There are other parties

around who would, if they were to come into government, including some in our group, who would look to provoke that sort of rupture. (Interview B)

In response to this answer, this author asked whether Interviewee B thought the tactic employed by others was to try to ‘bring the house down’? They replied:

Yeah. That would be their logic. That wouldn’t be our logic at all. So just to be clear about that. (Interview B)

The question of whether Sinn Féin is learning in preparation for government was put directly to Interviewee B as well. This author asked whether there has been any thinking at a party level about how they might deal with the new avenue of seats on the European Council or Council of Ministers. Their response was temperate but pointed to a ‘taking notes’ approach on learning from Syriza’s experience in what not to do:

[There has been a] limited amount of thinking . . . If Mary Lou or whoever from Sinn Féin was to be Taoiseach then you’re in a very interesting position. Again, I think what we would want to do is to learn from the experience of what our friends in Syriza have done . . . You would look at that and learn a little bit and realise you are only one member of the Council . . . [We would] look to build alliances. And that is one of the things that Sinn Féin is very, very good at. In this House [the European Parliament] we have been very, very good at building alliances across the political spectrum. (Interview B)

The tactical mistakes made by Syriza are clearly to be avoided. Perhaps just as important in this line of thinking is Sinn Féin’s pragmatism in attempting to always extract concessions from political adversaries via negotiation and building alliances, even when dealing with those with whom they have fundamental disagreements. This author then asked Interview B a more direct question of whether a place on the European Council would prompt a reorientation of fundamental policy on Europe:

No . . . You [have to be] willing to look at what the other governments interests are and build alliances according to what the issues are. So, there is not a huge amount of thinking that has gone into it, but there is a certain realism as to what might be achieved in there. A Sinn Féin government is not going to go in and turn the EU upside down. It doesn’t work like that. You build alliances, find room for maneuver, and pursue your policies as best you can. (Interview B)

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the effect of watching their sister party in a bruising conflict with the EU affected Sinn Féin officials at the highest levels. They are now learning from Syriza’s past failures to avoid repeating them in future. The learning effect from Syriza, and the forward planning for a future Sinn Féin government in the Council, displays the spillover effect of participation in a European Parliamentary group. This is not only into the domestic political arena but also to the other institutions in the EU and wider relationship with Europe itself. As a party which has now spent 30 years in a continuous set of negotiations with the British and Irish governments, as well as inter- and intra-community political negotiations in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin have developed a highly sophisticated approach to conflictual politics based on constructive participation rather than setting immovable, ideological red lines. Syriza’s experiences in power are, therefore, one to learn from and improve upon for Sinn Féin. The Greek lesson is further motivation for them to continue softening their critical stance, or at least to develop a

more nuanced form of engagement. This includes moving beyond the ‘attention-grabbing soundbite’ style attacks on the EU that Maillot identified a decade ago (Maillot, 2010: 151).

Another clear instance of learning which came up prominently during the course of these interviews is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the lessons Sinn Féin have drawn from British Euroscepticism and Brexit. Sinn Féin, along with others in Irish nationalism broadly defined, are deeply opposed to Brexit and lament the forces they see driving it:

So, are we critical about the EU? Yes. But we are critical about almost everything in life and especially big institutions. But is it an institution which has delivered real change and hope to the North of Ireland and to the Irish peace process? Absolutely. And do we want to be involved with it going forward? Absolutely. I mean the idea that you would take a policy of splendid isolation rather than being part of this great European project and to try and improve and enhance it from the inside, that you would switch or trade that to be on the outside with a bunch of knownothings and anti-immigrant racists, and people who are nostalgic for an all-white British Empire past, that sounds bonkers to me. (Interview A)

Scholarship elsewhere has shown that the position of critical engagement adopted by Sinn Féin since the 2000s contained within it a commitment to reform, rather than a strategy of exiting Europe (Frampton, 2005; Maillot, 2010). However, Brexit has copperfastened this view in the party and they now see Ireland’s future, north and south, as firmly within the EU. Brexit is seen by Sinn Féin as a British revival of an imperialist mind-set, and one which has no relation to their own criticism of the EU. There is no solidarity with any of the architects of the Brexit position and the party are unequivocal in their denouncement of the strategy pursued by Brexiteers. During interviews conducted during this research, participants were asked whether they agreed Brexit has shaped or reshaped Sinn Féin’s position on the EU:

Sinn Féin is an all-Ireland party but I can speak with more authority for northern nationalists and republicans. Forever, it will change our view of the EU. (Interview A)

Given the exceptional nature of Brexit and northern nationalism’s deep opposition to it, Sinn Féin North and South were aligned in seeking a ‘special status’. Evershed and Murphy (2021: 11) have recently highlighted that ‘reorientating’ their European policy while pursuing power on either side of the border will prove to be challenging prospects. In retrospect, Brexit may be seen as a crystallising moment for Sinn Féin when it comes to the EU. Criticism of the European project will remain, but the threat of campaigning to leave the EU is even more remote after the lesson of Brexit. This does not reflect a dichotomous change from Euroscepticism to a pro-EU stance but does show the impact of an exceptional juncture in EU politics.

Many scholars have previously written about participation in the EU. Meserve et al. (2009) highlight how some MEPs aim to use their time in the Parliament to advance into leadership positions in Brussels, while others ‘view their time in the EP as a valuable stepping-stone to higher office in their home state’ (Meserve et al., 2009: 1018). The latter approach provides opportunities for parties to use the Parliament to give younger candidates an important ‘proving ground’ from which to launch careers at the national level (Meserve et al., 2009: 1031). The *learning* strategy observed in this article, and the tendency for many Sinn Féin MEPs to seek a return to national politics during their term in office,³ might indicate that they have often viewed election to the European Parliament as a stepping-stone towards domestic politics. It has been shown elsewhere that national

politics tends to dominate considerations in ways beyond career strategy. Scully (2005) has demonstrated that MEPs do not become more pro-integration as they socialise into the Parliament. His work suggests that MEPs remain broadly similar to their national colleagues in terms of loyalty and attitudes (Scully, 2005). If this is the case for Sinn Féin, it would suggest that the *learning* approach in Brussels stems from their domestic policy objectives, rather than a newfound affinity with the EU.

Teaching before and after Brexit

Along with the theme of using the European Parliament as a venue through which to learn, there was a corresponding perception that Sinn Féin had effectively used the Parliament as a platform to *teach* others of the complexities of Ireland's political history and Irish nationalism. Sinn Féin members specifically relate this to effectiveness in translating an Irish republican narrative on the peace process, and later, the border during Brexit to their group and the wider European Parliament. They frequently draw reference to the wide range of actors they have been able to influence in Brussels. They also claim proximity to particular actors through GUE/NGL directly corresponds to the efficiency of their message being received and accepted, even before the Brexit vote.

It is clear the Parliamentary group channel was valued by Sinn Féin for this reason. Within the GUE/NGL group, Sinn Féin felt their briefings about developments within the peace process and GFA since entering the Parliament in 2004 had resulted in a reasonably high level of understanding and awareness of Brexit's difficulties for Ireland than in other groups. Indeed, many GUE/NGL MEPs had actually visited Ireland, including the border areas, both prior to and after the Brexit vote (Interviews B and E). In 2019, GUE/NGL commissioned a legal and academic report on what the EU could do to help facilitate Irish unity (see Harvey and Bassett, 2019). Sinn Féin also felt they had an educational role across the Parliament which would go beyond just the members of GUE/NGL. Further to this end, Sinn Féin initiated in 2014 a resolution of the European Parliament in support of the GFA. This was resolution 2014/2906(RSP) (Europarl.europa.eu, 2014).

The utility of using the Parliament as a means of teaching colleagues the nuances of Ireland's peace process therefore predates Brexit. Across interviews with Sinn Féin members, the sense that the GUE/NGL was an important instrument was consistently found along with the sense that Sinn Féin had been effective in teaching those in the Parliament who did not belong to their group. One interviewee (Interview D) agreed with the statement that GUE/NGL's position on Brexit was following Sinn Féin's:

They did yes [follow Sinn Féin's position]. And in fairness, it was not just within our own group. That would have been reflected in the discussions and relationships we had with other groups. I think just about every single decision coming out of the Brexit steering groups was unanimous across the different political spectrums in the Parliament. On Brexit you know there was complete unanimity amongst us. So that was a great help and ensured that a lot of the positions in relation to Ireland that we wanted to see on the Good Friday Agreement and ensuring there was no hard border . . . They largely took their lead from ourselves. (Interview D)

In the immediate aftermath of Brexit, this sense the European Parliament had to be utilised to send the correct messages on the politics of Ireland and Northern Ireland is most evident. In one interview (Interview B), a Sinn Féin member stressed that the solidarity with the idea of finding a special accommodation for Northern Ireland had not fully formed in the European Parliament immediately after Brexit. While there was

sympathy for the people of Northern Ireland and Scotland who had both voted against leaving, there was an emerging sense that the issues around the border were ‘a shame’ but also an unavoidable consequence of the United Kingdom leaving (Interview B). Sinn Féin (along with others) then began a major public relations and political outreach campaign with the highest levels of EU officials, including EU Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier and the European Parliament’s Brexit coordinator Guy Verhofstadt, who met Northern Ireland Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness in October 2016 (McMonagle, 2016).

As an issue which had not featured prominently prior to the referendum, the nuances of the border issues were not well known in Brussels in the immediate aftermath of the vote. However, in the weeks and months after the referendum, in line with ChaquésBonafont and Márquez’s (2016a) ‘persuasion approach’, Sinn Féin officials received a very receptive audience across the political groups as MEPs began to see the border as one of the EU’s priorities in the upcoming negotiations. Barnier and his team came in for particular praise from Sinn Féin, but the party stressed this was a period in which they were ‘relentlessly’ bringing the issue to anyone in the Parliament they could (Interview B).

The framing of this post-Brexit lobbying as educational in nature is not just rhetorical. Documents which Sinn Féin used to brief Barnier and others display the sense that Sinn Féin found it incumbent upon themselves to teach their colleagues the historical nuances of the situation at hand (Sinn Féin, 2016). In one document in particular, given to Barnier’s team, Sinn Féin drew attention to the complexities of Brexit for the guarantees of the GFA. The document reads like a historical and political explainer of the 1998 Agreement, stressing how anything short of special status for Northern Ireland would be tantamount to a breach of the Agreement by the UK government and indeed the EU who had endorsed it. This educational effort went well beyond Barnier and extended across GUE/NGL and the wider Parliament. All of the Sinn Féin members interviewed for this project took great pride in the party’s efforts after Brexit both in raising the profile of the border problem and in positioning the party as an effective voice for Northern Ireland/Ireland during the resulting impasse. One interviewee (Interview D) gave a particularly interesting response to a question about whether engagement ‘went both ways’ in the Parliament:

Oh yes well you can’t have involvement in an institution like that and not build up both knowledge and relationships and become aware of other issues in other parts of Europe that you were not previously familiar with and find common cause. It was the international solidarity that worked for Martina [Anderson, Sinn Féin MEP] in particular who literally worked the corridors and did thousands of meetings with individual MEPs from across the EU. To help build up that sense of agreement on Ireland and the key principles. We have a knowledge of Irish issues and particularly the complexities of them as you can imagine which people from Southern Italy or Eastern Poland are not overly focused on or aware of . . . We had to break it down. You know whatever about all the different nuances of it, people across Europe no matter what part you are in understand war and peace. They have all experienced their own conflicts at certain points in their history. So we had to explain to them that there had been a conflict, that it had ended, that the visibility of the border was a key element that had secured the peace and if Europe were to reinstate that border they would put the peace process at risk. (Interview D)

It should be said that Sinn Féin correlating the solidarity shown to Ireland during the Brexit process with their efforts to teach their colleagues in Brussels does not make it just so. Other parties, as well as the Irish government, undertook similar efforts to stress the need for a special Northern Irish accommodation (or ‘special status’) during this period

(Evershed and Murphy, 2021: 7). We know the Irish government influenced the EU position and that the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) had an influence, however strained, on the UK government's position (see Barnier, 2020; Murphy and Evershed, 2020). However, as discussed earlier, a successful 'teaching' strategy is not without historical precedent for Sinn Féin. As a party, they have long championed their role in bringing the Irish American political lobby into the peace process in the late 1980s and 1990s through a similar effort.

Assessing how successful Sinn Féin's efforts were in this period with the EU is difficult given the short time that has lapsed and the secrecy with which much of the Brexit negotiations took place. We know from interviews that Barnier frequently agreed with Sinn Féin (and others in Ireland) when setting out the potential risks of various forms of Brexit:

We must preserve the Good Friday agreement in all its dimensions, maintain the common travel area as it is, and respect the rules of the single market. (EU Chief Negotiator, Michel Barnier; Barker and McClean, 2017)

We also know from press reports that Sinn Féin leaders met with Barnier directly on multiple occasions during the negotiations (see Hughes, 2018; Irish News, 2020; McMonagle, 2018; Smyth, 2019). While other devolved leaders from Scotland and Wales did also meet with Barnier (see Dewey, 2019; McIlkenny, 2019), the nature of the meetings with Northern Ireland's party leaders arguably took on more of the character of active negotiations, rather than a normal briefing, given the prominence of the border issue in the Brexit talks. In an address to the Institute of International and European Affairs in September 2020, Barnier spoke of 'being very attentive to the concerns voiced by all the different parties and communities in Ireland and Northern Ireland', before adding that he had held meetings with all Northern Irish and Irish MEPs (four of whom were Sinn Féin representatives; Barnier, 2020). Elsewhere, he has spoken of his frustration dealing with the DUP (Barnier, 2021; Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), 2021).

Aside from Barnier, we know the UK side in the negotiations lamented the EU's supposed lack of sufficient effort to understand the DUP position, as well as the lack of intraUK formal channels to all Northern Irish parties given the collapsed institutions at Stormont (Davidson, 2020). Former Downing Street Chief of Staff, Gavin Barwell, went as far as to say that the lack of a sitting Assembly made it difficult for the British, Irish and European governments to arrive at a soft Brexit compromise which all Northern Irish parties could live with (Barwell, 2020). He also said informal meetings with political leaders in Northern Ireland, in particular nationalist representatives, left a profound impression on British Prime Minister Theresa May (Barwell, 2020).⁴ While the Irish government were the main interlocker for the EU (see Evershed and Murphy, 2021: 8), it is clear Sinn Féin were also well placed to make an impact on both sides of this negotiation. This is particularly true in the direct private meetings with Barnier, and the formal channels provided through the European Parliament, where there was a high degree of overlap in negotiation priorities.

While they are critically engaged with the European Parliament in a functional, practical and day-to-day manner, it is clear Sinn Féin sees the Parliament's real utility as a venue to pitch a particular constitutional perspective and understanding of history and Irish nationalism. The receptive audience Sinn Féin claims to have gained in this period certainly did exist with many key actors. The effect of that will, of course, be a matter of debate, but one reading would align with Chaqués-Bonafont and Márquez's 'persuasion'

approach to venue shopping. Along with the Irish government, Sinn Féin did have an impact on key actors during the Brexit negotiations. Unlikely allies arose for Sinn Féin in the EU, as that institution battled the UK government on the terms of Brexit. It is clear from this research that the collegial attentiveness Sinn Féin receives is seen by the party as a core benefit of participation in both GUE/NGL and the wider European Parliament.

Conclusion

This article began by highlighting the various positions on the EU which Sinn Féin have held since the 1970s, as the party moved from a position of outright Euroscepticism towards a policy of ‘critical engagement’ in the early 2000s. It argued, like others have, that a key period of change occurred for Sinn Féin coinciding with their election to the European Parliament in 2004. A significant amount of time has now elapsed since that period, including the tumultuous Brexit referendum result. Circumstance has led to Sinn Féin becoming passionate campaigners in favour of Northern Ireland remaining in the EU. Given their prominence during the Brexit fallout, an in-depth exploration of their activities in Brussels was warranted.

An idea advanced in this article is that membership of the European Parliament and the GUE/NGL group led to Sinn Féin engaging with European institutions in a particularly novel manner, both before and after the 2016 Brexit referendum. The ‘venue shopping’ hypothesis advanced here demonstrates how Sinn Féin use the European Parliament, and their party group, as a forum through which to ‘learn’ lessons of what the practical limitations of criticising the EU are. Likewise, Europe has become a valuable venue to advance the nationalist cause through ‘teaching’ their colleagues in Brussels about Ireland’s history and the complexities of the border. The self-described ‘critical engagement’ step in the early 2000s must now be seen together with 15 years of a somewhat atypical, yet pragmatic, strategic engagement with the European Parliament.

The electoral effect of this strategy is not yet clear. The 2019 election was a disappointment on either side of the border for the party. Their vote share declined in the north, and they lost two of their three seats in the Republic of Ireland (Haughey and Pow, 2020). A key test for Sinn Féin’s European policy may come in the future through a European treaty ratification referendum in Ireland. Balancing criticism of the direction the EU is taking, with their support for Northern Ireland re-joining the EU via Irish unification, might prove challenging, particularly as they are now realistically pursuing government in the Republic (Evershed and Murphy, 2021: 11).

What is clearer is that a new and even more complex relationship with Europe has emerged for Sinn Féin as a result of their venue shopping approach since 2004. Much like their relationship with Irish-America during the peace process in the 1990s, Sinn Féin now has the ear of powerful EU figures on matters related to the politics of the Irish border. In the coming decades, as the party moves towards positions in government in the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin will retain their critical stance on the European project but will do so in a manner which presents Europe as a crucial building block of their ultimate goal of Irish unification. This is not due to a sudden affinity with the idea of a federal Europe but rather a need to utilise the venue the EU provides to advance their cause.


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Notes

1. As noted by Maillot (2010: 157), a variation of this phrase appears once in the 1999 Manifesto, but nine times in their 2004 Manifesto.
2. There is a distinction between European Parliamentary Groups (composed solely of elected Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and the extraparliamentary 'Europarties' (Raunio, 2017: 1). European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) are the former.
3. Three of Sinn Féin's six elected MEPs have stood in domestic elections during their term. They are Mary Lou McDonald (2007 General Election), Liadh Ní Riada (2018 Presidential Election) and Matt Carthy (2020 General Election). The three other elected MEPs who have not are Bairbre de Brún, Martina Anderson and Lynn Boylan. Anderson and Boylan have since re-entered domestic politics after losing their seat after Brexit and the 2019 European Election, respectively.
4. David Lidington (2020) agreed, though attributed this to meetings with nationalist community representatives.

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