

**“Time & Distance:
Commemorating and Contesting the 1981 Hunger Strike
through Continuity and Rupture”**

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The commemorative discourses surrounding the 1981 Hunger Strike centre on the contested and contestable meanings of that event in the political context of the present. They are an attempt to ascertain or assign an explicitly political significance to a version of history which is challenged and disrupted even as it is iterated. In this paper, I will explore the commemorative discourses surrounding the 25th anniversary of the Hunger Strike and the ways in which these reflect and reproduce a complex of oppositions entwined with the politics of the present. In relation to the Hunger Strike these discourses engage in negotiations of continuity and rupture, repetition and progress, and the legitimization of violence or constitutionalism in ways which provoke significant problematization. Through critical and deconstructive readings of the commemorations, I explore the possibilities presented by these diverse and divergent narratives of Republican history, and point to the implications of this process of reiteration for wider conceptions of the political.

The commemorative discourses explored here illustrate the memory of the Hunger Strike in negotiation within and through a complex of political manoeuvres. The official logo of the anniversary, an emblem of a block-letter ‘H’ juxtaposed with the number ‘25’ provides a visual and symbolized example. Obviously, the ‘H’ represents not only the actuality of the H-Block, but also comes to stand for the whole series of events surrounding the protests. It suggests that the complexity of these events cannot be expressed except through their simplification to a single, iconic letter. Crucially, the logo also symbolizes the complex relationship between event and memory, past and present: the ‘H’ is at once entwined with, imprisoned by, and partially obscured by, the number. It is tied to time and to memory; yet equally, it suggests that (republican) memory remains tied to the significance of the Hunger Strike. The logo has appeared on posters, special issue newspapers, and, recently, Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) jerseys:

The official supplier of GAA shirts, *O'Neill's*, has launched a commemorative jersey to mark the 25th anniversary of 10 IRA and INLA members choosing to die on hunger strike. The launch was attended by [...] two prominent GAA players, the Antrim senior manager and Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams. Gerry Adams argued the shirt was appropriate as:

‘A number of the men who died in the Hunger Strike were GAA members and keen players. One such was Joe McDonnell [...]’ (Slugger O’Toole, 10 July 2006).¹

In this way, republicans can literally wear the memory of the hunger strikers as a badge of identification. Through its association with community, culture, and sport, commemoration becomes incorporated into and implicated in everyday life.²

This insistence on commemoration, on continually *re*-membering the Hunger Strike and pulling it into various aspects of republican existence reflects and reproduces the ways in which the protest was itself commemorative. As such, the Hunger Strike was itself a political act predicated on commemoration. The event was linked, and linked itself, to commemorative discourses in complex ways:

the strike would start on 1 March 1981 – the fifth anniversary of the date on which the government had started to phase out special status; it would climax at Easter, the anniversary of the 1916 Uprising [sic] and symbol of redemption and resurrection (O’Malley 1990: 36).

The strikers themselves, as well as those who would later memorialize them, explicitly placed the protest into the narrative of Irish independence. The deaths of Thomas Ashe in 1917 and Terence MacSwiney in 1920, were entrenched as iconic republican moments. Bobby Sands, anticipating the impact of this comparison, wrote in the diary of his fast, “I remember, and I shall never forget, how this monster took the lives of Thomas Ashe, Terence MacSwiney, Michael Gaughn, Frank Stagg, and Hugh Carey” (cited Aretxaga 1997: 102). This discursive conjunction allowed the strikers to claim a legacy - a line of legitimacy

¹ “Terrorist Remembrance and the GAA” (Source: <http://www.sluggerotoole.com>, 10 July 2006 (accessed 11 July 2006).

² It is equally interesting to note that Sinn Féin has marketed several ‘commemorative’ items to ‘defray the costs of staging the [Casement Park] rally’, which include: t-shirts and black flags with the ‘H-25’ logo discussed above, silver pendants and pins bearing the logo, a special 1981-2006 mouse mat, ‘Remember the Hunger Strikers’ wristbands, and a CD entitled ‘Macnaimh/Reflections’ featuring among others Bik McFarlane and Francie Brolly on vocals. Source: http://www.sinnfeinbookshop.com/en-us/dept_93.html (accessed 12 August 2006).

and continuity – to the republican tradition culminating in the Easter Rising and the War of Independence. By reaffirming these historical parallels, the strikers not only portrayed themselves as the next in a long line of republican martyrs, but simultaneously implied that history would repeat itself: “there grew among a number of the blanket men a belief that a hunger strike would provide the catalytic momentum that would make 1916 come again” (O’Malley 1990: 56). The strikers, in explicitly appealing to the commemorative connotations of the event itself, anticipated their own memorialization³: “The diary [Sands’] is a statement for posterity, not a record of his fast” (O’Malley 1990: 57). Like the 1916 martyrs, it suggests, “It was of course, the manner of his [Sands’] dying for which he was remembered, not the circumstances of his life” (O’Malley 1990: 36). Furthering the analogy, many commentators suggest that “the hunger strikes *were* the northerner’s 1916” (Tim Pat Coogan, cited Walker, R.K. 2006: 11, Walker’s emphasis).⁴ O’Malley draws the comparison at a number of levels, particularly in the conscious choice of martyrdom as a political strategy:

His predicament was not at all unlike the predicament Patrick Pearse had to face in the run-up to the Easter rising. Sands, like Pearse, was driven by what William Irwin Thompson describes in *The Imagination of an Insurrection* as ‘an intense consciousness of failure’ (O’Malley 1990: 56).

By continually citing (and reciting) this analogy, Sands links himself (along with the other strikers) to an entire republican tradition, extending from 1916 in both directions: “[h]e and the collective past were part of the same organic whole; all Republicans were linked to one another and to the past and future generations, itinerants in the diaspora of the dispossessed” (O’Malley 1990:57). This claim to a republican legacy serves as an end in itself - aside from, or beyond, the substantive demands on the basis of which the protest is held. In his diary account of the first 17 days of his strike,

He [Sands] does not mention the five demands or indicate what he will settle for. Only that he will die, that the Republic of 1916 will never die, that he is sustained by the memories of Thomas Clarke, Terence MacSwiney, Frank

³ Greenlaw makes this point repeatedly throughout his chapter on the hunger strikes, “A Hunger For History” (2004: 105-177).

⁴ Again, Walker turns to Coogan’s analysis to elaborate on this point: “The duplicity of the British in failing to make ‘a serious offer’ to the hunger strikers in 1980 is seen by [...] Tim Pat Coogan as a grave error – one that essentially guaranteed another hunger strike whose participants would take their protest all the way. The result would be a propaganda disaster for the British akin to the firing squads of 1916” (Walker, R.K. 2006: 77).

Stagg, Michael Gaughn, Thomas Ashe, Sean McCaughey, and above all, James Connolly (O'Malley 1990: 57).

In this discourse, the Hunger Strike's relation to 1916 is both parallel (repetition) and linear (progression). In both versions (and they do not function exclusively to each other), history, and the *use* of history as political, is central to the struggle. The hunger strikers are engaged in the (re)appropriation of history, the creation (production) of history, and the transformation, re-creation, and re-writing of history. Again, these processes are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they hint at a larger process of reiteration – of speaking, repeating and changing what is being said, and of claiming the right (the power inherent in legitimacy) to do so. Thus there is much at stake *politically* in placing the Hunger Strike alongside, in a lineage to, 1916 – as opposed to other events in Irish history,⁵ or as opposed to standing alone, as *sui generis*.

As English proposes, “there are unavoidable echoes between 1981 and 1916”:

in each case a combination of republican violence and republican politics was used in the hope of translating the high-ground of sacrifice in ultimate political victory with the establishment of the free republic. And, in each case, such millenarian hopes were to prove, ultimately, unfounded (English 2003: 211).

However, what is more significant is the similar ways in which the two events have been deployed in overtly politicized commemorative discourses. The Irish government's intention to erode Sinn Féin's claim to the Easter Rising⁶ is further complicated by the republican movement's alignment of the Rising with the hunger strike – a comparison not recognized by the Fianna Fáil version of Irish history. Yet both moves are politically motivated and political in effect; both moves are problematic. They each seek, in their own way, to establish or deny a claim to historical, political, and ideological continuity, but the very existence of the other challenges the seamlessness of this attempt. This question is crucial: how is this rupture written and re-written within Republicanism to provide continuity and unity, or to legitimize or contest change and reinforce division?

In 1981 the critic Denis Donoghue called the strikes “a carefully devised campaign to take possession of the entire tradition of Irish republicanism, from the rising of 1798 to the

⁵ To play the devil's advocate in this instance, other historical events such as the Irish Famine of the 1840s, or the Emancipation and Repeal Movements led by Daniel O'Connell, could arguably provide points of comparison on a number of interpretive levels.

⁶ It is useful to read this in light of Sinn Féin's bid for electoral dominance on both sides of the border.

Fenians and the men of Easter Week” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990: 141, Greenlaw 2004: 157). This claim is about more than ownership; it emphasizes and reaffirms claims to continuity, unity, legitimacy, and legacy. The appeal to these terms undeniably proved useful to the republican movement in the aftermath of the protests as they instigated an electoral policy. Donoghue’s cautionary and cynical tone was echoed by former government officials who witnessed the fall-out of the protests first-hand: Sir Ian Gilmour (Foreign Office Minister, 1981) believed that the hunger strikes were “a great propaganda coup for the IRA”, while Sir Kenneth Stone (Under-Secretary to the Northern Ireland Office, 1981) warned that: “Northern Ireland is not a place to grow martyrs if you can avoid it” (cited by McFayden 2006: 77). On the one hand, the hyper-politicized commemoration of the Hunger Strike seems to support such cynicism: remembering the 1981 protest in line with the tradition of republican martyrdom is strategically useful, vis-à-vis republicanism’s internal and external audiences. It is not, however, a strategy that is entirely unproblematic. In making a claim to continuity and repetition of history, the comparison also highlights disruption, and difference.

In the progressive reading currently popular in mainstream republicanism (i.e. Provisional Sinn Féin), the 1981 Hunger Strike is represented not only as a point towards the peace process, a watershed, but as the embodiment or epitome of both the true nature of the conflict (struggle) and Republicans’ attempts to overcome that conflict. In other words, this re-writing is intended to suggest that the Republican struggle was always equally an attempt at resolution - albeit a decidedly partial one.

But resymbolization is not merely or only the installation of a new origin myth: the old one is never replaced, never erased. The previous narrative remains in play, not only as a trace that cannot be forgotten, but as a marker by which to reference the rewritten meaning of the event.⁷

One goal of the accounts [of the hunger strikes] [...] seems to be to find oneself in presentations of the past as either an identically consistent or seamlessly continuous ‘history of sacrifice’. Yet these accounts also allow for the opposite, for a discontinuous ‘sacrifice of history’, by revealing the insufficiency of the terms at which they otherwise seem to arrive (Greenlaw 2004: 119).

⁷ My argument here is *contra* Githens-Mazer (2006) on the role and nature of historical/political ‘myth’.

It is not the (professed) totality of the story that is significant; rather it is the gaps and inconsistencies of this complex of discourses that point to the political in its widest sense. The dominant narratives of repetition and progression, far from being the fated legacy of 800 years of ‘struggle’, rather script the transformation of their own boundaries even as they attempt to close them down. This reiteration and rewriting of the meaning of the Hunger Strike has become ever more significant – and politically expedient - after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Subsequent commemorations, particularly in 2001, were set in the context of the ongoing debate on arms decommissioning. At this juncture, the republican movement and IRA faced considerable uncertainty over their very future.

In a speech linking the IRA’s 23 October 2001 gesture of decommissioning to the 20th anniversary of the hunger strikes (entitled ‘The Political Legacy of the Hunger Strike’), Gerry Adams argued that the hunger strike, like decommissioning, could have been resolved through dialogue, but he was careful to add that, because decommissioning is a strategic tactic - not defeat or surrender - the IRA still posses a ‘sense of themselves’ (Greenlaw 2004: 108). This tactic is crucial to the negotiation of continuity and change, and links very intricately to the August 2005 statement read by Seanna Walsh calling an end to IRA activity (to which I return in a later section of this chapter). It is crucial, therefore, to ask: what is disrupted by hunger strikes commemorations, and what ruptures do they seek to bridge or contain? The negotiation of these ruptures hinges primarily on the complex relationship between armed violence, constitutional politics and legitimacy.

The problematic source of republican legitimacy is Janus-faced: one direction looking inward, within Northern Republicanism; the other, confronting the Republic. The source of authority emanating from the nationalist tradition in the 26 southern counties is destabilized firstly by its definition of ‘the Republic’ and secondly by its definition of ‘politics’. The centrality of 1916 is contested as the ‘official’ origin of the (an) Irish Republic – one which remains merely ideal, unfulfilled, partial, and incomplete. The difficulty of memorializing the Hunger Strike as part of this narrative of an ideal unified (32-county) state is a key part of the rupture or lack that necessitates a continual call to commemoration. A recent row over a republican memorial in Ballyseedy (near Tralee), Co. Kerry encapsulates this ambiguity in an almost literal sense. As part of the ongoing commemoration of the Hunger Strike in 2006, a republican organization (presumably Provisional Sinn Féin or affiliates) placed posters of the ten dead hunger strikers atop an established memorial to several ‘Irregulars’ killed by Free

State forces during the Civil War.⁸ The incongruity of this juxtaposition is apparent: first, because while present-day republicans would perhaps claim a similarity to the Irregulars in their rejection of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, the ideological and tactical reasons behind their opposition are significantly divergent; and second, because there is seemingly little to link the two events historically or ideologically - from the perspectives of either pro- and anti- Treaty positions, the Irish Civil War was not fundamentally fought as a rejection of partition. While perhaps the Irregulars and the hunger strikers may both be labeled as 'Irish martyrs', they did not die for the same Republic. The act of re-memoration on the part of present-day republicans - changing the meaning of one memorial or event by placing it in conjunction with another - was further complicated by claims that a rival republican organization (allegedly Republican Sinn Féin) had 'vandalized' the memorial by removing the hunger strike posters.⁹ More than a tit-for-tat exchange, the repeated putting-up and tearing-down of the posters can be read as reflecting the contest between the two rival claims to 'republicanism' itself, designed to delegitimize each other's claim to represent and use its history and heroes. The source of the post declared that

This is a disgraceful act by people who claim to be real republicans. They have made no attempt to remember or honour the hunger strikers in Kerry. The only thing that seems to matter to them is their bitterness and hatred towards Sinn Féin. No matter what their motivation is for doing this, nothing can excuse vandalizing a monument that was erected to honour the 12 hunger strikers who died over the last 35 years. Shame on them.¹⁰

The irony of this statement, and the act itself, is that the original monument is not mentioned. The Civil War, which already occupies a difficult space in the history of the 'Southern' state,¹¹ is further marginalized and obscured by this exchange. Yet both moves - the re-commemoration of the memorial by Provisional Sinn Féin and the de-commemoration of the posters by Republican Sinn Féin - highlight the centrality of the

⁸ Nine men were killed near the site when they were roped together and a landmine, which they had intended for the Free State forces, was deliberately detonated. The incident retains a resonance in the area as one of the worst atrocities of the Civil War. Dolan's work *Commemorating the Irish Civil War* suggests that this event, and the memorial that marks it, has itself become a by-word for entrenched division and lingering Civil War bitterness in the post-independence Irish state. (See Dolan 2003:44, 47, 140, 167 especially.)

⁹ The allegation was posted on a Politics.ie discussion site on 23 May 2006. Source: <http://www.politics.ie/>. Follow path for Post Subject: "RSF Vandalise Hunger Strike Posters"(accessed 20 July 2006).

¹⁰ Source: <http://www.politics.ie>, as above. The "12" hunger strikers here refers to Frank Stagg and Michael Gaughn in addition to the ten men who died in 1981.

¹¹ See Dolan (2003).

hunger strike within their own version of (Irish, Republican) history by placing it in juxtaposition to a moment that cannot be incorporated into that narrative. Here the analogy or continuity to 1916 diverges sharply: like the Civil War, the Hunger Strike, its consequences and political resonance, remain liminal, even as it is continually pulled into focus by various shades of republicanism. The assertion of a connection between the Hunger Strike and the struggles of the past and the affirmation of its significance to the politics of the present is an attempt to cover over this gap. But it can only make the attempt: the connection of 1981 (or 2006) to 1916 is unstable and problematic; while it legitimizes Northern Ireland's claim to inclusion in (a) the Republic, it also de-legitimizes that Republic as partial (both incomplete and biased).

Mirroring the partition between northern and southern republicanism represented by the border, division and fracture within republicanism and between 'republicanisms' is endemic to the nature of the movement. An appeal to unity through historical ties is therefore a necessary, but not totally possible, rhetorical strategy for anyone claiming the banner, particularly when employed to smooth over the ambiguity of ideological difference and political compromise. The various claims and counter-claims to the legacy of the hunger strike(s) and their meaning in the context of present politics simultaneously reflect and reproduce these conflicts and divisions within and between Republicanisms.

The commemorative discourses of the Hunger Strike present a sacred event that is torn between several competing claims to both the past and the present. Like the 'authority' of the Republic ('the Republic', if you will), and its reliance on 1916 as foundational, the authority of a continuous, unified strand of republicanism extending from 1969 is also disrupted. "From the terms of decommissioning to those of interment and internment, republican authorities are undermined at the same time as they are relied on to provide a monumentalizing touchstone for resistance" (Greenlaw 2004: 13). Gerry Adams' speech launching the 25th anniversary commemorative programme outlined a Janus-faced strategy for mainstream republicanism:

The forthcoming year will provide an opportunity to reflect upon the ten men who died, the contribution they made and the sacrifices made by their families during the summer of 1981. These events must also be about more than looking back. They must also be about looking to the future, exploring how best we move our struggle forward in the coming years and how best we

complete the job of delivering Irish unity and independence (Adams, 13 February 2006).¹²

In contrast, Adams' speech at a Republican (read: Provisional Sinn Féin) commemoration of the death of Bobby Sands (05 May 2006), brings the ideal of the hunger strike clearly into the present, while anchoring it firmly in 1916:

It is clear 25 years later that the hunger strikers hold a special place in the hearts of many people. [Their] generosity of spirit, self-sacrifice, and unselfishness [have made them] role models for Irish republicans everywhere. [...] The enduring legacy of the hunger strikers is to be found all around us. Like the Easter Rising 65 years earlier it is a watershed in modern Irish history. The political growth of Sinn Féin and of Irish republicanism is no small measure a result of their courage. But more importantly, their legacy is to be found in the peace process and the positive transformation it has wrought in Irish society in recent years (Adams, 05 May 2006).¹³

Adams again reiterates the meaning of the event by explicitly linking Sands and the Hunger Strike to the Easter Rising:

In 1916 James Connolly wrote of the men and women of the Easter Rising; 'Never had man or woman a grander cause, never was a cause more grandly served.' This remark could have been written for Bobby Sands and his comrades (Adams, 05 May 2006).

Here Adams emphasizes the sense of a historical succession from 1916 to 1981, with the hunger strikers inheriting the motivations, intentions, and ideology of the Easter rebels – thus ensuring them a similar place in republican history.

In both mainstream republicanism and its dissident off-shoots, the circle-squaring attempted is how to reconcile the hunger strike to 1916, and more problematically how to reconcile the hunger strike to 2006. Republican Sinn Féin, 32 County Sovereignty Movement (hereafter abbreviated 32CSM), and other dissident republicans, are critical, derisive of Provisional Sinn Féin's attempts (or claims) to write Republican history in a straight line – incorporating the hunger strikes retrospectively into a narrative of the peace process (as 'political process'). The statement issued by the 32-County Sovereignty Movement

¹² Source: <http://sinnfein.ie/news/detail/13046> (accessed 30 March 2006).

¹³ Source: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/sf> (accessed 05 May 2006).

emphasizes this connection between legitimacy and legacy, and writes the conflict as a struggle for ‘(our) history’: “Today in our capital city we witness Provisional Sinn Féin in collusion with Fianna Fáil attempt to rewrite our history” (32CSM 20 February 2006). By linking the political battles of the present to a struggle for history, such statements claim for their writers a privileged access to the underlying ‘truth’ of both past and present. ‘History’ (i.e. failure, betrayal, and oppression) will inevitably be repeated because the ideological continuity of ‘true’ republicanism has been disrupted and betrayed.

Yet, in their vehement denunciations of ‘revisionist politics’, such statements seek their own revision: re-writing the politics of the present as inevitably, inextricably tied to the incompleteness of the past serves to reinscribe the political meaning of both. This move attempts to reiterate versions of both past and present that re-call (remember, invoke, and name) the struggle for history on their own terms: “let us remember why it is important to assemble here [...] and remember our responsibilities to uphold the sovereignty of the Irish people with pride” (32CSM). Crucially, this call to remember ‘why we assemble here’, to ‘remember our responsibilities to the Irish people’ could be invoked by any shade of republican allegiance. The move to reiterate the political past and present is performed by all sides. The boundaries of definition, the borders of republicanism, are maintained, challenged, and redrawn through what is remembered and what forgotten, why and to what ends. “The question of reiteration [...]. Politicians in the North imitate and recite one another while competing for the proper contents of national identities, but they do so in a way that weakens the boundaries they seek to establish” (Greenlaw 2004: 11).

The conjunction of the anniversaries of the Hunger Strike and the 1916 Rising unsurprisingly produce a myriad of comparisons. They are spoken of in the same breath because they appear – or are made to appear – in the same timeline, the same historical space. Despite many attempts by the Sinn Féin leadership (as well as dissident Republicans) to assert both a historical continuity and parallel between the hunger strikes and the Easter Rising, however, the political (and politicized) implications that make this juxtaposition desirable and necessary for them also threaten its stability. In 2006, both the 25th anniversary of the Hunger Strike and the 90th anniversary of the Easter Rising were remembered in a monumentally changed political context. In 2006, the question that promises the ‘meaning’ of the hunger strikes is centered on the tension between progress versus continuity, constitutionalism versus violence.

The vociferous reactions to a commemorative rally held at Casement Park (the GAA's Belfast stadium) on 13 August 2006 point to the issue of commemoration as one which centres around explicitly political boundaries for both unionists and republicans. The DUP's Gregory Campbell criticized the GAA for approving the use of their ground for the event, at which Gerry Adams was to be the main speaker, along with several members of Sinn Féin attending in official capacities (BBC News Online 01 August 2006).¹⁴ While the GAA's central body in Dublin had determined that the event would break the organization's own rules about staging political events, the local Antrim board had not objected. Peadar Whelan, a representative from the National Hunger Strike Committee – the organizers of the event – insisted that the commemoration was 'non-party political'. The controversy surrounding the rally hinges on the disparity between republican and unionist definitions of 'the political'. For Campbell, there must be a clear distinction between sport or culture and politics: "They have to decide, do they want to play sport or do they want to play at politics. They can't do both and maintain that they are a purely sporting organisation" (BBC 01 August 2006). One gets the impression that this remark could just as easily be directed at Sinn Féin. Whelan, on the other hand, seeks to present the commemoration as above politics: "Anyone, regardless of their party affiliation is entitled to remember 10 brave men who died on hunger strike in 1981" (BBC 01 August 2006.). In this view, while the event remembers an explicitly political event and employs highly-visible political figures, it transcends narrow political divisions by appealing to a universal value which can be inclusive of all allegiances. Naturally, for many this claim is problematic. For many nationalists and/or republicans, the GAA can remain 'apolitical' as long as it does not engage with explicit party interests; from a unionist or loyalist perspective, however, the organization is already explicitly political as it cannot be extricated from an exclusive nationalist agenda.

The participants in this discourse are engaged in a dispute over the very boundaries of political definition. What makes an event political? Can politics be held separate from other arenas of society such as culture or history? What are the legitimate uses of politics? And, specifically, what is the place of politics in the commemoration of the hunger strike, and of commemoration in politics? Responses to the event from leading unionists alongside

¹⁴ "GAA Accused Over Rally at Ground", BBC News Online, 01 August 2006. Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/5235220.stm (accessed 03 August 2006).

details of Gerry Adams' address to the rally, link the political fall-out from the commemoration directly to the stalled 'political process' to resurrect the power-sharing Assembly. While Adams "called for compromise and confidence in dealing with unionists", and declared that "The challenge facing us is to be avowedly anti-sectarian, to face up to the challenge of making peace with the unionist section of our people and that means we should not be afraid to make correct strategic compromises" (Adams, 13 August 2006), it was clear from the reaction of unionists themselves that the event, and Sinn Féin's reading of its place in the history of the Troubles, was already seen by many as exclusionary. For DUP MP Jeffrey Donaldson, "The sordid efforts of Sinn Féin to revise the history of the last 35 years according to a republican script are only succeeding with the most gullible" (quoted in the *News Letter* 14 August 2006).¹⁵ As Adams attempts to employ the 'courage' displayed by the hunger strikers as an example to the republican mainstream, the solidity of the 'republican script' has already been shaken by two opposing forces: the recently increased profile and renewed activity of 'dissident' republicans, and the seeming failure of the IRA's 'historic' gesture of standing-down to propel Sinn Féin into the power position it seeks. For Adams, the memory of the Hunger Strike is the key to republican cohesion: "We have a mandate, we are in a transitional phase. We are about a new egalitarian society on this island, we are Irish Republicans, and we are proud to be republicans" (Adams, 13 August 2006). That memory is held out to define 'Irish Republican' – who 'we' are – and to bridge the gap along this 'transitional phase'. As Margaret O'Callaghan has memorably put it, "To hold the ceasefire they have to own the Hunger Strikes."¹⁶ Yet the potential for cohesion through commemoration is one that is continually threatened by compromise in the pursuit of power. It is, furthermore, perhaps a strategy that will not be rewarded: as Donaldson holds the commemoration – evidence of Sinn Féin's perceived manipulation of history and the victims of that history – as justification for unionists' reluctance to share power:

I think that what Sinn Féin have done will undermine any chance of devolving government once again. The Sinn Féin leadership need to realize that their celebration of the hunger strikes and politicization will only do damage to the possibility of building a new political dispensation in Northern Ireland (*News Letter* 14 August 2006).

¹⁵ The paper featured several related articles under the banner "Fury as Park Hosts Rally", pp. 1, 6, 7.

¹⁶ Private discussion, August 2006. My sincere thanks to Dr O'Callaghan for her permission to use this phrase.

As the commemoration becomes a tool for unity and division both within and between communities, highlighting continuity and change, the potential of rupture is exposed. The boundaries of the political are continually questioned, eroded, and reinforced through commemoration. The anniversary of the Hunger Strike in 2006 illustrates not only the potential for unity and division, consensus and conflict, negotiated by commemorative discourses, but crucially allows for the re-valuation and reiteration of these political boundaries.