

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: 'The ablest of all the fearless women who worked for Ireland's freedom'

Sheehy Skeffington fought for equality and the republican cause – but why wasn't she put forward as a candidate in the crucial 1918 election?

GIVEN HER UNDOUBTED talents as a strategist and as a public speaker, why did Hanna Sheehy Skeffington not become one of the key figures in the republican movement?

More specifically, why did Sinn Féin not put those skills to best use by selecting her as a candidate in the crucial election of 1918?

There were many tributes made to the Irish feminist following her death in 1946. These included Maud Gonne MacBride, who described her as "the ablest of all the fearless women who worked for Ireland's freedom".

From Labour, Cathal O'Shannon considered her not only "the ablest of the women" in Irish public life over the past forty years, but "in some respects she had a place of her own even among those of her political class and calibre in America and in Britain".

Another wrote that she had been "distinguished for her grasp of public affairs and her outspoken style of expressing her views".

She had joined Sinn Féin in 1918, following her return from a tour of America, where she had been hailed as the most successful of the republican propagandists to have visited in the aftermath of the Rising.

The Sean Connolly Club unanimously selected her to contest the Harbor division in Dublin, but they must have been overruled as she was offered only the unwinnable seat of North Antrim, an offer she rejected with indignation.

She was generous with her time in campaigning for the imprisoned Constance Markievicz, determined that the woman who had been "thrown as a sop to the women of the country" (in the words of Irish Women's Franchise League member Meg Connery), would be successful.

Forthright views As editor of the suffrage paper the Irish Citizen, Hanna had a vehicle in which to articulate her views regarding the formation of Dáil Eireann.

Her forthright words perhaps provide a clue why party leaders might have preferred she remained as a worker rather than a spokeswoman with the authority of an elected position.

While she congratulated the Dáil for its progressive action in appointing Constance Markievicz as Minister for Labour, she was less than impressed by the pomp and ceremony the TDs attempted to bring to proceedings, regretting they had not “cast off the whole system of British cabinet making and British parliamentary methods, a system that has strangled true democracy”. She preferred the progressive small nations of the Scandinavian countries, most of which “in feminism far outstrip us”.

Hanna, as organising secretary, was working in close proximity to Michael Collins, whose organisational skills she admired, although there were elements of his personality she disliked, writing in her unpublished memoirs: “He had the usual soldier’s contempt of civilians, particularly of women, though these often risked their lives to help him.” In her opinion the Republic he visualised would have been “a middle class replica of an English state... for he knew no other”.

For his part, Collins complained about the Sinn Féin ‘Standing Committee of malcontents’, who were much too “political and theoretical” and not militant enough for that military man.

Hanna was one of five Sinn Féin women elected to Dublin City Council in January 1920.

At this time forty two women were elected throughout Ireland, but the Irish Citizen was scathing in its assessment of that result: “We do not think 5 in 80 members on Dublin city council or 42 women throughout Ireland a fair proportion – 50% would be more like our idea of fairness.”

Sinn Féin was commended for setting a good example, but the other political parties, including Labour, were criticised for the lack of support they gave women. Her record as a councillor reflected her experience as a teacher of many year’s standing, giving an indication of what her concerns would have been, if she had been elected to the Dáil.

She was a member of the Cleansing Committee, a member of the Technical Education Committee and Chair of the Public Libraries Committee. The unequal position of female local government employees was one of her first concerns and all town councils were written to and asked for the numbers of women they employed as clerical workers, what their pay scales were and whether they were eligible for promotion.

She would receive many letters of gratitude from clerks whose positions she had helped to improve. When she was appointed to the Finance and General and Purposes Committee, she

became involved in promoting the 'Orion' system of building corporation houses, with the first buildings opening in Clontarf in July 1921.

She was also a judge in the republican courts and one of the most effective speakers for the republican cause, travelling the countryside for that purpose. In August 1919 in County Westmeath she was struck on the head and stunned by the butt-end of a police carbine as 20 armed police rushed the platform where she was speaking.

Although unable to speak on the Treaty in the Dáil, she used her journalistic skills to make plain her opposition.

She was prominent in the unsuccessful campaign to have the franchise extended to women between 21 and 30 before the vote was taken (Kate O'Callaghan, the Deputy who put forward the motion in the Dáil was a friend and former pupil) and in the American journal *The Freeman*, Hanna emphasised this was not merely a feminist concern but a question of democracy and of supporting working class interests:

The antediluvian property franchise, with all its anomalies and rottenness, its plural votings and university electorate...(which would) naturally be to the advantage of the vested interests, for the propertied classes, the people that boast of "stakes in the country!", are all in favour of the Free State. These will all vote at the election.

While the election concerned "the future destiny and status of the nation", adult suffrage would only be granted after others had voted them into the Free State.

In her sardonic dismissal of politicians who promised "jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but never jam today", we hear the voice of a woman who could have made a powerful and radical contribution to the emerging Irish state.

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