



PUBLISHED BY SINN FÉIN, 44 PARNELL SQUARE, DUBLIN 1, IRELAND.

Tel: +353 1 8726100 or 8726932 Fax: +353 1 8783595

Email: sfadmin@eircom.net Web: www.sinnfein.ie

Gerry Adams Presidential Address to Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 2000

If asked, 'Where stands the Good Friday Agreement today?' most nationalists, and all republicans, would say that it's dead.

This response is hardly surprising given the two years of time-wasting and obstructionist politics by unionists, the body-blows inflicted on the process over that period, and the British Government's suspension of the institutions, including the all-Ireland bodies.

I do not intend to take this Ard Fheis through every twist and turn of the 12 months since we last met. Instead, I want to deal in a broad, brushstroke way with the politics of this phase in our struggle.

And I want to confront the need for us all — that is every single activist here — to review our individual stewardship of the process and our personal handling of the various issues. I also want to see us doing this in a constructive and comradely way, not just at this Ard Fheis but as part of an ongoing process, through every level of this party from the Ard Chomhairle to the cumann.

Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil cáineadh éigin ann faoin dÚigh inar lamhseáil an ceannasaíocht gnéanna áiríthe dár stráitéis agus ar ndÚigh tá cuid daoine ag ceistiú an stráitéis féin. Tá sé sin uilig maith go leor, mar abhár fíor creidim go bhfuil an t-idirphlé agus an díospóireacht sin lárnach dár gcoimhlint agus d'obair an pháirtí seo.

I know there is some criticism of how the leadership have handled elements of the strategy. And indeed there is some questioning of the

strategy itself. All of this is fair enough. In fact, I believe such ongoing dialogue and debate is an essential part of this struggle and of the work of this party.

Let me also say that I appreciate immensely the great commitment shown by our activists and by the republican base in the face of frustrating and, at times, provocative actions, particularly by the British Government and the unionists.

While the main focus of your dissatisfaction is with the British Government, I also know that many of you are critical of the Irish Government's and the SDLP's handling of some aspects of the process.

London's approach has created a real anger within republicanism and nationalism. There was confusion, though that should have disappeared by now. I know there is considerable frustration, and let's face up to it, there is also disappointment at the current state of the peace process.

That disappointment reflects in many ways the feelings of people, north and south of this island, and others throughout the world who support the search for a lasting peace in our country.

Peace Requires Justice

But I have to say that republicans should be the last people to be surprised by what happened here over the last two years.

Who said it was going to be easy?

Everyone here knows that peace requires justice.

Everyone here knows that this demands great changes within society, particularly, but not exclusively, in the North.

Everyone here also knows, or should know, that such changes will be resisted by those who cling to the old order, the old agenda.

There is no comfort in this for the faint-hearted or the weak-willed. But then we know that people like ourselves who want to see a total transformation of society on this island cannot be faint-hearted or weak-willed.

When war was a daily fact of life or death — unlikely or unpopular as it may be to say this, many people — including perhaps some of us, took refuge in that. Depending on one's perspective, you either blamed the IRA or depended upon the IRA. These totally opposite viewpoints had one thing in common — the war was the reason or the excuse for doing nothing or for not doing as much as we could.

Rising to the Challenge

Sinn Féin's peace strategy has challenged all of that. And the peace process, which is a consequence of our strategy, has clarified issues for many people and closed down the hiding places for many others.

At a time of widespread conflict it challenged those who paid lip service to the role of peace maker.

At a time of censorship, misinformation and revisionism, it challenged the opinion makers in the media and the censors.

It challenged the partitionist attitudes of the government and of the Establishment political parties here in Dublin.

It challenged the cosy consensus between church and state on this island.

It also challenged political opinion in the North, most clearly within the unionist section of our people.

While rejectionist unionism opposed our efforts, we recognise that more progressive and modernising

elements of unionism, who voted for the Good Friday Agreement, and others within civic unionism and the business community, have risen to that challenge.

And, of course, our peace strategy challenged the British Government and political parties in London.

The first organisation to accept that challenge was the IRA. Its cessation in August 1994 — six years ago — created the space in which politics could grow, if others were up to the challenge.

Out of all of that came the Good Friday Agreement.

Many things have and can be said, for and against that Agreement, from the republican perspective. But I believe that one of the most compelling arguments in favour of the Agreement is that, for the first time, a British Government and others were made to face up to what is wrong in the North.

Whatever happens to the Agreement, we have to understand that this is ground gained which must never be conceded.

From our perspective, the measures contained in the Agreement may not go far enough to right these wrongs. But this has to be seen as work in hand because, from the unionist perspective, these measures go too far and there has been an ongoing effort to reduce them still further or to remove them entirely.

This is what has created the current crisis.

Huge Mistake

The British Government made a huge mistake and miscalculation on February 11th when it endorsed the unionist view that the issue of decommissioning was a precondition on the continuation of the institutions. Whatever reason is put forward to justify this decision, this is the reality. It is also the biggest single mistake by the British Labour Party since it took power in May 1997.

It is totally contrary to the Good Friday Agreement. There is no default link between 'government and guns' in the Agreement. This is also the reality.

Credit for this is sometimes given to the Sinn Féin negotiating team. Let me make it clear that we did not have to change one word in the

decommissioning section of the Good Friday Agreement.

The governments knew the score. They accepted reality and they valued the cessations. This is the truth.

The Agreement took the wise course, the conflict resolution course, which saw the resolution of the arms issue as an objective of a process and not as a blockage on progress on all of the other matters.

But the ink was barely dry on the Agreement when the British Prime Minister stepped outside of this framework and produced his side letter for the Ulster Unionist Party. From then on this issue was treated as an issue of tactical political management.

It ceased to be an objective of a peace process. Instead it became a precondition dogging the process. This reduced the Good Friday Agreement to something less than the people voted for. It also subverted the electoral mandates of genuinely committed pro-Agreement parties. The value of the vote and the implementation process was, and is now, subject to unionist terms. From that point on, the current vacuum was a crisis waiting to happen.

That's the flaw which the British Government introduced into the Good Friday Agreement.

Tackling the Arms Issue

This is what has subverted all of Sinn Féin's efforts to resolve this issue.

All these efforts were based on our view that the purpose of any peace process must be for opponents or enemies to see each other's point of view and to find a compromise, an agreement, an accord which accommodates the difficulties that exist.

On a number of occasions we went far beyond our obligations under the terms of the Agreement as we tried to resolve this issue.

Some might think this was a mistake. I disagree. And furthermore, let me make it absolutely clear here today that this Sinn Féin leadership will continue to support efforts to resolve the arms issue.

We remain wedded to our objective of taking all of the guns out of Irish politics. This is a collective responsibility and there is no special onus on our party to do this above and beyond the responsibilities of every other party in this process.

We will continue to do our best but if a British government, with all of its military firepower and muscle, could not get an IRA surrender in 30 years of war, then unionist leaders or British ministers cannot expect a Sinn Féin leadership to do it for them.

British Strategy has Failed

That is not the way to build lasting peace on this island. It is not the way to build a new, inclusive political dispensation.

Had the Agreement been implemented as agreed, I am quite sure that a way of resolving the weapons issue would have been found by now because politics would have worked.

Instead, the opposite has been the case and the entire process of change and the rights of citizens has been made conditional on unionist approval. Worse still, it has been made conditional on those unionists who have clearly set their face against change and against the Good Friday Agreement.

The responsibility for this rests squarely with the British Government. There is no way that a workable solution to the current crisis can be found unless Mr Blair and Mr Mandelson come to terms with this.

The strategy pursued by the two governments on the weapons issue, insofar as it can be described as a strategy, has failed.

It has failed to resolve the issue itself.

It has failed to win the confidence of unionism.

It has moved outside the Good Friday Agreement.

It has alienated republicanism.

It has brought the entire process to the current impasse with the British Government in breach of the Agreement.

Like all of the other failures of the past, this failed

strategy has to be set to one side.

Outstanding Aspects

The question Mr Mandelson has to answer is: Where is the peace process to go from here? Is everything to be thrown away?

These are questions that all the parties to the Good Friday Agreement, and especially the British Government, must ponder on.

There is a vacuum.

There is the possibility that all of the good work of recent years could be frittered away. Worse still, there could be a slide back to conflict.

This has to be prevented.

The priority at this critical point in the peace process must be to get the institutions back in place as soon as possible.

The two governments must also urgently co-operate to implement all the outstanding aspects of the Good Friday Agreement. The reality is that we are still awaiting delivery of the:-

Equality Agenda;

A New Policing Service;

Justice Matters;

Human Rights;

Cultural Rights;

And Demilitarisation.

Saving the Good Friday Agreement

I said earlier that republicans are disappointed and confused by the suspension of the institutions. It is my view that this confusion is a direct consequence of the unfulfilled hope shared by the vast majority of people on this island that this British government actually showed signs that it was prepared to keep to the commitments which it made in the Good Friday Agreement.

In my view, those republicans who dared to hope that this British government was different, though

they may never admit it, are hurt that London once again caved in to unionist threats and reinstated the veto.

But it is still not too late to save the Good Friday Agreement.

The biggest problem facing the Agreement arises from the British Government's attitude to it.

Not only is London in breach of its commitments but there is also no tactical or strategic merit in its approach. Apart from everything else, the institutions were working and they were popular. And let me give full credit to all our Assembly team, to the Sinn Féin chairs and deputy chairs of the various committees. and to our two ministers, the Minister for Health, Bairbre de Brún, and the Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness.

In the most difficult circumstances they behaved with great courage, honesty, impartiality and magnanimity. They were a credit to this party and showed that Sinn Féin is indeed ready for government.

Maybe that is the real problem.

It is an indictment of British rule in Ireland that since partition we have endured 50 years of one-party rule under the old unionist regime, 30 years of war, and eight weeks of inclusive institutions.

The British Government's suspension of the institutions is illegal and unilateral.

For a British government with such an unprecedented majority to behave in such a way is an unmitigated disaster and an enormous setback for the peace process.

If the decline of the Good Friday Agreement is to be reversed before it becomes terminal then Mr Blair must steer his government and the process out of the current wobble.

He must act to save the peace process.

He must order the reinstatement of the institutions.

A Message for Unionism

I also have a very clear message for the unionists.

We in Sinn Féin remain prepared to and have proven our ability to work within shared structures with your representatives, and we remain willing to develop a shared and agreed future for all the people of this island.

We know that, by its very nature, this historic task cannot be completed unless unionism has ownership of it. And I have acknowledged and I appreciate the huge challenge and the difficulties that this presents.

The way ahead for unionists and the rest of the people of this island is to walk forward together, to jointly carry the burden of our history.

That way the weight will not be as heavy.

That way we can chart a course for the future.

That way we can secure a shared future for everyone, especially our young people. Sinn Féin has not given up on the unionists. Bypassing the unionists is not an option for us. Our option is for dialogue and engagement.

But those unionists who have set their faces against progress need to reflect that while change can be delayed it cannot be prevented except in one circumstance Ú and that is if those of us who want change are prepared to give up.

Let me make it absolutely clear that we are not prepared to give up.

The days of second-class citizenship are over.

Let me make it clear that we will continue to be relentless in campaigning and working, agitating and struggling for change.

It would be a lot easier for everyone if the unionists would join with us in managing this change, and I personally believe that this is the best way forward.

But I also believe that the British Government cannot pass the buck on this issue or make this opportunity for peace conditional on the whims of rejectionist unionism or British securocrats.

London has to face up to its responsibilities.

A Hierarchy of Victims

One of the open wounds within nationalist and republican communities is the real sense that there is a hierarchy of victims. Those at the lowest tier are the victims of state terrorism, or of collusion between the state terrorists and their allies within loyalism.

If we are to have a real healing process then those most in need of healing, the victims' families, must have ownership of it. There also has to be recognition that no section of our people has a monopoly on suffering but that every section has a responsibility to provide and to work for a solution.

This is an equality issue as important as any other.

The refusal by some to accept this is at the core of the current difficulties. It is little wonder that there is a scarcity of ideas from the British Government and the unionist parties about how to resolve problems when they feel no responsibility for causing these problems.

Not only have the British Government refused to accept responsibility for these victims of their actions, but successive British governments, including this one, have actively engaged in a cover-up of the activities of their forces.

There is no other way of describing the refusal of the London government to come to terms with this issue.

For example, I have raised many cases with both Tony Blair and the present and the former British Secretaries of State. These include the high-profile cases of Rosemary Nelson, Pat Finucane and Robert Hamill.

I have also given them files on the case of the British Intelligence agent, Brian Nelson.

I have raised the cases of the 400 victims who have died as a direct result of killings by British Crown Forces and I have received no satisfactory answer to any of my representations.

This refusal to deal with these cases has to be challenged. Many people here welcomed the recent very public proclamation by the Irish Government that there was state collusion in the killing of Pat Finucane and that Pat's killing was

only one of many such cases.

It is understandable that victims' families expect the Irish Government to go much further than this. The British Government has to be faced with its responsibility to address these matters in an honest and forthright fashion.

I want to commend the relatives of those killed on Bloody Sunday and their supporters who successfully campaigned for the scrapping of Widgery and for a new inquiry. I also want to pay tribute to those families of victims of shoot-to-kill actions by the British state forces who this week took their cases to Strasbourg.

There are many, many more families who have stories to tell.

If we are to have a lasting peace there can be no restrictions imposed on fact, on truth, on grief, or sense of loss. There has to be an acceptance of the equivalence of grief. There can be no grief more worthy than any other.

These are difficult issues which we have to face up to, which everyone has to come to terms with.

Building Political Strength

As activists this party also has to come to terms with the need for us, the men and women of Sinn Féin, and our young activists in Ogra Shinn Féin, to be tenacious, resilient, and relentless in our efforts to advance our project.

Sinn Féin has an intelligent, methodical strategy grounded in reality. This strategy needs to be implemented right across the range of issues which it encompasses if we are to achieve the strategic and tactical objectives which we have set ourselves.

The theory needs to become practice. This is not a task for the faint-hearted or the short-sighted. It certainly cannot be accomplished through rhetoric alone.

People struggle for two reasons: either because they perceive it to be in their self-interest or because they are motivated by a big idea.

For us, Irish republicanism is the big idea! We also believe it is in the self-interest of the majority of the

people of this island.

Sovereignty

What is republicanism? In its essence it proclaims, defends and asserts the core principle that the people are sovereign.

In Ireland today the people are not sovereign.

We are not sovereign because of the partition of this island and the involvement of the British Government in our affairs. Even those leading partitionists who described the Good Friday Agreement, endorsed in referendum North and South as the exercise of self-determination by the Irish people, have had to skulk away from that propaganda assertion.

Sinn Féin took a more measured view. It is clear now who was right, given the way the British Government ignored the votes of the people of this island.

Ireland voted and Britain vetoed.

So self-determination for the people of this island has yet to be achieved.

Neutrality

This means not only winning independence from Britain but asserting our sovereignty in terms of the promotion of an independent foreign policy and positive Irish neutrality.

It means keeping this state out of the NATO camp.

It is deplorable that the government here failed to honour a Fianna Fáil election pledge to hold a referendum on membership of NATO's so-called 'Partnership for Peace'.

I welcome the draft Bill co-sponsored by Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin to write neutrality into the 1937 Constitution in an effort to prevent Dublin governments from exceeding their authority and bringing this state into military alliances against the will of the people.

An Inclusive Citizenship

I also want to totally repudiate the hostile and racist attitude being shown to asylum seekers.

The republican concept of citizenship has always been inclusive.

It includes all who share this island, whether their ancestors lived here for thousands of years, whether they came in as part of the Plantations, or whether they have just come recently to make a life in our country.

Today there are people from many countries seeking asylum here. There are also economic migrants looking for work. Our own history encompasses the experience of both. We know the pain of exile whether forced by political, social or economic circumstances. We also have experienced discrimination, hostility and racism.

We have resisted such treatment when we were the victims. The people of Ireland must reject and resist such treatment of others.

Cancel Foreign Debt

This party has also long supported the demand for the cancellation of foreign debt and we commend the work of Jubilee 2000 which is seeking to achieve this in this jubilee year.

The time for the cancellation of developing countries' debt is long overdue. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund cannot continue to act without accountability to the people their programmes affect.

After disasters, many caused by the environmental policies of richer countries, the international media focuses in on the plight of the victims. The most recent example of this was in Mozambique, where many thousands were killed by some of the most devastating floods in recent memory and many more thousands were left homeless.

What was not deemed so newsworthy, however, was that while the people of Mozambique were clinging to trees and roof-tops just to stay alive, their government was being forced to send 1.4 million dollars a week to its debtors in the G7.

After 'Hurricane Mitch' hit Central America, Honduras and Nicaragua were spending over half their government's revenue on debt repayments.

This week we have learned that 16 million people again face starvation in the Horn of Africa. Thirty-

seven African countries owe a total of 354 billion dollars.

The UN estimates that if the funds to pay off debt were diverted back into health and education the lives of seven million children a year could be saved, seven million children! Just think. That is two million people more than the entire population of this island.

That is 134,000 children a week.

We have raised this issue with the US Government, the Irish Government and the British Government; and our party will continue to support the demand for debt cancellation.

Poverty and Corruption

The social and economic problems here in Ireland are but a shadow of the great poverty, inequalities and distress experienced by other nations.

But they are no less real for those who have no jobs, for the elderly, for the sick, for lone parents, the disabled, for the travelling community, for working-class neighbourhoods emasculated by the scourge of drugs, for all who face hardship and obstacles to securing a decent quality of life.

In the 26 Counties, in the midst of plenty, there is great poverty, inequality and disadvantage. The North faces similar social and economic disadvantage with the additional burden of sectarian and political discrimination and unionist elitism.

But in addition, the economy, social policy, health policy, education and all other aspects of society in the Six Counties are controlled by London. The short-lived institutions did not have enough time to dent the decades of mismanagement by transient British ministers.

The Celtic Tiger is partitionist. It has clearly benefited many, many people in this state and Sinn Féin welcomes that. But for many others the Celtic Tiger does not exist. This is indeed the best of times and the worst of times.

While being preached at by business and political leaders about the need for pay restraint, those working people who pay their taxes, who obey the laws of the land, who do not wield political power or

have the means to amass wealth, have watched one scandal unfold after another.

We have experienced abuses of the planning processes.

We have witnessed improper payments to politicians and massive tax evasion by big business, politicians and the banking system.

We have seen illegal off-shore bank accounts and the systematic siphoning off of funds out of the country, and banks stealing from their own customers.

And we are expected to believe that no one knew.

There is clearly one law for the rich and another law for the rest of us.

One of the dangers about all of this is that Irish society at this stage in its evolution could be redefined into a less caring and a more selfish form of 'mé féinism', with cynicism about politics replacing idealism and materialism replacing compassion and a sense of public service.

In my view this does not represent the feelings, and the views and aspirations of the vast majority of our people.

So what is to be done about all of this?

The heart of the question is whether all Irish people are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities and a share in the wealth of the nation.

Sinn Féin's task is to make sure they do.

Republican and Labour

Our policies can best be summarised by what I have called the republican and labour position.

At its most basic level, this means that republicans see the individual and the community we belong to as the core building blocks of society.

Market-led ideology sees society as being constituted of the businesses that make up the economy.

The market-led approach cedes power and rights

to big business while, at the same time, disempowering people and their communities. It is a sad indictment that businesses in the Irish economy have more protection under the law than the ordinary people.

In the republican society, the rights of individuals must not only be guaranteed but actively promoted.

A republican and labour position is people-centred. It puts people first.

It sees economic and political democracy and empowerment as the opposite sides of the one coin.

Wherever you go on this island you will find Sinn Féin acting on this agenda in our local communities, in environmental lobby groups, in local development projects.

Our analysis is a long-standing one. It is for a new Ireland. A different Ireland. An Ireland which will cherish all the children of the nation equally.

In the 1970s we predicted that the European Union would erode Irish sovereignty and that the farming community would fall victim to Common Agricultural Policies. We were right.

Sinn Féin was among the first organisations to call for the closure of Sellafield. Our views were dismissed. Now it is accepted that Sellafield is rotten to its nuclear core. We were right on that one also. Sellafield needs to close. And it needs to close now.

We warned about the scourge of drugs. Sadly and regrettably, we were right on that one as well.

Our argument for remedial and rehabilitation programmes needs to be acted on.

We want the chance to implement our policies on social reform and economic democracy, as well as women's rights, cultural development, children's rights, environmental protection, civil liberties, administrative reform, sovereignty and unity.

None of this is achievable unless those who share this vision are part of the struggle to make it a reality. This is perhaps one of the biggest challenges we face. To broaden and widen this struggle, to empower people to form alliances, to

network, to become a catalyst for change. We are in a prime position to do so.

Coalition?

Sinn Féin is the fastest-growing political party on this island.

We are also the only all-Ireland party. And tomorrow our increasing political strength will be manifest as we seriously debate resolutions regarding the approach of this party to the possibility of coalition in the wake of the next general election in the 26 Counties.

Speculation about a Fianna Fáil/Sinn Féin coalition has been widespread in the media. This is a novel experience for our party and it has provoked a great deal of internal debate. It is important to set out some basic points on this very important issue for the future of Sinn Féin.

First of all, I want to challenge the assumption that we in Sinn Féin are only waiting to win the right number of Leinster House seats and the correct parliamentary arithmetic before heading straight into a coalition government with Fianna Fáil. That is news to me.

Some pundits are speculating whether Fianna Fáil will go into coalition with Sinn Féin. As I told the Taoiseach recently, the real question is whether Sinn Féin would go into coalition with Fianna Fáil.

Secondly, there is an assumption abroad that our only consideration in such a scenario would be the peace process.

Let me emphasise this: Sinn Féin is not, and never has, been a one-issue party.

We approach the question of coalition informed by the principles on which our party is based, by the policies adopted by Ard Fheiseanna such as this, and by the experience of our elected representatives and our activists.

Delegates may decide to completely rule out any coalition.

Or they may decide that this party will not enter any coalition unless mandated by a special delegate conference.

I will argue for the latter position which is being put forward by the Ard Chomhairle.

Because we need to take every opportunity to inform the electorate of our positions, and to get our political opponents to come to terms with the principles of our party and the policies which we would seek to have implemented.

These range from advancing the peace process, to Irish neutrality, from housing and health to education and the welfare of the disadvantaged in Irish society.

Sharing the wealth and creating real change in our country as opposed to creating careers would be the Sinn Féin priority in that political context as in all others.

More fundamental still is the point that this party, small though we are at present, is out to transform Irish politics.

We want to see the dominating and conservative forces in Irish politics replaced with real people's politics.

Ultimately, the coalition we want to build is the coalition of the dispossessed, North and South, East and West, urban and rural.

We want, in the words of James Connolly, "a regenerated Ireland, an Ireland reconquered for its common people". Are we up to this task?

A Party on the Move

Before we meet again in Ard Fheis we could be contesting elections on both parts of this island. It is our duty to ensure that we consolidate and continue to build our electoral strength.

We must work to modernise our party by building on the progress we have made.

I have consistently said that Sinn Féin gets the vote that we deserve.

The next elections could be a watershed moment for us. We must seize that moment.

In the last elections our vote increased in every constituency, in every part of this island.

Until recently, most of our good election news has been in Ulster. In the Six Counties, Mitchel McLaughlin came extraordinarily close to taking a seat in Europe when he received 117,643 votes. Now the four main parties in the North are divided by only 4 percentage points.

In this state, Cavan and Monaghan have long been the pace setters.

But now the Sinn Féin vote is on the rise through Connacht, Munster and Leinster. Our vote increased everywhere in these provinces with breakthroughs in Dublin as well as in rural areas.

Seán Crowe, Seán MacManus, Arthur Morgan and Martin Ferris almost trebled the Sinn Féin vote in last year's European election and now we stand at 6.3 per cent.

We are still a small party but we are a party on the move.

The test for this generation of republicans is how we modernise our ideology to meet the needs and conditions of our time.

The tens of thousands of Irish people who voted Sinn Féin, and the many others who demand a lasting peace, and who expressed that desire when they voted YES for the Good Friday Agreement, are watching our deliberations intently.

How we respond, what strategies and tactics we apply, what leadership we demonstrate, and what inspiration we provide will determine our success or failure.

Is Sinn Féin equal to these challenges?

I believe we are.

I believe we have the ability, the imagination, and the wisdom to achieve the goals we have set for ourselves.

I believe we can succeed.

It won't be easy.

The change we seek is profound.

Níl aon réiteach draíochta ann. Níl aon roghanna furasta ann dár leithéidí. Tá alán daoine ag brath

orainn in san gearrthearma chun rudaí a dhéanamh i gceart i dtaobh le prúiseas na síochána. Sé mo bharúil go bhfuil tabhacht ar leith ag baint leis seo don todhchaí.

There are no magic solutions. No easy options for activists like us. An awful lot of people are depending on us in the short-term to get things right in terms of the peace process. In my view, the future very much depends on this.

Despite our frustration, anger and annoyance, the search for peace will continue to make great demands on us. It's not fair but that's the way it is.

So we need to have great resilience, tenacity and a commitment to hard work.

Hunger Strikers Remembered

None of this is about forgetting the past. It is about learning from the past. For example, this year marks the anniversary of the first hunger strikes. Next year marks the 20th anniversary of the hunger strikes of 1981. We also remember Michael Gaughan and Frank Stagg who died on hunger strike in England in 1974 and 1976.

Earlier this year, Barry McElduff suggested that the 20th anniversary of the hunger strikes be marked by the establishment of 1981 committees. I want to commend that idea.

I want to see all of those people from the prisoners' families, former hunger strikers, former blanket men, women in Armagh, Relatives Action Committee activists and supporters, Smash H-Block/Armagh Committees and everyone who played any part in that epic struggle, coming together nationwide and abroad not just to remember the hunger strikes but to talk, to discuss, to debate and to learn the lessons of that period and to build them into further advances for the freedom struggle.

For those of us who survived that period it is a matter of wonderment that almost 20 years have passed since then. It's as if it was yesterday when the prisoners in the H-Blocks and Armagh women's prison stood against the intransigence of Margaret Thatcher and her cohorts.

Today Thatcher is remembered as an extreme right-wing friend of Pinochet while the memory of

Bobby Sands and his comrades is revered throughout the freedom-loving world.

Let us recall the names of:-

Bobby Sands MP

Francie Hughes

Patsy O'Hara

Raymond McCreesh

Joe McDonnell

Martin Hurson

Kevin Lynch

Kieran Doherty TD

Tom McElwee

Mickey Devine

Frank Stagg

Michael Gaughan

Let us rededicate ourselves to their idealism, their unselfishness and their dedication.

Let us take a deep breath.

Let us refocus.

And re-energise ourselves.

Ní thigeann saoirse go furasta. Ní go furasta a scoileadh lucht an chumacht, nÚ lucht siombail an chumhacht, nÚ an lucht a creideann go bhfuil cumhacht acú, ní go furasta a scaoilfidh siad an cumhacht sin uathu.

Freedom will not come easily. Those with power or the symbols and perceptions of power will not relinquish that power easily. All history teaches us that. We will only get as much freedom as we can take.

But all history also teaches us that the determined movement of people, organised and relentlessly demanding their rights, wears down the old order. That is what we have to do.