



Gerry Adams Presidential Address to Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 2001

29th September 2001

I want to begin my remarks by extending solidarity and condolences to the victims of the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. This Ard Fheis, the first of the 21st century, takes place in the shadow of these outrages.

Ionsaí millteanach a bhí ann ar la millteanach do mhuintir na Stait Aontaithe chomh maith le muintir na tíre seo.

In the week or so after these attacks, like many other people on this island, I spent several hours each night on the phone trying to get through to friends in New York and Washington, including our representative in the US, Rita O'Hare, to make sure they were safe, and to hear news of the extent of the tragedy. The enormity of this catastrophe for them is very personal. It is for me also.

Two years ago I visited the north tower of the World Trade Centre. Some Irish/American friends who are associated with Friends of Sinn Féin and who work at the World Trade Centre and in the Mercantile Exchange adjacent to it, had organised lunch in the Windows on the World restaurant.

The restaurant was at the top of the tower and gave a spectacular view of New York and New Jersey, of the Hudson river, of Ellis island and the Statue of Liberty. It was an impressive sight and our friends were clearly enormously proud of this engineering marvel where each day 50,000 people worked.

Sadly, tragically, one of those who organised our

visit is now dead. Others we met that day or on other occasions, are dead also.

Many of us in the north of Ireland and here in Dublin have experienced the grief and hurt of loss during the years of our conflict. We understand the personal trauma that is now touching thousands of American homes, and homes in Ireland, in Britain and elsewhere in the world.

Our thoughts and prayers are with them at this terrible time and I have sent deepest condolences and sympathies on my own behalf and on your behalf to the people of the United States. I welcome the US Ambassador Richard Egan to this Ard Fheis and I welcome the President of the Friends of Sinn Féin in the USA, Mr. Larry Downes.

Of course seeing the Irish names on the list of the dead, particularly among the firefighters and the New York police reminds us of the close ties between us and America and of the millions of US citizens who proudly trace their roots to Ireland. The people of Ireland owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Irish American community, to Congress and to the US Administration who devoted time, energy and resources to help the peace process here.

Sinn Féin, in particular, has benefited from the generosity of Americans who want to bring about peace, justice, equality and a United Ireland. The support of Irish America has enabled us to bring about real change in Ireland. The back bone of our fund raising effort in the US is the construction industry and workers in New York. Many of them, who follow in the footsteps of the Irish who built

America' have suffered grievously in these atrocities. That is why we have endorsed the Friends of Sinn Féin recommendation to dedicate the proceeds of the annual November fundraiser in New York to the families of the construction workers who lost their lives.

It is right that we express solidarity and sympathy with the people in the USA and that we repudiate these atrocities. But we have to go further than these expressions of our sorrow, shock and denunciation.

Crisis in the Peace Process

Our own peace process is in a mess and it must now be obvious to everyone that the political institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement are going to collapse unless the unionists lift their threats and work with Sinn Féin and the other parties, as they committed themselves to do under the Agreement.

The institutions will collapse because unionists are refusing to administer them except on their own terms. They have prevented the all-Ireland institutions, and ironically the British-Irish Council from functioning. They have vetoed the work of the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health and now they are moving a motion to exclude Sinn Féin from the Executive. In my view all of this has been greatly influenced by the manner in which the British government approaches the process. That approach has been characterised by making all other issues secondary to the issue of IRA arms.

In other words the issue of IRA weapons has been made a precondition for progress on all other issues. This is in direct breach of the Good Friday Agreement. The British government may protest that this is not the case, or insofar as it is the case, that it arises from David Trimble's resignation and from the price which Mr. Trimble has put on the future stability of the political institutions. But this is not the whole truth. The whole truth is that resistance to change in the north of Ireland comes not only from those within unionism, but from within the British system also.

This goes back much further than the current crisis. Indeed, it has been an historic factor in every effort to deliver equality, justice, and peace.

In this phase, it goes back to the private

assurances in the side-letter that Tony Blair gave to David Trimble hours after they had endorsed the Good Friday Agreement three and a half years ago. It is his government that is responsible for permitting a virus to enter and to remain at the heart of the Agreement.

The fault line in the Agreement, and of every crisis in it can be traced to that point. That letter showed a willingness on the part of the British government to pander to unionism and to create the space for Mr. Trimble to commence his effort to hollow out the Agreement.

For my part, I believe that the issue of arms can be resolved. We in Sinn Féin have done our best and enormous progress has been made in the past 6 years, particularly in relation to IRA arms.

But, as I have said many times, I do not believe that the issue of arms, all arms held by all armed groups, including those held by the British state forces, will be resolved on British government or unionist terms, or on the basis of threat, veto or ultimatum.

Some accuse Sinn Féin of being opposed to the decommissioning of arms and of not doing enough to achieve this. This is untrue.

In stark contrast to the continued use of loyalist and British weapons IRA guns are silent and the IRA cessations are now into their 8th year. The IRA has acknowledged that the issue of arms has to be dealt with as part of a conflict resolution process, and last year the IRA leadership set out a context in which it would put its weapons verifiably beyond use.

In addition, as a confidence building measure it took the unprecedented initiative of agreeing with the two governments the appointment of two International Inspectors and allowing them to examine its arms dumps to verify that their weapons have not been used.

Last month in a historic breakthrough the IICD announced that it had agreed a scheme with the IRA to put arms completely and verifiably beyond use. And the IRA is presently engaged in ongoing discussions with the IICD.

These are not small, unimportant events. No one who lived through the 70s, or 80s, or most of the

90s, or who has even as a cursory understanding of republican history and theology would ever have considered any of these things possible. These are huge developments, which, in the proper context, point the way to a future free of IRA weapons.

The Sinn Féin leadership helped to create the conditions that made this possible. We did so because of our commitment to a lasting and just peace settlement on this island.

The UUP response to this progress has been to ignore Sinn Féin's democratic mandate, the mandate of the other parties, the referendum, the Good Friday Agreement itself and their responsibilities and obligations.

The British government have not done much better.

Many republicans are angry at a Unionist leadership that frustrates, belittles and undermines this progress, while at the same time doing absolutely nothing to end the daily bomb and gun attacks by loyalists on catholic families.

They are angry at a British government which underpins the UUP position, in breach of the Agreement, and which has remilitarised nationalist and republican heartlands.

Universal Rights

This is a huge mistake. Republicans and nationalists want to be convinced that unionism is facing up to it's responsibilities. They want to believe that a British government wants to right wrongs and usher in a new dispensation based upon equality.

For the unionists to reject the IICD determination as they did and for the British government to suspend the institutions, as it has done, not once, not twice, but three times, is hardly the stuff of peace making.

The democratic rights and entitlements of nationalists and republicans cannot be conditional.

These rights are universal rights. They effect all citizens.

In the Good Friday Agreement these matters, that is policing, the political institutions, demilitarisation, human rights, the justice system and the equality

agenda, are stand alone issues. These are issues to be resolved in their own right. They cannot be withheld or granted or subjected to a bartering process.

The Only Direction is Forward

So what does Sinn Féin do about all of this? Do our heads go down in frustration because at every point when it appears that progress is possible the unionists do something to make the process more difficult?

Do we stand on our dignity and our record and put it up to others to fulfil their duties and responsibilities?

Do we give way to righteous anger at the way a British government panders to a unionist veto?

Or do we resolve, despite all of this, or perhaps because of all of this, that Sinn Féin is going to continue to try to resolve this issue. The choice is clear.

This Ard Fheis meets at a time that is deeply somber, from any point of view. Whether you stand in Ardoyne, or America or Afghanistan reflecting on the peace process here or the massacre in Manhattan it is hard to avoid a foreboding about what lies ahead. Hope seems to sink and apprehension seems to grow, but we cannot afford to succumb to despair. For the true political activist the only choice is struggle not acquiescence. The only direction is forward.

Ní pairtí Sinn Féin a chuireann a dhroim leis na deaicreachtaí. We are a party that has learned through decades of struggle, to deal with the objective reality in which our struggle finds itself.

But there is no easy way to sort out these issues and for my part I want to reiterate my total commitment to playing a leadership role in bringing a permanent end to political conflict on our island, including the end of physical force republicanism. I say this conscious of the dangers, risks, and history of such departures.

I have no illusions about any of this and I know my commitment is shared by the Sinn Féin leadership. From within the broad republican constituency we are working for the day when all the armed groups, including the IRA, cease to be. But we will not be

part of any effort to criminalise or to deem as terrorists those men and women who fought when they considered they had no other choice and who had the integrity courage and wisdom to support a peace process when they had that choice.

Forgotten Ten

I want to welcome the steps being taken by the Irish government to re-inter the ten IRA Volunteers buried in Mountjoy jail and to urge people to attend their State funeral on October 14th in Dublin. Republicans have always remembered and commemorated with pride those who gave their lives so that future generations may live in better times.

Republicans continually look to the future and how best to achieve our goals but we also acknowledge that it was the sacrifice of previous generations that has brought us closer to the objectives of independence, justice and a lasting peace.

The forgotten ten played their part and we will commemorate their lives with pride.

Súineas sioraí do Kevin Barry, Thomas Whelan, Patrick Moran, Thomas Bryan, Patrick Doyle, Frank Flood, Bernard Ryan, Thomas Traynor, Patrick Maher and Edward Foley. I measc laochra na nGael go raibh siad.

We know the difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist. And that the second can be an agent of a government and a foreign one at that. There are elements on this island who say there should be a repudiation of those who used force to win freedom and that Ireland should apologise for our patriots.

I am sure that even at this serious juncture America is not going to apologise for George Washington, who would expect them to, neither should the Irish nation apologise for Wolfe Tone, or Padraig Pearse or James Connolly, or Maire Drumm, or Mairead Farrell or Bobby Sands or Kevin Barry.

Building Political Strength

Many republicans and nationalists are disillusioned with the pace of progress and frustrated by the hypocrisy and cynicism of anti-Republican elements who have sought to use events of this summer to gang-up on Sinn Féin or to relaunch

their anti-republican agenda. Following the arrest of three Irishmen in Columbia and the atrocities in the USA it was almost like the bad old days of vilification, demonisation and media disinformation once again. While loyalist paramilitaries threw over 250 bombs, while their murder campaign intensified on a daily basis, while young catholic school children were blockaded on their way to and from school, there was an unrelenting agenda to pressurise, marginalise and blame Sinn Féin for all of this. And the hypocrisy and opportunism wasn't limited to the usual anti-agreement elements in the British and unionist establishment. Others north and south clambered onto the anti-republican bandwagon.

Why was this so?

Could it be that what all these elements have in common is a fear of the growing strength of Sinn Féin. Could it be that many of those who railed against us in the old days - who were against the Hume/Adams initiative, who were for censorship - or could it be that in June of this year they saw their worst nightmare starting to become a reality, and seized upon other events in an unprincipled and opportunistic attempt to batter us and to unnerve our support? This will not be successful.

I spoke here in Dublin, in March, at a special conference held in place of our Ard Fheis which was cancelled because of the foot and mouth crisis. At that conference I predicted that Sinn Féin would win more votes than ever before in the elections in the north. I said and I quote: 'Despite the obvious intent by the SDLP of introducing Brid Rodgers as a spoiler into West Tyrone I am confident that when our Ard Fheis finally meets later this year it will be to welcome Pat Doherty as the MP for West Tyrone.' Failte Pat.

I want on to predict significant gains in North Belfast, Mid Ulster, Newry and Armagh, Foyle, and all other parts of the north.

I want to commend Comhairle na Se Chondae for the outstanding achievement of putting forward the biggest number ever of local government candidates and achieving significant breakthroughs everywhere. I want to commend them and the people for making Sinn Féin the largest nationalist party in the six counties.

In March I also pointed to the opportunities in the

Nice Treaty referendum for Sinn Féin to mount vigorous opposition to that Treaty and to put forward our policy against an EU superstate and the loss of sovereignty. I want to commend all those who played such an important role in a vigorous public campaign to mobilise opinion for the defence in Europe of Irish democratic rights, not the erosion of them.

In the face of all elements of the Irish establishment, including the government itself and all the establishment parties, the people's voice was heard. When the votes were counted Sinn Féin's voice was with the majority for democracy, sovereignty and economic and social justice. The government and the establishment were defeated. The people won.

And finally, my friends in what was a deeply personal and emotional campaign for me we put it to the people of Fermanagh and south Tyrone that it would be a fitting tribute to Bobby Sands if they could elect Michelle Gildernew, as their MP and the first woman Sinn Féin MP since Countess Markievez. And the people answered a resounding yes.

We will see this growth continue in the months ahead. Nuair a theann an TD do Cabhan/Muineachan Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin ar ais go Teach Laighinn ní bheidh se ag siul isteach leis féin ach beidh daoine eile tofa mar TD ag Sinn Féin.

And it is in this movement forward, it is in this strengthening of Sinn Féin's position that will bring about real and lasting change.

All Ireland potential

Sinn Féin is the only meaningful and truly republican party on the island because we are the only party organised throughout the island which genuinely strives to give democratic voice to the sovereign people of the 32 counties.

- We are the only party that puts forward candidates in all elections held among the Irish people;

- We are the only party that has representatives elected to Westminster, to the Assembly, to the Dail, and to local authorities, north and south, and which sits in all but the first of these - for obvious

reasons;

- We are the only party that nominates members of all-Ireland Implementation Bodies on both sides of the border;

- We are the only party which has the potential to have members of the all-Ireland Ministerial Council from both parts of this island;

- We are the only party which can influence membership from both Belfast and Dublin of the all-Ireland Joint Committee of the Human Rights Commissions;

- We are the only party which will be able to make an input to northern and southern membership of the 32-county Consultative Forum of Civil Society;

- We are the only party which will have participants from north and south in the Joint Parliamentary Forum;

- We are also seeking representation for northern MPs in the Dáil and full membership as of right for nominees of northern political parties in the Seanad;

- And we have campaigned for votes for citizens in the six counties in Presidential elections and relevant constitutional referenda.

Sinn Féin is the only all-Ireland party. Not just geographically, not just politically, not just strategically but also because we have a vision of a new future - a united, independent Ireland.

Ending inequality

The political landscape of Irish politics is changing and republicans in every corner of this island are at the forefront of that change. People are sickened by what they have seen from the Beef tribunal, through to the McCracken, Lindsay, Moriarty, and Flood Tribunals. Many politicians here make a genuine contribution to public service we seem to have a prevailing political ethos which is all about legitimatising a two-tier society.

You walk through the streets of our towns and cities and you can see young men and women sleeping in doorways. There are others who are less unfortunate and conspicuous, but are still among the excluded and deprived.

21% of Irish workers live on low incomes. This is the second highest proportion in the EU. The 26 Counties also has the second largest gap between rich and poor in the EU. The income inequalities in the Six Counties are just as pronounced.

A recent border education study found that there are 1.1 million people on the island who can be categorised as education poor, in that they had little or no formal educational qualifications and that 24% of the adult population north and south had literacy difficulties.

In a world where literacy and education are the key to a better and more fulfilling standard of living this is a shocking indictment of the society that has been built in Ireland, north and south.

The last official assessment of poverty showed over a third of persons falling below the 60% relative income poverty line. In the midst of plenty, it would be easy for society to forget those who have been left behind. But, while Sinn Féin exists, they will not be forgotten and they will not be abandoned. We must ensure that, for everybody, Ireland is a place in which to live and not to leave.

In the months ahead, and before we convene as an Ard Fheis, there are certain issues that we have to particularly address, under the headings of:

- Health care and provision;
- Crime and drugs;
- Housing;
- Childcare;
- Education;
- Transport; and
- The environment - with particular reference to waste disposal and proposed incineration.

We have developed policies on all of these and we must continue to carry them to the people.

We need a coalition of all of those seeking an end to poverty, and inequality.

We need a coalition across sectarian and racial divisions. We need a coalition of those in urban and

rural communities who have been shut out of the increased prosperity of recent years. We need a coalition between republicans in the broadest sense and all those campaigning for real and lasting change in our country, including decent politicians of all parties.

Tá polaitíocht na hÉireann ag athrú agus tá poblachtánaigh ó gach cuid den tír chun tosaigh san athrú sin.

Saoirse, fuascailt agus ag tabhairt cumacht don pobal príomh téamaí Shinn Féin.

Tá muid ag lorg níos mó ná saoirse polaitiúil ár dtír. Tá muid ag lorg saoirse soisialta agus eacnamaíochta na saoránaigh ar fad atá in Éirinn..

Ciallaíonn sin, saoirse ó smacht eachtranach, saoirse ó aineolas agus eagla, saoirse ó plá na ndrugaí, saoirse ó ranganna scoile plódaithe, ó scuainí oispidéil agus ó easpa tithíocht.

Sharing the Wealth in the island economy

The combined effects of Foot and Mouth and unease about the faltering global economy has had a significant impact on us all.

This makes it all the more important to take the steps across the island to create linkages and new structures that will rebuild an island economy and ensure that the Irish economy of the 21st century is one where everyone has access to a dignified standard of living, where they are employed in meaningful work, where they are housed adequately and educated in line with their needs, where health and other social services are delivered locally and with quality.

Most importantly we want to construct a society where people decide, plan and deliver these issues for themselves.

Sinn Féin wants to help build a society that rewards those people who actually make the profits, the goods and the wealth.

What we want to construct is a society where decision making is increasingly taken out of the hands of central government and placed in the hands of the communities to decide for themselves the sort of local economy that suits their needs.

Surely this would be better than the golden circle of corruption uncovered in Irish society over the past 10 years. A golden circle where decision making at a national and local level was something often bought by wealth and bribes by those who had the resources rather than by any real exercise of democratic decision making.

We want a decentralised Ireland where the east coast Dublin-Belfast power axis is replaced with regional government empowered to shape political and economic society.

To stop the decline of rural Ireland. To rebuild the depopulated communities. To bring much needed resources and investment to deprived areas rural and urban. To educate for good and eradicate the bad.

This requires political will and competence which is absent in the establishment political thinking of today.

It is Sinn Féin which has been spearheading the agenda for a just all Ireland economy through our efforts in Leinster House through the Assembly Committee on Trade and Investment through InterTrade Ireland and through our representatives in local government.

An example of this was the meeting in Sligo where the mayors of Derry and Sligo, along with the chairpersons of Cavan, Donegal, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Monaghan, Sligo and Strabane councils met and discussed the formulation of a common strategy to develop the eight North Western counties of Ireland.

Sinn Féin's Sean MacManus, Mayor of Sligo Corporation, was the catalyst for making this cross border conference on economic development happen.

Making Politics Work

This is the first Ard Fheis attended by Bairbre de Brun as Minister of Health and Martin McGuinness as Minister for Education.

Sinn Féin is responsible for two of the most difficult Ministries in the Executive. And I want to commend Bairbre and Martin for the remarkable job they have done in conditions which no other Minister in these islands has had to endure.

Inside and outside their departments they have won the praise and admiration of many people, including some who are not Sinn Féin supporters.

As part of Sinn Féin's drive to provide a more effective patient centred Health Service Bairbre de Brun has taken a range of initiatives designed to:

Improve the standard and efficiency of health care service delivery; and

Develop a strategic direction for health, social services and public safety which will deliver modern, effective, accessible services and commend public confidence.

Bairbre's initiatives include:

- A review of acute hospital services;
- Establishing a Social Care Council to improve protection of vulnerable patients and raise standards of practice;
- The expansion of children and young people's services;
- Placing the equality agenda at the heart of Health Care Service delivery;
- Bringing forward strategies to reduced drug and alcohol related hardship and to reduce teenage pregnancies;
- Increased the priority given to Health in the Executive's Programme for Government;
- And she has led the debate for an all-Ireland health service.

Tá sí tar éis bheith chun tosaigh ag úsáid an Ghaeilge ina rannóg, istigh san Assembly, áit a bhí uirthi cur suas le drochíde seicteach ó aondachtóirí.

Ba mhaith liom tacú le iarrachtaí Bairbre an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn agus tá mé ag súil leis an lá a bheidh muid ar fad san Assembly agus ins na institiúidí eile ag déanamh ár ghnó chomh maith céanna tré Ghaeilge agus Béarla.

Molaim chomh maith na teachtaí (MLAs) eile ag Sinn Féin nach bhfuil líofa sa Ghaeilge ach atá ag lorg bealaí chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn tré

brú a chur ar an gcóras.

Martin as Minister for Education has made a real impact on the practice and development of Education in the north. This year alone we saw a massive 130 million investment in the schools infrastructure. That means 17 new schools for our children.

We also saw increased funding for a new trust fund to support Irish-medium education and he has initiated a fundamental review into the way schools are funded in order to ensure equality and fairness.

Martin has won the hearts and minds of large sections of the educational community by his straightforward, honest and thorough approach. Including many who would be our most trenchant opponents. Wherever he goes he builds up a warm rapport with the pupils and teachers.

He has ensured that there is regular interaction between Na Ranna Oideachais, between Belfast and Dublin. Four Education Working Groups were set up dealing with:-

Special needs;

Child protection;

Exchange programmes;

North-South teacher mobility to increase the mobility of teachers throughout the island of Ireland.

In the field of equality, like Bairbre, Martin has ensured that his department has an Equality Scheme and he has added an Equality Division to oversee the implementation of equality measures.

He has targeted social needs, aimed at distributing funds more fairly, and supported small rural primary schools. And he made clear his opposition to the 11+ and initiated a review of that unfair selection system.

I want to commend all our MLAs, those on Committees, as well as our Ministers. We have all been on a learning curve in terms of our input into the Executive, the Assembly and when they existed the all-Ireland institutions. I am satisfied thus far we have made a valuable and constructive contribution to decisions and developments at all

levels. We have been extremely patient also in the face of provocation from unionism.

UNIONISTS

The cause of unionism is being disgraced daily on the Ardoyne Road, as it was previously at Harryville and Garvaghy Road. There is no excuse and no right to protest and blockade against children. The leaders of unionism need to make that clear. Sinn Féin has been working in North Belfast, not only to lower tensions but, while repudiating the protest, attempting also to deal with the fears of unionists in that part of Belfast city.

I want to assure unionists that we will have no truck with sectarianism of any kind whether or from any source. Irish republicanism is against sectarianism. Everyone should have the right to live, to shop, to work, to travel, to be educated, or entertained wherever they wish free from sectarian harassment of any kind.

We want to reach out to unionists. For republicans they are in the culture of everyday life, no less Irish than the rest of us. However if they or some of them, to one degree or another, do not choose to look at it in that way that is their entitlement.

They should not be compelled into acknowledging what they do not want to, and we accept that narrow green conservatism has contributed at times to their sense of alienation from the community of Ireland which we desire them to embrace.

And we recognise that in looking to Britain some of unionist think, not so much of Empire, but the traditions of the Reformation and the democratic struggle in England against absolutist monarchy. Both of which should be accorded the deepest respects.

Unionism overall is locked into a leadership battle which is being fought out around the Good Friday Agreement and the changes which that Agreement involves. There is resistance to these changes and unionist no leadership has yet to emerge to actively and consistently promote an acceptance of them.

Despite this a lot of progress has been made and our difficulties and our differences in many ways have been put in context by what is happening in other parts of the world. And I am sure that our

horror at recent events is shared by the unionist family.

Our collective responsibility at this time is to settle our differences and I appeal to the leaders of unionism to join with us in doing that so that all sections of our people can go forward on the basis of equality.

John Hume and the SDLP

I want to pay tribute to SDLP leader John Hume. His resignation as party leader and that of his Deputy Leader Seamus Mallon marks the end of an era.

They and we have a different analysis and different objectives.

But it is to John Hume's credit that he responded to the invitation from Sinn Féin to dialogue with our party in the late 1980's and reached out to work with us in trying to find a peaceful resolution of the causes of conflict on this island and between Britain and Ireland.

He was vilified, of course, including by some within his own party. But in a short period the Hume/Adams dialogue, as it became known opened up the possibility of a new beginning. This gave all our people hope and led an agreement which was endorsed by rank and file unionists as well as nationalists and republicans.

That period of hope is often forgotten now as the peace process stumbles from one crisis to another. But that hope should be a lasting tribute to the finest hour of John Hume.

I extend to John and Pat and to Seamus Mallon and his wife Gertrude my warmest best wishes for the future.

I look forward to working with this new leadership of the SDLP. Sinn Féin and the SDLP represent a shared constituency which has come through too much and endured too many indignities to settle for anything less than equality and justice.

The new generation of leaders seeking to take up the mantle of John Hume have a in a search for genuine resolution of this conflict.