



Gerry Adams Presidential Address to Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 1995

NINETEEN NINETY FOUR was a momentous year, a year of significant and far-reaching changes. The road from Tallaght last February back to the Mansion House has not been easy but it has been eventful and it has seen Sinn Féin advance our broad strategic and political objectives.

It was not without its tragedies. In all my presidential addresses it has been my sad duty to remember those comrades who have been killed between Ard Fheiseanna. This year is no different. Since our last Ard Fheis, Theresa Clinton, wife of Sinn Féin activist, Jim Clinton, and the mother of Siobhán and Roseanne, was murdered in her home by loyalist death squads in South Belfast. Here in Dublin, a major atrocity was averted and countless lives were saved by the brave action of IRA Volunteer Martin Doherty, who confronted loyalist bombers at the Widow Scallan's bar. He too was to die. We remember also Paul Kinsella, a republican prisoner from Derry, who died in British custody after a long illness. To their comrades and their families we extend solidarity and condolences.

Nineteen ninety four was the year which saw the first fruits of our recent efforts to strengthen the nationalist agenda and to end British and unionist domination. It was the year when Sinn Féin's crucial and pivotal role in laying the foundation for the peace process became clear. But we have yet to get peace. There is a hard road yet to be travelled. Peace means justice. Justice demands freedom.

I extend a special word of solidarity to the families of republican prisoners and especially those prisoners in Britain and in other jails outside Ireland. I extend a hearty céad míle fáilte to those who have come from prisons to this Ard Fheis. We are totally committed to the release of all political prisoners. There cannot be a peace settlement without them.

One cannot mention the political prisoners without commending their support groups here in Ireland and abroad. I want to single out for special mention the work of the Irish Northern Aid Committee. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the founding of Irish Northern Aid. The INAC's work in support of political prisoners and their dependents and in promoting Irish national reunification and independence has been an integral part of this struggle. Their continuing role in this regard remains vital.

The most significant contribution to the peace process came on 31 August when the IRA leadership announced the cessation of military operations. This was a courageous initiative, universally recognised and applauded throughout the world.

For many republicans it was also unsettling, difficult and traumatic. For over two decades, IRA Volunteers had conducted an unprecedented and unbroken period of armed resistance. For many republicans this was one of the certainties of our time and of our struggle. The 31 August statement changed all that. But it not only removed one of the certainties for us, it also put the onus on the British

and persuaded the loyalists to call a tactical halt to their campaign. It put a moral obligation on all who portrayed the IRA operations as the cause of our troubles. Now in the absence of these operations, how have they dealt with the real cause of our troubles?

The IRA's initiative has also placed a heavy responsibility upon us and upon everyone committed to ending conflict in this country. We must all become guarantors of the peace process. We must bring it to a democratic conclusion. That is the implicit and explicit import of the IRA's statement.

Who here will ever forget the moment when we heard the IRA announcement? When I went with other leaders of our party to address a spontaneous demonstration outside Connolly House in Belfast, I saw assembled before me a section of those who have carried the struggle since the late 1960s in that city. My brother reminded me that that day was the 21st anniversary of the death of Volunteer Patrick Mulvenna. I saw Patrick's parents in the throng. He had been killed by the British army along with another dear friend of mine, Volunteer Jim Bryson, in Ballymurphy in 1973. Patrick was married to my sister. She was six months pregnant when he died. I am sure I was not alone as this and many other thoughts crowded my mind. All of us felt the same. All of us who have lived and hoped, who have fought for freedom and justice and who have lost friends and comrades along the way thought of them and their friends.

For this reason alone the IRA's initiative was a brave one. To sue for peace is a noble thing and the 31 August initiative was undertaken by a confident, united and unbroken army. This Ard Fheis commends them for their courage. In commending this initiative and the men and women Volunteers who brought it about, we are mindful also of our responsibility to ensure that this opportunity for peace is not squandered, that it is built upon and that it leads to a permanent peace settlement.

We want to see an end to partition. This is our primary objective at this time. Our strategy between now and the ending of partition should be based upon the widely-accepted view that there can be no internal solution, that there has to be fundamental change and that during a transitional

phase there must be maximum democracy. There has also to be equality of treatment and parity of esteem.

The wording of all the statutory undertakings by the British is intended to maintain the union. There is a general debate about how committed the British are to this and there can be no doubt about our commitment to bring an end to it. But it is important to note that the current British position does not prevent, without the stated consent, other constitutional changes or political advance which falls short of that.

What does 'parity of esteem' mean in practice? Sinn Féin believes that this term would be better replaced by the more specific term of 'equality of treatment'. There is a pressing need for physical, legislative and practical expressions to deliver positive proof that nationalist rights, identities and allegiances are guaranteed actual parity. In political terms it must mean all parties being treated equally.

There is a need for:

1. Equality of opportunity in employment;
2. Equality of treatment for the Irish culture and identity;
3. Equality of treatment of elected representatives and voters;
4. Proper security provision for all citizens according to need;
5. Equality in the provision of education, particularly through the medium of Irish;
6. Equality of treatment in economic development.

Níl sampla níos fearr den dearcadh naimhdeach, leatromach atá ag rialtas na Breataine ar na náisiúntúirí ná an dÚigh a gcuireann siad cosc ar chur chun cinn na Gaeilge. Scannal atá ann go bhfuil scoileanna scairte go fúill sa Tuaisceart — áirím Meánscoil Feirste, Meánscoil Dhoire, agus bunscoileanna san Lú, i Machaire Rátha, in Oileán an Ghuail, in Ard Eoin agus i mBaile Uí Mhurchú ina measc. Agus ar nÚs na scoileanna scairte a bhíodh ann fadú, tá scoth an oideachais sna scoileanna seo.

Agus níl ansin ach gné amháin den chosc ar an Ghaeilge Ú Thuaidh. Tríd is tríd, caitheann Rialtas na Breataine le hÚireannaigh mar bheadh coimhthígh ina dtír féin ann. Níl sin inghlactha. Úilímid na cearta céanna — comh-urraim — don Ghaeilge agus don Bhéarla sa Tuaisceart.

It is in these areas of our daily lives that the quickest changes can occur. These changes do not require negotiation — they should happen as of right. The absence of equality of treatment is one of the clearest examples of the failure of past and current political and constitutional structures. The reality is that the status quo is unacceptable and will have to be changed.

Partition has failed — it has failed the people of this island, nationalist and unionist. It has failed for the British too. The political structures and institutions born out of partition fail the democratic test. The other state on this island has failed the people also, forcing hundreds of thousands to emigrate and impoverishing over a million more. Change is needed throughout this island.

How will we accomplish this? By agreement. By sitting down in inclusive peace talks and agreeing a settlement based on democratic principles. Why by agreement? Because coercion doesn't work. How do we know that? Because British governments have been using it for centuries and we're still here — defiant as ever — unbowed, unbroken and telling Britain its time to go; and telling the world that Irish people have the humanity, the intelligence and the creativity to map out our own future, free of conflict and free of outside interference and impediments.

It is often said that there are two traditions, or two cultures, in Ireland. There are not. There are scores of traditions, maybe hundreds. All making up a diverse and rich culture. All equally valid. All part of what we are. Female and male. Urban and rural. Small town and hill village. Fishing port and island. Inner city and farming community. Gaeltacht and Galltacht. Labour and artisan. Literary and oral. Feminist. Song and dance. Orange and green. Pagan and Christian. Protestant and Catholic. North and South. East and West. The sum total of all of this and all that it represents is part of the diversity of Irishness.

I have consistently argued that the consent and allegiance of unionists is needed to secure a peace

settlement. But unionists cannot have a veto over British policy and Mr Major and others must stop pretending they have. The balance must be tilted away from the negative power of veto towards the positive power of consent, of seeking consent, of considering consent, of negotiating consent. Our proposal that the British join the persuaders is the logical extension of this.

Once again the unionist leaderships are playing the Orange card. The politics are politics of not an inch. But those days are over and I would appeal to unionists to engage fully in the search for a lasting peace. I too am an Ulsterman. We don't need British ministers to rule us. We are well able to agree our own future. I appeal to unionists bring your hopes and dreams, your concerns, your fears to the conference table and let us all, as equals, seek to find ways to persuade each other of our good intentions — let us together agree the democratic basis on which we can all live on this island in peace.

The publication of the framework document by London and Dublin should now clear the way for inclusive peace talks and for the next phase of this process.

Sinn Féin will enter these peace talks on the basis of our republican analysis. We will put our view that a lasting peace in Ireland can only be based on the right of the Irish people to national self-determination and an end to British jurisdiction in our country and the creation of a new agreed Irish jurisdiction.

The framework document is a discussion document. But its publication by the two governments is a clear recognition that partition has failed, that British rule in Ireland has failed and that there is no going back to the failed policies and structures of the past. While the political framework envisaged is clearly an all-Ireland one and even though we would like to see this more deeply rooted, prescriptive and thoroughgoing, Sinn Féin will judge the framework document pragmatically and in the context of our objectives, policy and strategy.

For over two years now, Mr Major has had a minimalist approach to the peace process. Now after the publication of the framework document the strategy pursued by the British government will indicate the extent to which it is prepared to

engage in advancing the peace process.

The framework document is neither a solution nor a settlement. Irrespective of its contents — of how much of it we might like or dislike - the onus is on both governments, but particularly the British government, to move the situation speedily forward into inclusive dialogue. The Dublin government has a responsibility to ensure that this happens without preconditions or delay.

Clearly, negotiations cannot take place above the heads or behind the backs of our people. For republicans, negotiations are another area of struggle in which we will seek to advance our broad strategic and political objectives. We are not afraid of the prospect of inclusive negotiations.

There is a need for fundamental constitutional and political change if we are to bring this phase of the peace process to a democratic conclusion. Sinn Féin's objective is to bring about an inclusive and negotiated end to British jurisdiction in Ireland. We seek to replace it with a new and agreed Irish jurisdiction.

In our view this poses no threat to any section of our people, including the unionists. However, we know that others hold a different view. Therefore agreement is required. New relationships will have to be forged between all the people of our country. This will be difficult. It will take time. It will require negotiation. It demands inclusive democratic dialogue. It demands a process of inclusive negotiations without preconditions and without any predetermined outcome. Negotiations need to take place in a climate where no section of our people hold an undemocratic power of veto.

The British have successfully militarised an essentially political problem. The process of demilitarising the occupied area has been too slow. There needs to be an end to all forms of repressive legislation; an end to house raids, arrests and harassment; all our cross-border roads should be opened now.

There needs to be a decommissioning of all the British crown forces, including the disbandment of the RUC. British spy posts, whether in housing estates, in sports fields, in farming land, on hillsides — where ever they are they should be dismantled. If we are to agree a lasting peace then there needs to be the permanent removal of all the guns —

British, loyalist, unionist as well as republican.

There needs to be speedy movement on the release of all political prisoners, whether in Ireland, Britain, Europe or the USA. In the immediate future, Irish prisoners held in Britain should be transferred to Ireland to be closer to their families.

During a recent visit to London I was struck by the welcome there for the peace process. British public opinion clearly favours an end to war on these islands.

During my visits last year, particularly to the United States and Canada, I was struck by the confidence of Irish people in these countries. That confidence has manifested itself in the vital and positive role they have played in the peace process.

In the US, Canada, Britain, Australia and elsewhere, people of Irish descent, our more recent exiles, and those who have no direct or ancestral connection with this nation, have contributed immeasurably to the struggle for freedom, justice and peace in our country.

The event which, more than any other, began the Irish diaspora throughout the world was an Gorta Mór, the Great Hunger of 1845 to 1849, the 150th anniversary of which is marked this year. At Grosse Isle in Canada where the coffin ships landed and where thousands died on the threshold of the New World, at Philadelphia, Boston and at Ellis Island in New York, where I visited last year, the tragic legacy of the past is still evident. One of the great tragedies of course is that economic injustice in our country still forces so many of our young people into exile today. In a sense, we are all survivors of the Great Hunger, that most appalling manifestation of British colonial misrule in our country. It is time now to end that legacy of colonialism.

For a number of years now I have promoted the notion of a freedom charter or a charter for a new Ireland around which the widest section of Irish opinion might rally. Such a charter would be useful as an outline of the fundamentals of a new national democratic programme around which to build, in time, an alliance of progressive opinion in Ireland. We have already commenced preliminary discussions about this with others and this is an idea which we will return to in the future.

Sinn Féin believes that there is a need for the transformation of all Irish society, not only in the occupied area but throughout the entire island.

We believe that there must be fundamental changes in the whole structure and nature of Irish political, social, economic and cultural life. Our vision is of a new beginning for all our people. We seek an end to conflict and division. To reverse inequality and poverty. To establish and to protect the rights of children. We seek to enshrine and guarantee the rights of women in a new and non-sexist society. We demand civil and religious liberties and the separation of church from state. We seek a redistribution of wealth, a new economic democracy to end unemployment and emigration, to guarantee education, houses and jobs. We seek to turn this vision into a reality.

How? In the first instance by refusing to have our expectations lowered. By refusing to be caged in or conditioned into accepting anything less than full freedom. There are two kinds of freedom — freedom from and freedom to. We want both kinds of freedom. We want freedom from oppression, inequality, foreign rule and poverty. We also want freedom to build a better, more equitable, decent society.

All of this is possible and we demand that this British government give the people of Ireland the opportunity to realise these objectives. We demand that the British government commence the process of disengagement from our country.

A peace process has been built. 1994 was a year of change. 1995 must consolidate the peace and make change irreversible.