



## **Gerry Adams Presidential Address to Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 1997**

I want you to take a journey with me over the next short time, a journey of imagination, a journey of vision, a journey of time, a journey into the future.

I want you to imagine what Ireland will be like on that day when a lasting peace is established.

I want you to imagine where you will be, where our nation will be. I want you to imagine what it will be like as we cross that extraordinary moment into a new beginning.

Imagine an Ireland in which the guns are silent. Permanently. An Ireland in which all of the people of this island are at peace with each other and with our neighbours in Britain.

Imagine an Ireland united by a process of healing and national reconciliation.

Imagine the people of this island free from division, foreign occupation, injustice and conflict. Imagine the 5 million people of this small island applying our collective energy, our wisdom, our intelligence to building the future.

Imagine an island economy thriving, working hard to produce the wealth which can reduce unemployment and improve the quality of life of our people.

Imagine an Ireland using that wealth to tackle poverty, to build homes, to improve education, to care for our environment, to heal the sick, to help the weak, the aged - all the children of the nation.

Imagine.

Some will say this is a dream. But it is a dream which we can turn into a reality.

Had I asked you 5 years ago to imagine the changes which have happened elsewhere in the world, you would have scoffed at me. If I had outlined developments here in Ireland, the potential which had been created, the expectation and hope; what would you have said?

What do you say now? The expectation was dashed but the hope has not been crushed. But now, looking back we can see what is possible. We can see what can happen and we can see that we have made it happen. And more importantly, we have created the hope and the expectation that much more will happen in the time ahead of us. Why? Because we never give up. We have kept the light of hope alive.

And not just our generation. In the lean years of the 30s, 40s and 50s, Irish republicans kept the fenian faith. Today we are reaping the seeds of their unbroken determination. In our time, we have shaped and evolved, and we are shaping and evolving our party and our republicanism to meet the needs of today and for the future.

The civil rights campaign, the prison struggles, our electoral strategy, the demands for decent houses, for cultural rights, for real jobs, the cry for national freedom - are all proof of our commitment and of our refusal to give in to repression.

Even as they vilified us and demonised us and repressed us, we never gave up. Instead of giving up we challenged them. We sued for peace. We tried to make friends of our enemies. And we did so with confidence and commitment. And even now, despite all the messing and bad faith engagement, despite the provocative actions of our opponents and enemies, even now we remain committed to our peace project. We face forward, determined to play a positive and principled role in building a new peace process and a new Ireland.

Níor éirigh linn go fóill síocháin bhuan a bhaint amach dár dtír. Cuireadh moill ar an phróiseas sin i dtreo na síochána ach níor cuireadh deireadh leis. Ní féidir lenár naimhde an strechailt a scrios mar ní thuigeann gur ina n-intinn féin a chéad ghlac muid seasamh ar son na córa. Mhínigh Bobby Sands go maith é nuair a dóirt sé i nGaeilge ina dhialann ar Lá na Féile Pádraig 1981. "Muna bhfuil siad abálta meon na saoirse a bhriseadh, ní bhrisfidh siad thú. Ní bhrisfidh siad mise mar tá meon na saoirse, meon saoirse do mhuintir na hÚireann, i mo chroí. Tíocfaidh an lá nuair a bheidh meon na saoirse ag muintir na hEireann uile. Ó Sin an fáth ar theip ar riail na Breataine in Úirinn - thar na céadtaí bliain - an streachailt ar son neamhspleachais agus saoirse a chloí.

The search for a lasting peace has not succeeded so far. It was subverted but it cannot be crushed. It can only be postponed. The forces ranged against us are powerful but despite their power they have failed to defeat our struggle.. They have failed to defeat our struggle because they fail to comprehend that the first step of liberation is in the human mind. Bobby Sands explained it well in one of the darkest moments of our struggle: "If they aren't able to destroy the desire for freedom, they won't break you". That is why centuries of British rule in Ireland has failed to subdue the struggle for independence and freedom. That is why they have failed to break us.

George Bernard Shaw once said: "Some people see things as they are and ask why?: I dream things that never were and ask why not?"

For most people on this island, but particularly those living in the north, peace was a dream which appeared forever destined to be played out as a nightmare. For many the conflict in Ireland seemed endless, a burden fated to be borne by successive generations.

No one has been untouched by the events of the past 28 years or by the decades of violence and inequality which preceded them.

This reality, the reality of British rule in Ireland, means that the IRA remains a potent force in this situation with volunteers like Diarmuid O'Neill who was gunned down in London, prepared to unselfishly pit themselves against British rule in our country. That is the stark reality of the situation. But it does not have to be forever so.

The cessation of military operations announced by the IRA in August 1994 did not occur because the IRA had succumbed to threats, demands, or preconditions. Meaningful dialogue, force of argument, and openness to the historic possibilities that this course of action might create were the key factors in the IRA's decision.

When John Major decided to scupper the peace process he had the active assistance of the Unionist party at Westminster. But we are undaunted. Heath, Thatcher, Major - British Prime Ministers come and go as we face them down and prepare for freedom day.

Ian Paisley and David Trimble do not give progressive leadership. Their every word betrays a veiled contempt for, and an utter lack of faith in the ability of their supporters to come to terms with a new situation. In 1985 Ian Paisley stood on a 'Smash Sinn Fein' ticket at the local government elections in the north. He posed with his sledgehammer, that symbol of loyalist death squads and our councillors and our families paid with their lives to represent our electorate.

DUP councillors blew their whistles and squealed their wee heads off in Belfast City Council and other Unionists took to chaining themselves to office furniture in Derry City Council. But despite it all we persisted and eventually the Unionist campaign petered out. It did so because their electorate wanted real council representation.

Today the Unionist leaders say they will not sit down with Sinn Fein but today there are no empty seats in the Council Chambers in the north. So Sinn Fein cannot be denied access to all party negotiations because of this threat from the Unionist leadership. If the Unionists do walk out they know the door will not be locked behind them. If they walk out they know they will have to walk

back in again.

Peace is the issue here. When the British announce publicly that there can be no negotiations without yet another precondition, they merely echo the Unionist position on Sinn Fein's entrance to all party talks. They used the Unionists as an excuse. They encourage Unionist inertia. These exclusionist attitudes cannot create peace.

The Sinn Féin peace strategy, the Irish peace initiative, and the subsequent peace process are all part of our effort to change this. Sinn Fein know the lessons of the past. Irish republicanism is 200 years old next year and its principles are still relevant. The need to break the connection with England is as pertinent now as it was then. For Irish republicans the aim has never been the victory of one section of our people over another but a new union of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. It is not a pseudo peace - pax Britannica - but a real peace build on a solid democratic foundation and a future of justice and equality.

We have a vision of that future and the spirit and confidence to work in partnership with others to achieve this.

This means change.

Our task as republicans is to be agents of change; it is to build equality and partnership, and to empower change within our society. It is to change minds and attitudes and to rebuild relationships between the people of this island and with our nearest neighbour Britain.

We must be prepared to act as a beacon, lighting the way through the darkness to a safe and better future.

Sinn Fein is a party of the future and our leadership is absolutely united behind our peace strategy. We have pursued this strategy with singular determination.

For us, and thus for everyone else there will be no going back to the bad old days of Unionist domination. There will be no going back to second class citizenship, there will be no return to Stormont rule.

Irish Republicans are prepared to do business, now, with the British government and with the

unionists, without preconditions, without qualification, without delay. We are prepared to meet, to discuss and to reach agreement, to come to a democratic accommodation with unionism. But we are not prepared to pander to bigotry or the out-dated concepts of Orange supremacy and Unionist domination. We are not prepared to tolerate triumphalism and sectarianism. We will not be reconciled to the burning of churches and schools, to the denial of civil or religious liberties.

We make no apologies for this or for our committment and our efforts to create a new political culture throughout this entire island. We stand for equality. We make no apologies for wanting an end to British rule and a new agreement between all the people of our island.

I want to speak directly to the Unionists. Some Unionists say that we do not comprehend or appreciate the effects of the last 25 years on them. We do. Or at least some of us do. Or we are trying to and we are also trying to reach out because we who have suffered do understand your sense of hurt. When Irish republicans talk about British interference and the British presence we do not mean the Unionist section of our people. We want to make peace with unionists, to work with Unionists so that when we collectively reach the end of our journey we will be able to accommodate and celebrate our diversity as equals.

And today, through an ongoing dialogue with members of the northern protestant and unionist community we are trying to develop a much better understanding of the political analysis that represent the bed-rock of their thinking.

Many important insights have emerged from this dialogue which will help us to see unionism in its totality and which gives us a sense of what is going on inside the unionist section of our people.

The erosion of their political power base since the late 1960's, their belief that they have given a lot and received nothing, their deep mistrust of the British and their perception of an all powerful nationalist agenda are the elements of a deepening crisis within the unionist section of our people.

'Not an Inch', 'What we have we hold' and 'No surrender' are more than ever the anchors of the unionist leaderships political philosophy. On the surface David Trimble and Ian Paisley seem

unable and unwilling to move away from its 'top dog mentality'. In reality they are paralysed by the idea of real talks, honest talks, with them actually negotiating. They are afraid that this means them negotiating themselves out of existence. They are afraid of change.

Republicans need to be concerned about what is happening inside unionism. It is not in the national interest that Unionists remain trapped inside a siege mentality.

We must make every effort to ensure that the northern protestant and unionist section of our people are not forced to occupy that political space we wish to escape from. If being marginalised, abandoned and disempowered was bad for us, then it is bad for the unionists.

Giving up on the unionists is not an option for Sinn Fein. By-passing the unionists is not an option for us. Our option is for dialogue and engagement.

Republicans recognise that there will be no peace in Ireland if unionists are not a part of shaping that peace. Therefore our heartfelt wish is for a Unionism that is capable of shaping its future inside a negotiating process based upon equality. Our wish is to reach an accommodation with unionism.

This will not be easy. The road ahead will be difficult and dangerous and risky for all of us but working together I am convinced we can succeed. It is my conviction that we will have a peace settlement. If we are resilient, if we dig deep, we can overcome all obstacles.

We have all suffered over the generations, we have all lost loved ones, and friends and neighbours. I can think of many of our loved ones. So can you. Think, for example, of our friend, Councillor Pat McGeown, who died tragically last October. Pat Beag was described in death even by our opponents as a bridge-builder. Go ndeanfaidh trochaire air. We must learn the lessons of the past - not to recriminate, for as William Butler Yeats said:

"We need not feel the bitterness of the past to discover its meaning for the present and future."

I believe that we can put the anguish of the past behind us; we can heal the wounds; we do not need to forget but we can learn to forgive.

And of course dialogue is a two-way process. We actively listen but we also seek to inform. So Unionists need to see that Irish nationalists and republicans are forced to live in a British statelet which treats us as second class citizens. A statelet which for all of its existence has accorded the Orangemen the right to march through nationalist areas in triumphalistic coat-trailing and sectarian parades. There are also lots of reminders that the ethos which feeds this is not confined to the street or to working class loyalists. It permeates through the institutions of the six counties. These institutions remain faithful to Brookeborough's suffocating structure. Today the six counties is still run by Unionists for Unionists and policed by Unionists for Unionists.

But those days are numbered.

To those nationalist communities which in recent years have challenged Orange supremacy I extend our best wishes and solidarity. We salute the courage of the people of the Lower Ormeau, of Garvaghy Road, of Rosslea, of Dunloy, of Harryville, of Bellaghy, and the many other small isolated nationalist communities. We salute the people of Derry who did not stand idly by when these smaller communities were under threat and we salute those from the Protestant tradition on this island who took a stand for equality.

When republicans speak of change we want change through this entire island. A resistance to change is not confined to the unionists or the British. Throughout this state also there are partitionists for whom Ireland is 26 Counties. For the partitionists, the censors, the revisionists, nationalists of the Six Counties are outside the pale. But the republican peace strategy, the Irish Peace Initiative, the IRA cessation and the entire peace process was a major set-back for those forces. The nay-sayers had to acknowledge the strength of Irish opinion at home and abroad, and the support for an inclusive peace settlement, for the end of the partitionist status quo and the need for political and constitutional change.

Then to their own surprise some of those who had been most negative about my dialogue with John Hume and about the Irish Peace Initiative and the IRA cessation, found themselves in government in the middle of the peace process. "A bit of a shock" as John Bruton said.

At the time we acknowledged that it was difficult for him to address the new situation and we commended efforts to create progress in the face of British government intransigence.

We were flexible and open minded. We kept every commitment we made and we did so in good faith. Mr Bruton knows this. But we refused to lower our expectations. We refused to be caged in or conditioned.

Whatever shade of government emerges from the general election in the 26 counties Sinn Fein will endeavour to work with it to rebuild the peace process. That is our pledge given here today. But that government must respect the mandate which our voters give us. No one in government buildings in Dublin should expect us to collude in our own exclusion or in undermining the rights of our electorate.

Mr Bruton has called upon the people not to vote for Sinn Fein. But when they ignore him then he, or whoever succeeds him as Taoiseach, must respect and uphold the rights of that section of our people. Nil aon slí eile ann.

Unlike Fine Gael Sinn Féin is offering people the opportunity to vote for us on both sides of the border. We stand on our strategy for peace, our record in building the peace process, our continuing efforts to restore that process on a sound basis, our social and economic analysis, our work in communities, our progressive policies on the range of issues which concern the electorate in both urban and rural areas - north and south.

In this election Sinn Féin is the only party of the left standing on an independent platform. We represent that tradition in Irish politics which may be described as the republican left, the legacy of Pearse and Connolly and Mellows. As Councillor Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin said at Easter here in Monaghan, Sinn Féin is the "voice of an idea". It is the idea of republican Labour; the thought of a free Ireland. And in the last few years, for the first time in over two decades, people here are hearing that voice. They are receiving our message and they are increasingly receptive to it.

For us the struggle is where the people are and where the activist should be. It is our collective responsibility to succeed, to continue our journey, to get others to join us.

Sinn Féin's idea of social justice involves the harnessing of economic activity for the benefit of all. Instead the wealthy are rewarded and the inequality gaps are widened between the low paid and the well-paid, and between those in work and the unemployed. While the fat cats get the cream, our young people are threatened with a drugs epidemic and rural communities are robbed of much needed resources. It is a disgrace.

Politics here has been reduced by some politicians to an ivory tower of back room dealing, scams, backhanders and strokes. The Irish general election provides voters with a chance to dent the smug, self-satisfied circle of power in Leinster House. This general election provides the chance for our party to challenge this culture of privilege and inequality. This Ard Fheis is enjoying the hospitality of the people of Monaghan. It was the constituency of Cavan/Monaghan which elected Ciaran Doherty as its TD. (I want to welcome Ciaran's father, Alfie, here today along with the families of the other hunger strikers. Failte mor rombaibh uilig.)

Sinn Fein is fighting three elections this year and in this state there is a real prospect of a seat for Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin in Cavan/Monaghan.

This chance of a breakthrough and strong votes for our party in the another 14 constituencies from Dublin to Donegal, from Louth to Sligo, from Kerry to Cork can be a milestone in the development of republican politics.

So let us go out there and make that breakthrough.

Today there are many in Ireland and throughout the world, who at this defining moment in our history are fearful of the future. There is a current of hope, coupled with uncertainty, of optimism combined with apprehension. The journey to a peaceful Ireland is a difficult one. But the people of Ireland, from every corner of our country, and from throughout the Irish diaspora across the world, have expressed their hope that that journey will reach a lasting peace settlement and new democracy.

Sinn Fein have played a pivotal role in creating this opportunity. We are here as peacemakers.

Our objective is clear. It is to build a democracy which will be owned by every woman, man and

child, on this island.

That means removing the causes of conflict from our country. British policy in Ireland has manifestly failed. One of the achievements of my dialogue with John Hume is our agreement that an internal settlement is not a solution. There is no going back to the failed policies and structures of the past, to the domination of a one-party unionist state supported by the British government.

How do we move forward? And brothers and sisters, let there be no doubt about that - we must move forward. How do we do it? How do we fulfil the potential, the ideals and dreams, so that our children and our children's children can enjoy peace and justice?

Sinn Fein is absolutely committed to democratic and peaceful methods of resolving problems and part of our responsibility is to make alliances with others, to help chart the journey forward, to illuminate the way and to work with the people of Ireland to establish beacons or guide-lines, based on international experiences, to help us all to traverse this period of transition. We are on a journey from the past into a new future.

Irish freedom, democracy and peace are in the interests of all the people on the island. Partition affects all of us. Sinn Fein seeks national self-determination, and the unity and independence of Ireland as a sovereign state.

In our view this issue of sovereignty, the claim of the British government to sovereignty in Ireland, is the key matter which must be addressed in any negotiation.

There are some who say the British government is neutral. Whatever about its strategic or economic interest, John Major has made it clear that he is a defender of the Union. This policy and the Unionist veto are at the core of the conflict.

The aim of democratic opinion must be to seek a change in British policy towards Ireland and an end to the Unionist veto. Negotiations are an area of struggle for Irish republicans.

There are many issues which fuel the conflict which must be tackled but which do not require negotiation. For example, parity of esteem and equality of treatment will have to be dealt with; the

imbalance in the employment ratio; equality in economic development; greater and more equally shared prosperity; the Irish language and culture need equality of treatment; there is a long overdue need to bring about the empowerment and inclusion of deprived and marginalised communities. These should be pursued inside and outside negotiations.

The whole issue of demilitarisation needs to be resolved. This includes the release of all political prisoners. The treatment of convicted killers from the British Army in comparison, for example, with the treatment of untried, remand prisoner, Roisin McAliskey, is proof of British double standards. Disarmament, policing, the administration of justice and an end to repressive legislation also needs to be tackled.

Is páirtí é Sinn Féin ar mhaith leis cúrsaí a athrú. Níl aon eagla orainn roimh an athrach. Leoga ghlac muid go fonnmhar leis an athrach. Is é an t-athrach bun agus bárr an scéil nuair atá streachailt pholaitiúil ag dul ar aghaidh. Agus is é an t-athrach an dúshraith don tsíocháin bhuan. Is é an tasc atá romhainn a dhéanamh cinnte nach féidir an t-athrach atá ag teacht a chur siar a choíche.

Sinn Fein seeks change. We are not afraid of change. We have embraced change. It is the life-blood of political struggle and the basis for a lasting peace agreement. Our task must be to make change irreversible. Some time ago, in a spirit of generosity and in an effort to create a space in which progress could be made I made it clear, in the context of proper all-party talks and in a situation in which all the other parties sign up to the Mitchell Report, that Sinn Fein will do so also.

We ask no more than is accorded to any other party, open and honest dialogue, everyone at the table, everything on the table and no Unionist veto. For us there is no room for failure. We need to be persistent and pragmatic because we have a confidence in ourselves and in the future and because we know that what has gone before has failed all of us. This is especially true of the relationship between Irish republicans and the British. A new government is about to be elected in London. That new British government knows precisely what is required and knows just as precisely our position on the issues of concern to it. Let the British government face up to its responsibilities. Let it and Sinn Fein face up to

each other on our own terms. Let each of us put behind us the failures of the past, the lack of confidence, the distrust. We can do business, we can find agreement if political leaders and especially governments are prepared to take risks and if political will exists on all sides. A lasting peace is the prize.

Sinn Féin is prepared to take risks. This leadership has that will. Our party has that will. Sinn Fein is engaged in this struggle because we know we will be part of the democratic thrust forward into a free Ireland. The Westminster elections and a new administration taking power in London, do create a new opportunity to reconstruct the peace process. But that cannot be accomplished without an Irish republican involvement. Sinn Fein is an essential key component in any lasting peace settlement. We stand ready to play our part. We, the men and women of our generation will not be deflected from our historic task as we journey forward into the future. We know that the driving force against oppression is the moral superiority of the oppressed. This must guide all our efforts.

Today I pledge Sinn Fein's commitment to peace and to negotiations and to agreement. We have the political will to pursue these goals and we ask others to demonstrate that same commitment.

That is the only reliable guarantor for all our future.

The Westminster elections on May 1 are a watershed moment in our history which must be seized. We must send a clear message to the new London government and to the Unionist leadership. Last May, in a great national effort, our party made an unprecedented appeal to voters in the north. Our vote increased in every constituency. I want to commend you all. I want to thank those who put their trust in us. We will never betray that trust.

Next month; on May 1 voters throughout Antrim and Down, Derry and Tyrone, Fermanagh and Armagh - every one of the six occupied counties and in 17 of the 18 constituencies - voters have the chance to vote once again for Sinn Fein. I am confident that they will do so with great heart. Despite all the negative campaigning by our opponents our voters know that their vote is a vote for freedom and justice and peace in Ireland and for an end to all violence. They know that we will never let them down and we know that they will never let us down.

So we have a job of work to do in the days ahead. We must elect Sinn Fein MPs to put the republican analysis. We must help to create a new opportunity for peace.

We can do it. You can do it.

We are going to do it. We are going forward together into the next century. We are going forward to a new future as equals.