



Gerry Adams Presidential Address to Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 1998

10 May 1998

Fifteen years ago when I became party president of this organisation it was not long after the hunger strikes in Armagh Women Prison and in the H Blocks of Long Kesh. It was never my ambition to represent you in this position or to stay for so long. Indeed my commitment was from one to three years. Having said that, and although I have been known to complain the odd time at the trials and tribulations of this office, let me tell you that I consider it an honour to be a member of this party and to be a part of our leadership.

There have been many changes in the fortunes of Sinn Féin especially over the last ten years. This generation of Irish republicans have never retreated from the tough decisions, nor have we been rushed into making rash or hasty judgements. Together, collectively, we analyse, we assess, we examine options, as Sean MacManus says 'we cogitate' until finally, and democratically, we move forward together.

Sinn Féin's Peace Strategy

Sinn Féin realises the need for strategies and tactics which can advance our struggle for freedom and justice. We understand that our strategies and tactics need to be constantly reviewed and reassessed in light of changing political developments and of our growing power and influence. Our political goals require the development of a process which is evolutionary and transitional, which moves through phases, building our political strength, until Irish independence is achieved.

Our peace strategy has transformed the Irish political landscape over the past 5 years. It contains the dynamic which led to the Irish peace initiative and to the cessation of military operations by the IRA in August 1994.

It was Sinn Féin which put British constitutionality and sovereignty on the agenda; it was our party which placed equality, partition, injustice and national and democratic rights at the top of the agenda in Ireland, Britain and internationally.

Building Democratic Alliances

In February 1994 I pointed out in my Presidential address to the Ard Fheis that "Irish republicans, by ourselves, simply do not possess the political strength" to bring about Irish unity.

A critical part of our strategy to "politically engage our political opponents and enemies alike" meant seeking allies to build alliances. That is why I sought meetings with John Hume. That is why we entered into dialogue with the government in Dublin. That is why we developed our relations with Irish America.

The vast majority of people in Ireland want peace. Peace demands justice. Nationalists, including those with reservations about the outcome of the talks process, want to exhaust every possibility of achieving peace. They wish to see their representatives concentrating their efforts to bring about a just and lasting settlement.

All experience to date shows that a shared

understanding and common positions between nationalists on the most advanced positions possible is needed to further the democratic demand. An absence of such common positions is detrimental to the national position.

I would like to take this opportunity to speak to the Protestant people in the six counties and say to you that we in Sinn Féin remember with pride that our republicanism grows from the separatist roots of the mainly Presbyterian United Irishmen. Sinn Féin is not a Catholic party. We uphold the right to civil and religious liberty for all and we want to see the emancipation of Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters.

I am conscious of the difficulties faced by unionists. Let me try to assure you and your leaders that Sinn Féin comes to these latest developments and that we face the future seeking a good faith and a genuine engagement with you.

When we call for the end of the British presence in Ireland we do not mean our unionist neighbours. You have as much right to a full and equal life on this island as any other section of our people.

I have a word of advice for the British Government and more particularly the British establishment.

Any judgement by nationalists and republicans on the Good Friday document will be determined by whether it can produce justice and how quickly it positively affects the day to day lives of citizens. How quickly will the prisoners be released? When will the RUC be replaced by an acceptable policing service? How will the British government process the constitutional changes which they have agreed? Is this truly a transitional, a rolling process? Will the British and Irish governments pro-actively pursue the establishment and development of all-Ireland bodies? When will the British Army, and especially the RIR be taken off the streets? How quickly will the equality agenda take effect? How will the mechanisms of change be managed? How deep rooted will it be? Will orange marches be pushed through nationalist areas this year?

There is a huge responsibility on the Irish government to develop strategies which remove the divisions on this island and which advance a process to replace British rule.

The Referendums

It is clear that the referendums do not constitute the exercise of national self-determination. Self-determination is universally accepted to mean a nation's right to exercise the political freedom to determine its own social, economic, and cultural development without external influence and without partial or total disruption of the national unity or territorial integrity. These criteria are not observed in Ireland. British government involvement in our country is in contravention of the established international norms which create and sustain conditions to the establishment of internal peace, democracy, justice, stability and national freedom.

It is also clear from our debate here today there are elements in both referendums that present difficulties for some republicans and nationalists. In my view these difficulties trouble a wider section of national opinion than we represent. Let me seek to give assurances to these people. While Sinn Féin has made it clear that we are not opposed to changes in the Irish constitution we do accept that there is real and justified concern at the changes in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution.

Sinn Féin opposes changes that would dilute the definition of the territory of the nation, weaken the imperative to unity or dilute the citizenship rights in the north and incorporate the 'consent' clause. We do not accept the legitimacy of the six county statelet. And we never will.

As I have said earlier, all experience to date shows that a shared understanding and common positions between nationalists, republicans and democrats on the most advanced positions possible is needed to bring about national change. But while seeking at all times to advance such a consensus let me tell you that I understand fully why some nationalists or republicans will not vote yes or will abstain entirely from voting in the referendums. That is your right and this leadership will not be pressing anyone to do anything against your beliefs. It is enough and a great tribute to your vision and commitment that you voted yes to the continuation of our strategy. We have advanced our struggle here today. That is our business. What you do in the polling booth is your business.

It is important that we all realise that the peace process is not concluded. The Good Friday

document is another staging post on the road to a peace settlement.

It also provides a benchmark against which British government and Irish government actions in the coming months can be measured. It is a significant challenge to unionism. It is also a challenge for us.

Changing British Policy

The British government is the central player in all of this. It is British policy which has underpinned unionist intransigence, domination, inequality and injustice. British policy in support of the Union, as well as the unionist veto, has been at the root of the conflict here. A key republican objective is to change British policy. That is why one of the most significant developments during the last phase of negotiations was the fact that the British government moved unionism further than the unionists wanted to go.

I can understand why the British do not want to unsettle the unionists any more at this time but the logic of the proposed changes must be that the British government must move to encourage and facilitate progress toward Irish unity.

Today we decided collectively how we will approach the Good Friday paper. On the one hand it upholds the unionist veto over the constitutional status of the north, and, on the other hand it reduces the British territorial claim to that one hinge while it compels unionists to accept key and fundamental changes involving all-Ireland dimensions to everyday life.

Our negotiating team went into the talks to get the Government of Ireland Act repealed. We succeeded in that. We also secured the inclusion of a clause in the new British constitutional legislation which states that the new act "shall have effect notwithstanding any previous enactment". This includes the Act of Union and the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973. There is now no indefinite commitment, no raft of Parliamentary Acts to back up an absolute claim. This is a long way from being as British as Finchley. But British rule has not ended. Neither has partition. That is why our struggle continues.

Because the Act we want to see is the Act which ends the union. We haven't got that yet. But we will. That is the reality.

An Historic Decision

Today's decision that successful Sinn Féin candidates should participate in the assembly in the north is a historic one. It must be underpinned by a strategy wedded to mobilisations, campaigning, street activism and the international dimension. Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin has set a high standard for all our representatives and we need more constituencies like his throughout the twenty six counties represented by Sinn Féin deputies. The work in the north will assist this but our party is the only national one in Ireland and we have to build our political strength everywhere on this island if we are to secure the national advances we require.

So the struggle has to be where the activist is and it has to be social and economic, as well as political. It has to be about ending poverty, about building an economic democracy, about treating all the children of the nation equally, as well as about ending British rule.

The Assembly elections will give us the opportunity to renew and to increase our mandate. The preparatory work must start now.

Building Our Political Strength

I also want to call for a truly national effort in this crucially important election for Sinn Féin. Increased political strengths in the election will ensure republican representation in the North/South Council and enhance the effort to expand the all-Ireland structures.

So those who will be elected to represent us face huge challenges. I hope I am wrong but I do not believe that the status quo can be changed without putting ourselves in danger. This party has already paid a very high price for our mandate. Last week's bomb attack on Brendan Curran's home is a reminder of that. Twenty of our members have been killed and scores of our activists have been injured. Family members too have been killed. So when we uphold the republican position we do so mindful of all the dangers. As I have said before we are doers and we are not distracted by the naysayers and begrudgers or intimidated by the task before us or by our opponents and enemies.

No amount of messing, of refusals to accept the Sinn Féin mandate or the rights of our electorate will deter us. The efforts to resurrect the issue of

decommissioning as a means of undermining the rights of voters or this party is a nonsense.

The IRA has made it clear that it will not surrender its weapons. So have all the other armed groups including the British forces. Sinn Féin is not an armed group. We are not the IRA. We want to see all the guns taken out of Irish politics and we will continue to work for that. We go into this next phase of struggle armed only with whatever mandate we receive, armed only with our political ideas and our vision of the future.

This has been a good Ard Fheis. We are forever moving forward and like every other party , and including the two governments we are moving into uncharted territory. It is our responsibility to liberate that territory. Like you I have concerns and apprehensions about the future. But I am confident of our growing strength. I am encouraged at our growing ability to devise new strategies and I am uplifted by our commitment to press ahead come what may.

This is the day that James Connolly was executed here in this city eighty two years ago. It is a good day for us to recommit ourselves to our republican ideals and the struggles which lie ahead of us. In one of my first presidential addresses I quoted from Connolly's Sinn Féin and Socialism. He wrote;

" Sinn Féin. That is a good name for the new Irish movement of which we hear so much nowadays. Sinn Féin, or in English, ' Ourselves'.

It is a good name and a good motto."

And so it is.

Today is an important day for us. In many ways an historic day. But it is not as important as tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that with all of the challenges which they will bring.

Today we cleared the way for the future. Tomorrow we start to build the future. The future is freedom. Together let us build a bridge to freedom.