



Gerry Adams Presidential Address to Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 1999

Shaping the Future

I speak to you today at the last Ard-Fheis of Sinn Féin in the Twentieth Century - a century whose opening witnessed the origins of our party. A century, which as it draws to a close, has seen Irish republicans advance our goal of an independent and free Ireland.

Emancipation and empowerment are the key themes of Sinn Féin. We envisage not only the political independence of our country, but also the social and economic liberation of all citizens within it. This means freedom from foreign domination, freedom from ignorance and fear, and freedom from poverty and inequality.

Ours is a noble heritage of self-reliance and self-determination. We have sought to assert the distinctive character and fundamental rights of our people, while also seeing ourselves as part of a world-wide trend in modern history towards democracy and equality in all spheres of society.

It has been a difficult year for us but in these tasks there is no room for despondency or complacency. That is why the oldest political party on this island is also the youngest - in its spirit and very membership. Idealism is not dead in Ireland while Sinn Féin lives. People require a vision of where we are going and what we can be, and Sinn Féin is not afraid to proffer it. Our endeavour must be to spell out the policies and detail the tactics that will lead to a new Ireland in the new millennium.

I would like at this time to welcome our visitors to

our Ard Fheis. Cead míle Failte romhaibh.

I want to say a special few short words of tribute to Joe and Annie Cahill. Joe ends his 17 years as Treasurer of this party at this Ard Fheis. He has devoted all of his very long life to the struggle for freedom in Ireland and it has been my privilege to work with him. It is also a great honour for us that he is going to continue his work as a Vice-President of Sinn Féin, and he will be visiting with all of you in that capacity.

Building political strength

Republicans can also look back on the last year with some degree of satisfaction. We have built our political strength on both sides of the border.

This increased electoral support has been matched by an unprecedented development of the party's organisational capability. But we have still a long way to go. We need to build, to organise, to recruit and to develop our skills, and if we are truly to establish an alternative political to the establishment parties then we need to surpass them, not just in our commitment, but by our determination to convince others of our relevance, and by our ability to shape a better future for all the people of this island.

In this context I would especially commend Ogra Shinn Féin for its pioneering work in establishing itself as the fastest growing youth section of any party in Ireland.

I also want to commend our international section

and to thank the comrades who have taken up and advanced the work of our mission in the USA. and in other parts of the world. We continuing to develop our relationships with the African National Congress and other progressive movements worldwide. We are also moving to establish Friends of Sinn Féin in Australia. And we are re-prioritising outreach work in Britain where we need to build a solidarity movement, the lack of which has enabled British governments to do what they liked for decades in Ireland.

Last years Ard Fheisanna saw us making huge changes to our constitution and taking enormously difficult but important decisions in respect of the Good Friday Agreement. We also celebrated the election of Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin as a TD. This followed the election of two MPs and our strongest electoral mandate for decades in the North. Since then our party has scaled new heights with the election of 18 Assembly members on an increased vote. But we could have done better. Our strategists and party managers have pin-pointed new areas of growth, and in the time ahead we need to focus on these, and with confidence develop and build upon them.

Next month fresh opportunities will arise to confirm and increase that growth. Local elections will take place in the twenty-six counties.

Sinn Féin's election campaign is up and running. We believe the local government elections will signal the emergence of Sinn Féin as a major radical force in Irish politics. I am confident that the republican project will be supported wherever we have developed our potential. All our resources of youth, vitality and dedication must be applied to the challenges at hand. The banner of Sinn Féin will be raised the length and breadth of Ireland with the object of planting it permanently on new heights of achievement.

Positive neutrality in Action

Elections to the European Parliament also will take place across the thirty-two counties. In many ways these elections are the important contest. Not only can we make real gains but they provide a clear opportunity to amplify the republican position on the economy, on neutrality, on European policy, and on many related issues.

It is of crucial importance that we build a 32 county

wide struggle. Our country is facing two huge political problems - the north, and the whole question of the political and economic direction of the southern state, particularly our role in Europe. It is hard for a small country to face two major problems at once. It is even harder for a national independence struggle to deal with such a conjuncture.

One of these two problems, the north, has absorbed the energy, thinking and resources of the best elements of the Irish people, leaving the other problem virtually untackled. The key strategic challenge facing Irish republicanism at this time - in the context of the re-conquest of Ireland - is to advance our work in the north, while at the same time establishing a capability to mount a real challenge to the central political and economic line of the southern political establishment in the coming period so that we can build support for the alternative - Irish unity and independence.

Here in the twenty-six counties, a cosy, conservative consensus has emerged among the main parties in Leinster House. For example, on neutrality Fianna Fáil has reneged on its own commitment through a U-turn on membership of the NATO-inspired and cynically named Partnership for Peace.

Fianna Fáil is not the only party seeking to foist Partnership for Peace on the people of this state. That has been Fine Gael policy for a long time. And the Labour party only recently cobbled together a face saving position in support of a referendum.

Sinn Féin believes that there is no role for the European Union in military and defence matters. These should be left up to the individual states. International peacekeeping should be under the auspices of the United Nations. We are totally opposed to membership of the so-called Partnership for Peace.

This party is for positive neutrality in action. We have a world view, as well as a distinctly Irish view. We make common cause with oppressed people throughout the world against economically and militarily powerful states.

Ireland is a small country and we should not overstate our influence but the Irish have a very special role to play in international affairs. As a people who have been fighting against colonialism

for centuries we are unique in the European union, most states of which are former colonial powers. Our responsibility therefore should be to work with other nations to develop a bridge within Europe, between those emerging nations in eastern and southern Europe which are disadvantaged through years of repression and poverty, and between Europe and the peoples of what is called the 'south' - the poorer nations of the world representing the majority of humanity who are crippled by a foreign debt which keeps them permanently impoverished.

The Irish government should be pro-actively supporting the campaign which is demanding that this debt be scrapped. This is our place in international affairs. Promoting the peaceful resolutions of conflicts, for disarmament, protection of the environment and the fair distribution of the world's resources. We cannot do this if we acquiesce in the creation of a European Super-state with a military arm.

I am mindful of the fact that the Amsterdam Treaty came into effect on May 1st, and I am conscious of its 'military alliance' subtext. I am also mindful that Germany produced a proposal in March to turn the European Union into a straight military bloc, doing away with even the Western European Union. While this is only a proposal it shows the road we may be forced down.

But little or no substantive argument is made to convince us as to why we should join Partnership for Peace. Instead, we are told that we should acquiesce lest we be seen to be alone. But alone where? Not in the real world. Not when we extend our gaze to other continents. Not when we think of the Third World and those ex-colonial countries with which we have so many connections, past and present.

Sinn Féin is a party which can be trusted to give expression to the spreading disquiet among Irish people at the perils of Partnership for Peace, and the threats it may pose to the lives and safety of Irish men and women.

There must be a referendum on the subject if the government is really intent on membership.

But in the meantime we have to raise this debate in the European election in particular and public consciousness generally. The question of neutrality underscores the importance of providing voters

with Sinn Féin as an option in elections and in grass roots political activity. For those who are put off by the conservatism of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, for those who are looking for a radical choice beyond an increasingly centrist and catch-all Labour, Sinn Féin is that alternative. This is especially so as Labour is inclined, not to be the vanguard of the working class, but rather with DL - the Disappearing Left - to be the mudguard of Fine Gael.

Stop the War in the Balkans

Partnership for Peace in linked body and soul to NATO and clearly there is a community of interests in maintaining and expanding NATO, not between the peoples of the NATO member states, but between the armaments industries, the military establishment, the intelligence agencies, and sections of the political establishment, who are interested only in holding on to power, profit and prestige.

NATO now acts as a world policeman, usurping and dominating the United Nations. This aggressive policy is responsible for the obscenity of the sanctions against Iraq, where an estimated half a million children have died because proper food and medicines are denied to them. Albert Reynolds spoke for most of the people of this country recently when he called for an end to these sanctions. We support that call.

We also believe that the NATO bombing of Serbia should end. Slobidan Milosevic is a gross violator of human rights and all right thinking people will repudiate his actions. But other such violators have been supported and armed by the NATO allies, including the Indonesian regime, which is still committing genocide in East Timor, and Turkey which ruthlessly suppresses the Kurds.

The bombing of Serbia is not the solution to the complex political crisis in the Balkans. All previous experience shows that military intervention by foreign powers will serve only to deepen the national and social divisions within the region and postpone the prospect of peaceful long term solutions.

Instead of passive support for NATO aggression Ireland should be part of the effort outside NATO, in the EU and in the UN, to secure a diplomatic solution. There should be a determined effort for a

peaceful negotiated settlement under the auspices of the United Nations. I urge the government to call for an emergency meeting of the neutral member states of the European Union to bring forward a peaceful alternative to this war.

Essentially the issue of neutrality is about our self-respect and self-confidence as a people. It is about how we see ourselves. It is about our world view. How sad and tragic it is, as we strive to take all British and Irish guns out of Irish politics we are being asked to keep the nuclear bomb in European politics and to break international law by backing a war when we should be actively working to bring all war to a speedy end. By the same token it is amazing how tons of bombs dropped in the Balkans are morally and politically acceptable while the silent guns of the IRA, we are told, are a threat to peace.

Finally, on this issue all of us have been moved by the plight of the refugees. Their stories of ethnic cleansing, of rape, murder and brutality, can be replicated across the world. There are millions of refugees from many parts of this planet and the developed world needs to do more to help them. The Irish government needs to do more. And in so doing the Irish people must extend a genuine *cead míle fáilte*. We Irish who have suffered so much from racism, we who have sought refuge world wide from political, economic and social upheaval in our own country have to exorcise any trace of racism from within us.

Our message from this Ard Fheis to those who proclaim a narrow sense of Irishness is a clear one. We want none of it. We say no to racism, and we say no to bigotry.

We have a spirit of genius in this nation - no less. It reaches back to our gaelic roots and draws as well on our interactions with the other cultures of this continent, and indeed of the world further afield, particularly where our people have travelled and settled. Our unique Irishness is the outcome of a rich inheritance and the result of constant innovation. We must therefore continue both to cherish our past and recreate the present. In so doing, we should think of that great family of the Irish across the globe which now numbers no less than 70 million, and forge new and firmer links with them in a mutually supportive bond of cultural and material interest.

Challenging Corruption

Many people on this island, particularly young people are cynical about politics. Who can blame them? The failure of politics led to the partition of this island and to almost thirty years of war. Even now a peace process is being resisted by those who are against the primacy of politics and who cling even yet to the old agenda. Here in this state people feel betrayed as scandal follows scandal. Stories of the ill-treatment of those in the care of the state, particularly young children and the mentally ill, have led many, and especially the young, to question the morality of all of this. Scandals of child abuse have infected some of the main institutions, and the extent of the cover-ups have shocked many citizens.

It is against this background that people have caught the smell of the stench of corruption - the culture of brown envelopes - which surrounds the bigger parties. This corruption may not always entail violation of the law, but it is still morally reprehensible.

By putting money in the pocket of a politician, you put that politician in your pocket. So out there among the people, side by side with their cynicism there is a necessity and a desire for a wind of change which will sweep away sleaze and cronyism and restore respect in politics. More generally, people who want this change are seeking a party which is not comprised of place-seekers, gombeenism and those in search of illicit monetary gain. Sinn Féin is that party. Our credentials are clear and our principles are intact.

More recently, we have learned that corruption is not confined to politicians and is to be found among the bewigged and begowned who lord it over us, in courts designed as though the British Raj had never left any part of Ireland. The class bias of the legal system is plain for all to see. Petty crimes by the socially disadvantaged result in harsh prison terms, while much more serious offenses by the better-off, are treated leniently. We even have to listen to errant judges, who get caught, bemoaning that their future is bleak on a pension of £30,000 a year! That is a bleakness which many people in Tallaght or Ballyfermot, for instance, could readily live with. Who do these individuals think they are? It is time for the wigs and the gowns to go along with the class prejudices that they reflect.

The Re-conquest of Ireland

Writing in 1915 James Connolly said: "The conquest of Ireland had meant the social and political servitude of the Irish masses, and therefore the re-conquest of Ireland must mean the social as well as the political independence from servitude of every man, woman and child in Ireland."

Sinn Féin is an Irish republican party in the tradition of Connolly and Pearse and Tone and Lalor and Markevicz and Sands and Farrell.

We stand for the re-conquest of Ireland. We look to James Connolly and those others for guidance on our path to Irish freedom but we understand that they were of their time and that we in Sinn Féin must be of our time. Connolly understood this. He wrote, "We are told to imitate Wolfe Tone, but the greatness of Wolfe Tone lay in the fact that he imitated nobody."

So too is it with Sinn Féin. We are mapping out our own vision for the future and our policies for the here and now. In the immediate future that means Sinn Féin will be standing in the European and local government elections on a broad republican labour platform promoting common sense policies that will improve everyone's quality of life, but particularly the most disadvantaged, who deserve equal treatment and the right to share all the benefits of society, including the new wealth created by the Celtic Tiger. Every section of our people deserves the best.

Decades of emigration displaced many Irish people. Now the Celtic Tiger is bringing some of them home. But the Celtic Tiger is partitionist. It has a hard heart. Even the relatively well off, particularly young people with decent incomes can no longer afford houses. The Celtic Tiger does not cherish all the children of the nation equally and the plight of the less well off, the people on the poverty line, and the conditions of the disadvantaged remain unchanged.

Drug abuse, housing shortages, crowded classrooms and hospital queues are not the mark of a just and equitable society. Meagre handouts are not enough. Citizens have the right to equality, to real jobs, to decent homes, access to education at all levels and to a proper health service. Citizens have the right to a real future as equals for

themselves and for their children.

We believe that local communities must have as much say as possible in how they are governed, the needs that are defined and met, the facilities that are provided, the sustenance of family integrity. The scourge of drugs is a particular evil that must constantly be confronted and eliminated.

We are particularly aware of the distinctive nature of various localities and regions and articulate this. In doing so, we have to understand that Ireland is not Dublin and Dublin is not Ireland. Our capital should be fostered and developed, and areas of underprivilege within it tackled earnestly, but the regions must not be neglected in the process. The rural dimension must be kept in sight as well as the urban. The agricultural population, and most notably the devastated small farming sector, deserves to be catered for equally with those in industry and services.

Even in a country the size of Ireland, there is too much centralism and bureaucracy and, indeed, a woeful lack of transparency at times in how decisions are arrived at and implemented.

Empowerment of the nation should be accompanied by empowerment within the nation.

We therefore welcome the proposed insertion of a section in the Constitution on local government. Furthermore, we would call for new Local Government Acts, north and south, to introduce a reformed structure of powerful regional, county and district councils. And we ought also to be mindful of what is termed civil society - the associations of citizens which address the problems not just of locality, but specific groups according to cultural interest and social requirement.

The Good Friday Agreement

The most important political development in the past 14 months, and probably in recent modern Irish history, was the Good Friday Agreement and its endorsement in referendum by all of the people of this island. All of the citizens of this island, whether in the north of Antrim or in west Cork, in Connemara or Dublin, or whatever part of Ireland you live in have a stake in the Agreement. Clearly, the vast majority of people who voted Yes did so because they wanted to see a transformation of the situation in the north.

Sinn Féin decided in an historic Ard Fheis to advocate a Yes vote in the referendums. This decision caused difficulties for many of us and it was taken after weeks of intense debate which saw republicans accept that the Good Friday Document is not an end in itself, but is a transition towards a full national democracy in Ireland. For Irish republicans the struggle for full independence and sovereignty is not over. The struggle continues. Let it be clearly understood that Sinn Féin is neither weary in our stance nor limited in our horizon.

We made substantial concessions in committing ourselves to the Agreement. We did so in the context of our overall objectives, and our commitment to the peace process, and because we believed that this would advance the peace process and move us towards those objectives. It is worth noting that the concessions made by us have been largely ignored by those who repeat the propaganda line that republicans have given nothing.

We committed ourselves to implementing the Agreement and we have participated in the process on that basis and in good faith. This party has honoured all our commitments. The unionist political leadership and the British government have not. The Good Friday Agreement is now in its second year. The Executive, the all-Ireland Ministerial Council, and the other all-Ireland bodies should now be functioning with full power. Instead only one institution, the Assembly, is in partial shadow formation. This is the one institution most desired by unionists and least desired by nationalists and republicans.

Freedom from Sectarian Harassment

Other aspects of the Agreement are in abeyance also. The most obvious of these is the right to 'freedom from sectarian harassment' and the 'right to freely choose ones place of residence'. This is most sharply felt by the people of Garvaghy Road. Portadown is the Alabama of these islands and the killing of Rosemary Nelson is the most savage and recent evidence of that. In the wider context hundreds of people have been forced to flee their homes because of intimidation and violence.

I welcome David Trimble's talks for all of the elected representatives for Upper Bann. The negative response of some orange leaders and of the DUP is not unexpected and Sinn Féin is

participating positively and in support of the residents.

The Irish government also has a responsibility to defend the people of the Garvaghy Road. Since last July the people there have experienced over ten months of living under siege. Racism and sectarianism have been the daily diet of the men, women and children who have had to endure over 160 loyalist marches in and around that district. The situation for these people has got worse since the Good Friday Agreement. Sinn Féin pledges our support to the people of Garvaghy Road. Their plight is proof of how far we have to go before there is justice.

I also want to commend all those families, individuals and groups, who have campaigned on justice issues.

In keeping with human rights organisations across the world we have pressed for a number of independent and internationally based investigations and inquiries. The recent killing of Rosemary Nelson, the Robert Hamill case, and the release of Lee Clegg all demonstrate the corrupt nature of the British judicial system in the north and the unacceptability of the RUC. There is also the Pat Finucane case and the role of Brian Nelson and other British intelligence agents. People here in Dublin have suffered also as a result of collusion. Sinn Féin supports the demands of the relatives of victims of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings for a tribunal of enquiry, and I call upon the Irish government to set this up.

This is an issue which is totally within the competence and authority of the government. Millions of pounds of tax-payers money are being spent investigating corruption in politics and in big business and collusion between some politicians and big business. Surely, the circumstances of these bombings deserve investigation also.

We have pressed the British government and the Irish government on all these issues at every opportunity and we will continue to do so.

The RUC Must Go

The British government is also obliged under the Agreement to publish an 'overall strategy' on demilitarisation. This should tackle among other things the dismantling of hilltop forts in South

Armagh, Derry and Belfast (Divis Tower, New Lodge flats and RVH property at Broadway); the standing down of the RIR; the ending of British Army patrolling; the withdrawal of plastic bullets; action on the 140,000 licensed weapons; keeping the RUC out of sensitive areas; the closure of the interrogation centres at Castlereagh, Gough and the Strand Road. This was promised last November. We are still waiting.

While the Patten Commission was set up in June 1998 there has been no change on the ground in the behaviour and attitude of the RUC. In the 11 months since its establishment more and more evidence has emerged exposing the RUCs brutality and sectarianism and reinforcing its unacceptability. For nationalists policing is a touchstone issue. A new police service must be established. The RUC must go.

It is also important to point out that there have been no changes to the Emergency legislation. All such laws in place before the signing of the Agreement are still in place. In fact more draconian laws have been introduced since then in both states on this island.

There has been no real progress on the critical issue of the equality agenda. The Equality Commission has not yet been established, and the Unionists succeeded, with SDLP support, in preventing agreement on a separate stand alone Equality department in any future Executive.

Nothing concrete has yet happened on the Irish language front. There have been lots of plans and promises but no action. For example; there was a commitment to ratify the European Charter for Minority languages in respect of Part 3 for Irish in 1998. It has not yet happened, nor has the promised extension of Irish language broadcasting involving *Telifis na Gaeilge* been implemented.

The Good Friday Agreement promised much and even in those areas ostensibly under the direct control of the two government it has delivered insufficient and minimal change.

Specifically, there is also a responsibility on the Irish government to open up institutions in this state to Irish citizens in other parts of this island. Sinn Féin has made formal representations to the all party Oireachtas committee on Constitutional reform to extend voting rights in Presidential

elections and referendums. We also want people in the north to be given the right to representation in Leinster House.

This too is within the competence and authority of the government and parties in the south. We have lobbied all of the parties and the government on this issue. In fact Sinn Féin was referred to the Oireachtas Committee following discussions between myself and the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern during the Good Friday negotiations. What kind of message would it send if the Dublin parties or government said No to the people of the north.

Unionists Block Implementation of Agreement

The success of the unionist tactical approach to the Good Friday Agreement is that they have successfully impeded and frustrated progress on many issues but most particularly the institutional matters.

The Agreement is now over one year old. It is clearly in crisis. Indeed the hopes and relative confidence of many people in the north comes mostly from the continuation of the cease-fires and not from any confidence in the political process, even though there has been some obvious and welcome progress there. There has been a promise of change, not yet realised, but clearly foreshadowed in the Good Friday Agreement.

But progress in the search for peace has been thwarted by those who have seen the peace process as a party political contest or war by other means. They ignore - and indeed some may even be involved in or encouraging the constant campaign of bomb attacks against catholic homes and property - including over 120 individual attacks on Catholic families and at least six deaths since we last met here in the RDS.

These elements, including securocrats, sections of unionism north and south and parts of the British establishment refuse to recognise the significance of the IRAs role in creating and maintaining the conditions in which peace can be established. Indeed some see the IRA cessation as the 'most destabilising development' in the north since partition.

At Easter it was my privilege to speak here in Dublin. I praised the men and women of 1916. I paid tribute to that generation of IRA Volunteers.

Today I want to pay tribute to every generation but I want to especially commend today's IRA Volunteers. On this the 12th anniversary of the killing of the 8 IRA Volunteers at Loughgall I want to pay tribute to the courage and resilience and sacrifice of the families of IRA Volunteers and all of those families who have suffered. Be assured that you are constantly in our thoughts and in our prayers.

Honouring Commitments

I know that there is a lot of justifiable anger and frustration, among republicans especially, and nationalists generally, at the refusal of the British government and the unionists to implement all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement.

Our history and more importantly our own experiences teach us that thus far this century unionism has exerted a veto and it has been this veto and British policy towards Ireland which are at the core of conflict and injustice in our country. I have been challenged and confronted by this justifiable anger many times since the last Ard Fheis but particularly since the negotiations at Hillsborough. I know our party well enough to know that these doubts will not necessarily be voiced at an Ard Fheis but in private meetings and in one to one conversations activists have made it very clear where they stand and of how they view the British and Irish governments handling of the situation and the approach of sections of the SDLP and the unionists.

Notwithstanding this we have a job of work to do and we should not be mesmerised by the tactical manoeuvrings of the moment. We need to have a longer term view - a strategic view - of where we are going so that we can apply ourselves to getting there.

Recently, I said that I was prepared to stretch our constituency. Some republicans understandably asked me what that meant. It means us being far sighted. It means us working out if and how we can move and it means most importantly doing all of this in the context and the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. And it means the governments and the other participants doing likewise.

The current negotiations cannot go on indefinitely. In Downing Street this week we urged the British government and the Irish government to set a

dead-line and to bring these negotiations to a conclusion. We also urged them to reconvene last Thursdays talks as quickly as possible. For our part we will be meeting with the UUP on Monday morning. We remain in regular contact with the other parties but these conversations cannot go on forever. The governments have to act.

At the beginning of this latest round of talks we put a number of ideas, set firmly within the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, which we felt could break the present deadlock. Maybe they will not have this effect. Maybe this British government, despite a good start when it came into power, is not up to the historic task facing it at this time because the only way forward is through Mr. Blair asserting the primacy of the peace process, of the Good Friday Agreement, and focusing on righting the wrongs that have endured for too long as a direct consequence of British involvement in our affairs.

Let me tell you what we have been telling the British government and the Irish government. First of all we have been telling the British government that we want them to leave our country. We have also told both governments that the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is the bedrock of this phase of the peace process. There can be no renegotiation of the agreement; no rewriting of the agreement by any of the parties to it and no further parking of its implementation. The various provisions of the agreement are quite clear. The multiple breaches of the agreement are well known and have threatened the entire process. This must stop.

Republicans Committed to Peace Process

Let me also try to give some assurances. I want to make it absolutely clear to the people of this island and to our many friends and allies in the US, in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, that Sinn Féin is totally committed to the peace process.

As I said in my opening remarks we are on the threshold of a new millennium/a new century. This compels us to develop new politics, new ways of dealing with old problems, new ways of understanding each other.

Is it too much to hope for, to expect, to work towards, to ensure that the century we are leaving behind is the last century the people of this island will be in violent conflict with each other.

For my part I believe that we have inflicted enough hurt and pain on each other over the last four centuries. The fact that the enmity has lasted for so long and has resulted in so much hostility and bitterness between us is not an excuse for not trying to overcome the legacy of mistrust and suspicion. On both sides it must act as an incentive as a spur pushing us forward, pushing us together.

In recent years Sinn Féin has prioritised our work with Unionist people. We have learned much about their perceptions of us as republicans and their views of the nationalist people. We have learned much about the state of mind that unionists are in.

It is true to say and we recognise this that they are living in a siege mentality. They believe they are under attack from many quarters, from republicans and nationalists and they cannot trust either the British or Irish governments.

They fear for their way of life, for their religious liberty, for their identity. Protestants and Unionists have been in Ireland for four centuries yet they feel their belonging here to be precarious.

That might seem hard for republicans to understand given the experience nationalists in the six counties have had under unionist domination since partition. But if we are to be reconciled with our unionist neighbours then we must accept how they see themselves and work to change the circumstances in which they make these judgments.

At present they trust only themselves. As a consequence many of them are, euphemistically speaking, circling the wagons, retreating into a lagoon world of their own creation which reinforces their fears and suspicions.

We are constantly looking for ways of building bridges between us and it is my belief that the majority of unionists want this process to work.. We believe the Good Friday agreement is the foundation upon which new relationships between unionists, nationalists and republicans can be forged. It provides for new institutions, the Assembly, the Executive, the all-Ireland Council wherein we can all work together for the good of all the people of this island. The sooner these are established the quicker we can begin the process of national reconciliation.

It is of course a source of deep frustration that unionist political leaders have yet to respect the democratic mandate of Sinn Féin and the rights of our electorate and are not prepared to embrace the provisions of the Good Friday agreement.

However let me repeat what I have said many times to unionists from this podium. Republicans have no wish to discriminate against you or to dominate you, or to marginalise you, or to drive you from this island, or to make you second class citizens in the land of your birth.

We want to go forward in agreement with you so that we can all live in peace, justice and harmony together. This means recognising each others integrity as well as listening to each other.

But at the heart of this process of national reconciliation there needs to be an acceptance that there is going to be change. The old agenda has failed. It cannot work any longer. The Ireland of the 21st century must celebrate our diversity and all our people must go forward as equals. There can and there will be no more second class citizens.

This is a major job for all of us. But it will be particularly so for the two people chosen by the Ard Chomhairle to be our Ministers in the new institutions. If and when they are established this will be an entirely new area of struggle for us. But I believe that our nominees will do a tremendous job. They will need our full support. Please acknowledge Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brun who we will be nominating as Sinn Féin Ministers.

Finally let me reassure republican activists. Sinn Féin's position is very clear. We understand our obligations under the Good Friday Agreement and I have spelt these out privately and publicly. We have also made it clear both privately and publicly, that Sinn Féin cannot deliver the demand for IRA weapons no matter how this is presented. Sinn Féin's clear intention is to manage this phase of the process so that we emerge with real progress in the search for peace. Let me remind you all once again that the democratic and republican position will only be advanced by clear strategic thinking and by intelligent, disciplined and forward thinking activists. We are about shaping the future. That is our collective task.

Republican and Labour

The core of republicanism, both semantically and ideologically, is the public, that is, the people. The people must be sovereign. That means government of the people by the people. But what ultimately is the point of republicanism unless it signifies not only political democracy, but the maximal welfare of the maximum number? The end of authoritarianism does not automatically mean the end of privilege. Sectional and powerful groups can and do get control of a republic and, through their wealth and their command of state institutions and the media, run it in their own interests and to the disregard of others, while pretending that they are the people. They are often content that, for many citizens, existence means subsistence. But that is entirely unacceptable to us.

We want an economic democracy, as well as a political democracy. A genuine republic must entail, not alone a novel political dispensation, but a new social and economic order. It must be based on enabled collective self-help which is how Sinn Féin might be politically translated in modern Ireland and if we are to succeed then we can do so only by building our political strength, by developing alliances and by broadening our struggle to all parts of this island. The alliance of Connolly and Pearse marked out a great divide on the Irish Left which still persists. Sinn Féin adheres to the legacy of Pearse and Connolly, while others have repudiated it. One would think that Connolly in particular never existed. The British killed him in 1916 but there are those today, calling themselves socialists or social democrats, who would murder his memory and his message. But so long as Sinn Féin endures - and endure we will - they shall not prevail and Connolly and Pearse shall survive.

Sinn Féin has seen many trials and tribulations, especially in the decade of the Nineties. We have faced daunting tasks of analysis and policy-formation, of strategic perspective and tactical decision. Yet we have come through this period not only undiminished but strengthened. We have proven ourselves adaptable without being opportunistic. In this, we have been sustained by the enthusiasm, industry and selflessness of our members and supporters. Sinn Féin has been and will persevere in being a voice for the voiceless, a lobby for the marginalised, a champion of the forgotten, a campaigning party, while at the same time appealing to a broad range of people on the

platform of all-round national democracy and social equity. We are not therefore only a party of protest. We are also a party of serious opposition and good government, as the case may be, and increasingly will be so in the years to come as we decidedly contribute to the construction of the Ireland of the future.

A hundred years ago, the notion of an Irish republic would have seemed wishful thinking to many people. But since then, we have experienced the steady advance of the republican cause. There have been setbacks, but never has there been total reverse and that is because of you. I thank you all for your commitment, for your idealism, for your efforts. I thank you especially for allowing you to serve along side you all in the struggle for a new and better Ireland. We are conscious as we enter into the new millenium of defeating discrimination. We are conscious of the final ebb of empire. We also want to establish a new brother- and sisterhood across old divides and throughout this land; we want people to be proud of all the enriching traditions that Ireland has to offer; we want to see the flourishing of our culture in every facet; we want the prospect of peace and prosperity for our children.

As I said to start with, this century opened with the seeds of Sinn Féin being sown. It closes with our organisation firmly growing throughout Ireland. The next century will commence with a further expansion of Sinn Féin. There is business to be completed, the final establishment of a united, democratic, and progressive Republic of Ireland, and Sinn Féin is the party to complete it.

We want to shape the future. And we shall.