



Annual Bodenstown Speech 2000

Address by Sinn Féin Vice President Pat Doherty

18 June 2000

We gather here today, as we do every year, to remember and honour Theobald Wolfe Tone, the founding father of Irish republicanism.

This is one of the few republican gatherings which instill a sense of reflection in us. Gathered here, standing before the memory of Wolfe Tone, we are compelled to examine and reaffirm our actions, of what we are about and where we stand.

In this, the first Wolfe Tone commemoration of the 21st Century, it is fitting that we not only look at where we stand today but look to the future, to where we are going.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to two men who died during the past week - Terence 'Cleeky' Clarke of Belfast and Matt Merrigan of Dublin.

Thousands of republicans from across Ireland and beyond gathered in Belfast on Friday to bury one of our finest and most dedicated comrades. 'Cleeky' Clarke was known and loved by republicans across this island. He spent more than 21 years in prison but he never deviated from the republican cause. Cleeky's personal courage in his long battle against cancer was a mark of his deep inner strength and a source of great inspiration to us all.

To Cleeky's family, and especially his wife Mary and children Seamus and Marie, I want to extend the heartfelt condolences of republicans everywhere.

The past week also saw the passing of another republican and labour activist with the death at a

union conference in Dublin of Matt Merrigan. A life-long trade unionist, Mattie was a tireless campaigner for civil rights and social justice throughout Ireland and the world. His strong advocacy of national sovereignty as an intrinsic part of republican and labour ideology and his work on behalf of those marginalised in our society will never be forgotten.

To his daughter Olga and son Matt, and his friends and comrades, we offer our condolences.

The past year has been one of enormous change, both in terms of the peace process and in terms of the development of Sinn Féin as a real force in Irish politics. We saw Cathal Crumley become Sinn Féin mayor of Derry, while Alex Maskey narrowly miss out on this post in Belfast. In Sligo, Seán MacManus holds the post of deputy mayor. Councillor Brian McKenna will take the chair of Monaghan County Council next month, the first Sinn Féin chairperson of that Council in a hundred years of local government.

Sinn Fein has had a number of significant electoral successes at council level in the Six Counties - in Omagh, Erne West and Toome. And where we have not won we have seen significant increases in our vote. We have much to be proud of, but with the possibility of three electoral contests over the next 12 months we have a lot of work to do.

With your ongoing commitment we will see an increase in Sinn Féin's representation in Leinster House and we will increase on our success in the Westminster elections.

Since we last assembled here 12 months ago, there have been many highs and lows in the peace process. After 18 months of unionist stalling and bad faith we finally saw the establishment of the political institutions, including the all-Ireland bodies. But as you all know, after less than three months, at the behest of unionism, Peter Mandelson made a terrible miscalculation and collapsed the institutions.

However, we did not let our disappointment and anger at the British Government's actions in February deflect us from our task. We again re-focused and worked tirelessly to ensure that those rejectionists buoyed up by the collapse of the political institutions would not succeed in their stated aims of undermining and scuppering entirely the whole Good Friday Agreement and the potential of change contained within it.

During the negotiations leading up to the Good Friday Agreement, and the subsequent rounds of talks which took place at Hillsborough Castle, we fought tooth and nail over issues such as equality, emblems and symbols, policing and all-Ireland bodies.

Looking to the future we will continue to move forward with our republican agenda. The battle for republicans has not ended with the re-establishment of the political institutions. We want to see Northern representation in Leinster House as soon as possible. We want to see the British Government remove all of its forces from our country and we look forward to the day when all of the guns are taken out of the politics of our island.

I realise that there have been some steps taken by the republican leadership in the past year which may not rest well with some of you. This is understandable.

As we have often said, we believe that we have stretched the republican community to its limits. But the steps which we have taken were necessary in order to bring about real change, and change suits us - we should not fear it, we are the party of change. The only groups which have to fear change are the conservative and reactionary elements who wish to see the status quo upheld on this island.

We have seen this fear of change swell among the ranks of unionism. This manifested itself in not only

the ranks of the 'NO' unionists but also among some of those in the 'YES' camp who continue to throw obstacles in the way of progress.

We have seen the decommissioning argument come and go at various phases only to be replaced with the demand for the RUC name to be kept when the issue of policing was beginning to be addressed. We know that there are those within unionism who will continue to throw up such barriers in order to halt the tide of change.

There are those among the unionist 'YES' camp who are opposed to change - who saw and, indeed continue to see, the Good Friday Agreement and the Six-County Assembly as a way of taming republicans, a way of 'house-training' us. I can assure you - and them - that this is not going to happen. We know where we stand, we are confident of our analysis and our aims. We are there to make change happen, to revolutionise society.

The unionist opposition to change has its roots in one of the major blights on our society - sectarianism. Sectarianism is the antithesis of everything Tone stood for. He worked to unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter; the British Government and their agents in Ireland worked to divide them. It is from Tone that we take our lead and try to unite and respect all cultures and creeds.

The sectarianism which was used to attack the United Irishmen is the same sectarianism which has laid siege to the people of the Garvaghy Road for over 700 days. This siege continues with ever-increasing threats of violence coming from the leaders of the Orange Order. It is the same sectarianism which triumphantly tramples over the rights of the nationalist people in areas such as the Lower Ormeau Road and the Springfield Road. It is the same sectarianism which we witnessed in Lurgan yesterday when the Parades Commission allowed an Orange Parade to march through a nationalist area.

The days of the Ulster Unionists' one-party Orange state are over. But the unionists have taken heart from the lack of backbone shown by the British Government, by their repeated failure to stand up to the unionists. And the British Government's lack of resolve in implementing the Agreement Ú an Agreement which the vast majority of the people on this island voted for Ú casts a shadow over the

whole process.

When the people of Ireland are looking forward to a new beginning, some unionists are looking back to the days when they ruled unchallenged and they would like to keep it like that, and the British Government tries to look the other way.

The days of the British Government allowing the unionists to lurch us all from one crisis to another must end.

Republicans should be under no illusions. There are elements within the British Establishment who are trying to do politically what they could not do militarily - defeat the IRA. In the back-rooms there are still those securocrats who want to see us 'house-trained' to their standards.

Yes, we have seen some demilitarisation in the Six Counties and we welcome this. But only as a useful first step. Such moves are long overdue under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement and, indeed, were minuscule when we look at the size of the British military presence in Ireland. In South Armagh in particular, the community still has no respite from British military occupation.

The British Government is continually stalling the process by refusing to implement the Patten report in full. And remember, the Patten Report is not a report that republicans could endorse in the first place. For nationalists and republicans policing is a touchstone issue and an acid test of the peace process and of the British governments commitment to the Good Friday Agreement.

However at the last count there were over 75 deviations from Patten in the Police Bill and yet the SDLP voted for this. I want to say clearly today that the Policing Bill is not acceptable and we cannot and will not advocate membership of or support for the police force envisaged in such legislation.. The new beginning that we want does not include a repackaged RUC. We are working and campaigning for real and radical change. We have only one chance to get this right. We are interested in creating the sort of policing service which can enjoy real support from within the nationalist and republican community.

But Patten is only the first stage in this process. Other areas not dealt with by Patten need to be addressed. We must see an end to repressive

legislation, an end to the use of plastic bullets and a complete overhaul of the criminal justice system. That is the context in which republicans will feel able to join any new police service.

The political juncture at which we stand now is not ideal. We have made it clear, time and time again, that the Good Friday Agreement was not a republican document. But it does offer an opportunity for change. It is not an end in itself. It will not create change. Only republicans can provide the dynamic for change. If it is left to any of the other parties, change will not happen. History tells us this.

It will be Sinn Féin which will drive the process of change on this island, on the streets, in our communities and in elected office. It will be Sinn Féin who will lead the way towards our ultimate goal of unity and independence.

Next year marks the 20th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike. 1981 marked a watershed in modern republicanism. Bobby Sands led the way for republicans re-engaging in electoral politics. Today we are the fastest-growing party in Ireland. We stand with 18 Assembly members, two MPs and one TD. I am confident that this number is set to grow.

And we will use our increased political strength to advance our policies as a republican and labour party. We will continue to campaign for social justice and to ensure that the wealth that is being created in our society is used for the benefit of all. We will work to stamp out corruption in public life. We will work to make communities the length and breadth of this island an integral part of this process. We will work to bring about the type of change which people want - a society based on equality and justice.

We all know that the so-called Celtic Tiger economy, like so many economic booms both here and abroad, has seen some get rich at the expense of others.

There is wealth in this state - but alongside it we see young families unable to find a home, we see a crisis in the health service, we see the ongoing depopulation of rural Ireland aided and abetted by the ongoing withdrawal of essential local services.

We have seen a rise in racism and racist attacks on

this island. But it is important to point out that racism does not grow by accident. Everywhere it has taken hold it is because unscrupulous people in politics and other spheres of society have nurtured it for their own cynical interests. It is up to political leaders to make it crystal clear that they will not play party politics with the race issue, and that they will not tolerate racism in any form in their party. Racism and sectarianism are two sides of the same coin. Let me say it clearly here today Ú there is no place for racism or sectarianism in our new Ireland.

We have also seen the many abuses of the planning processes. The almost daily revelations at the Flood Tribunal and the Moriarty Tribunal prove what we have been saying for years. That is that politics in this state have been subverted by a cosy cartel - a golden circle - of establishment parties and big business. We stand by our call that those found guilty of corruption be compelled to leave public office and not just their parties.

There is a possibility of three elections on this island over the next 12 months. But now the Irish people have a real choice. With our advances across the 32 Counties, Sinn Féin is starting to live up to the potential we knew existed.

The tired and worn-out parties of the Establishment, North and South, are now looking over their shoulders at Sinn Féin.

They are talking about Sinn Féin making major gains. Well that is a matter for the electorate. The one thing we can be sure of now is that Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin won't be the only Sinn Féin TD walking through the gates of Leinster House after the next election and that Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams will not be the only Sinn Féin MPs after the Westminster elections. And given our recent by-election successes in the Six Counties we expect to make major gains at local council level.

How many elected representatives we have is up to you.

We are relying on you and all your friends and family who are not here today to make sure you are registered, make sure that you all get out and vote and work in support of your Sinn Féin candidates, that you help continue the great work republican activists are already doing in our communities.

I long for the day when the Republic envisaged by Tone and declared by Pearse and Connolly becomes a reality. This dream will not become a reality on its own. It can only become a reality if everybody here makes it so. So as we remember the founding father of Irish republicanism I also ask that we look forward to the 20th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike. How can we best honour those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the Irish republican cause?

This is a question which each and every one of us must ask ourselves. I believe that the best way to pay tribute to these people is to make their dream become a reality. We must create the Republic that they desired, the Republic that they died for.

The IRA cessation opened up the possibility of new avenues of struggle. It is up to us to redouble our efforts and make the most of the opportunities which present themselves.

Wolfe Tone was a man of action. It will be through our own actions Ú whether by organising in our communities streets, towns and villages; challenging corruption, protesting, canvassing for elections or working as a full-time activist - we will make Wolfe Tone's dream become a reality.

The struggle is far from over and there is a place for everyone in it, be they Protestant, Catholic or Dissenter.

Beir bua, tá ár lá ag teacht.