



Annual Bodenstown Speech 1997

Address by Sinn Féin MP Martin McGuinness

22 June 1997

Not far from here last week, Volunteer Patrick Kelly of the Irish Republican Army, was laid to rest. Like Wolfe Tone, Pat believed in the need to break the connection with England. Like Wolfe Tone, he died as a result of his treatment in prison by a British government.

I would like to send a message of solidarity to all the political prisoners and assure them that there can be no settlement here which does not include the release of all prisoners of this conflict.

Thank you all for coming to this, our annual gathering at the graveside of Ireland's greatest National hero, Theobald Wolfe Tone. Next year is the 200th anniversary of the Society of United Irishmen and Sinn Féin intends to be part of a popular nation-wide celebration of this momentous event in our history.

On the 22nd of June 1913, Padraig Pearse speaking at this place, proclaimed that of all those who have died in testimony of the truth of Ireland's claim to nationhood, Wolfe Tone was the greatest. Three months before he gave his life for the Irish Republic, Pearse wrote that, Tone was the greatest of modern Irish separatists and the first and greatest of Irish Democrats.

"To break the connection with England and assert the independence of my country were the guiding principles of Tone, the visionary, the realist and the founding father of Irish Republicanism.

He would, I believe, be pleased that there are three elected members of parliament here today, whose

oath of allegiance lies with the democratic Irish Republic for which he died.

Since I last had the honour to address you here in Bodenstown in 1993, we have faced disappointment but we have also made very significant gains in our struggle for justice and a real democracy throughout this island. We are here in Bodenstown today, we are in good heart, we are in good shape and in our fifteen years of fighting elections we have our biggest mandate ever. Our mandate is an All-Ireland one which has stunned our political opponents North and South.

Our success is all the sweeter because for the first time Sinn Féin have made mould shattering electoral breakthroughs all over our island. Sinn Féin is vibrant and confident and we are a party on the move forward.

We have contested four important elections in the past year and the results you have achieved are dramatic, historic and unparalleled. Our mandate has been strengthened at election after election. We have overtaken the DUP. and become the third largest political party in the north.

In the British general election our party President Gerry Adams swept to victory in West Belfast and I now have the honour to represent the constituency of Mid-Ulster.

Caoimghín Ó Caoláin, will be the first Sinn Féin representative to take a seat in Leinster House since 1922. We are the only political party with an All-Ireland mandate and an All-Ireland agenda.

I want to congratulate our candidates in all those elections. This is the electoral breakthrough we have been working for and provides us with the foundation on which to build for the future.

I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate Dodie Mc Guinness and Joan O Connor, the Six and Twenty-Six county Directors of Elections and all of our party candidates, workers, supporters and voters for the tremendous successes achieved on both sides of the border. We must use this strengthened mandate to move forward in a positive fashion.

It has not all been plain sailing, the begrudgers and the whingers have been beavering away attempting to misrepresent our mandate.

Some of our political opponents and others in the media are at pains to interpret a vote for Sinn Féin as a vote for violence. Not only are they wrong but their comments are both unjust and a direct incitement to loyalists to mount attacks on Sinn Féin members and Councillors like James Mc Carry and their families.

Sinn Féin is committed to a single strategy of seeking a negotiated democratic settlement of the conflict on this island. We believe that a durable peace can only be achieved through dialogue and negotiation based on the democratic principles of equality and inclusion.

A vote for Sinn Féin is a vote for our political analysis that British domination and injustice should end and for our proven commitment to our peace strategy. A vote for Sinn Féin is a vote for peace.

Those who have been the most vociferous in lecturing Sinn Féin about exclusively democratic means - the two governments and the Unionist parties - are also to the fore when it comes to denying the Sinn Féin electorate their most basic democratic right - the right to equality of representation by the party of their choice.

If we are to move this process forward the British government, the Dublin government and the Unionist parties should stop lecturing people on democracy and start practising democracy instead.

Since the cessation of 1994 the British government has introduced precondition after precondition to

Sinn Féin's participation in peace negotiations. The as yet unresolved obstacle of decommissioning was deployed ruthlessly by a British government, wedded to a military agenda. A British government motivated solely by a desire to divide and conquer rather than face up to the need for fundamental political change. We did not allow ourselves to be deflected by the negativity of the British government or the confused and flawed analysis of John Bruton.

The international experience of conflict resolution teaches us that the way forward is through equality of treatment and inclusive negotiations without preconditions. The British government and the leaders of unionism know this also.

There can be no return to the failed policies of exclusion. Attempting to isolate Sinn Féin has failed miserably.

We are all living through difficult times. The killing of two RUC men in Lurgan last Monday, the ongoing campaign of the British Crown Forces, the firebombing of the homes of prison warders and the bomb beneath the car of Sinn Féin Councillor James Mc Carry's car, are all potent and tragic reminders this week of the conflict which has engulfed our people for three decades. They are also reminders that there are no cessations in place by any of the armed groups.

The weeks events coupled with the tensions building towards the Orange marches in July, have created a climate of fear and apprehension.

Let me today seek to give some measure of reassurance.

Some of the media and some political leaders have launched a specific attack on the integrity of Sinn Féin, particularly of this Leadership, seeking to demonise and marginalise us again. They have short memories. While they were busy using the same rhetoric in the late 80's Sinn Féin was taking real risks for peace and laying the foundations for the peace process. I point proudly and firmly to that record of achievement and to our efforts for a just and lasting peace in which all sections of our people would be accorded dignity and respect.

In the face of the bad faith by the previous British government and the intransigence of the Unionists we held the ground for peace.

When the opportunity was squandered and the IRA cessation collapsed we did all in our power to rebuild the peace process.

This Sinn Féin leadership is not giving up on our peace strategy.

We are not giving up on the search for a permanent end to conflict and a lasting peace settlement. We will not be deflected. We will not shirk our responsibilities.

We will not betray the trust placed in us by the people of Mid-Ulster, of West Belfast, of Cavan/Monaghan, of Kerry, of Dublin and of people beyond this island.

The Sinn Féin leadership, with others, is working very hard to save the situation. We are trying to remove the obstacles to credible negotiations erected by John Major's government.

I have been involved in all of the meetings with the British government representatives, during the last regime and since this new one was elected. Let me say that I do not accept that the meeting which was scheduled for last week should have been cancelled. The task facing us if it is to be successful needs absolute clarity and this can best be accomplished in face to face discussions.

Having said this let me also say that this British government appears to be taking up a position and approach which is an advance on the position adopted by the last British government. However, the distrust created by the bad faith engagement of the John Major administration is so pervasive that the next phase must be built on a very solid foundation indeed. This needs to be done without delay. It requires everyone to take risks and this includes Mr. Blair.

Some might feel that when they compare Mr. Blair's style to Mr. Major's, or when they compare the style of the present Secretary of State with the arrogance of her predecessor, that the new British government is moving very far indeed.

I hope they are right.

I welcome the change in style but I reject totally Tony Blair's pro-union position as outlined in his Belfast speech. How can he say that he will not even negotiate 'sensible arrangements for co-

operation' with the 26 Counties if Unionists feel threatened?

All of these matters must be issues for negotiations and the question of the union is the most important of the constitutional matters at the heart of the negotiations.

But obstacles to these negotiations have not yet been cleared away. And there cannot be real negotiations until they are. Let me also say that this British government has addressed, in varying degrees, the four issues which are central to that. I hope that this signals Mr. Blair's intention to move quickly to resolve these issues fully.

Sinn Féin is taking a positive approach to all of this. We want to create a dynamic and credible talks process.

Indeed it was our party which first articulated the demand for inclusive negotiations - for real all party talks. To do this absolute clarity is required. Especially in regard to the decommissioning issue. Decommissioning has not yet been removed as an obstacle in the negotiations. This remains the biggest stumbling block to forward movement.

What is the demand for decommissioning? It is the demand that the IRA surrender its weapons before talks begin or before they can make progress. Those who make this demand have no interest in making peace.

The last British government and the unionists used this issue as an obstacle to and in negotiations. They undermined the peace process and caused its collapse in February 1996. Since then the Unionists have used the decommissioning issue to obstruct any forward movement. It is no accident that this has occurred.

Decommissioning is an important issue to be addressed as part of a negotiating process. But it needs to be removed as an obstacle so that it can no longer be employed to block negotiations, now or in the future.

Sinn Féin wants to see a total demilitarisation of the situation. We are prepared to address all of these matters as part of a negotiations process.

No one can be in any doubt about this position. We made our submission to the International Body. It is

there in substantial detail.

I spoke earlier of the legacy of distrust bequeathed by the Major government and the need to build the next phase on a solid foundation. An immediate injection of confidence into the situation is the prescription for these two matters. This British government has made broad positive comments on confidence building. This needs to be given substance and detail. People need a view of the immediate and longer term horizon. It is entirely reasonable to see that be provided.

If it is indeed this government's intention to address issues of equality and demilitarisation then clarity on these issues is essential.

Today there is a lot of apprehension. Given the fluidity of the situation it is understandable. Sinn Féin seeks to give leadership. We will not be deflected from our historic task.

But making peace on this island is a shared responsibility. The matters which we are seeking to have removed are not Sinn Féin preconditions. They were put in the path of the peace process by the British government. They can only be removed by a British government. We have sought to assist and be helpful. Clarity will act as a catalyst to create the foundation necessary to the building of a new peace process. If equality is to underpin the process of negotiations then the Sinn Féin mandate must be fully and unconditionally recognised. This is particularly so against the background of an increased Sinn Féin mandate north and south.

We Republicans recognise that Unionists have certain legitimate fears of their culture and traditions being subsumed in a United Ireland. They have the right to express those fears and to seek guarantees that their rights and traditions will be respected. But they must break out of this psychology which views negotiation as a sign of weakness.

Republicans realise that the new Ireland which we envisage can not be built without those sections of the Irish nation who see themselves as Unionists or Loyalists. We do not underestimate the divisions which exist among our people.

But in order to assist in the bridging of those divisions, the British government must remove its

undemocratic veto to constitutional change which only feeds the Unionist refusal to negotiate.

Vetoes and preconditions are designed to predetermine the outcome of any negotiations and are used by the parties exercising them to frustrate any moves towards change. And that is why unionists are afraid to negotiate, because they know that to concede the need for negotiation is to accept the need for change. Negotiation leads to change, Change will inevitably lead to Equality and equality means the end to domination which is the ethos on which the Northern State was founded.

Despite this undemocratic nature of the British statelet in the North of our country there were - and to some extent still are - those within the broad nationalist community who believed that nationalist rights could be guaranteed within it. Drumcree, the capitulation by the British government to Orange mob rule and the consequent forcing of the Orange march down the Garvaghy Road, the curfew of the Lower Ormeau, the siege of Catholics at Harryville and the constant rejection by the Unionist leaderships of any progressive proposals for change has reminded most people of the truly corrupt nature of the state. It is British government policy which encourages this mindset and prevents real change from taking place.

It is ironic that those who have been the most vitriolic in their attacks on Sinn Féin following the shooting of the two RUC members in Lurgan last Monday were the ones who contributed least to the peace process. In all conflict resolution situations there are always low points. That is what challenges us. It would be easy to give up when things get tough. The easiest thing in the world is to close doors and do nothing. But those of us who are determined to see this process through to a successful and peaceful conclusion must never despair.

We must use all our energy to overcome any obstacles which are put in our path. Sinn Féin has shown the lead when it comes to taking risks for peace and we will continue our efforts in that direction. We will not be deflected nor will we allow anti-republican politicians or media pundits to scapegoatÆ our voters.

Both the British and Irish governments have a responsibility to recognise the rights of Sinn Féin voters to be represented at negotiations on the

basis of the mandate which they have freely given to our party.

The hopes of the Irish people for peace have not been extinguished. All who are actively involved in the search for peace must redouble our efforts to insure that those hopes are turned to reality.

Last month I was part of a Sinn Féin delegation in South Africa. Nelson Mandela honoured us with his presence for one of the workshops and I thought to myself, if Nelson Mandela, one of the most visionary political leaders of this century, can meet with Sinn Féin, then what logical reason can John Bruton, Tony Blair, David Trimble or even Ian Paisley have for their refusal to follow his example and also meet with Sinn Féin.

If those parties who took part in the South African conference, even if they don't accept similarities in the causes of the conflict here, can accept and apply the system or the process of problem solving based on the South African experience, then I have no doubt that we can move forward towards a settlement of the conflict here.

In Ireland as in South Africa the momentum is with the advocates of change. Only we can guarantee that this momentum creates irreversible political change which will lead to a new Ireland for all our people.

We have been told through the media that Sinn Féin is to be given one last chance for peace.

Let me say that until there is peace all of us must focus on achieving it . Peace demands justice. It demands change. Rather than eyeballing us, government and political leaders should be applying themselves to making change and to creating justice.