



Annual Bodenstown Speech 1998

Address by Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams

21 June 1998

Hope and history rhyme

On the two hundredth anniversary of the United Irish Rebellion, Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams spoke at the grave of Wolfe Tone at Bodenstown about the continuing inspiration of Irish republicanism

Exactly two hundred years ago yesterday on 20 June 1798 Theobald Wolfe Tone made one of the last entries in his diary. He recorded that it was his 35th birthday. He was in Paris seeking the aid of the French Republic for Irish Independence. The tide of revolution in Ireland was turning and exactly 200 years ago today, on Vinegar Hill, County Wexford, the United Irish army was routed by British forces.

Our gathering here conjures up those historical events. They are brought closer still when we see in his writings the warm and generous personality of Wolfe Tone. He was an intelligent, courageous, and humorous man. A man who liked a drink with his friends. A man who loved his family deeply and suffered separation from them. He was a keen observer of the frailty of the human condition, including his own.

Yet this was the man who, more than any other, was responsible for establishing republicanism in Ireland. He linked Protestant and Dissenter with Catholics under the United Irish banner. He brought the democrats of Dublin and Belfast together. He founded the Republican movement. Wolfe Tone knew as he wrote his diary that the prospects for successful revolution in Ireland were

fading but he was determined to struggle on and he was to accompany the final French expedition to Ireland. Captured off Donegal he was held in Derry jail where the jailors refused his request to be treated as a prisoner of war. He died in Dublin that November, 200 years ago. Today the Irish nation owes a great debt to Tone and the United Irishmen and Irishwomen of 1798. They brought together the disparate elements, the tributaries that flow into the river of the Irish mind, and created a national consciousness.

Two great concepts inspired both the leadership and the rank-and-file in that heroic endeavour. One was to attain a real democracy of which national independence and sovereignty would be an integral part. The other was social. To obtain real democracy it was necessary to unite all the people, to make friends with their enemies and cast off the manacles of religious sectarianism and 'abolish the memory of past dissensions'. Its aims were to create a socially progressive, tolerant and just society in Ireland. Its banner proclaimed 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. Ideals which are as relevant today as they were two centuries ago.

These ideals, rooted in democracy and sovereignty, are the bed-rock upon which modern republicanism is built and they are the political beacons which will guide us in the time ahead.

When we in Sinn Féin made our formal written submission on Constitutional Issues at the Multi-Party-Talks we deliberately paraphrased in our paper the words of Wolfe Tone, and I quote:

" The constitutional and political status quo with which we have had to live for the past 75 years has manifestly failed. The root of the failure is the constitutional connection with England. As an Irish republican party we say clearly that that connection must be broken. We assert the independence of our country. We wish to replace the denominations of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter with the common name of Irishmen and Irishwomen".

That remains our aim. That, God willing, will be our achievement. It is my conviction that will deliver the end of British rule in our country. And until we do the struggle will continue.

Sinn Féin is the catalyst for change on this island. It was our party that first prepared the ground for the building of the peace process. In building anything that will stand and endure, foundations are needed that are strong and solid. Our foundations are our Republicanism, our commitment is to a new Ireland, and our determination is to bring an end to partition and British rule in our country. Our quarrel was and is with the foreign power that continues to uphold partition. British policy lies at the heart of this conflict. It has failed, just as partition has failed.

Without Sinn Féin there would not be a peace process. There would not be the possibility of a real peace settlement. There would not be a Good Friday Agreement.

But, it is important to remember that we do not yet have a peace settlement. The talks process has not settled centuries of British interference in Irish affairs. The Good Friday Agreement marks the conclusion of one phase and the beginning of a new phase of struggle.

There have been many agreements before this one and they all failed because they lacked the republican hand in shaping them.

That is what made the difference this time around and that is why, despite the many unresolved issues, this agreement, has the best chance of working and taking us out of conflict.

We are preparing for government. We are preparing to plan, with others, the future for the people of Ireland by playing a full and active part in the Assembly, in the Executive, and the all-Ireland Ministerial council. We are looking forward to

taking our seats in all of these bodies. We intend bringing the republican analysis into the heart of institutional politics across this island.

I believe these institutions have the potential to be the powerhouses which will shape a new political future for all the people of this island. And there we will play the same pivotal role that we played in the negotiations.

This phase of the process of transition is about taking the people of Ireland out of a century which has been dominated by conflict into a new century, a new millenium, where dialogue is the key instrument for change.

We are seeking a partnership based on equality and justice for all the people of this island. Indeed that is, in this 200th anniversary of the United Irish Movement the greatest challenge facing nationalist and republicans.

Sinn Féin remembers with pride that our republicanism grows from the separatist roots of the mainly Presbyterian United Irish movement. 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.

Republicans have no wish to discriminate against unionists; to dominate or marginalise or drive them from this island or make unionists second class citizens in the land of their birth.

Today Unionism is worried. Divided. Concerned. Change is never easy. The politics of change are volatile but unionists and republicans must deal with the politics of change. I understand the difficulties facing David Trimble. It is time that he and I sat down across the table and talked and agreed how we can manage the change which is coming.

Equality is not a threat to unionists. It means civil and political rights for unionists as well as nationalists and republicans. Whether it is the right to march, or the right to worship or the right to vote - these are civil, religious and political rights which must be guaranteed and protected.

Inequality and social exclusion are the enemies of peace. We need a partnership, based on equality, which will empower and improve the quality of life

of citizens by being open, inclusive and democratic.

While all elections are important, the election this week has a particular significance. Sinn Féin is the strongest and most determined voice for change. It is our party that will push the potential for the new Ireland furthest. To do that we need political strength.

We will bring all our energies to ensuring that the essential all-Ireland element of the Good Friday agreement, which is the core of the agreement, is the powerhouse of the new political arrangements. It is through the new all-Ireland bodies and the Ministerial Council that the most impact can be made in linking the transition to our goal of unity. In the shorter term, it is this core element which will also begin to deliver on the political, social, economic and cultural issues that impact directly on the lives of our people.

As well as political power, social justice and cultural rights, we also are determined to see economic power reaching those who have been excluded and marginalised by poverty and unemployment. We will work to establish an all-Ireland economic authority. It must actively work to reverse the decades of discrimination against nationalist areas and those border regions that have been crippled by partition and a fractured economy.

The Good Friday agreement was seen as a breakthrough and was rightly welcomed as a new beginning in Ireland. However it is still depressingly clear that there are still those in the political parties and administrative structures of the north and Britain who still hanker for the old days of Stormont and who will do anything to limit and indeed obstruct progress. Decommissioning is being used as it was before, as an obstacle. It is not a desire for security or an abhorrence of violence that motivates those who want to use decommissioning as a precondition, but a desire to bring the momentum towards justice and equality to a shuddering halt. But there can be no additions to the agreement. On all the essential elements - equality, policing, prisoners - no preconditions can be attached.

Wrongs must be righted. And the British government cannot absolve itself of the responsibility to do this. That requires the British Prime Minister to remain focused and to be

prepared to stand up to those within his own system who wish to perpetuate injustice. Mr Blair did the right thing when he scrapped the Widgery report but more than that is needed. In recent days I have spoken with some of those involved with the Bloody Sunday Justice Committee. I have been briefed on the current situation and I am deeply alarmed and concerned at what appear to be efforts to subvert the potential of this inquiry and to deny relatives proper and adequate legal representation. Mr Blair must ensure that no obstacles are placed in the way of a thorough investigation and inquiry. He must prevent those within the British military and political system, who for years opposed any inquiry, from undermining the ability of this inquiry to arrive at the truth.

Mr Blair also has to uphold the rights of citizens in areas like Garvaghy Road. Irish nationalists and republicans may be justifiably sceptical about the prospects of any British Prime Minister standing up to Orangeism and in defence of the rights of nationalists. This is fair enough but if we are truly into a new era then until the people of Garvaghy Road say otherwise there can be no Orange march down Garvaghy Road. The British government must ensure this.

The danger of course is that the British government will be more concerned to bolster David Trimble's position. During the referendum campaign Sinn Féin understood the need to do this. But there is a vast difference between working to get a Yes vote and pandering to the extremes of Orangeism. The most important element in the Yes vote was that a huge section of unionism voted Yes. They want, or at least they accept the need for change. They voted for dialogue. They do not want their hopes to be jeopardised because of the wish of a minority - the Orangemen to march where they are unwelcome.

So Mr Blair must do the right thing. The pressure should not be on the host communities. There are signs that this will be the case. There will be a huge effort to pressurise the residents in host communities to allow orange marches into their neighbourhoods.

This process of conditioning has already begun. Indeed some sections of the media yesterday carried a British government spin that this issue is a test of Sinn Féin's commitment to the Good Friday Agreement. This is nonsense. It is a test for

the British government and for the leaders of unionism. Sinn Féin upholds the right of the loyal orders to march. I do so again today.

There are over 3,000 Orange marches each year. So there is no question of eroding these rights. Where there are contentious marches it is not a question of conflicting rights, as some have suggested, but an issue of equality. And many people quite rightly see this issue as an acid test for the British establishment.

There is also an onus on the Irish government to stand firmly with the residents of these beleaguered areas. I held a crisis meeting with Mr Ahern some weeks ago on this issue. The government in Dublin is fully aware of the Sinn Féin position. Mr Blair must be told that there can be no repetition of the disgraceful scenes of recent years when the RUC and the British Army hacked their way through peaceful protesters in order to clear a path for triumphalistic processions.

Mr Trimble must also be told by the British government, and the Irish government, by the SDLP, as well as Sinn Féin, by church leaders and the business community, in other words by opinion makers throughout this island that he has to show positive leadership on this issue. The way to resolve problems is through dialogue. The way to reach an accommodation, if accommodation can be found on this issue, is through face-to-face negotiations on the basis of equality. If the Orangemen will not recognise, never mind uphold the rights of their neighbours, then those in powerful and influential positions must do so. This is what I told Mr Blair at our last meeting.

I would also like to make a special appeal to our friends in the Church of Ireland to put an end to the practice where their church at Drumcree is used in the way that is has been in recent years.

I want to now speak directly to republican activists. We have come a long way through difficult and dangerous times. Indeed for all of us the pace of events, the twists and turns of the situation, has at times moved with bewildering speed or with frustrating slowness. We have applied ourselves to advancing our strategic objectives and our republican aims. At times we have made mistakes. At times you and we have had to be remarkably patient. And at all times we have remained united. I want to pay tribute to your commitment and to

your understanding of the situation. I also want to pay tribute to your loyalty to our cause and to our struggle. The difficulties and dangers are not over. I said recently that I expected a battle a day and that is exactly how it will be.

The courage, commitment and determination that republicans have shown in the past will be brought to those battles.

In our opinion and in order to meet the challenges ahead we want to maximise and to strengthen the nationalist and republican vote.

That is why we sought a pact with the SDLP. Their refusal to consider a pact in the past gave nationalist seats to the unionists. In this election they have also refused to consider a pact with us while some SDLP leaders have called for a voting arrangement with the UUP. Given the attitude of the UUP since the Good Friday agreement I am calling upon the SDLP to change this position. I accept that they will not enter into a pact with us and I believe that this is wrong. It is also wrong for nationalists to vote for the Ulster Unionist Party, or any unionist party, until and unless that party stops trying to unpick the Good Friday Agreement as Mr Trimble has attempted to do a number of times.

It is my opinion that Mr Trimble believes that he will be able to get into a coalition with the SDLP after the election. In this way he thinks that he will be able to exclude Sinn Féin. Of course he is wrong but this short termism and tactical manoeuvring has guided his approach throughout this process. He did the right thing in accepting the Good Friday Agreement. But now he must implement it right across all of the issues.

Sinn Féin stands today with those who sought Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. We have to develop, with others, a truly Irish vision of our nation, one which is not distorted by the prejudices and sectarianism which those opposed to independence have fostered and encouraged. We have to rely on the wisdom, life experiences, talents and ingenuity of all of the people of this small island, women and men. There can be no divisions, no 'apartheid', in finding solutions to the problems created by partition and the British presence.

Sinn Féin's vision is for a new Ireland. 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.

An Ireland united by a process of healing and national reconciliation.

An island free from division in which all of the people are applying our collective energy, our wisdom and our intelligence to building a new future.

An island thriving, working hard to produce the wealth to reduce unemployment, tackle poverty, build new homes, care for our environment and cherish all of the children of the nation equally.

This is a watershed moment in our history which must be seized. Now is the time for all the people of Ireland to stand together as we embark on this difficult journey.

It is particularly appropriate that we celebrate the life of Wolfe Tone here today, 200 years since the 1798 rebellion. Hope and history rhyme again.