



Annual Bodenstown Speech 1999

Address by Sinn Féin Councillor Martin Ferris

June 1999

We assemble at this spot every year to honour the founding father of Irish Republicanism - Theobald Wolfe Tone. At this, the last Bodenstown commemoration of the 20th century, we rededicate ourselves to the ideas which he pioneered in our country. We look forward to the 21st century and the new millennium, confident in our peace strategy, and assured that we are making real progress toward the republican goal of a free and independent Ireland.

Wolfe Tone was not simply a separatist. He saw separation from England not only as essential to the life of the Irish nation but also as part of a worldwide struggle against tyranny and for democracy. Tone celebrated the fall of old monarchies in Europe in his day and he looked forward to a People's Europe whose states would be democratic republics.

In these days when Irish neutrality is under the greatest threat it has ever faced we should remember that it was Wolfe Tone who first articulated the idea of independent Irish foreign policy and neutrality. In one of his first political statements he called for no involvement by Ireland in the then impending war between England and Spain. How ironic that a year after it marked the 200th anniversary of the United Irish Rising of 1798 this Dublin government is preparing to enter NATO's so called Partnership for Peace and to end the independent foreign policy which took decades of struggle and sacrifice to establish.

One of Wolfe Tone's great contributions was to define the Irish nation in terms of all its people,

regardless of their religious or political affiliation. The United Irish Society for the first time brought together Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter in the cause of Ireland. Their unity was based on a shared view of the need for civil and national rights. The response of the British establishment was to divide and conquer and they quite deliberately used the sectarian Orange Order to promote sectarian division.

We respect the cultural traditions of all sections of our people but we can have no respect for sectarianism in any form. The Orange Order founded in County Armagh in the 1790s is the same Orange Order which has spewed sectarian poison in Portadown in the 1990s.

The current Orange siege of Garvaghy Road which is now over 350 days old is part of a shameful tradition of sectarianism over 200 years old. There can be no place for such bigotry in the Ireland of the 21st century; it is the antithesis of everything Wolfe Tone stood for.

As Irish republicans our struggle, like the tricolour carried from the barricades of Paris to Ireland, is for a unity of orange and green based on equality, on liberty and on fraternity. The goal of the United Irish movement was independence and the "freedom of Ireland". For Tone and his colleagues this meant "the removal of absurd and ruinous distinctions - and for promoting a complete coalition of the people." We too must seek to end the divisions, and mistrust and fear which separates Irish republicans from our unionist neighbours and from those who support or are members of the Orange

Order.

We must reach out the open hand of friendship to all our brothers and sisters, irrespective of religion, colour, race, sexual orientation or disability. Our historic task is not just to end the union, but is to unite Protestants, Catholics and dissenters. The United Irish movement declared "We wish that our animosities were buried with the bones of our ancestors, and that we could unite as Citizens and claim the Rights of man."

All of that must be seen to some as impossible in the current climate of the siege of Garvaghy road and the 'long march' planned by some loyalists in support of the Orange Order at Drumcree.

It is obvious that this march is sectarian and deliberately provocative.

It is a transparent attempt to intimidate the Garvaghy Road community and to pressurise the British government into conceding to sectarian threats. Mr. Blair must stand firm and uphold the right of the nationalist people of Portadown to live free from sectarian harassment and threats.

But nationalists and republicans must also stand firm behind the ideals of Tone and Emmet and McCracken and not rise to the provocation offered by this march. Provided it does not seek to go through nationalist areas nationalists should ignore the march. Our main concern and that of nationalists, republicans and democrats should be defend and uphold the rights of beleaguered communities like Garvaghy Road. The people of that area have made it clear that they do not want an orange march on Garvaghy Road. Nothing should deflect from that legitimate position.

The Orangemen have quoted Martin Luther King in defence of their demand to march wherever they choose. This has clearly angered and annoyed many people. They are deeply affronted by the bogus efforts to introduce any sense of equivalence between struggles for justice, freedom and equality with the sectarian demands of orangeism.

There is no overriding right to march. That right has to be set against the right of individuals and communities to live free from fear and sectarian harassment. The nationalist people of Portadown have lived in fear for a very long time. Their

situation has worsened significantly since the Good Friday Agreement was signed. The shadow of sectarian hatred hangs over Portadown and nationalists view this 'long march' as provocative.

If those unionists who are using Martin Luther King to defend their position are serious and are genuinely embracing the spirit of Martin Luther King that means accepting King's view that "White America must recognise that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society." In the context of the north of Ireland, the logic of this position is that unionists must recognise that justice for nationalists cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society. Change is traumatic for everyone, particularly those who perceive change to be to their disadvantage. Fears are exploited in this atmosphere and those who exploit these fears will often use high sounding rhetoric while demonising their opponents. No one should be afraid of equality or of dealing with others on the basis of equality. That is the real test for the march organisers.

Implement the Good Friday Agreement

Over the next two weeks, there will be intensive efforts to confine such bigotry to the annals of history when the two governments spearhead discussions aimed at securing the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. If they, and those parties who want the Agreement implemented, are to be successful, the obstacles to progress must be resolved. The provisions of the Agreement are clear.

The executive, the all-Ireland Ministerial Council and the all-Ireland Policy and Implementation Bodies should all have been in place by 31 October last year. They have been persistently blocked by the UUP using a precondition which is not part of the Agreement. If there had been such a precondition Sinn Féin could not and would not have signed up to it.

I welcome the fact that in advance of this period of critical negotiations the British Prime Minister Tony Blair in his speech in Belfast last week, clarified a number of vitally important points. Specifically, I welcome his assertion that we must return to the Good Friday Agreement. Sinn Féin has been arguing that position since May of last year when the vast majority of the Irish people endorsed the

Agreement in referendum.

That is the binding agreement which we all made on Good Friday 1998. It cannot be rewritten, renegotiated or reinterpreted on unionist terms. There is a democratic imperative to implement it.

I also welcome Mr. Blair's statement that there are no pre-conditions to the establishment of the Executive and that June 30th is a real deadline. I hope Mr. Blair's comments will create a new focus that will drive us through the next phase of negotiations toward agreement by June 30th.

For our part Sinn Féin wants to resolve the current difficulties and move the process forward.

The Unionists cannot forever hold up progress. If they fail to rise to the challenge, and if they succeed in blocking the establishment of the institutions, then there can be no Assembly and the governments have to implement all other aspects of the Agreement.

If unionists believe that they can prevent the implementation of the equality agenda the governments must make clear that they cannot. We still need a new policing service, new anti-discrimination laws, the Human Rights Commission, progress on demilitarisation and justice agendas and the release of political prisoners. These aspects of the Good Friday Agreement must be progressed. Sinn Féin will approach the next two weeks of negotiations with a determination to see the full implementation of the Agreement in all its aspects.

Too much time has been wasted. If the hope for the future, which the people of Ireland backed in the referendum, is to prevail there must also be substantial progress in the intense discussions which will commence later this week and which must conclude by the end of the month. I believe we can fulfil that hope. If there is goodwill and a determination of purpose by all of the participants I am convinced that this period of talks can overcome all obstacles and see the full implementation of the Agreement.

It is a fact that there are those within both unionism and the British establishment, who are opposed to progress and to the peace process. This opposition is being strengthened and encouraged by the failure to deliver real change and implement the

Agreement. The political vacuum, which has existed since the Agreement was made, has created a dangerous and unpredictable situation. It has been filled by the rejectionists, by those within the establishment, the bureaucrats and securocrats, who seek at every opportunity to dilute or delay every proposal for change.

We can see the establishment fighting back in the decision to back anonymity for the paras who killed innocent civil rights marchers on Bloody Sunday. We can see it in the release of Lee Clegg. We can see it in the failure of the British government to produce its proposals on demilitarisation. And we can see it in the actions of the British Army in South Armagh and Tyrone and in the behaviour of the RUC.

This vacuum has also been filled by a loyalist campaign of violence and intimidation against nationalists. 10 people have died. Men, women and children. Nationalist communities in East Antrim, South Antrim, Portadown, North Belfast and elsewhere are subject to threats and violence. Scores of families have been bombed and frightened from their homes. School children have been terrorised.

What message would failure on June 30th send to those involved in and behind these actions? They would sense victory, success - they would be encouraged.

This cannot and must not be allowed to happen.

Sinn Féin argued for a deadline for the implementation of the Agreement to ensure that the obstruction and stalling is brought to an end. Non-implementation of the Agreement suits unionist interests. They do not want change. They want to maintain the status quo. But peace, justice and stability demand change. A credible and effective conflict resolution process requires change. There must be change if the peace process is to survive and develop towards a lasting peace settlement.

The Good Friday Agreement is the one chance we all have to change all that. That chance must be acted on over the next two weeks. Time is running out. The rejectionists have no alternative. The Good Friday Agreement is the common ground and provides the only way out of the present impasse. The next two weeks are critical if the Good Friday Agreement is to survive. Sinn Féin will play our

part. We will do our utmost to move the Agreement on. We will hold to the terms of the Agreement. It represents the hope for the future.

Building Political Strength

This has been a week of celebration and satisfaction for Sinn Féin. You have a right to celebrate, to be proud of our achievements in the European and local elections. Our vote has risen all over the country and we are now truly an all Ireland party, growing in strength and confidence. I want to salute each and everyone of our election candidates and workers. I salute all of you who gave of your time and efforts to make these tremendous results possible. Those results show that republicanism is alive and well and is relevant to the Ireland of today and, more importantly, the Ireland of tomorrow.

I know that the breakthrough was a long time coming and it took many years of hard work to achieve but now that they have come they are all the sweeter for the long wait. With 62 seats in local government Sinn Féin is now the fourth largest party in the 26 Counties.

In the Six Counties Mitchel McLaughlin recorded a massive 17.33% of the poll. Across the 32 counties Sinn Féin now represents almost 10% of the electorate. It took courage, determination and hard work to achieve this result and more can be achieved. We should remember that just fifteen years ago, Alex Maskey was the sole Sinn Féin councillor on Belfast City Council. Today Sinn Féin is the biggest party and we have proud to have with us today the Deputy Mayor of Belfast, Marie Moore.

In the 26 counties, for the first time, solid foundations have been laid with gains made in Dublin, Wexford, Cork, in my own county of Kerry and in large and small towns dotted around the country. But we need to keep up the momentum and turn the success we have enjoyed on a local level into more Leinster House seats. We need to build our political strength so that we can deliver real change and Irish unity and independence.