



97ú Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 2001

Presidential Address to Ard-Fheis from Ruairí Ó Brádaigh

Dishonest Agreement will fail

An edited version of Ruairí Ó Brádaigh's Presidential Address to the 97th Ard-Fheis of Republican Sinn Féin in Dublin on October 14 is printed here.

A Chathaoirligh, a theachtaí, is a cháirde ar fad,

The past year has been a very busy one for active members of Republican Sinn Féin. At our last Ard-Fheis we designated the coming twelve months as “the Year of the Hunger Striker”, since 2001 would be the 20th anniversary of the great hunger strike which resulted in the deaths of ten of our comrades.

A programme of action was outlined and each county was directed to engage in some public activity to commemorate the sacrifices made, the reasons why they

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were made and the fact that the very same issues were at stake again 20 years later.

The response was in most cases an outstanding success as the counties rose to the occasion. From February in Mayo, where Gaughan and Stagg who died in jail in England in the 1970s and McNeela who expired in Arbour Hill, Dublin in 1940 were honoured, to Belfast where ex-prisoners did a run from the graves in Milltown to the gates of Long Kesh where their letter of protest at denial of political status in 2001 was refused by the prison authorities, the memory of the hunger strikers and the relevance to-day of their sacrifice was fittingly marked.

Memorial plaques were unveiled, marches and public meetings organised, seminars and lectures held and everywhere the points were driven home: "We know what the hunger-strikers died for – political prisoner status in the ongoing conflict with British rule in Ireland". There was not a straight line from Bobby Sands's election in Fermanagh-South Tyrone in 1981 to the Stormont Agreement in 1998.

Many of those who during 2001 were loud in their support for the hunger strikers of 20 years ago were silent this year in the face of the plight of Republican prisoners in Maghaberry whose physical safety even is in danger from loyalists, ordinary prisoners and prison staff.

The former Republicans who rebuilt the Stormont assembly are now part of the British system in Ireland and have turned their backs on the successors of the hunger-strikers of 1981. Their progress since then was not a line of advance but a gradual retreat from the ideals that motivated our martyrs of 20 years ago. The policy of acceptance of Leinster House and Stormont and of the Unionist Veto on Irish national independence has now become a classic counter-revolutionary stance.

Yet the unsullied ideals of the hunger strikers who suffered such painful and agonising deaths continues to motivate and inspire young people to strive for Irish freedom. Sands in particular, like Pearse, Connolly and MacSwiney before him has left us copious writings which makes it very difficult to misrepresent him.

He and his comrades did not die for mere civil rights under English rule nor for a spurious equality, but for human dignity and prisoner-of-war treatment as part of the ongoing struggle for Irish national liberation and the liberation of all humankind.

As an extension of the ongoing campaign for political status in Maghaberry Prison, Co. Antrim led by Tommy Crossan of Belfast, it was decided by Comhairle Uladh/Ulster Executive and endorsed by the Ard-Chomhairle that a protesting prisoner be put forward in the Westminster election to be held in June.

Tommy Crossan was selected as a candidate and sanctioned and a steady campaign based on our Falls Road office was built throughout the West Belfast

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constituency. Election workers put up 1,000 posters and distributed 20,000 leaflets. Morale was never higher in recent years in our ranks in Belfast and help came from other places in the Six Counties and from Dublin.

However, under an edict of Margaret Thatcher after Bobby Sands's election Tommy Crossan's nomination papers were refused by the returning officer and his name did not appear on the ballot paper. The election workers then asked the people of West Belfast to "write-in" Crossan's name on the voting paper which was a formidable task indeed.

These papers were classified as "spoiled" votes in the count and the returning officer's staff confirmed that they came to 4% of the turnout or 1,707 votes.

Those who take part in Westminster — and the Provisional movement is already more than halfway there — forfeit all right to resist British rule in Ireland. The weaving and manoeuvring of the Provos on this question is highly reminiscent of de Valera's gyrations as he finally came to accept the 26-County parliament. The Provisionals are providing us with a repeat performance 75 years later.

However, the nationally-minded people will not be taken for granted if the change by the Provos from revolution to constitutionalism in the Six Counties is finally completed, even gradually. There will always be those who reject British rule politically and even those who actively resist it, as history teaches us.

Republican Sinn Féin must be willing and ready to give such people a lead and to confront the Provisionals at the polls whenever they decide, ultimately, to go into the Westminster Parliament. The honoured name of the historic Sinn Féin organisation never belonged there. We must ensure that this does not happen through our default or with our acquiescence. If they continue to use the name Sinn Féin and seek to take it into Westminster then they must be opposed with all our resources.

POLITICAL STATUS

Meanwhile the Republican prisoners in Maghaberry are not just denied political status but stand in danger of their lives. Firstly they are isolated from each other; then they are placed in close proximity to loyalist and ordinary prisoners, from both of which groupings have come vicious assaults in the past. Tommy Crossan's life has been threatened by loyalist prisoners who said he will be "another Billy Wright".

The Republicans have been deliberately placed in harm's way in the prison and on the outside their families have been threatened. Their demands are that all nationalist political prisoners be brought together on a wing or landing of their own, that they be recognised as a separate group and that they deal with the prison authorities through their own spokesperson.

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Similarly, south of the Border in Portlaoise Jail political status is again being denied to Continuity Republican prisoners. Like their comrades in Maghaberry they are, *Buíochas le Dia*, few in numbers but this very factor seems to be seized upon to bully them in an attempt to lower their morale and finally to deprive them of political status.

Two of the three Continuity Republicans in Portlaoise spent three weeks on hunger strike during August in protest against being confined in the “bunker” or punishment area of the prison. When an agreement was worked out with other prisoners on the re-allocation of space within the jail — with the assistance of independent third parties — the Chief Officer on duty said there should be “no problem” in implementing it. Essentially each group of prisoners would have its own autonomous area within the jail.

The hunger strike was then ended but the Governor, acting presumably on instructions, refused to carry out the agreement. The two former hunger strikers are still in the punishment area, a third is in a separate “bunker” from he entered the prison in August, because the Governor says his life has been threatened by a member of another group while a fourth Continuity prisoner is held in Wheatfield Prison and denied political status.

Republican Sinn Féin has picketed Portlaoise Jail and the GPO in Dublin in support of the protesting prisoners.

Other groups within Portlaoise have their own areas where they manage their own affairs. The Continuity prisoners simply ask for equal treatment. It behoves us then to step up the public protests and other activity in support of them.

Earlier, on May 31 a Dublin man was sentenced to four years imprisonment by the Special Non-jury Court simply on the “opinion” of a 26-County police Chief Superintendent, which marks a return to the regime of the early 1970s when several hundred persons were dealt with in this manner.

First the jury was abolished. Then the evidence was found to be unnecessary. A simple accusation was sufficient. The Non-jury Court has become something of a sentencing tribunal. This procedure is tantamount to internment without trial.

But the great success of the past year was the rejection of the Nice Treaty in the 26-County referendum by 54% to 46% on June 7 last. Every single constituency with two exceptions had a clear majority against. Ever since the original vote on EEC membership in 1972 the numbers against have been mounting.

Republican Sinn Féin campaigned then and on each occasion since: the Single European Act in 1987, the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, the Amsterdam Treaty in 1998 and finally success in 2001.

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The tide has at last been turned in the fight against the progressive tightening of the grip of the EU and the erosion of neutrality. The issues were (1) the centralisation of power in the EU; (2) the domination of the Big Four states; and (3) the militarisation of the Union through an embryo European Army. The people of the 26 Counties decisively rejected these three proposals. Our slogan was "No to Nice, No to NATO" and with the cooperation of various citizens' bodies against all of the big parties the day was carried.

Yet, even in defeat, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour and the PDs continued to misrepresent the issues at stake. Abuse, downright untruths regarding the funding of anti-Nice campaigns and the unfortunate intervention of the Catholic bishops (with one exception) all availed them nothing.

Even the Referendum Commission was attacked and blamed by politicians unused to such a level of democracy in action. In point of fact, the credibility of the establishment politicians with the people has been undermined by their own behaviour in recent years.

The result is that relations with other EU states need to be examined and re-assessed. To ignore the outcome of the referendum and force the Nice Treaty back on the people again accompanied by a massive brain-washing exercise would be an act of dictatorship.

Alternatively, the Leinster House politicians may attempt to fudge the issue by moving on and incorporating some or all of the provisions of Nice into the Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC) planned for 2004. The combination of the two would then be pushed on the people of the 26 Counties under a new title.

In any case, Republican Sinn Féin must be vigilant and prepare. Already we have appointed our delegate to the Peace and Neutrality Alliance (PANA) as our spokesperson on such matters.

Furthermore, throughout the 26-County state as the much-vaunted Celtic Tiger economy slows down, the annual United Nations Human Development Report published in July was once again revealing in its contents. While high in the scale as regards wealth, the State was as ever low in the matter of human development. There was an ever-widening gap between rich and poor as about 25% of the people did not in reality benefit at all from accelerated economic growth.

The campaign against the introduction of incinerators as detrimental to public health and polluting the food chain has continued with our members in leading roles locally. The Minister for Incineration, Noel Dempsey and his government have in their "National" Development Plan earmarked £450 million for the building of incinerators out of a total of £600 million for waste management. The Public-Private Partnerships planned will ensure that communities will be forced to guarantee

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waste supply to these incinerators for up to 25 years – regardless of their toxic emissions record. Already, planning permission has been granted for a large incinerator in Meath, and another application is expected in Ringaskiddy, Cork.

Republican Sinn Féin supports fully the public campaigns against incineration — it is a dangerous, expensive and unnecessary technology — which will endanger the green and clean status of Irish food producers, and will destroy the development of the recycling infrastructure needed to solve this problem.

The decision by the Fianna Fáil/PD administration to strip local councils of their decision making powers over waste plans — because they would not support the top-level incineration policies — is a direct assault on local democracy (Galway, Longford, Laois, Louth, Wexford). This administration is further attempting to take the waste management function away from local councils and to give it to multinational waste companies who will charge the people top price for their service.

We believe that waste should be viewed as a resource — not as a problem — and that the emphasis of sustainable waste management policy should be first of all to reduce the amount of waste being generated — this will mean effective measures to ensure producer responsibility, particularly in the packaging industry. The most effective bodies to deal with waste resources are the elected local councils, working with community and interested groups, on behalf of, and for the greater good of the community.

Meanwhile the “left” as it is called has collapsed and there is almost total acceptance by Irish trade unions with a few honourable exceptions, by the Labour Party and even commentators on RTE, of the stock-market culture of “privatisation” and “competition” as a solution for economic ills, in areas as diverse as health insurance, oil refining, broadcasting, and even the provision of cleaning and meal services in hospitals.

Abroad, the Palestinian Intifada or uprising has continued all year. Frustrated by the failure of the so-called peace process to end Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip – taken by force in 1967 – and outraged by Israel’s offer of about 46% of the 22% of the original Palestine to Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian population has fought on in righteous rage with stones and light arms against tanks and helicopter gunships.

Since the Oslo Agreement of 1993 the number of settlers planted in the occupied territories has risen from 125,000 to 200,000. The Israelis control water, electricity, transport, the airspace, access to the sea and all key-roads. Application of the UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 — total withdrawal of all Israelis, soldiers and settlers alike from the occupied West Bank and Gaza — is the only legal solution in terms of international law.

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Needless to add, of the 700 or so lives lost since September 2000, 550 approximately have been Palestinian and 150 Israeli. Of course United States support for Israeli policies in this dire situation has contributed to the recent atrocities in the United States which Republican Sinn Féin has deplored. We offered sympathy to the people there and especially to our friends in the Emerald Societies of New York who suffered hundreds of lives lost. And we uphold the right of the United States and every other country to defend itself when attacked.

The resulting situation was seized on by many with their own agendas including those in the EU who since 1999 have been attempting to by-pass the courts and substitute mere "backing" of extradition warrants for judicial procedures. Does this signal an EU police force as well as an EU army? Furthermore, their proposed definition of "terrorism" would cover everyone from George Washington to Pearse and Connolly, to Nelson Mandela.

For our part we oppose the stampede to all-out war and Comhairle na Mumhan of Republican Sinn Féin picketed Shannon Airport on September 25 when 26-County Minister for Foreign Affairs was leaving for New York to take up the Chair of the UN Security Council. We oppose the giving of Irish airspace and the use of Irish airports and re-fuelling facilities to warplanes, just as we did during the Gulf War in 1991.

It is pertinent to add that the last time the 26-County State was a member of UN Security Council was in 1981-82 which covered the period of the great hunger strike from March to October in 1981.

They held the Chair of that body throughout April of that year when Bobby Sands was elected on the 40th day of his fast, yet never did they use that powerful position to support the parliamentary representative of the people of Fermanagh-South Tyrone in his extreme situation or to put pressure on the Thatcher regime.

One matter for which it has been well-nigh impossible to secure a line in the press, or indeed a mention on radio or television has been Republican Sinn Féin calls on young Irish people not to join the re-named RUC because it is still a British police force in Ireland and will enforce English rule here at the point of a gun.

We tell them again not to do so and to bear in mind the record of the old RIC, 80% of whose members came from nationalist families, and to consider their fate and how they were finally disbanded when England no longer needed them to do her work here.

We would remind the GAA that their Rule 21 debar from membership of the association not "security forces", or RIC, or RUC but "members of the British armed forces and police". We call on the GAA to uphold that rule and when the British Army and British police finally leave our shores, it will be redundant.

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No doubt the next demand is already being formulated e.g. that GAA grounds and clubs are no longer named in honour of Irish patriots. Irish nationality must be fully and entirely repudiated. The association must realise where the road they are asked to travel leads and whether they wish to start out on such a journey. Because in the end they must deny that they are Irish. It is time to realise that and to be fully aware of it.

As we prepared for this Ard-Fheis news has come that the British government, far from closing down Sellafield, has decided to expand the Nuclear Reprocessing Facility there. For four years the Dublin government has been committed to convincing the British to close Sellafield but has been met with a stinging rebuff from that quarter.

The dangers to people in Ireland and the pollution of our environment from the Sellafield plant are well known as are the hazards of cargo ships with reprocessing material moving up and down the Irish Sea. These dangers have increased with the recent attacks in the United States and Irish people are exposed more than ever to risks over which they have no control.

In the lead up to St. Patrick's Day last, our National Treasurer and former Bundoran councillor, Joe O'Neill was removed from a flight to New York and banned from entering the United States. He had been to America many times over the past 36 years and was travelling to launch the autobiography of our late Patron Michael Flannery the following Sunday.

Needless to say the book launch was a great success but the refusals of entry to spokespersons can only be regarded as denials of freedom to circulate political ideas. Our spokespersons, year after year, are prevented from putting the alternative peace process — the IRA — to the Irish-American public and to the American people generally. Minority viewpoints seem to count for nothing with those who hypocritically laud freedom of speech and human rights generally.

During February the British parliament enacted its new Terrorism Act 2000. Amnesty International immediately denounced the legislation. It said: "This Act effectively takes emergency powers that were conceded to deal with the situation in Northern Ireland and puts them permanently into legislation. We will be watching closely to see how it is used".

It is apt to remember that the British "Northern Ireland (Constitution) Act" which re-established Stormont states that final authority remains in "Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II". This aligned with the new Act means that British rule in the Six Counties and British judicial/police terror are now permanently established in English law and the renamed RUC will be enforcing that rule and that law. Amnesty also stated: "The Act shifts the presumption of innocence to the presumption of guilt. We are seriously concerned over the extension of stop and search powers given to police

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in Britain and the Six Counties and the extension of the amount of time a suspect can be held without access to a lawyer from 36 to 48 hours". So much for the so-called Peace Process.

A year and a summer of attacks on nationalist people culminated in the onslaught on children as young as four years and their parents going to school in North Belfast in the last week of June. Talks between residents during the nine-week vacation led nowhere with the attacks being intensified throughout September and into October. Each night nationalist homes were targeted, at first with stones and bottles and later with pipe bombs and gunfire.

On September 4 at about 10.30 p.m. on Alliance Avenue in Ardoyne and at Brompton Park Provisionals produced a firearm and ordered the people back into their homes. They stood undisguised just yards from the British troops and RUC as they acted as policemen taking away the people's right to defend their families and their homes. The Provos did not enter a defence themselves but their action is a clear portent of the future when they do destroy their arms and join the ranks of the renamed RUC.

In all of this activity during the year Republican Sinn Féin members were present on the ground supporting the beleaguered people defending them in particular from British Crown Forces attacks.

Throughout the Holy Cross, Ardoyne school-going episode, it must be noted that British troops and RUC provided only a narrow gauntlet for parents and children with the attackers so close that they could even spit on them. We, here at this Ard-Fheis, wish to compliment our Belfast members in particular for upholding the people's rights in their hour of need. Such actions will not be forgotten in days to come.

An interesting statistic from no less a source than the English House of Commons "Select Committee on Northern Ireland" is quoted in the Irish emigrant weekly, the Irish Post of April 21 last. It reveals that in the three years since the Stormont Agreement some 1,600 people have been forced from their homes in the Six Counties by armed groups. However, it said that many cases went unreported for fear of reprisals.

The report insisted that summary expulsions — evictions would be the term familiar to Irish ears — violated international human rights norms. And so it goes on as each house, each street and each housing estate is disputed. Are we to have 30, 40 or 50 years of this as the hopes, expectations and fears raised by the Stormont Agreement are attempted to be realised.

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That Agreement will ultimately fail, whether in the short, medium or long term, because its dishonest and contradictory basis drives recurring crises and constant conflict.

For 30 years now we have advocated a totally New Ireland, a four-province federation including a nine-county Ulster. Under the proposed structures nationalists and former unionists would share power according to local majority. It would be on a natural horizontal basis rather than in an enforced vertical manner. Policing would be carried out under the local district council.

At this grim time we support the anti-war movements in the United States, at home in Ireland and elsewhere. We believe that those responsible for the recent horrific loss of life in the United States should be brought to justice through due process.

For our part we must bend ourselves anew to our work, especially at local level among the people, not forgetting to place the question of the next local elections in the 26 Counties in 2004 high on our agenda.

We have work to do. Let us go from this place and rouse a new generation to join with us in carrying it out, for the awesome responsibility of doing so at this time devolves on us, Republican Sinn Féin.

An Phoblacht Abú!

Victory to the All-Ireland Republic!