



## **Sinn Féin – 100 Years of Unbroken Continuity**

*The following lecture was delivered by Des Dalton, Vice-President, Republican Sinn Féin, in Wynn's Hotel, Dublin on May 10, 2005 as part of the RSF Centenary celebrations.*

THIS year, 2005, marks a milestone in our history. We are celebrating 100 years of Sinn Féin, 100 years of unbroken resistance to British rule, 100 years of unbroken continuity. Many organisations will, and have, attempted to claim ownership of the organisation founded in the Rotunda in November 1905. Many spurious claims have been put forward in an attempt to hijack the legacy of those who founded Sinn Féin. However one political organisation alone spans those 100 years of Irish history maintaining an unbroken link into the 21st century.

Republican Sinn Féin is the only organised body of political thought in Ireland which continues to uphold the Irish people's right to national freedom and independence. Republican Sinn Féin is the only political organisation continuing to campaign for a British withdrawal and the creation of a New Ireland North and South.

Since 1917 when a Republican Constitution was adopted there have been five occasions in which that Constitution has come under attack. In 1922, the departure of those who would become Cumann na nGaedhael/Fine Gael; 1926, when those who would form Fianna Fáil walked away; 1946 and the formation of Clann na Poblachta; 1969/70 when those who left to form the Officials, later Sinn Féin, The Workers' Party, later again the Workers' Party and latterly Democratic Left, before being subsumed into the Labour Party and 1986 with the withdrawal of the Provisionals when those who remained in Sinn Féin took their stand on the fundamental principles enshrined in that Constitution.

In each case the Constitution has been defended and carried forward intact by those who have remained faithful to the spirit and content of that Constitution. Through all of these various walkouts and defections, at no point was there any break in the organisational chain stretching back to 1905. An unbroken continuity has been maintained at all times and in all circumstances. In 1986 those Republicans who walked out of Dublin's Mansion House brought with them the Constitution of Sinn Féin and simply reconvened the Ard-Fheis elsewhere.

And so it is that Republican Sinn Féin can without fear of contradiction assert our ownership of the history, legacy and philosophy of Sinn Féin. Based on the solid and irrefutable facts of history we can stake our claim on the very title deeds of the historic Sinn Féin organisation. Looking at the history of

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Sinn Féin over the past 100 years it is possible to break it into four periods, 1905-1917, 1917-1926, 1926-1949 and from 1949 up to the present day.

Ireland in 1905 was in the grip of an intense national reawakening. Since the commencement of the Land War in 1879 and the various Home Rule campaigns of the 1880s there had been an increased sense of the need for Ireland and her people to de-anglicise, to carve out a distinct political, social and cultural identity.

With the foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in 1884 this process began in earnest. 1893 saw the founding of Conradh na Gaeilge, which Pearse described as the beginning of the Irish Revolution. Arising from all of this came a plethora of literary, cultural and political groups; all had to a greater or lesser degree an advanced national view.

It was in this atmosphere that men such as Arthur Griffith and William Rooney and women such as Maud Gonne, Ethne Carbury (Anna Johnston), and Alice Milligan began to expound separatist and Republican ideas in journals such as the Shan Van Vocht and the United Irishman. In 1900 Maud Gonne founded Inghinidhe na hÉireann, which the historian Richard Davis described as “something of a pioneer in the history of women’s liberation”. Like its male counterparts it promoted cultural activities, the study of Irish history and the Irish language, running free classes for children. It also, in opposition to the Boer War, began what Maud Gonne depicted as “an intense campaign against enlistment in the British army”.

In 1898 the centenary celebrations of the 1798 Rising fed into this resurgence of nationalist fervour, as did the various protests organised against British royal visits to Ireland. Behind the scenes of course the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), whilst small in numbers, quickly seized on the importance of harnessing all of this activity in keeping with its constitution, which stated: “it should lend its support to every movement calculated to advance the cause of Irish Independence.” Consequently IRB members became involved in many of these organisations. The Boer War became a focal point of a campaign aimed at not only expressing solidarity with other peoples in conflict with the British Empire but also highlighting Ireland’s ongoing struggle for independence. Arthur Griffith led the propaganda war whilst Major John McBride led his Irish Brigade in combat against British forces.

The Irish Transvaal Committee established to co-ordinate the anti-war campaign was made up of representatives of the most advanced nationalists. It was from this pool of people and organisations that Arthur Griffith and Maud Gonne founded Cumann na nGaedheal in 1900. Its aim was the total de-anglicisation of Ireland. Its programme whilst emphasising cultural activities also made provision for the development of an Irish foreign policy as well as consumer protection of Irish industry, public

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boards were to be nationalised. Thus was laid the basis for what was to be Sinn Féin's social policy. RIC reports for the time describes it as the "extreme party". In 1903 the Abbey Theatre was founded, the aims of which were "to show the Irish people to themselves".

And so it was in this cauldron of social, political and cultural activity that Sinn Féin was founded on November 28, 1905. It was comprised of an amalgamation of Cumann na nGaedheal, the National Council which was founded in the main to organise protests at the visit of the British King, Edward VII, and included in its ranks Edward Martyn, Séamus McManus and Maud Gonne, and the Dungannon Clubs, a largely IRB-dominated Republican campaign group. Contrary to the perception which has been advanced by some that Sinn Féin in its first years was not Republican in character but rather sought a limited form of Home Rule on the dual monarchist model, Brian O'Higgins, a founding member of Sinn Féin, who took part in the 1916 Rising, and was a member of the First and Second Dáil, remaining a steadfast Republican up to his death in 1962, had this to say in his Wolfe Tone Annual of 1949: "It is often sought to be shown that the organisation set up in 1905 was not Republican in form or spirit, that it only became so in 1917; but this is an erroneous idea, and is not borne out by the truths of history.

"Anyone who goes to the trouble of reading its brief constitution will see that its object was 'the re-establishment of the independence of Ireland.' The Constitution of Sinn Féin in 1905, and certainly the spirit of it, was at least as clearly separatist as was the constitution of Sinn Féin in and after 1917, no matter what private opinion regarding the British Crown may have been held by Arthur Griffith."

The facts are that many leading IRB men were among the founders of Sinn Féin, such as Éamon Ceannt, Seán Mac Diarmada, both future signatories of the Proclamation of the All-Ireland Republic and leaders of the 1916 Rising, Patrick McCartan, Denis McCullough, Bulmer Hobson and Seán T O'Kelly. Also present in the Rotunda at its inception were PH Pearse, and Michael O'Hanrahan, later executed as leaders of the 1916 Rising. Séamus MacManus, Donegal, teacher and poet, who remained a committed Republican until his death in 1960, was another one of its founders. It is fair to say that a sizeable proportion of its early members all went on to play leading roles in the revolutionary years from 1916-23.

The name Sinn Féin (Ourselves) was suggested to Arthur Griffith by writer and Irish speaker Máire de Buitléir, and denoted its ideas of self-reliance, relying alone on the resources of the Irish nation in every sense. The historian and biographer of Arthur Griffith, Seán Ó Luing, summed up what he described as Sinn Féin's "cardinal principle": "He [Griffith] argued that the presence of the Irish members in the House of Commons was useless and demoralising. It gave the colour of sanction to British usurpation of Ireland's right, it shifted the centre of political gravity from Ireland to England, and it held no present or future prospect that the eighty Irish nationalists in the British parliament

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could make any useful impact on an assembly seven times their number. Nowhere else on the planet could Ireland's salvation be worked out except in Ireland."

At its first Ard-Fheis the following resolution was adopted: "That the people of Ireland are a free people, and that no law made without their consent is, or can ever be, binding on their conscience." The objective of the organisation was to withdraw Irish representation from the British parliament and to set up a Constituent Assembly for all of Ireland. This would be a council of three hundred comprising abstentionist MPs and delegates from local bodies, which would then assume the powers of a parliament, exercising its functions through the Co Councils. Under its first President, Edward Martyn, the new movement quickly formed branches in Dublin, Belfast and Cork and in many other parts of the country. From 1906 Sinn Féin published a paper under the same name edited by Arthur Griffith until the British government suppressed it in 1914. Sinn Féin also spread to the US. Judge Daniel F Colahan and John Devoy founded the Sinn Féin League in New York in 1907 and the Sinn Féin League of America was founded in Buffalo a year later.

During this time Sinn Féin had members elected to a number of town and city councils, in Castlebar, Loughrea, Dundalk and Donegal. In Dublin at one point it had 12 members on the Corporation. In 1908 it contested its first ever by-election in North Leitrim in a campaign directed by Seán Mac Diarmada, its candidate was an exIrish Party MP CJ Dolan. Their platform was abstentionist. Dolan polled 1,157 votes, losing out to the Irish Party candidate. These elections were used to promote Sinn Féin and its policies on the national question, the restoration of the Irish Language and its economic programme of self-sufficiency very much influenced by the German economist Frederich Liszt.

In the years leading up to 1916 Sinn Féin was in essence a campaigning group, providing a focal point for advanced nationalists and Republicans. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, along with the Irish Neutrality League, it led opposition to Ireland's involvement in the war, leading an active anti-British army recruitment campaign.

Whilst Sinn Féin itself was a purely political organisation with no links to any other group some members were also in the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army. The 1916 Rising was to change forever the political landscape. In the public mind Sinn Féin became associated with the rising, despite the fact it had played absolutely no part in it as a body. Nevertheless both the Irish public and the British government knew the rising in popular parlance as the Sinn Féin Rising and those who had taken part in it as "Sinn Féiners".

The executions of the 1916 leaders quickly swung public support behind the ideals and objectives of those who had participated in and led the Rising " ending British rule and the establishment of a free

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and independent Irish Republic. A series of by-elections in 1917, in Roscommon, Longford, Clare and Kilkenny clearly illustrated the strength of this support with the election of Republican candidates, all standing on a clearly Republican and abstentionist basis. In October of that year at its Ard-Fheis Sinn Féin adopted a distinctly Republican Constitution giving the organisation, as the historian Brian Murphy put it, “a new Republican reality”. He singles out Fr Michael O Flanagan, Count Plunkett, JJ O’Kelly and Cathal Brugha as the architects of this change, which placed Sinn Féin at the centre of the revolutionary Republican Movement. From this point on, as Brian Murphy points out, the organisation became Republican Sinn Féin. Significantly Seán O Luing writes: “This Ard-Fheis, which was numbered tenth in the Sinn Féin series, thus keeping up the continuity with the original movement launched in 1905.”

The British government’s threat to introduce conscription in Ireland in 1918 provided Sinn Féin with yet another opportunity to mobilise people in an effective anti-conscription campaign. In so doing it galvanised the support of the Irish people behind the national movement. In the general election of December of that year Sinn Féin consigned the Irish Party to history by winning 73 out of 105 seats. It moved quickly to implement its policies clearly outlined in its election manifesto: “to make use of any and every means available to render impotent the power of England to rule Ireland in subjection by military power, or otherwise”. The manifesto went on to declare that: “Sinn Féin stands less for a political party than for the nation.”

In January 1919 the First Dáil Éireann was convened to which all elected representatives were invited. A government was elected, ministers appointed and government departments established. From 1919 to 1922 the All-Ireland Republic became a living functioning reality, with its own courts and police, an army in the field and the support of the vast majority of local government authorities in the country. It also appointed foreign envoys to a number of countries. All of this took place against the backdrop of a guerrilla war waged against what was then the world’s only superpower.

The British response was the passing by their parliament of a Government of Ireland Act partitioning Ireland into six and 26 counties. Following the calling of a truce in July 1921 negotiations on a treaty ensued. This resulted in what has become known as the ‘Treaty of Surrender’, imposed on the Irish people by the British government under a threat of “immediate and terrible war.” It effectively implemented the British Government of Ireland Act, partitioning Ireland, subverting the All-Ireland Republic all of which overturned the clearly expressed will of the people of Ireland as expressed in the 1918 election, the last such All-Ireland election to date.

It created two states; in the Six Counties a Unionist-dominated state with power devolved to Stormont. The state, carved out of the province of Ulster, was gerrymandered so as to guarantee a permanent Unionist majority. It was underpinned by wholesale discrimination in terms of housing,

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jobs and education against the nationalist population. It was maintained by the imposition of what was virtually martial law eroding the civil rights of all nationalists.

In the 26 Counties a Southern Parliament was imposed in place of the 32-County Dáil Éireann. And the institutions of the Republic were dismantled. Sinn Féin was divided. Those who stood by the constitution of Sinn Féin and in defence of the Republic held on to the name Sinn Féin, those who accepted the Treaty of Surrender later went on to organise as Cumann na nGaedhail.

In the Civil War or counter-revolution of 1922/23 77 executions and many other sacrifices by Republicans failed to extinguish the flame of Irish Republicanism. In the 26-County election of August 1923 Sinn Féin had 44 candidates elected securing 286,000 votes, despite massive repression, mass arrests and the imprisonment of many of its members and workers. All of which the historian Michael Hopkinson said: "demonstrated the continuity of Republican support." By 1926 Sinn Féin had rebuilt its organisation and had 48 parliamentary representatives. Once again the question of entering the partitionist assembly of Leinster House was raised. When those who advocated it were defeated they resigned from Sinn Féin and established Fianna Fáil under the leadership of Éamon de Valera in May 1926. The subsequent years were a time of decline for Sinn Féin. A political test oath was imposed in 1927, in which candidates had to pledge their willingness to take seats in Leinster House, precluded Sinn Féin from contesting elections in the 26 Counties. In 1933 Paddy McLogan was elected as an abstentionist for South Armagh in the Six-County Westminster elections. In 1938 Sinn Féin was the first political organisation to elect a women leader when Margaret Buckley was elected President.

The 1940s in the Six Counties were a period of intense repression carried out by the de Valera-led Dublin government against Republicans which resulted in executions by firing squad and the use of the English hangman to murder Republicans and the death on hunger strike of three more. The internment camp and the prisons of the 26-County were filled with Republicans but despite all of this Sinn Féin and the Republican Movement emerged intact.

In 1946 came the formation outside of the Republican Movement of Clann na Poblachta, led by Seán McBride. This was the most benign manifestation yet of constitutionalism. It had many former Republican activists but did not attempt to take over the Republican Movement. It brought down a Coalition Administration in the 26 Counties in 1957 rather than engage in coercion against Republicans.

The year 1949 marked yet another important point in the history of Sinn Féin. Following the repression suffered during the 1940s many Republicans realised that support amongst the public was essential for any continuation of the struggle. And so Sinn Féin was revitalised and launched a

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new paper, the United Irishman. The historian J Bowyer Bell wrote: "The small blurred United Irishman was a long way from the violent muckraking An Phoblacht edited by Ryan and O'Donnell; but it was a beginning, a sign that Sinn Féin was not dead."

The 1950s saw the launch of yet another military campaign against British rule in Ireland with Operation Harvest on December 12, 1956. Prior to that in 1955 Sinn Féin polled 152,310 votes and had two candidates elected in the Six-County Westminster elections, Tom Mitchell for Mid-Ulster and Philip Clarke for Fermanagh/South Tyrone, as Bowyer Bell points out: "Sinn Féin had swept almost the entire nationalist vote on a platform stressing only the national issue". As both Mitchell and Clarke were prisoners under British law they were ineligible to hold their seats. It took three by-elections and the introduction of a spoiling "nationalist" candidate to unseat Mitchell.

In recent times we hear much about the electoral success of the Provisionals as if their recent election successes were something unique. In the 1950s Sinn Féin had six parliamentary candidates elected, two in the Six Counties and four in the 26 Counties, including the present President of Sinn Féin, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, elected for Longford/ Westmeath.

By 1960 they had 30 Councillors, all elected on an unequivocal Republican platform. This rebuilding of the Sinn Féin organisation was achieved despite the internment in 1958 of the entire Ard Chomhairle, with the exception of Margaret Buckley.

Following the ending of the Border Campaign in 1962 Sinn Féin once more entered a period of transition. Fresh thought was given to developing social and economic policies which could be seen as relevant and would provide a radical alternative. However whilst this may have been welcome and indeed necessary, elements within the leadership once more were contemplating 'constitutionalism' over revolutionary Republicanism.

At an extraordinary Ard-Fheis in 1965 a proposal to take seats in Stormont and Leinster House was heavily defeated. Despite this a by now reformist leadership continued in their efforts to bring Sinn Féin into the partitionist system. In 1969/0 it finally came to a head. With the Six Counties once more aflame this reformist leadership lead their followers out of Sinn Féin and the Republican Movement having been successfully opposed by those who remained steadfast in their adherence to the ideals and constitution of Sinn Féin.

Whilst continuing to use the honoured titles of the Republican Movement, Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army, they went on to fully accept British rule in Ireland, even going so far as to engage in physical action against the Republican Movement. Eventually in 1982 they finally gave up their use

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of the name Sinn Féin, becoming the Workers' Party, then Democratic Left before final absorption by the Labour Party.

The years since 1969 have witnessed one of the most heroic periods in the long struggle for Irish freedom. Many Republicans lost their lives, endured long years of imprisonment and ten men died on hunger strike in the H Blocks of Long Kesh to vindicate their right to political status as Republican prisoners. In the 26-County State ongoing harassment and coercion was coupled with blanket censorship with Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act banning Sinn Féin representatives from both radio and television, similar legislation was eventually introduced in Britain and the Six Counties.

However in all of this time Sinn Féin and the Republican Movement remained united and committed to continue the struggle to a finish. And it was also during this period that one of the most original and progressive political documents was launched by Sinn Féin.

ÉIRE NUA, crafted largely by Dáithí Ó Conaill and Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, Vice-President and President respectively, provided a road map for the ending of British rule in Ireland and a framework within which the failed partitionist system, which had been imposed by the Treaty of Surrender, could be replaced by true All-Ireland democracy. When put to some of the leaders of loyalist/Unionist opinion at the Feakle talks by the leadership of the Republican Movement in 1974, they accepted it as a workable alternative to continued union with England.

Once again in the late 1970s and early 1980s, for the fifth time attempts were made to transform Sinn Féin and the broader Republican Movement into a constitutional and reformist organisation. Beginning with a takeover of the leadership of the Republican Movement this group finally made their push at the 1986 Ard-Fheis. In a gerrymandered vote they breached the Constitution of Sinn Féin by forcing through a resolution advocating taking seats in Leinster House, this despite the fact that those advocating such action are precluded from membership of Sinn Féin. Again those who remained loyal to that Constitution and the Republic, which it upholds, withdrew reconvening the Ard-Fheis at a different venue. They brought with them intact the Constitution of Sinn Féin.

Through all of these 100 years Sinn Féin has survived executions, internment camps, prisons, hunger strikes, bans, censorship and state harassment. Today Republican Sinn Féin is no less determined to continue the programme first formulated by those who gathered in the Rotunda 100 years ago. With our policies ÉIRE NUA and SAOL NUA we have the blueprint for a New Ireland north and south ensuring real political and economic democracy.

We are the only political organisation in Ireland today with a credible and viable alternative to the failed and sectarian Stormont Agreement. British rule is the cause of conflict in our country,

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Republican Sinn Féin is the only political organisation committed to ending it. We are the inheritors of a proud history, it is our duty to ensure the continued growth and development of this proud organisation, to finally realise the ideals and objectives, which inspired all of those heroic men and women these past 100 years.

An Ireland free of British rule, a sovereign independent Democratic Socialist Irish Republic in which Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter can live together in peace and justice. Truly it has been 100 years of unbroken resistance to British rule, 100 years of unbroken continuity.