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ANNUAL WOLFE TONE
COMMEMORATION

Bodenstown
1993



Oration given by
Martin McGuinness,
20 June 1993

In his last letter to his wife, Wolfe Tone said, "Cherish my memory". Little could he have known that today, almost 200 years after his death republicans from all over Ireland would assemble to pay tribute and homage to his memory. He was the founder of modern republicanism, the father figure and we his children proudly gather in Bodenstown graveyard to cherish his memory.

Wolfe Tone was born on the 20 June. Today is his birthday. On your behalf I would like to wish the old Provo, 'Happy Birthday'.

At his court martial Tone said "he had acted in hostility to the government of Britain in Ireland". "From my earlier youth", he went on "I have regarded the connection between Ireland and Great Britain as the curse of the Irish nation and felt convinced that whilst it lasted this country could never be free or happy."

Like Tone, we republicans have always acted in hostility to the government of Britain in Ireland. We will continue to do so until Britain admits her guilt, recognises our rights and leaves us in peace.

We come here to Bodenstown to renew our guiding principles and to pledge our unyielding opposition to British rule in our country. We come also to say what we are for a new Ireland, a just Ireland, a free Ireland, a peaceful Ireland. We come to Bodenstown in good shape, strong, united, utterly determined and confident that we are winning the struggle to break Britain's will and finally achieve the freedom of our country.

The British, the unionists and many others throughout and beyond this island also know that our efforts have faced Britain with a stark choice — cross the Rubicon or face the inevitability of eventual defeat and continuing humiliation.

Throughout the world change is taking place. Freedom movements in South Africa and Palestine have initiated great change. Determined and unconquerable freedom fighters in the vanguard of people's struggle have exposed the unjust and undemocratic nature of artificial and corrupt governments.

Here in Ireland the courage and spirit of Irish freedom seekers remains unremitting, unbreakable and unbeatable. We have broken out of every attempt to contain us.

The British by way of contrast are confused, dismayed and disheartened. They are infuriated, angry and amazed that in spite of everything we continue to fight back and prove that we are the most potent political movement on this island today.

Certainly last month's local government election in the Six Counties did nothing to help the British. From Britain's point of view Sinn Féin's electoral successes were a disaster. We emerged from those elections stronger than before and succeeded in our aim of strengthening the nationalist agenda. We won eight extra seats, more than any other party gained and in Ireland's second largest city the republican voters, who have borne the greatest suffering, have made Sinn Féin the largest political party in Belfast. The dramatic increase in the Sinn Féin vote was a devastating blow to Britain's effort to marginalise the demands for British withdrawal and Irish freedom.

Yes, the increase in our vote by 10,000 was dramatic and I'll tell you this, if Sinn Féin's vote had instead decreased by 10,000 the British and all our opponents would have claimed a dramatic and highly significant victory over republicans. That our vote increased significantly is due to the wisdom and ability of republicans like yourselves who've turned on its head the most intense assault yet on the republican struggle by the British government, and its propagandists. In the Six Counties almost 80,000 electors saw through the censorship and the lies.

They supported Sinn Féin activists who were prepared to give leadership and to die if necessary for their political beliefs. People like Sheena Campbell, Alan Lundy, John Davey, Bernard O'Hagan and Eddie Fullerton to name only a few. They gave their support to those who refused to submit to British terrorism, people like Alex Maskey, Gerard McGuigan, Gerry Adams, John Smith in Castlwellan.

Many of those activists are here today, we should take this opportunity to thank and pay tribute to the bravery, intelligence and dignity of the most courageous politicians in Ireland. Our admiration also goes out to their families and the families of everyone who endure the terrorism of pro-British murder gangs.

The strength of the votes given to our elected representatives increasingly exposes the undemocratic policies of those who would disenfranchise the people only we can represent.

Fifty one Sinn Féin councillors were elected, seven of them women. Because of the inequalities of society the achievements of republican women candidates is all the greater. One of them, Una Gillespie, a young woman from Belfast, gained the biggest vote of all. Bernie Bradley and Mary Nelis were elected in Derry; Margaret McKenna, South Derry; Marie Moore and Annie Armstrong, Belfast and Lisburn, and Denise Sutton, Dungannon.

We have here today other Sinn Féin councillors from throughout Ireland. We should also pay tribute to them, they work just as hard, and as we witnessed with the murder of Eddie Fullerton take the same risks. They, all of them, stand here with us today as United Irishmen, representatives of the only anti-partitionist political party in Ireland with elected councillors all over this island.

Before the local government elections our opponents told the electorate they should not vote for Sinn Féin because their votes would, in the aftermath, be interpreted as votes for armed struggle. Well the election is over and I would like to nail that lie.

Our voters are freedom voters. They vote for British government withdrawal and the right of the Irish people to national self-determination. They are, I repeat, freedom voters, who voted for the Sinn Féin peace strategy which is now a central part of our function as a political party and they voted for effective representation.

But we must keep the recent election results in their proper perspective. There is still much work to be done,

plenty of room for improvement. As an all-Ireland political party we recognise the imbalance between the levels of our support in the Six and 26 Counties. While it is to be hoped that electoral success in the North will give encouragement to republicans throughout Ireland in our attempts to re-organise and build more efficient and effective party structures no one can deny that, with honourable exceptions, we have generally failed to make any significant impact on the political map of the 26 Counties. This is not solely a 26-County problem. It requires a national focus by us and a fundamental change of attitude if the imbalance is to be corrected.

The Ard Chomhairle have discussed this situation and are convinced that given the will and serious commitment to change, we have the ability to turn the situation around. There are many areas throughout this state where considerable work has been done. Our councillors, like their colleagues in the North, have advanced our agenda against all the odds. They need back up and assistance, we need more republican representatives elected to increase their influence as a political party. This can only be done by sheer hard work, determination and commitment. We must be involved in every issue which affects our people. Our activists must campaign on the issues of unemployment, low pay, poverty, women's rights and emigration. This must be linked to our demand for an end to partition and British withdrawal from the Six Counties. A party which is committed to progressive social and economic changes and to Irish independence would be in tune with the thinking of many people in the 26 Counties.

Section 31 and the continuing censorship of Sinn Féin is specifically designed to prevent Sinn Féin from progressing its political project. There can be no doubt that there are people in the Dublin government and media who are seriously embarrassed about the censorship of democratically mandated political representatives. Those in government and in the media who believe one thing but do another should be ashamed of themselves. And RTE,

who have the cheek to regard themselves as a national broadcasting agency are, in the eyes of many Irish people, nothing short of a national disgrace.

The nationalist community in the Six Counties in common with republicans throughout Ireland feel a deep sense of betrayal, disgust and contempt for the RTE authority, its senior executives and the pro-British bias of some broadcasters.

Maybe I'm a little hard on RTE. They don't totally neglect the North. After all Ken Maginnis does get an odd interview, after interview, after interview. Joe Hendron, the 'SDLP/UDA' MP for West Belfast gets an odd look in as well. But if you want to know about life in Ballymurphy, the Bogside, Crossmaglen or Coalisland, then forget RTE. As far as RTE is concerned these areas don't exist. Those who live in those areas are not important or relevant. If you want more information about British army harassment, RUC raids, the loneliness of the nationalist community, economic corruption, discrimination, loyalism and partition then you may go there yourself, or read *AP/RN*. If you want to know about the despair and the hurt that British occupation has caused, don't watch RTE and its West Brit news. Broadcasting pygmies that's what they are. Michael D Higgins is a decent man, he should do the decent thing and repeal Section 31. Political censorship disinform, it encourages ignorance, it breeds and perpetuates conflict.

Let me take this opportunity to commend all those who have led the fight back against the revisionism of our history. Let me also make a special mention of those who have confronted head on the attempts to appease Paisley and Mayhew on Articles Two and Three. The preservation of our mutual history and nationality is vital if we are to have a future to pass on to our children.

Much has been heard in recent times about the alienation of the unionists. Some commentators, including politicians and senior clergy have even attempted to rationalise the ongoing loyalist murder campaign in this context. In recent times 13 members of Sinn Féin have been murdered by loyal-

ist death squads. From January 1990 over 100 Catholics have been slaughtered in a blatant and deliberate campaign of wholesale intimidation by loyalist gangs.

The Brian Nelson case is the tip of the iceberg and shows undeniably that British intelligence controlled, directed and supplied the UDA. None of this comes as any surprise to republicans. We have known for years that the British military, are influencing the activities of loyalist death squads. There is no confusion either about why this is happening. It has a two-fold purpose. They hoped that by dragging the IRA into a religious war, the war in Ireland can be portrayed as sectarian and secondly they sought to intimidate and break the resistance of the people. Thankfully neither of their two main objectives has succeeded.

Republican resistance has not been broken and our republicanism has ensured that the only sectarian murderers in Ireland today are loyalist dogs aided by their British masters.

Attempts to portray loyalist violence as reactive to the IRA are spurious to say the least. Everyone including those who call for no retaliation by the IRA when a Catholic is murdered understand totally that there is no tit for tat campaign by the IRA.

Republicans do not blame Protestants for loyalist death squads. Protestants have nothing to fear from republicans. For years in Belfast for example, on a daily basis, Catholics are targeted by loyalists. So if tales of a tit for tat campaign were even remotely true then surely Protestants would be attacked by the IRA in Derry which has such an overwhelming nationalist majority. But they are not attacked. Not in Derry, not anywhere.

The manipulation and exploitation of unionist fears by the British is a classic counterinsurgency strategy. But the IRA to their credit have stood back from Britain's game plan. Republicans understand that the real enemy of the Irish people, Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter is the British political establishment who are the real terrorists and the original source of division in our country.

We salute the IRA's refusal to be sidetracked into a cul-de-sac of sectarian warfare.

As Irish republicans our task is not to see the political difficulties through nationalist eyes alone. The unionist community have real fears also. Many of them suspect that the British government is slackening its hold on the Six Counties and they are no longer wanted. They believe they will eventually be sold out by the British.

I reiterate that the republican demand for a British withdrawal is not aimed at unionists. It is a demand that the people of Ireland including Protestants be allowed to control our own destiny and shape a society which is pluralist and reflective of the diversity of all our people.

Our message to Protestants and unionists is a simple one. We want to live in peace with you. We realise that to achieve national reconciliation, the deep fears held by people must be addressed. We need to address those fears honestly and we accept that interim arrangements to allay understandable concerns may be required to facilitate the establishment of a dynamic Irish democracy that we could all be proud of. In an Irish national democracy those of the unionist tradition would command far greater political influence than they do now in union with Britain.

Republicans have no desire to coerce anyone into a United Ireland but we are stating our total conviction that the unionist veto over the future of the Irish people is undemocratic. Many unionists admit that partition was imposed by threat of violence, is sustained by force and accept that it will inevitably come to an end.

Each of us gathered here know that unionist consent will never be given whilst Britain allows the unionists to derogate from a process which has as its ultimate goal the building of a peaceful and agreed Ireland.

The initiation of such a process requires a clear and unambiguous indication from the British government that it accepts the right of the Irish people to national self-determination and that it intends to make an enthusiastic contri-

bution towards the unification of the Irish people. We are also asking the Dublin government and the SDLP to join with us in urging the British to accept this process.

The adoption of such a scenario would create a dynamic which would undoubtedly transform the political situation throughout Ireland. It would, I believe, attract widespread international goodwill and support. It would also provide a real opportunity to bring to an end centuries of conflict between Britain and Ireland and for the first time in Irish history be a decisive and inexorable move towards a lasting peace.

The launch of Sinn Féin's proposals to establish a genuine peace process through inclusive dialogue was initially greeted by our political opponents and the media with scepticism and cynicism. Many now accept, albeit reluctantly, that we really do want peace and the end of all war.

Yes, republicans want peace. The president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, has worked tirelessly and vigorously to place our peace proposals on the political agenda. There are now clear indications that he is succeeding in provoking new thinking and discussion amongst our political opponents.

The continuing talks with John Hume on the objective of agreeing an overall strategy for a lasting peace are valuable and potentially productive. Certainly there are still major difficulties which remain to be resolved but we wish our president well and pledge to him our wholehearted support and encouragement in the work which lies ahead.

An interesting aspect of these talks is the distinct absence of criticism of the talks from both the British and Dublin governments. This is not surprising because there is an obvious goodwill from the public at large who perceive these discussions as the only genuine peace talks. Speeches directed at republicans by Peter Brooke and Patrick Mayhew clearly indicate that the British government now accepts that talks between Sinn Féin and themselves are inevitable.

Last month's local government election results reinforces the need for a

greater realism by both Dublin and London that there will be no lasting peace without a role for Sinn Féin and those it has a renewed mandate to represent.

The question is constantly being asked, "Who will make the first move". The answer is quite simple and logical. We are all going to have to make the first move. The British government as well all know have their difficulties and its Prime Minister John Major is afraid of slipping on anymore banana skins. But this is not the time for faint hearts. We have striven to create a climate where talks are possible but it is the British government who refuse to grasp the olive branch. For our part we are ready, willing and able to make a serious contribution to any realistic and democratic search for a peaceful and just resolution.

Last year's round table talks ended as predicted by Sinn Féin. Similarly the present attempts by Mr Mayhew to rekindle the embers of that debacle are going nowhere. Suggestions that there may be a possibility of resurrecting something in the autumn begs the question, which autumn?

On the military front the British establishment has been shaken to its very foundations by the IRA. The stiff upper lip and the manipulation of news does little to mask the fact that the British are in the worst Irish crisis for many years.

Internment is yet again being promoted but there would be no greater admission of defeat. Meanwhile the RUC's Chief Constable and the desperate chairperson of the RUC Federation have made proposals which show how little they have learned about the effects of increased repression and the denial of justice.

There are no military solutions. What is needed is a political resolution of the conflict. This truth which is increasingly supported by the British people is staring the British establishment in the face. Now, not next autumn or the autumn after that, is the time to begin to bring it all to an end. Republicans are not interested in instant solutions. We accept it will take time and we are prepared to constructively assist the task of shaping a new Ireland.

Now is the time to begin, the British must end their dithering and all of us, Irish and British, must wait no longer.

The time has finally come for the British to be honest with the unionists. We must all be honest with the unionists. The unionists must be honest with themselves.

For years the British have attempted to demoralise and break republican resistance. They have failed.

For years they have tried to convince us that we can't win. Again they have failed.

For years the powerful British propaganda machine has tried to portray us as demons and brand us as guilty and responsible for the continuing conflict. They have, as always, failed.

We are Irish Republicans in the tradition of Tone, Pearse, Connolly, Markievicz, Sands and Farrell. We are proud that we are the representatives of those in Ireland who believe that the garlands of guilt and shame belongs around the necks of those who partitioned Ireland and divided our people and those who for so long have failed to confront the denial of justice and democracy.

Finally to end on a high point, I'm sure all of you were as delighted as I was at the success of the all-Ireland expedition which succeeded in conquering Mount Everest.

Well last year Gerry Adams and I climbed Mount Errigal in Donegal. The fact that I reached the summit before him and without oxygen is irrelevant so I thought I'd better mention it.

Republicans are in many ways like mountaineers, they do not shirk a challenge. They constantly live with danger and there are no shortage of obstacles. Fear must be overcome if they are to succeed.

I've always had an interest in what motivates mountaineers, particularly those who climb the most dangerous peaks.

Almost all of these remarkable people admit that there are occasions when there is a very strong compulsion, even when they are almost at the summit, to pull back and return to base camp. ☺

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those who are the most exceptional push on, in spite of all the risks. Ultimately, they are the ones who make history.

Republicans too, in our push to the summit must face risk and danger. Like the really great climbers we also have obstacles and fears to overcome. That

we have the ability to overcome them there can be no doubt. We are the history makers. We are well on our way to the top of our mountain. There will be no turning back.

Peace, Freedom and Unity are waiting there for all of us Catholic, Protestant and dissenter.