

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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SEEN BY TAOISEACH

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Easter Address by Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams
Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin Sunday, April 4, 1999

SEEN BY TAOISEACH

EMBARGOED UNTIL 3.15pm

Building Our Political Strength

It is customary at Easter Sunday to review the course of the republican struggle since last Easter. Republicans can look back on the last year with some satisfaction. We have built our political strength on both sides of the border.

This increased electoral support has been matched by an unprecedented development of the party's organisational capability. But we still have a long way to go. The majority of people here are not members of Sinn Féin. I would appeal to you to join. We need to build, to organise, to recruit and to develop our skills, and if we are truly to build and establish an alternative to the establishment parties, then we need to match them, not just by our commitment but by our ability to shape the future.

Last Easter, we celebrated the election of Caoimhghín O Caoláin as a TD. This followed the election of two MPs and the strongest electoral mandate for decades in the North. Since then our party has scaled new heights, with the election of 18 Assembly members on an increased vote. But we could have done better in both parts of this island. Our strategists and party managers have pin-pointed the areas of growth and in the time ahead we need to consolidate and build upon the base we have identified.

We will have an opportunity to do this in June with the local government elections here in this state and the European elections throughout the country. The local government elections will signal the emergence of Sinn Féin as a major radical force in local politics to mirror our profile at national level and in the North. I am confident that the republican project will be supported wherever we have developed our potential. The European elections, which will take place on the same day throughout the entire country, give us the opportunity not just to win support for our policies but to build our organisation nationwide.

Here in Dublin, we have the opportunity to build on the record of Councillor Christy Burke. I am confident that there will be a huge increase in Sinn Féin support in this city, if you work at it, if you become part of the election campaign. We also have the possibility of making a breakthrough in the European elections with Seán Crowe as our candidate.

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Sinn Féin will be standing in both of these elections on a broad republican labour platform promoting common sense policies that will improve everyone's quality of life, but particularly the most disadvantaged, who deserve equal treatment and the right to share all the benefits of society, including the new wealth created by the Celtic Tiger. Every section of our people deserves the best.

Drug infestation, housing shortages, crowded classrooms and hospital queues are not the mark of a just and equitable society. Meagre handouts are not enough. Citizens have the right to equality, to a real future for themselves and their children.

I want to pay tribute to the IRA. I commend today's IRA Volunteers. 1916 was an IRA uprising. For that reason and because the promise of the 1916 Proclamation does not find favour with the Establishment, the Easter Rising is not accorded the respect by this state that it deserves. It was a different story up to 1969. But then the emergence of a new generation of IRA freedom fighters brought out the contradictions of the lip service paid until then to the memory of other generations of IRA freedom fighters. So revisionism and a political cowardice has erased the history, the deeds and the significance of 1916 from the official recognition of that event.

But despite this, the freedom-loving people of Ireland and of the Irish Diaspora acknowledged the sacrifices of Easter 1916. In paying tribute to those men and women, Sinn Féin pays tribute also to the men and women of the IRA in every generation, including this generation, which has shown great discipline in the face of provocation.

One of the provocations - aside from continued British Army, RUC and loyalist operations - has been the demand on the IRA to disarm. This is something which the IRA has made clear it feels under no obligation to do. Indeed, the unionists have attempted and have, to a large degree, succeeded in narrowing the peace process to that issue.

There can be no doubt that this strategy is supported also by securocrats within the British system - in other words, by those who are opposed to the peace process. The danger of all of this to the quest for justice in the North has been pointed out many times to the Irish and British governments.

I welcome yesterday's announcement that the British Army will vacate the GAA pitch at Crossmaglen. Sinn Féin has lobbied continuously on this issue and I raised this only last week with the British PM. But demilitarisation needs more than mere announcements. In the Good Friday Agreement, the British Government committed itself to publicise an overall strategy dealing with the removal of Crown Forces, Crown Forces installations and repressive powers. We are still, one year later, awaiting the publication of this strategy.

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Transforming Irish Society

Sinn Féin does not pay lip service to the 1916 Proclamation. We are sincerely and genuinely committed to the transformation of Irish society. Those who wrote the 1916 Proclamation, those who made the stand in Dublin City 83 years ago, understood exactly what that means. They had a vision to "cherish all of the children of the nation equally".
That is our vision also. Irish patriots were executed in this city because of their stand for Irish freedom. By their writings and idealism, their courage and selflessness, they set an example to all freedom-loving people and for our struggle.

Those who gave us the Omagh bombing have no role in this struggle. We have made this clear.

We share the democratic position, the republican position, the position of the 1916 Proclamation on the national question. We stand with Connolly on this issue.

Sinn Féin is an Irish republican party. We make no apologies for that. We are not wink and nod republicans, armchair revolutionaries, sloganisers, or verbalised nationalists. Our goal of a united Ireland is not merely aspirational. It is an achievable goal - a just and democratic goal. And we have a strategy that can create the conditions in which the people of the island can end the union with Britain and unite in freedom and independence.

The Good Friday Agreement

In reviewing developments since last year, we also have to focus on the Good Friday Agreement. The endorsement of that Agreement involved all of the people of this island and that should not be forgotten.

You people here, the people of Dublin, and throughout the South, have a stake in the Agreement, and the vast majority of people who voted 'Yes' did so because they wanted to see a transformation of the situation in the North.

In an historic Ard Fheis, Sinn Féin advocated a 'Yes' vote in the referendums. This decision was taken after weeks of intense debate. Despite the strength of feelings involved, it is a mark of the commitment of the vast majority of our activists that they remained united and disciplined.

Sinn Féin made substantial concessions in committing ourselves to the Agreement. We did so in the context of our overall objectives, our commitment to the peace process, and to advance the search for a just peace and to move us towards those objectives. It is worth noting that the concessions made by us have been largely ignored by those who repeat the propaganda line that republicans have given nothing.

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We committed ourselves to implementing the Agreement and we have participated in the process on that basis and in good faith. This party has honoured all our commitments. The unionist political leadership has not. The Good Friday Agreement is now a year old. The Executive, the all-Ireland Ministerial Council, and the other all-Ireland bodies should now be functioning with full power. Instead, only one institution, the Assembly, is in shadow formation. This is the one institution most desired by unionists and least desired by nationalists and republicans.

Other aspects of the Agreement, as I have noted, are also in abeyance. The most obvious of these is the right to "freedom from sectarian harassment". This is most sharply felt by the people of Garvaghy Road. Portadown has fast become the Alabama of these islands and the killing of Rosemary Nelson is the most savage and recent evidence of that.

Sinn Féin pledges our support to the people of Garvaghy Road. Their plight is proof of how far we have to go before there is justice. If ever talks were needed it is in this area, and Mr. Trimble's refusal to talk to the people of his own constituency is a sad reflection on his commitment to equality.

The Irish Government also has a responsibility to defend the people of the Garvaghy Road. Since last July, there have been over 150 loyalist marches in and around that district. The Irish Government has to defend the rights of those people.

Dublin-Monaghan Bombings

In keeping with human rights organisations across the world, Sinn Féin has pressed for a number of independent and internationally-based investigations and inquiries. The harassment and killing of Rosemary Nelson, the Robert Hamill case, and the release of Lee Clegg all demonstrate the corrupt nature of the British judicial system in the North and the unacceptability of the RUC. There is also the Pat Finucane case and the role of Brian Nelson and other British Intelligence agents.

People here in Dublin have suffered also as a result of collusion. Sinn Féin supports the demands of the relatives of victims of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings for a truly independent judicial inquiry, and I call upon the Irish Government to take up that case.

This is an issue which is totally within the competence and authority of the Irish Government. Millions of pounds of tax-payers' money is being spent investigating corruption in politics and in big business and collusion between some politicians and big business. Given the corruption involved, these investigations are necessary. But surely the circumstances of these bombings deserve investigation also.

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There is also a responsibility on the Irish Government to open up institutions in this state to Irish citizens in other parts of this island. Sinn Féin has made formal representations to the all-party Oireachtas Committee on Constitutional Reform to extend voting rights in Presidential elections and referendums. We also want people in the North to be given the right to representation in Leinster House.

This too is within the competence and authority of the Government and parties here. We have lobbied all of the parties and the Government on this issue. In fact, Sinn Féin was referred to the Oireachtas Committee following discussions between myself and the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, during the Good Friday negotiations. What kind of message would it send to the people of the North if the Dublin parties or Government said 'No'.

Crisis Talks Fail to Resolve Difficulties

The latest twist in the convoluted implementation of the Good Friday Agreement came this week. The success of the unionists' tactical approach to the Good Friday Agreement is that they have impeded and frustrated progress on many issues, but most particularly the institutional matters. They have prevented the establishment of the all-Ireland institutions.

The Agreement is now one year old. It is clearly in crisis. Indeed the hopes and relative confidence of many people in the North comes mainly from the continuation of the ceasefires and not from any great confidence in the political process, even though there has been some obvious and welcome progress there. There is more hope based on the promise of change, not yet realised, but clearly foreshadowed in the Good Friday Agreement.

Therefore, for the vast majority of people, the fact that the IRA guns are not in use is of immense significance.They recognise the silence of these guns as a sign of the IRA's commitment to the search for a lasting and democratic peace settlement. But progress in the search for peace has been thwarted by those who have seen the peace process as a party political contest or war by other means. They refuse to recognise the significance of the IRA's role in creating and maintaining the conditions in which peace can be established. Indeed, some see the IRA cessation as the 'most destabilising development' in the North since partition.

Last week, the d'Hondt procedure should have been triggered by the British Government, but instead of the transfer of powers and the institutions which the people of this island voted for, we got yet another collapsed deadline and considerable doubt when - or even if - d'Hondt will ever be triggered.

There were other, more positive, developments during the negotiations, not least in terms of the interaction between our party and the unionists. But there is also a lot of confusion about what exactly the governments' declaration is supposed to mean. Given the different pronouncements of the parties involved, and the very upbeat spins of the two governments, people could be forgiven for thinking that the declaration was a done deal. Such confusion is unhelpful. Let me clarify the situation.

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The implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is the bedrock of this phase of the peace process. All other progress is entirely dependent on that. There can be no renegotiation of the Agreement, no rewriting of the Agreement by any of the parties to it. The various provisions of the Agreement are quite clear. The multiple breaches of the Agreement in relation to the establishment of the political institutions are well known and have threatened the entire process for several months now.

The provisions of the Agreement in relation to the issue of decommissioning are quite unambiguous. All parties to the Agreement are bound by these. There is an obligation on all parties to honour their commitment to work constructively and in good faith with the International Commission and to use any influence they may have to secure disarmament.

Sinn Féin has and will continue to honour its obligations in relation to these commitments and objectives. Other parties to the Agreement must do likewise. There is an obligation on all parties to honour the commitments they made when they negotiated the Good Friday Agreement.

No one can impose obligations or commitments beyond what was collectively agreed on Good Friday in 1998. There can be no reneging.

Contrary to the spins, the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister made it clear in their remarks that the declaration produced last week at Hillsborough was not an Agreement between the parties but a draft position between the two governments. The impasse remains. The institutions are blocked and the Agreement is stalled. The governments have proposed a way forward. They say that decommissioning is no longer a precondition. But decommissioning was never a precondition. Nevertheless, it was allowed to block the Agreement. If the governments are now serious, then surely that blockage must be removed and d'Hondt must be triggered at the date to be set - the latest in a long line of dates - with no more blockages after that. That is the only possible and logical meaning of the phrase "decommissioning is not a precondition".

I have assured David Trimble that I will do my best to find a way out of the impasse. That is a shared responsibility and none of us have the right to remove the democratic mandate of any section of our people or to step outside of commitments endorsed in the referendum. The way forward proposed in the governments' declaration, as explained to me, may have merit, but it may also be counter-productive if it amounts to an ultimatum to armed groups. And if it removes the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement from the political parties and the two governments, this would not only put the declaration outside the Agreement itself, it would also be a failure of politics.

The fact that the Hillsborough talks ended in an adjournment means that there was no Agreement - no deal. The Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister have told me that they know the good work which Sinn Féin has done, but all of us have to do much more.

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Good work has been done but the institutions are still blocked and the Agreement is stalled. It will take a huge effort to shift it. That is a collective responsibility with a particular onus on the governments and a particular requirement that they do not move away from the agreement. People trying to understand the different signals coming at the conclusion of the Hillsborough talks, and the different pronouncements of the parties involved, could be forgiven for thinking that the declaration was a 'done deal', agreed by all the participants in the discussions. Such confusion is unhelpful. Clarity is what is required.

Sinn Féin's position is very clear. I spelt it out again privately during this week's discussions and publicly at the adjournment. Any resolution of these difficulties has to be made within the context of the Agreement. Sinn Féin has also made it clear, both privately and publicly, that we cannot deliver the demand for IRA weapons, no matter how this is presented.

The current impasse is a unionist impasse created by people who, for decades, have been used to exercising a veto over political progress. That has to change.

If we are to see real and meaningful change then all vetoes must be removed and all the participants must be part of an inclusive process based on equality and which respects the democratic mandates of all involved. Despite these difficulties, Sinn Féin will return to the renewed discussions in two weeks' time determined to see the full implementation of the Agreement.

There is also a lot of confusion about what exactly the declaration means in its own terms and in terms of the peace process. Such confusion affects the general population as well as activists from all sections of society.

Let me try to give some assurances. I want to make it absolutely clear to the people of this island and indeed people abroad, including the people of Britain, that Sinn Féin is totally committed to the peace process. The history of this island is a sad testimony of the conflict and divisions that have bedevilled Anglo-Irish relations for centuries. The resultant pain and hurt has touched everyone.
Sinn Féin's peace strategy is about bringing an end to all of that and we will not be deflected until, in partnership with others, we secure a future free from conflict and injustice.

Let me try also to assure our unionist neighbours. It is a source of deep frustration that your political representatives do not respect the democratic mandate of Sinn Féin and the democratic imperative of the Good Friday referendums and are not prepared to embrace the provisions of the Agreement. Despite this, we will do our best to remove any difficulties you may have and to understand your fears and your feelings. We will do everything we can within our ability to make this process work. We will do our best to find and to ease the way forward.

We have no wish to discriminate against you, or to dominate you, or to marginalise you, or to drive you from this island, or to make you second-class citizens in the land of your birth.

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We want to go forward in agreement with you so that we can all live in peace, justice and harmony. That means recognising each other's integrity and accepting each other on our own terms. But it also means change. Nothing must or will prevent that. The Ireland of the 21st Century must be different from today's Ireland. It has to be transformed so that we can live together as equals and in celebration of our freedom and diversity. Sinn Féin is for reconciliation. Real reconciliation. That has been a consistent part of our strategy because a process of national reconciliation, a healing process, is a very necessary part of uniting the people of this island.

We also understand our responsibility to the people of this island and our responsibility to this struggle and to the future so we do not and we will not contemplate failure.

We intend to manage this phase of the process so that we emerge with real progress in the search for peace. We will come out of this phase strong and united. Let no one allow confusion or the stresses and strains, the tactical manoeuvres of the moment unnerve us or divert us from our strategic view of the future. The republican position will only be advanced by clear strategic thinking and by intelligent, disciplined activists building our political strength and working alongside our people.

This is the last Easter Sunday of this century. It is my conviction that we will establish a lasting peace in our country. We face the new century confident in our ability, in the strength of our arguments, and in the certain knowledge that we will shape the future and bring an end to division and outside interference in the affairs in the people of this island.

ENDS