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Delivering Educational and Academic Excellence

Published: 10 March, 2009

Delivering Educational and Academic Excellence

The Sinn Féin leader commented on the attacks of recent days. Mr. Adams said:

"I am an Irish republican.

I want to see an end to British rule on this island and the unity of orange and green.

This can only be achieved by peaceful and democratic means and Sinn Féin is wedded to that.

It's also my conviction that these objectives can be achieved.

Sinn Féin has a strategy to do just that and we are building the political support and structures to advance this.

Those who carried out the two attacks which have resulted in the deaths of two British soldiers and one member of the PSNI, as well as serious injuries to others, want to destroy the gains made by the peace process.

The political institutions, the peace process and Sinn Féin are as much a target for them as those they have killed or injured.

They have no strategy, no popular support and no rationale for their actions.

They have to be resisted.

Politically. Democratically. Peacefully.

The gains made for and by the people of this island cannot be surrendered.

For our part genuine republicans and democrats will work with the PSNI to ensure that those involved are apprehended and subject to due process, and I am looking for support for our efforts.

One way of ensuring that these so-called dissidents

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don't have their way is to ensure that we make politics work and that it is business as usual in the work to bring equality and fairness to all sectors of our society."

The main thrust of the Sinn Féin Presidents remarks were about academic selection and the fundamental reform of the education system that Caitriona Ruane, the Minister of Education is carrying through.

Mr. Adams commended the Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane, for implementing the commitment made by Martin McGuinness when he was Minister of Education, to end the 11 plus.

He described the education system designed 60 years ago as "no longer fit for the modern world."

Mr. Adams said: "*Academic selection was an inappropriate and inadequate approach to education.*

It was also unjust and fundamentally wrong.

It is now gone.

Last year's was the last 11 plus and I welcome that fact."

The Sinn Féin leader outlined the Party's goal; "*...to develop an education system which is pupil centered and which meets the needs of our modern world.*

Her goal is an education system which guarantees the very best education available; the necessary resources and the opportunity to achieve your personal goals and ambitions...

That means we have to transform our educational culture to one that constantly strives for excellence.

I believe that Caitríona's efforts, which are about a complete reform of education, can create the circumstance in which excellence will thrive.

Her efforts will ensure a more equitable education system based on educational excellence, including academic excellence for all our children.

No parent or student who is academically inclined should feel threatened by these reforms.

On the contrary the academic excellence which exists in our current arrangements must also be protected, defended and enhanced."

Mr. Adams also commented on suggestion that the Catholic Hierarchy may propose a new test. He said:

"Finally, let me deal with the suggestion that the Catholic Hierarchy may be about to bring forward proposals that could contain a demand for the Education Department to introduce an interim test.

The suggestion is that this would be used for 3 or 5 years before academic selection would end.

The Catholic Hierarchy and others need to understand that there is no possibility of a Departmental test being introduced in the absence of legislation, even on a transitional basis.

Last year the Minister said she was prepared to commission such a test

*based upon the revised curriculum.
But this compromise approach could only have worked in the context
of a legislative framework.*

And this was rejected by the DUP.

*Any test operating outside of legislation is a legal minefield, as those
within some grammar schools who are proposing this approach are
now finding out.*

*Consequently, this proposition was sensibly abandoned and the
Minister published her guidelines.*

Caithfidh muid bheith soiléir air seo.

*Ní Bheidh aon scrúdú ag teacht ón roinn agus ba chóir don eaglais
glachadh leis seo.*

*Any attempt to construct a test would, in my view, be in opposition to
the policy of the catholic sector which is against academic selection
and for a more just, modern and fit for purpose process of transfer and
education system.*

*It would also be contrary to the principles of social justice which the
Catholic Bishops have set out.*

*Thus far resistance to the reform of our education system has mainly
been about protecting the old status quo and defending inequality.*

*It would be disappointing if the Catholic Bishops were to buy into that
type of retrogressive approach and it is my hope that they will defend
the policy of the Catholic sector against academic selection and stand
by the principles of social justice.*

So, let me say it again - the 11 plus is gone - finished - never to return.

It is now time to move on."

Concluding the Sinn Fein President said:

*"Republicans are committed to a program of change, in education and
in every other facet of our society.*

*A program of change which delivers equality and social justice, and
tackles institutional discrimination and inequality.*

*A program of change which delivers for disadvantaged communities -
nationalist and unionist alike based on objective need...*

*Sinn Féin is determined to build a system that delivers for all or
children and young people.*

*We have a vision of a transformed education system, which sets aside
ideology or outdated processes, for one which embraces innovation,
takes account of the needs of our global 21st century economy, adopts
modern methods and has the needs of children and young people at its
heart.*

I believe we will achieve that."

Full Text of Gerry Adams speech:

Delivering Educational and Academic Excellence

Ba mhaithe liom buíochas a thabhairt don Chumann Díospóireachta Naomh
Louise as an chuireadh teacht anseo agus labhairt libh inniu.

I want to thank the St. Louise's Senior Debating Society for the invitation to
address you today.

Thank you to Laura, Nuala and Sally.

I would also like to thank your principal Mrs. McCartan for facilitating this event
and for the warm welcome she and her staff have given to me on my visits to

St. Louise's.

Before I make my remarks I would like to begin by saying something about the events of recent days.

I am an Irish republican.

I want to see an end to British rule on this island and the unity of orange and green.

This can only be achieved by peaceful and democratic means and Sinn Féin is wedded to that.

It's also my conviction that these objectives can be achieved.

Sinn Féin has a strategy to do just that and we are building the political support and structures to advance this.

Those who carried out the two attacks which have resulted in the deaths of two British soldiers and one member of the PSNI, as well as serious injuries to others, want to destroy the gains made by the peace process.

The political institutions, the peace process and Sinn Féin are as much a target for them as those they have killed or injured.

They have no strategy, no popular support and no rationale for their actions.

They have to be resisted.

Politically. Democratically. Peacefully.

The gains made for and by the people of this island cannot be surrendered.

For our part genuine republicans and democrats will work with the PSNI to ensure that those involved are apprehended and subject to due process, and I am looking for support for our efforts.

One way of ensuring that these so-called dissidents don't have their way is to ensure that we make politics work and that it is business as usual in the work to bring equality and fairness to all sectors of our society.

Which brings me back to today's efforts.

The Daughters of Charity came to Belfast in 1900 when they took on the responsibility of teaching the half-timers.

For those of you who don't know - children began work at a very early age in the mills of Belfast.

West Belfast MP at that time, Joe Devlin, asked a question in the British Parliament in February 1908 about half-timers.

He was told that there were 711 boys and 1289 girls between the ages of 12 and 14 employed as half-timers in Belfast factories.

Lig dúinn smaoineadh air sin go ceann bomaite, Páistí a bhí iontú.

An dtiocfadh libh sin a shámhail - do dhearthair nó do dheirfiúr óg amuigh ag obair sna muilleáin le dó - dhéag uair sa lá? Tá sé dochreidte!

My granny was a half-timer.

I'm sure many of you could usefully research your family history and discover your great grannies worked in the Linen Mills.

James Connolly, the great republican leader who lived in one of the terraced

houses just below St. John's helped organise the Millworkers.

His daughter Nora Connolly O'Brien in her 'Portrait of a Rebel Father' writes a vivid account of that time.

Connolly described the millworkers as the Linen slaves of Belfast.

These child workers were usually paid between three and four shillings a week or in today's money - that is between 15 and 20 pence.

The children worked three days one week and went to school for two and the following week this was reversed hence the term half-timers.

Almost all were employed between 6.30am and 6pm in the evening with two intervals for meals amounting to one and a half hours.

The work itself was very hard.

But many families just survived on the small wages these children brought in.

Disease was widespread and the death rate among children was very high.

For those children who survived into adulthood most died before they were 45.

More than 15,000 poor children in this city were without school places.

Scannal millteannach a bhí sa scéal seo.

In the 1920's it was found that only six of 194 elementary schools in Belfast could be classified as satisfactory.

The Belfast Education Committee said: "About 40 are a direct menace to health."

St. Louise's itself came to the Falls Road in 1958 providing education for tens of thousands of young women.

At that time St. Louise's was dealing with the outworking of the 1947 Education Act which made education compulsory up to the age of 15 and introduced the 11 plus.

That was then and this is now.

Today we have to construct an education system able to meet the needs of children and young people in the 21st century.

First of all I want to commend the Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane, for implementing the commitment made by Martin McGuinness when he was Minister of Education, to end the 11 plus.

Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a chur chuig ár nAire Oideachais as an obair iontach atá déanta aici.

For decades the 11 plus condemned the majority of our children as failures.

It was a system of academic rejection for the majority of children.

It was part of an education system designed 60 years ago and no longer fit for the modern world.

In an age in which we pride ourselves on children's rights and on child protection our education system continued to inflict emotional pressure and trauma on thousands of children every year.

Academic selection was an inappropriate and inadequate approach to education.

It was also unjust and fundamentally wrong.

It is now gone.

Last year's was the last 11 plus and I welcome that fact.

Go raibh slán don am.

This would not have happened under British direct rule.

It would not have happened without a Sinn Féin Minister in the Department of Education.

The Minister has now published her guidelines for transfer.

Her goal and that of Sinn Féin is to develop an education system which is pupil centered and which meets the needs of our modern world.

Her goal is an education system which guarantees the very best education available; the necessary resources and the opportunity to achieve your personal goals and ambitions.

The world today is very different from when I went to school.

Tá an domhain go hiomlán athraithe ón am a bhí mé ar scoil.

The Information technology revolution has created a new economy - a knowledge economy - which will continue to transform our society in the time ahead.

When you conclude your education you will enter a market place in which you will compete with others in India and China and elsewhere around the world for jobs.

Society has a responsibility to provide you with the best education possible to compete in this shrinking world.

You as girls and young women are fully entitled to full equality.

Gender equality is crucial and should be a basic birthright for all Irish women - indeed of all women on this island.

That means we have to transform our educational culture to one that constantly strives for excellence.

I believe that Caitríona's efforts, which are about a complete reform of education, can create the circumstance in which excellence will thrive.

Her efforts will ensure a more equitable education system based on educational excellence, including academic excellence for all our children.

No parent or student who is academically inclined should feel threatened by these reforms.

On the contrary the academic excellence which exists in our current arrangements must also be protected, defended and enhanced.

But it must also be supplemented by excellence in every other aspect of our education system, in skills, crafts, art, sport, music and, in technology and communication also.

Tá a lán obair le déanamh ar an chóras oideachais.

Ní leor smaoineadh ar na daoine is fearr agus lucht an airgid.

Tá dualgas orainn amharc ar gach píosa den chóras agus cinniú go bhfuil muid ag seasamh leis na daoine is boichte, na páistí is laige chomh maith leis an dream is cliste.

That is the challenge we all face.

The Minister tried over the last two years to secure a political consensus on the way forward.

That was the right thing to do.

Regrettably, while she was about this necessary work, the opponents of change sought to create confusion and cynically accused the Minister of indecision.

Some politicised the issue of education and of academic selection in particular. In doing so they abandoned the children of this city in disadvantaged communities in the Lower Shankill and the Newtownards Road, as well as the children of the Falls and across the north.

The defense of academic selection is not based on educational insight or the needs of children - it is based entirely and solely on defending the failed status quo.

I am also deeply disappointed by the attitude of some within the education system who have adopted the same approach.

They claim that academic selection is the only way to provide and preserve educational excellence.

Nonsense!

Nár thaispean an scoil seo agus go leor scoileanna eile sa cheantar seo - Iarthaí Bhéal Feirste - go dtig leo an oideachas is fearr a thabhairt dár bpáistí go léir - is cuma faoin 11 plus.

Standing here in St. Louise's today, I can tell them with absolute confidence and authority that they are wrong.

The teachers, students, parents and governors of this school are proof that academic excellence can be achieved.

I want to thank all of you and the staff of this fine school for that.

I commend the work of everyone involved in St. Louise's and I congratulate you on over 50 years of educational excellence here on the Falls Road.

Finally, let me deal with the suggestion that the Catholic Hierarchy may be about to bring forward proposals that could contain a demand for the Education Department to introduce an interim test.

The suggestion is that this would be used for 3 or 5 years before academic selection would end.

The Catholic Hierarchy and others need to understand that there is no possibility of a Departmental test being introduced in the absence of legislation, even on a transitional basis.

Last year the Minister said she was prepared to commission such a test based upon the revised curriculum.

But this compromise approach could only have worked in the context of a legislative framework.

And this was rejected by the DUP.

Any test operating outside of legislation is a legal minefield, as those within some grammar schools who are proposing this approach are now finding out. Consequently, this proposition was sensibly abandoned and the Minister published her guidelines.

Caithfidh muid bheith soiléir air seo.

Ní Bheidh aon scrúdú ag teacht ón roinn agus ba chóir don eaglais glacadh leis seo.

Any attempt to construct a test would, in my view, be in opposition to the policy of the catholic sector which is against academic selection and for a more just, modern and fit for purpose process of transfer and education system.

It would also be contrary to the principles of social justice which the Catholic Bishops have set out.

Thus far resistance to the reform of our education system has mainly been about protecting the old status quo and defending inequality.

It would be disappointing if the Catholic Bishops were to buy into that type of

retrogressive approach and it is my hope that they will defend the policy of the Catholic sector against academic selection and stand by the principles of social justice.

So, let me say it again - the 11 plus is gone - finished - never to return.

It is now time to move on.
Tá Bealach eile ann.

Tá sé simplí agus tá sé ag obair sa chuid eile den tír seo.

The Minister has set out the criteria which should be used to govern the transfer of children to post-primary education from 2010 and beyond.

The guidance she has issued provides a set of admissions criteria already used widely.

They are:

- Family, Community, Geography
- All schools are obliged to have regard to these recommendations.
- It is recommended also that where schools use any of the geographical criteria - i.e. Parish, Catchment Area, or Distance from School - these should be combined with the "nearest suitable school" criterion so as to give equal priority to applicants for whom the school is the nearest suitable school.

For our part Sinn Féin will continue to act in the interests of all our children and young people.

Republicans are committed to a program of change, in education and in every other facet of our society.

A program of change which delivers equality and social justice, and tackles institutional discrimination and inequality.

A program of change which delivers for disadvantaged communities - nationalist and unionist alike based on objective need.

Last year's figures for children transferring from primary school to grammar schools graphically illustrate why the 11 plus had to go and why we need a new structure for education.

On the Falls 44 children transferred to Grammar Schools.

On the Shankill the number was 10.

On the Malone Road it was 214.

Cad é atá na figiúirí seo ag rá linn?

Nach bhfuil páistí Bóthar na bhFál chomh maith le páistí Bóthar Magh Luain?

These figures are for Belfast but the story is the same throughout the six counties.

Sinn Féin wants all children to do as well as the young people on the Malone Road.

In fact we want everyone to do better.

And we want every school - like St. Louise's - to be a school of excellence, well resourced, working to a modern curriculum and part of an education system which ensures that every child fulfills his or her potential.

Sinn Féin is determined to build a system that delivers for all our children and young people.

Ní bheidh an obair seo furasta ach creidim féin agus creideann páirtí s'agáin gur fiú é agus go bhfuil sé iontach, iontach tabhachtach.

We have a vision of a transformed education system, which sets aside ideology

or outdated processes, for one which embraces innovation, takes account of the needs of our global 21st century economy, adopts modern methods and has the needs of children and young people at its heart.

I believe we will achieve that.

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