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Annual Wolfe Tone Commemoration, Bodinstown

23 June 1996

Text of Speech by Sinn Féin's Director of Publicity, Rita O'Hare

A chainte agus a chomrádaithe
Fellow republicans

As we gather at the graveside of Theobald Wolfe Tone let us remind ourselves of the words which have inspired republicans for 200 years. In his autobiographical notes he sums up the ideas on which he based his life's work and for which he was eventually to give his life:

"To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, to break the connection with England, the never-failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country - these were my objects."

"To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter - these were my means."

These words have been repeated by republican speakers many times in this graveyard. The challenge to us is to apply them as they are relevant to our own time. Too often in the past the straightforward principles of Tone have been misrepresented. Emphasis has been placed solely on the need for separation from England but the need to unite the Irish people and to end sectarian division has been neglected. Or else pleas for reconciliation have been made while forgetting the ultimate source of division of our people and our island and the necessity to complete the unfinished business of Irish independence.

So in these times of danger and doubt, which are also times of opportunity and hope, let us say loudly and clearly that we are Irish republicans. We are out to break the connection with England as Tone was. Like Tone we seek to unite the people of Ireland. And with Wolfe Tone we assert the independence of our country.

What we do mean when we echo Tone's words and say that we wish to break the connection with England? We do not mean that we want to cut ourselves off from our nearest neighbours, to isolate the peoples of these islands from one another. It was well put by Wolfe Tone's party, the Society of United Irishmen in an address to the English Society of Friends of the People in October 1791:

"As to the union between the two islands, believe us when we assert our union rests upon our mutual independence. We shall love each other if we be left to ourselves. It is the union of mind which ought to bind these nations together."

For 200 years democrats in these islands have tried to establish a new relationship between our peoples based on mutual independence. In that time the denial of independence to the Irish people has been the single biggest cause of conflict in these islands. When at the start of this century the Irish people seemed about to achieve the dream of Wolfe Tone, a united Irish

republic, the British government rekindled the old fires of division and sectarianism which Tone and his comrades had almost quenched in their day. A political arrangement based on the sectarian division of the land of Ireland and the people of Ireland was imposed upon us by force.

Let there be no doubt that the very reason for the existence of our party is to set aside that failed partitionist arrangement and to replace it with a new political settlement worked out among the Irish people ourselves. The unity and independence of Ireland as a sovereign state remains the first aim of Irish republicans.

That new Ireland which we seek cannot be built without those sections of the Irish people who today embrace the political creeds of unionism and loyalism. We do not underestimate the divisions which exist among our people; they run deep and have been reinforced by decades of conflict.

We republicans acknowledge the hurt for which we have been responsible. It is noteworthy that while loyalists similarly have acknowledged the hurt that they have caused in the conflict, the leaderships of the main unionist parties have yet to acknowledge the injustices for which institutionalised unionism was responsible over 50 years in the Stormont state. Nor has the British government ever acknowledged the damage they have done to Ireland or admitted their direct responsibility for the many many cases of collusion and killing.

When we seek in the words of Wolfe Tone to "substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant Catholic and Dissenter" we do not seek to impose an identity upon any section of our people. We reject the grotesque caricature of the conflict which presents it in terms of Gaelic Catholic Nationalist versus Ulster Protestant British. That such is the perceived nature of the conflict reflects not some inherent inability of our people to live together in peace but is the continuing legacy of the age old policy of divide and conquer.

We recognise that there are many unionist and loyalists who do not regard themselves as Irish. For unionists there is an identity crisis which has deepened in recent years. But we republicans believe that it is only in reclaiming their Irishness can they begin to come out of that crisis. Again we say that we do not wish to impose an identity on anyone but we make no apology for asserting that the radical tradition of the United Irishmen which sought to bring together Irish people regardless of creed is a surer guide for the future than the tenuous link to Tory England which will abandon the unionist community whenever it sees fit.

And England still holds the key. There will be lasting peace when the British government recognises once and for all that it is time to transform its relationship with the Irish people, that the relationship must be based on mutual independence, not division and domination. Thereby hangs the success or failure of an Irish peace process.

I do not need to rehearse here the story of the past 22 months. The world knows that for 18 months the IRA maintained an unprecedented cessation of military operations. The world knows as well that the opportunity to begin the transformation of Anglo-Irish relations thus presented was squandered by the British government.

We should not lose sight of the gains made over those months through the many positive and constructive developments due to the peace process. Primary among those developments was the hope and expectation that the conflict could be resolved and that the age old desire for Irish unity and independence was not an impossible dream.

The "build a wall around it and forget it" school of thought was put into retreat. Through the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, debate on every issue of relevance took place and all strands of political, social, cultural and economic thought were represented. It was a vital and invaluable exercise. We in Sinn Féin learnt a great deal from the other participants and they, I know, learnt from us.

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116,377 voters across the Six Counties endorsed our party's republican programme and our peace strategy. That the British government has refused to recognise the rights of our voters is no surprise to republicans, though no less disgraceful for all that. We had a right to expect more from an Irish government. Mr Bruton cannot preach about democracy while refusing to recognise the result of the ballot box.

And as for Prionsias de Rossa and Mary Harney I would remind them while they are lecturing us about democracy that more Irish citizens voted for our party than for their two parties put together.

It almost seems that these two leaders and others - who opposed the peace process when it began - are more comfortable with a situation where Sinn Féin is excluded.

We in Sinn Féin understand the grave difficulties presented by the current situation to the Irish government and to Mr Bruton. The killing of Garda Gerry McCabe in Adare, County Limerick was totally wrong. The IRA said in their statement on 14 June that those who carried out these shootings did so to the detriment of the republican cause.

Following this tragic incident there have been widespread arrests and a number of people have been beaten in Garda custody. In times of highly charged emotions there could be a temptation to excuse attempts to secure convictions through extracting confessions by force. As in the past this has proved a dangerous practice which has led to serious miscarriages of justice.

Recent events, tragic and terrible as they are, should not make Mr Bruton walk away and follow the begrudgers and the nay-sayers.

Both the British and Irish governments have the responsibility to recognise the rights of Sinn Féin voters to be represented at negotiations. And we in Sinn Féin have the responsibility to represent our voters who have demanded their place at a negotiated peace settlement.

James Connolly wrote of Wolfe Tone:

"We who hold his principles . . . believe that any movement which would successfully grapple with the problem of national freedom must draw its inspiration not from the mouldering records of a buried past, but from the glowing hopes of the living present, the vast possibilities of the mighty future."

The hopes of the Irish people for peace are still glowing. All who are actively involved in the search for peace must redouble our efforts to turn those hopes into reality.

And the future does hold vast possibilities. The future we seek is for a transformation of Irish society.

- We seek constitutional change which places in the hands of the Irish people the sovereign power to determine our own future, free from outside interference.
- We seek reconciliation among Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, people of every religious belief and none, leading to unity in the common name of Irishmen and Irishwomen.
- We seek equality and respect for the rights of all in place of discrimination, sectarianism, and second-class citizenship.
- We seek employment in place of unemployment, prosperity at home in

place of emigration.

- We seek a society which measures economic well being not in terms of interest rates or corporate profits but in terms of the proper education of our children, the provision of a free and comprehensive health service for all, jobs and facilities in our communities for our young people, freedom from the scourge of drug abuse and the crime it brings, and a secure old age for senior citizens.
- We seek a place for Ireland in the world which accords with our history of anti-colonial struggle, a foreign policy based on positive neutrality, supporting the vast majority of the world's citizens against the handful of states and giant multinational corporations which exploit them.
- We seek the development of our natural resources and the fostering of industry with respect for the environment.

This is the vision which unites us as republicans. And we are going forward in unity to a peaceful and democratic future. We are United Irishwomen and Irishmen. We are republicans. It is as republicans that we formed our strategy for peace, as republicans we engaged with others, as republicans we fought the 30 May elections, as republicans that we will go into negotiations and it is as republicans we will come out of them.

I will quote again from Connolly:

"We are told to imitate Wolfe Tone, but the greatness of Wolfe Tone lay in the fact that he imitated nobody."

Tone was an innovator and a risk-taker. Republicans of today have shown our ability to take risks also. Our peace strategy has been fraught with risk but we have persisted with it and we must continue to take risks for peace.

Everyone involved in the search for peace needs to be equally persistent. We must not flinch in times of danger. We must pursue our peace strategy through the highs and lows because the prize of peace, justice and democracy is too great to be missed. Our strategy is firmly based on our republican analysis of where we are and how we got here.

I am confident that we will bring the same courage and commitment to this stage of our struggle that has sustained us throughout the last 25 years. We have the courage to negotiate and the commitment to find agreement. We have learned from the past, we are fully conscious of the realities of the present and are looking with confidence to the future. We are confident in our republican analysis, the concept of a new Ireland which we will bring to peace negotiations.

Before I conclude I wish to send a special word of solidarity to Irish republican prisoners wherever they are incarcerated and to their families. I want to say this - there can be no settlement that does not include the release of all political prisoners.

A year ago on this very day our party president Gerry Adams and I together with other Sinn Féin representatives and ANC leaders, were in another graveyard on the other side of the world. We stood at the graveside of Joe Slovo in Soweto, South Africa.

There too the path to democracy and justice was long and hard. There were obstacles put in the way of negotiations for a new South Africa, some of them similar to our experience. The unrealistic demand for decommissioning, refusal to release prisoners, refusal of some supporters of the old regime to come to talks. There were breakdowns of the whole process but with persistence and determination the people of South Africa refused to be deflected from the

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The failure of the British government to move on anything that could have enhanced the peace process, such as the treatment of prisoners, demonstrates a fear of peace and a preoccupation with pacification and with defeating and humiliating the republican struggle.

They are still operating with an imperial / colonial mindset not a democratic one.

As we contemplate these times of grave political difficulty for all sides we must not lose sight of the wasted weeks and months which were frittered away by John Major. That's how we got where we are today. Distrust of the British government has been reinforced and the task of peacemaking has been made much more difficult.

The breakdown of the IRA ceasefire, the bombing of Canary Wharf and the recent bomb in Manchester are tragic evidence of this collective failure. But the task of restoring the peace process remains to be done and republicans will not shirk that task.

When I last had the honour to speak here at Bodensdown in 1987 we were on the threshold of a new phase of our struggle. There were difficult years to follow but we developed our peace strategy at that time. We recognised then as we recognise now that there has to be a negotiated peace settlement involving the Irish and British governments and all the parties. We knew then as we know now that nationalist Ireland has to move towards that peace settlement with a common view on the way forward.

The peace initiative by our party president Gerry Adams and the leader of the SDLP John Hume inspired nationalist Ireland and with the engagement of the Irish government of Albert Reynolds the prospect of a peace settlement drew much closer. The peace process moved to the top of the Irish political agenda and the failed policy of isolation and exclusion of Sinn Féin was finally discredited. The IRA's cessation of August 1994 moved the peace process onto a new plane.

Britain was confronted with the demand for it to engage in a real peace process, a new phase of conflict resolution, a negotiated and democratic settlement. We know how the Tory government dodged and weaved and winced in the spotlight of international opinion. But nationalist Ireland, with the support of our exiles in the United States and elsewhere, kept the spotlight on them.

The British government may have squandered countless opportunities, they may have succeeded in substituting for a time the hope of August 1994 with the disillusionment of January 1996, they may have temporarily divided the forces of nationalist Ireland, but for the British government or for anyone else there can be no turning back.

There can be no return to the failed agenda of exclusion. No return to censorship and isolation of Sinn Féin. No return to the politics of the last atrocity. No return to Stormont. No return to institutionalised sectarianism and naked repression on the streets.

In a phrase we often hear these days we want to help the British government to embrace democratic politics.

Sinn Féin's mandate is based upon our rejection of the injustices of a partitionist state in the Six Counties, our advocacy of a negotiated peace settlement and our vision of a new Ireland for all the Irish people, and for a new relationship with the people of our neighbouring island.

That republican mandate was strengthened considerably in the 30 May election. I want to congratulate our candidates, party workers, and most of all our staunch supporters and our voters for the success of Sinn Féin in that election. Never has our party been stronger in electoral terms. We must now carry on that success into the next Westminster elections which could be called at any time and into both local and Leinster House elections in the 26 Counties.

drive to democracy. They like us were told that the task was too great and they would never succeed. But they have succeeded. We took inspiration and example from them as indeed they did from Ireland's struggle.

In Ireland as in South Africa the tide of history is with the forces for change. Only we can ensure that political change is progressive and irreversible and leads to a new Ireland for all our people.

ENDS.

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