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RUAIRÍ Ó BRÁDAIGH

DON 77 ú ARD-FHEIS

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

OF

RUAIRÍ Ó BRÁDAIGH

TO THE 77th ARD-FHEIS

TEACH AN ARD-MHÉARA, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH  
MANSION HOUSE, DUBLIN

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**SINN FÉIN 44 CEARNÓG PHARNELL BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH 1**

Teileafón 01-726932

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A chathaoirligh, a theachtaí is a chairde ar fad .

Céad fáilte romhaibh ag an 77ú Ard-Fheis de Shinn Féin!

The year since our last Ard-Fheis has already gone down in history as one of the most eventful and traumatic in the story of the Irish Nation. The establishment politicians, North and South, have received the fright of their political lives, from which they have not yet fully recovered - if ever they do; and their imperial masters in London have not gone undisturbed either.

The first hunger strike of the year, in pursuit of the five reasonable and just demands was in its seventh day when we met here twelve months ago. It lasted 53 days altogether and for the last 18 days the seven heroic prisoners in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh were joined on the strike by three equally heroic comrades in Armagh Women's Prison.

When the now notorious 34-page document, plus the text of a statement to be made in Westminster next day by Humphrey Atkins were received from the British Government the strike ended and Mrs Thatcher cried: "Victory" to the world. But as the Paris newspaper "Le Monde" concluded on its front page in its edition of the 21st and 22nd December, 1980:

" The best course would have been for the British Government to defuse the resistance in negotiating very quickly with the prisoners. It has, in place of that, provoked a mobilisation of the Catholic population of Ulster in favour of the I.R.A. without precedent since 1972. Where is, therefore, Margaret Thatcher's victory?". ( The terminology used is, of course, that of "Le Monde").

In addition, the gathering of support throughout the 26 Counties was unprecedented, the high points being the mass peaceful demonstrations of tens of thousands to the gates of Leinster House and to the British Embassy. World reaction, above all else, was most effective and it was on this level that London most decisively lost the propaganda war.

One of the most remarkable demonstrations of support, apart from the Trade Union and mass street demonstrations among others too numerous to mention, came from Portugal. On December 17th, the Portuguese national parliament unanimously passed a resolution condemning Britain's treatment of the prisoners and calling for the granting of political status. It was the first time in history, including the great days of 1919-21 that the democratically elected parliament of any country passed a resolution supporting Ireland in its confrontation with England.

Because the hunger strike ended the next day, news of this signal demonstration of support went largely unrecorded. However, the weekly paper of Irish emigrants in Britain, the "Irish Post" in its issue of January 1st, 1981 described reaction in London :

"The Foreign Office was enraged and the Portuguese Ambassador in London summoned. This is the strongest reprimand in the diplomatic code - the step prior to the breaking off of diplomatic relations. He was given a most severe dressing down and, as you might expect, was informed that Charlie Haughey (as witnessed in the Dublin summit) supported the British Government's approval <sup>ACH</sup> to the hunger strike.

"As if that were not enough, Lord Carrington despatched a communique to Portugal's Prime Minister-elect, Pinto Balsemão, endeavouring to have the parliamentary record 'set straight'".

(The issue was also debated in the E.E.C. Assembly and in the Parliaments of Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Quebec and West Germany).

However, as soon as public attention, nationally and internationally, was diverted from Long Kesh and Armagh, the 34-page document and the British Secretary's parliamentary statement were reneged on by perfidious Albion in the tradition of the Treaty of Limerick, broken before "the ink wherewith 'twas writ could dry".

In the New Year, confrontation after confrontation followed in the H-Blocks and a second hunger strike was embarked <sup>on</sup> March 1st.

This time it was led by a man whose name has since become familiar on a global scale, the Officer Commanding the protesting prisoners, Bobby Sands. He was followed by others whose names have also gone around the world, at intervals of at first, two weeks and then of one week in a hunger strike of epic proportions which lasted over seven months - 217 days in fact - and claimed ten precious lives. (One minute's silence).

It is difficult to speak of these events but certain matters must be recorded and conclusions drawn. Firstly, the hunger strike support campaigns were run under the leadership of the broad-based National H-Blocks/Armagh Committee and its hundreds of local action groups throughout Ireland which rallied the anti-imperialist forces and all who supported the prisoners' five demands. In this urgent national work Sinn Féin is proud to say that it played a major part.

Early in the second hunger strike an event occurred which gave the campaign an unexpected boost and carried world-wide impact. Frank Maguire, M.P. for Fermanagh-South Tyrone, a great Irishman who had worked unstintingly for the Republican prisoners in Ireland and England, died suddenly. Bobby Sands was nominated to succeed him and following a short, sharp and electrifying campaign was elected on the 40th day of his fast.

Margaret Thatcher and Humphrey Atkins said the election of Bobby Sands M.P. made no difference, but to people in Ireland and England- and throughout the world - it raised the whole Irish struggle to a level where the mass support of the Irish people in the British-occupied zone was seen clearly and in unmistakable terms.

Earlier, on March 10th, notable and effective submissions were officially made before the United Nations Commission of Human Rights at a sitting in its headquarters in Geneva on behalf of the prisoners by Sinn Féin Director of Foreign Affairs, Richard Behal and Maura McCrory of the Relatives Action Committees.

While support was mobilised on a greater scale than ever at home and abroad, the counter-attack began as efforts were made to sidetrack the protest, notably the visits to Bobby Sands' bedside of the representatives of the European Commission for Human Rights (acting through a lawyer) of the Papal Envoy, Fr Magee and the ghoulish arrival there of Don Concannon who as British Labour Minister for Prisons in the Six Counties had directed the building of the ill-famed H-Blocks.

None of these high-powered and highly-publicised interventions succeeded in persuading the M.P. for Fermanagh-South Tyrone to abandon his fast without gaining his five demands. Three Euro M.P.s also visited him in an attempt to assist the dying hunger-striker and two of these did not ask him to break his fast short of gaining his objectives.

But Mrs Thatcher resisted the assembling of moral forces around the world in support of the hunger strikers by pleading the on-going talks with Mr Haughey's government concerning "the totality of relationships between these islands". Mr Haughey, although besieged by relatives of the dying prisoners did not strip the British government of that protection from international opinion. He did not confront Thatcher publicly. He did not avail of E.E.C. assistance nor did he ask the United Nations Security Council to intervene, although his government is a member this year and actually held the chair in the supreme U.N. body during the month of April when Bobby Sands was elected M.P.

No, in the now well established tradition of Fianna Fáil, he stood idly by while the first four hunger strikers died, Bobby Sands, Francie Hughes, Raymond McCreech and Patsy O'Hara. He had the power but he did not use it; on the contrary, he continued to entertain the British Ambassador in Dublin and to maintain his troops and police in a collaborationist role with British occupation forces along the Border. And so, in due course, he lost the election and fell from power.

Two of the nine prisoner\* - candidates endorsed by the National H-Block/ Armagh Committee were successful in the 26-County general election in June. Ciarán Doherty and Paddy Agnew took seats from Fianna Fáil in Cavan-Monaghan and Louth, while all of the other prisoner-candidates polled very strongly. The intervention was decisive and Mr Haughey went out of office simply because he would not face up to Margaret Thatcher and tell her what the Irish people and world opinion thought of her death policy in the H-Blocks.

Dr Fitzgerald, on coming to power, initially declared the hunger strike his first priority, but during July and August the hunger strikers continued to die as the Coalition policy followed more or less on the same lines as Fianna Fáil. Mr O Leary, Leader of the Labour Party in Coalition said that if any British Prime Minister other than Thatcher were in office the issue would be resolved, but he was publicly reprimanded by Dr Fitzgerald within a week and thereafter was quiet as a mouse. Self-interest and fear that their own political fortunes would be diminished in the new, liberated and radical Ireland dictated the "do nothing that counts" policy.

Joe McDonnell and Martin Hurson died during July; and Kevin Lynch, Ciarán Doherty, T.D., Tom McIlwee and Mickey Devine during August. By this time it was clear to the Establishment in Britain and Ireland that only the Republican Movement was gaining from the impasse and so certain churchmen, with apparently the official backing of the Catholic Hierarchy, started putting pressure on the relatives of the hunger strikers to authorise medical intervention once their menfolk passed into coma, thereby breaking the strike.

While this action proved decisive in the long run, it cannot take from the determination of the prisoners who went unconscious believing they would die and later found themselves revived. If they went back on hunger strike the same thing would happen all over again, thus making their action pointless. They showed to the best of their ability that they were prepared to follow their comrades who had died, and it was only when circumstances beyond their control dictated otherwise that the hunger strike was ended on October 3rd.

We repeat here our statement of that date :

"Sinn Féin looks with compassion on the families who intervened and says to the families and fellow prisoners of the dead hunger strikers :

'Your sons, husbands and comrades who made the supreme sacrifice in this the greatest of all hunger-strikes will live in the hearts and minds of their own people and of all oppressed and struggling peoples throughout the world. Supporters of human dignity and freedom everywhere have paid tribute to them.

'And most importantly, because of their action and the response it inspired on a global scale the days of British rule in Ireland are numbered'".

The British response of October 6th which gave the prisoners their own clothes as a right and not as a so-called privilege was an important gain won by the hunger-strikers' sacrifices. For the other points we await their implementation by the end of the 28-day moratorium on November 6th, Meanwhile, the prison situation is being monitored by the National Committee at the prisoners' request.

The response to the hunger strikes throughout the world, of which you are well aware, resulted from the hard work abroad of members of this Movement over the past decade, and especially since the formation of the Foreign Affairs Bureau by our Ard-Fheis in 1976 and the visits year after year by fraternal delegations.

Support has been built up to the level where the hunger strikes are looked on as just a symptom of the greater problem which is British rule. It is now widely recognised that the Irish struggle is a war of national liberation and that the only solution to it is British disengagement and the creation of an entirely New Ireland.

In passing, it is well to remember the reactions in the United States where six States legislatures and several city councils supported the hunger strike officially due to the good work of our exiles there; in France where the Irish struggle struck old chords and streets and public squares in cities and towns are now re-named the "street of Bobby Sands and the Irish Martyrs"; "the square of the Irish Martyrs 1981" and so forth; in Latin America where Bobby Sands has for the present at least displaced Che Guevara as a popular hero and the dead hunger-strikers were named in succession in wall slogans as Bobby Sands No.2, No.3, No. 4 up to No. 10 because of the difficulty in spelling and pronouncing the Irish names.

In summary then, for Sinn Féin the men in the H-Blocks and the women in Armagh are part of a liberation movement with its roots in Irish history. That is the plain, unvarnished truth of the matter. The British lie is that they are thugs, terrorists and criminals. Certain individuals and groups - often styled colloquially as "craw-thumpers" have created situations where Britain has been able to implement this lie, i.e. to attempt to criminalise the prisoners and thereby the whole struggle.

The blanket protest and the hunger strikes were a principled stand to re-establish the truth, that is, to restore the special category status as of 1972-76. The tragedy of it all is the price that had (and may still have ) to be paid in suffering and death to do this; and the responsibility rests with the British but must be shared by those who aided and abetted them over the years.

A further development of the hunger strike campaigns was the successful return of Bobby Sands' Election Agent, Owen Carron as M.P. for Fermanagh-South Tyrone in the second by-election in August by an even greater majority than in April. Owen stood as a proxy prisoner candidate because the Thatcher administration had changed the electoral laws following the international embarrassment occasioned by Bobby Sands' election and had debarred prisoners from becoming candidates, thus ending a tradition dating back to O'Donovan Rossa's election for Tipperary in 1869 while a prisoner.

Evidently, when the results of the ballot-box do not suit the British Establishment, they proceed to change the rules - just as when a by-election is due in Cavan-Monaghan due to Ciarán Doherty T.D.'s death on August 2nd, it is put off indefinitely by the ruling coalition in Leinster House when the timing does not suit them.

Similarly, the British Establishment were wont to taunt the Republican Movement over the years saying "Send us your elected representative and we'll speak to him or her". Yet Thatcher refused to meet Owen Carron M.P. to discuss the hunger strike; and need we be too surprised to find that Garret Fitzgerald adopted the same attitude.

Again, when it came to access to R.T.É. and the peoples' right to know what is happening the result was in the negative. Owen Carron who was elected with over 31,000 Irish votes - more than any person sitting in Leinster House, Haughey, Fitzgerald and O'Leary included, was banned from RTE as one presumes would be the position of Ciarán Doherty T.D., Bobby Sands M.P. or Paddy Agnew T.D.

All four joined the 30 Sinn Féin councillors on R.T.É's black list during the past year because it is not enough to be an elected representative - one must be a pro-Establishment elected representative, e.g. Ian Paisley, Enoch Powell or Jim Kemmy.

The fact that members of this organisation stand for election and win seats changes nothing with regard to the matters mentioned, as those of us who are old enough to remember other and similar successful contests in the 1950s and 60s know only too well.

But there have been other changes too in the past year. The "Irish Question" had to be discussed at this year's British Labour and Tory Party annual conferences. The bipartisan policy on Ireland is dead following the Labour decision to work for a united Ireland, although retaining the Unionist veto which is in effect negating what they claim to be working for. The Tory conference was warned by the able and dangerous Mr Prior that British public opinion would not forever tolerate the "eternal bickerings" of the establishment politicians in the Six Counties.

Also, what Sinn Féin said last year (December) about the highly-publicised Haughey-Thatcher summit has been borne out. Thatcher's strategy appears to be to appear to loosen the British grip on the Six Counties through the "Ulsterisation" policy while at the same time getting a tighter hold on the 26 Counties. The much-vaunted joint studies do not appear to lead anywhere for the 26 Counties except back into entanglement with the so-called United Kingdom which has always been to our detriment as a people.

The last such joint commission was set<sup>up</sup>/during the 1973-77 Coalition and resulted in the Criminal Law Jurisdiction Act of 1976 which brought British jurisdiction back into operation in the 26 Counties for the first time since 1922.

And today two men from the Six Counties are before the Special Non-Jury Court in Dublin charged with escaping from British custody in Crumlin Road Jail, Belfast and face a possible sentence of seven years imprisonment each.

In addition, Mr Prior discussed political extradition with Dr Fitzgerald last week, we are told, and Mr Haughey urged Fitzgerald and Thatcher to establish an Anglo-Irish Council when they meet in the next few days. This meeting was held up for months because of the agonies and deaths in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh.

In preparation for it, Dr Fitzgerald proposed removing Articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 Constitution which never meant anything to the Nationalist people of the Six Counties since the alleged "second guarantors" never afforded them protection and they had to provide their own. For the Fianna Fáil party which brought in that constitution these articles were a means of salving their consciences because they were not prepared to do anything about British rule in Ireland.

Having been a dead letter for 44 years Dr Cruise O'Brien's and Mr. Cooney's advice to do away with them is being adopted by the Coalition and the people of the 26 Counties may be asked to re-enact the "damn good bargain" of the 1925 Boundary Betrayal which put the seal on partition and sold out the Nationalist people north of the Border.

This move is not acceptable no more than is Cruise O'Brien's re-partition scheme - following Owen Carron's election - or Mr James Callaghan's independent Six-Counties scheme so beloved of the U.D.A. The way ahead lies in forcing British disengagement from Ireland, dismantling both partition statelets (including the recently discovered "sectarian" one in the South so beloved of Cumann na nGaedheal, later Fine Gael) and the coming together of all our people to build a completely New Ireland.

Sinn Féin is on record in this phase of the struggle at its Ard-Fheis of 10 years ago in calling for the complete separation of Church and State and the building of a pluralist society. We never accepted the 26-County state - we have suffered for that - and we do not wish to impose it on others. As we have said in the past " we would not wish it even on our worst enemies".

But we do have clearly spelt-out policies formulated, refined and updated over the past decade and more for a Democratic Socialist Republic of All-Ireland, an egalitarian society with the widest distribution of ownership and control of wealth and maximum decentralisation of political power and decision-making.

The implementation of the social, economic and cultural policies of Éire Nua, together with its proposed political and administrative structures would end forever the ascendancy of power and privilege over ordinary people North and South while giving adequate safeguards to all minorities whether religious, linguistic, regional or whatever.

What the Irish are not told, however, is whether such matters as an E.E.C. military alliance or possible membership of N.A.T.O. for the 26-County state are discussed at these summit meetings. Last year Mr Lenihan said " we are neutral but <sup>NOT</sup> non-aligned" while this year, being out of office, he is accusing Prof. Dooge of going down the slippery slope to a military alliance.

Both Fianna Fáil and the Coalition indicate that such an involvement in imperialistic war preparations is possible when the national question is settled to their satisfaction, whatever that may mean. Sinn Féin, on the other hand, is committed ideologically to a neutral and non-aligned stance in the New Ireland. It is clear in its rejection of the E.E.C. and N.A.T.O. in the West and Comecon and the Warsaw Pact in the East.

The fact as disclosed ten days ago that expenditure on armaments and nuclear war preparations could, if diverted, more than solve the problems of world hunger and the North-South global economic imbalance tells its own story. This deplorable state of affairs has been aggravated in the past year since President Reagan came to power in the United States.

Meanwhile, the E.E.C. parliament has been discussing the place of "regional languages" within the Common Market on the motion of John Hume. The very term "regional language" is an insult. Irish, Scot's Gaelic, Welsh, Breton, Basque, Catalan, Corsican, among others, are not dialects or patois. They are national languages, in all cases the languages of oppressed nationalities, but national none the less.

The E.E.C. crypto super-power seeks to build a Europe of States with "harmonisation" of everything including, if it were possible, languages.

Its objective is the opposite of the free Europe of Peoples sought by Sinn Féin and its allies in the United Anti-E.E.C. Platform and the various <sup>national</sup> liberation movements in Europe.

But we are, perhaps, all to blame if our firm commitment to the promotion of our own language in every aspect of our lives, communities and country, has not been as successful as it might. There are all sorts of reasons for this - the reality of the pressures of the war in the North added to the subtle commercial and psychological pressures of modern neo-colonialism, North and South. But that does not diminish our resolve and we are glad to note the concern about lack of progress within the organisation itself which is reflected in some of the resolutions on this year's Clár. Ba mhaith liom mar sin, cúpla bunphointe a chur os bhur gcomhair.

1. Tá rún daingean, agus bhí riamh, againn do chúis na Gaeilge. Ní "optional extra" é ar chor ar bith, mar a bheadh i gcás an cheoil nó cluichí Chumann Lúthchleas. Sí an Ghaeilge an oidhreacht dhaonna is bunúsaí a fáisceadh as saothrú na mílte bliain de stair ár muintire.
2. Cé go moltar dár bpríosúnaigh pholaitíochta luí isteach ar an bhféin-oideachas mar an bealach is fearr leis an réabhlóid a chur chun cinn, má bhíonn sé de mhí-ádh orthu a bheith faoi ghlas ag pointe ar bith, tugann na deiseanna oideachais seo i dtimpeallacht a bhfuil rialtacht éigin ag baint léi, deis dár muintir luí isteach ar bharr feabhais a chur ar a gcuid Gaeilge. Dá bhrí sin, tá sé mar bhun-pholasaí ag ár muintir faoi ghlas, mar a bhí riamh ó aimsir na bhFiníní i leith, go luífeadh siad isteach ar fhoghlaim na Gaeilge má tá sí meirgeach, agus ar í a roinnt le daoine eile sa chás go bhfuil sí go maith ag daoine cheana féin.

We all know that some of the finest Irish speakers and scholars of the language in the past few generations learned it and familiarised themselves with the heritage that a history of imperial plunder denied them, while in jail or detention as soldiers of the Irish Republic. That good work continues today, North and South and even in Britain. Molaim díograis na múinteoirí agus an lucht foghlama ar aon. Tá an beart is réabhlóidí is féidir leo a dhéanamh le linn dóibh a bheith faoi ghlas, ar bun ag na daoine seo.

We have been critical of RTÉ often enough that it would be ungenerous of us not to mention in passing, in this context, the new "Anois is Arís" television and radio language-teaching series due to begin in a fortnight. If the series is as useful to learners as has been suggested in the promotion, then our only reservation is that "Anois is Arís" will not be available throughout the Six Counties and that this type of coordinated high-powered scientific approach did not get off the ground decades ago. Ach is fearr déanach ná go brách.

"Anois is Arís" will give most of us a new opportunity to catch up on our spoken command of the language in particular, especially if we decide to participate as well in the classes, and conversational

sessions that are now being organised in conjunction with the programme and the book. Iarraim ar na baill den eagraíocht a bhfuil Gaeilge mhaith acu cabhrú leis na seisiúin seo ina bpobail féin, ina gceardchumann féin, faoi dhíon a dtithe féin más gá. And I sincerely urge all the rest of us to take the matter seriously, to make a fresh start that gives reasonable prospects of success, so that this whole movement can move over permanently, for once and for all, to the stage where the dream of Pearse and Davis, of Terence Mac Swiney, and indeed of Bobby Sands, will take on a realistic shape. Seo chuige mar sin in ainm Dé!

On the social and economic front the greatest crisis to hit Ireland in modern times is upon us. There seems to be no alleviation of its severity in the immediate future and forecasts indicate that it will reach its peak in the next five to ten years. Already unemployment in this island is almost at the quarter million mark. One in five of the insured working population in the Six Counties is out of work.

Indeed, the E.S.R.I. ( an official 26-County body) economic conference of October 6th last told us that by 1991 300,000 would be unemployed in the Free State while a major housing crisis would emerge as well.

The planned closure of the Tuam sugar factory as part of the operation of imperialist E.E.C. economic policies was met by a call from Sinn Féin for organised economic resistance. But this blow to the West of Ireland may be only a Sunday-school picnic compared with what is to come.

The 26-County state tried frugal living in the 1920s, protection in the '30s and '40s, foreign investment and borrowing in the '50s, '60s and '70s, with E.E.C. membership in the last decade. All were efforts to make the state work and all have failed. There is no option left for the status quo.

The alternative is a New Ireland with proper organisation and development of our own resources. The land question is fundamental because land is our major resource and so also is a basic tax on all property according to its productive capacity. The victims of the political and military conquest in the North are the basis of the organised resistance there to British rule. Similarly, the victims of the imperialistic social, economic and cultural system in the 26-Counties must be organised and given leadership. The two major issues are unemployment and housing, but there are many others.

Sinn Féin has a positive attitude to elections and must now prepare for the 1984 local council contests in the 26-Counties. We must also consider the extent of our involvement in the next Westminster elections due within two years if we are to advance towards our strategic political aim of pushing out the S.D.L.P. and becoming the political leadership of the Nationalist people in the Six Counties. Other electoral contests will be assessed on the basis of decisions taken by the Ard-Fheis and on the objective conditions prevailing at the time and the merits of each case.

At all times we must endeavour to involve ourselves in activity which brings us as close as possible to the centre of the political stage while giving leadership to the people in their just social, economic and cultural struggles. In short, we must develop fully the gains made at such cost during the past year and consolidate them.

For this we need to expand membership and influence, improve our organisation, educate our members and supporters, promote the circulation of An Phoblacht-Republican News and having established short and long term local and national aims, work steadily towards them.

We must leave this Ard-Fheis in the historic year of 1981, for it has already gone down in Irish history due to the self-sacrifice, generosity of spirit and idealistic dedication of our comrades in prison, clear in our minds as to where we are going and how we are going to get there.

There is no panacea, no short cut, no magic means, only the hard progressive grind forward.

We have been given the lead this year once again by the most heroic generation of Irish people yet. They told us last year what they would do; they were people of their word and they did it in full measure.

Let us leave here determined to emulate them in our own way. Nothing less will be worthy of their suffering and sacrifice.

ENDS.