



## **Annual Bodenstown Speech 1992**

### **Address by Sinn Féin's Jim Gibney**

June 1992

I've been coming to Bodenstown annually for the last four years and as intermittently as her majesty's administration has permitted me in the years prior to that. One of my yearly calendar of republican events I find it one of the most pleasurable occasions. I enjoy the leisurely walk, serenity of the countryside and the sunny atmosphere which I always associate Bodenstown with, but most of all I enjoy meeting people I haven't seen from one year's end to the next. I get the impression from those who come along that they feel as I do and so make the annual pilgrimage to this site not only to drink at the font of republicanism but also to renew old friendships formed in the course of the struggle, on the streets, in prison, or perhaps in the heat of a youthful battle.

There are few republican occasions which instil a sense of reflection, a sense of questioning, not only in terms of "what stage are we at" in the struggle for independence but also "what are we about"... and Bodenstown Sunday is one of these. It is so because we stand before Wolfe Tone - a figure who challenged the conservative and established order of his day by embracing new and revolutionary ideas which centred around the international notions of liberating the oppressed, in Ireland's case Catholic peasants, Presbyterians, tenant farmers and women. His actions and his written legacy force us to examine our actions and our beliefs.

Some years ago at an internal Sinn Féin education seminar in Derry I picked up a telling phrase from a member of the Protestant community who, very bravely, took the step of addressing us. He talked

about attitudes within the Protestant community towards us and he said that our appeals to them can't be heard above the "deadly sound of gunfire". That of course is probably still the case not only for the Protestant community but for the majority of people across this and the neighbouring island because republican views are smothered beneath a wet blanket of censorship and when they are not they are distorted beyond recognition.

But I think the phrase can have an extra meaning, not intended when it was used. I feel it could, at times, be applied to ourselves. It's now, for this generation of republicans, a quarter of a century of unbroken resistance to the British occupation of the Six Counties. It is a truly remarkable achievement compared to our own country's previous attempts to gain independence or indeed compared to many other countries who fought for freedom this century.

During that time, for understandable reasons, we have found ourselves buried deep inside our bunkers, occasionally peering out over the edge to observe the vista. Simultaneously we fortified ourselves behind a set of republican beliefs first framed by the man we honour here today. These beliefs have sustained us in our convictions and carried us through the dark days of the struggle.

For the republican these have been difficult years. We have spent them in a penurious state and have visited such hardship on our families; we have spent long terms behind bars; we have shouldered the bodies of many comrades to their resting place; we have spent hours on end at meetings and

tramped the countryside to hold in place the sinews of struggle, we are constantly surrounded with the human consequences of a bloody and protracted conflict.

Republicans' lives are governed not by the tantrums of the seasons not by the daily chore of a nine to five job, not even in many cases by the rhythm of family and the responsibilities brought on by that. Blood flows in their veins surely, but their heart beats to the sound of a distant drum calling them to an ancient and noble cause. Republicans' lives are in hock to an ideal, to a belief, to a dream, which has eluded many, many previous generations of Irish people. Against such an intense, self effacing background it is important on this bodenstown Sunday that we ask ourselves, out loud, does this reality mean that republicans have been deafened by the "deadly sound of their own gunfire"? Does this reality mean that republicans are trapped inside a complex web of struggle from which they can't or don't emerge; hostages to an immediate past because of all the pain suffering and commitment; to past views expressed, trenchantly, which in time solidified into unyielding principles? Does this reality mean that republicans are incapable of recognising that there is a different world to the one that existed in the mid '60s or that they ignore the more recent changes sweeping across the globe? The answers to such questions cannot be found in the monosyllabic response "No".

The answers are to be found in the evolutionary changes that have taken place in republican thinking over the last ten years. These cover many issues, the most pressing one being the need for peace in our country.

We know and accept that the British government's departure must be preceded by a sustained period of peace and will arise out of negotiations. We know and accept that such negotiations will involve the different shades of Irish nationalism, and Irish unionism engaging the British government either together or separately to secure an all-embracing and durable peace process. We know and accept that this is not 1921 and that at this stage we don't represent a government in waiting. We're not standing in the airport lounge waiting to be flown to Chequers or Lancaster House; we have no illusions of grandeur. Idealists we are, fools we are not.

We have learned to develop our thinking over the years of struggle; we have moved on from simplistic slogans to the position where we now have a realistic programme for peace in our time. It is outlined in the document *Towards a Lasting Peace*. This is a serious, considered document; the product of a year's work by several members of the party's leadership. It is a thought-provoking document, a practical guide to a new Ireland. We are presently mailing this document to persons of influence in every sector of Irish, British and International opinion.

This document signifies yet another stage in the maturing process of republicans' thinking. Its contents give a lie to those who would claim that republicans are inflexible or dogmatic. To those who allege such things we say read the document carefully. We accept at this point in time the British government are not ready to seriously consider its proposals. They foolishly believe they can rearrange the furniture in the room slightly and that this can then be represented as a solution to the conflict. That's what the talks at Stormont and London are about.

The participants have deluded themselves into believing that they can discuss the political future of this island without republicans. But even before they set out they are sowing the seeds of failure because the underlying motivation is not to grasp the realities of the situation rather it is designed to contain and hold in check the legitimate demand for an independent Ireland. The British, under pressure, are trying to buy time and unfortunately they are being aided in this by the Dublin government and the SDLP. But this doesn't surprise us nor will it deter us from continuing until the British government yields to the Irish people our right to govern ourselves in our own country.

We would remind the participants in these talks that the last 20 years are littered with failed political initiatives because their origins lie in the vaults of Whitehall. British proposals which perpetuate partition, no matter how novel or seemingly innovative, are not the premise upon which a solution to this centuries-old colonial conflict can be based. British involvement in Ireland has been disastrous for the Irish people. It was so in "Tone's day, it was so prior to that and it has continued to be so.

Ireland today resembles Ireland in the 1790s;

hundreds of political prisoners languish in gaols; British soldiers shoot people on the streets of a small northern Irish town, Coalisland when they dared protest at being harassed; Loyalist murder gangs prowl the streets at night unhindered, killing and wounding nationalists; Tom King, the British Minister for Defence, involved himself in the murderous activity of a British agent, Brian Nelson. He wrote a reference to the DPP in the North seeking leniency for Nelson.

In any other country in the world the revelation behind the Nelson case would have at least led to the resignations of those involved. But because Nelson was targeting republicans and nationalists he is rewarded. And what of the Dublin government and the SDLP? How do they respond to such state-controlled terror? They issue meaningless statements. And why?

Because the British government have coopted them into their offensive against those in this country who struggle for freedom. The Dublin government and the SDLP have surrendered their ability to challenge British rule. The formula for peace in Ireland is to be found through British disengagement. That has been a cornerstone belief of republicans for close on 200 years.

We continue to reassert it today confident that it represents the overwhelming aspiration of the Irish people. This was graphically confirmed a few weeks ago in this state when a survey found that 75% of people favoured an end to partition. At the same time an economic report which was commissioned by the Dublin government and had the public backing of Albert Reynolds when it was published, called for the setting up of a 'single economic system on the island', in other words a united Ireland economy. If this is what the Dublin government really desire then why do they assist the British government in erecting political obstacles to such a development? You cannot have a single economy on an island which is partitioned.

But until such times as those in power come round, for whatever reason, to this reality, then it is our job to develop the struggle for freedom. The pace and manner in which we do so will have an effect on those who are at present reluctant to embrace the republican analysis.

Much work needs to be done not just to advance

the case of Irish freedom but also to halt the offensive by those conservative elements in Irish society who terrorised the electorate of this state into voting 'Yes' for the Maastricht treaty on the grounds that they faced even more poverty than they are presently experiencing if they voted 'No'; who are using the same type of economic blackmail to force trade unionists to accept lower wage increases; who defend levels of emigration and unemployment in this state on the grounds that there isn't enough wealth to put people to work; who attempt to criminalise women forced to have an abortion; who deny women the right to information and travel; who defended the state's confinement of a teenage girl who was sexually violated; who would drive women back into the role of servicing society instead of, being treated as equal citizens with men; who would corral us into thinking we should behave as if we have no language of our own or a definable culture.

Wherever people are struggling to advance the quality of their lives there you will find republicans, either with a small or capital 'r'. That's how it has been since the time of Tone and the United Irish Movement because they drew a line across the conscience of this nation. On one side stood those with progressive views and on the other stood those with conservative views. In its almost 200-year history the republican struggle has drawn people to it whose views were republican, nationalist, democratic, feminist and socialist. That's our history, that's why we are here today and that's why we have the capacity to endure the pressures of the struggle for a new Ireland.