

Republican SINN FÉIN Poblachtach

Theobald Wolfe Tone Commemoration
Bodenstown, County Kildare

1997

Michael McManus, Fermanagh gave the oration at the Republican Sinn Féin Wolfe Tone commemoration in Bodenstown, Co Kildare on Sunday, June 15. A large crowd of Republicans and marching bands paraded from Sallins village to the grave of the founder of Irish Republicanism, who died in 1798. In his keynote speech he said:

“There will not be a united Ireland in the lifetime of even the youngest person in the audience.’ Strong sentiments indeed. These words were spoken by Tony Blair, only 2 weeks after his electoral success in the British general election, while on a flying visit to Belfast.

“Tony Blair lost no time in defining British policy on the Irish question. And make no mistake this was a policy statement. The British government has put down a marker, and along these guidelines policy will be dictated for the next five years.

“If we analyse the significance of this statement one can only conclude that British policy and by extension British occupation will continue indefinitely or at least to the year 2085 or thereabouts.

“British policy in Ireland is to be built around what is called an internal Six-County solution. The thrust of that policy is to subjugate the nationalist people of the six north-eastern counties to the will of ‘Mother England’. Accept the English Crown and they will grant us a much heralded ‘parity of esteem’. Become good but quiet British subjects, keep our heads below the parapet.

“Implied in the Blair policy speech, was that the alternative was to endorse more repression, British army and RUC jack-boot tactics, British loyalist death squads roaming the streets at will, coupled with all the paraphernalia of a modern police State to ensure that we comply with the wishes of our ‘colonial masters’.

“We can conclude that in reality this means many more Irish citizens killed and maimed by the shoot-to-kill tactics of the British war machine. More Drumcrees, more Harryvilles, in its most base description, ‘Croppies lie down’.

“We are told to abandon even hope.

“There was a time in the early years of this century when all the suffering and sacrifice of the Irish people to attain their freedom had apparently failed. The situation seemed hopeless and as the Fenians, who had so heroically fought and then endured, were dying off one by one, even the aspiration of nationhood appeared to have dissipated. After the death of John O’Leary in September 1913 and

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remembering the many heroic but futile efforts from the men and women of '98 onwards, the poet penned these lines:

“‘Was it for this the Wild Geese spread the grey wings on every tide – for this all that blood was shed?’ ”

Recent policy statements from our erstwhile comrades in the Provo leadership, flushed with apparent electoral success, suggest the eventual acceptance of the new British policy. In their headlong dash towards what is known as constitutionalism they have revised their former ideology to a remarkable degree. Gone is the central demand for the duration of 25 years of struggle, the bottom line ie a Declaration of British Intent to withdraw her army and influence from this island – a total withdrawal. Instead we hear of ‘pushing the peace process forward’, ‘respect for our mandate’ and ‘all-party negotiations’. Never British withdrawal – which I always thought was the only thing Republicans wanted to talk to the British about.

“Was 25 years of struggle and sacrifice about engaging in all-party talks? Were all the deaths and maiming of Irish people simply to achieve a non-unionist mayor of Belfast City Council? Did the Hunger Strikers end their lives in agony to ensure the election of Provo councillors? Did we endure the worst excesses of the British army/RUC and loyalist death squads to send two former Republicans to Westminster? ‘For this all that blood was shed?’

“There are further questions I would like to put to the new or is it the right honourable members for West Belfast and Mid-Ulster. Would they care to comment on the recent abduction of faithful Republicans in west Belfast (one of Gerry’s own constituents) as reported in the Irish News on May 22, 1997? Will Gerry Adams condemn the actions of the Provos doing Britain’s dirty work? Does he approve of Broy Harrier tactics to enforce the British-initiated internal settlement? Are you in favour of repressing genuine Republicans who reject the 26-County State and continued British occupation of the six north-eastern counties? Gerry, reflect on the last 25 years – or better still the last 200 – and ask yourself, ‘was it for this all that blood was shed?’

“Yet we are assured that despite the revisionism of so many former revolutionaries there remains a force of Volunteers, loyal to the Republic who are prepared and capable of carrying on the struggle under the leadership of the Continuity Army Council.

“And there are others, who are gathered here today to commemorate Tone and the men and women of '98, to honour their ideals of one people and one nation, who will never reject nor dishonour those noble sentiments, who will not be intimidated, and we will proclaim again and again that Britain has no right in this country and never will have any right in this country.

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“In Leinster House Zig has replaced Zag in the short term at least, nothing has really changed and we will not hold our breath. The new Free State administration are committed to the same policies as the previous one, total acceptance of British occupation in part of our country.

“Of course the 26-County Free State was conceived in London, created with the help of British guns and maintained with the services of an English hangman. The original Free Staters waded through the blood of Irish patriots in their endeavours and in the process became a client British State. Collaborators are usually more ruthless than their imperial masters and in this respect the Free Staters were no exception.

“But what Republicans find really sickening is the spectacle of representatives of the self-same Leinster House parties trooping to this graveyard year after year pretending to pay homage to Wolfe Tone and the men and women of '98.

“Pádraig Pearse in his document on ‘The Separatist Tradition’ reproduced in the Wolfe Tone Annual of 1961, had this to say. “If Tone says break the connection with England – and I say maintain the connection with England, then I am preaching a much saner (as I am certainly preaching a much safer) gospel than his – but I am obviously not preaching the same gospel.”

“In other words, adherence to Republican, separatist ideology is specific, there can be no prevarication. You either accept Tone's philosophy in its entirety or you reject it. Therefore the presence of any Free State parties – of all Free State parties in this graveyard serves only to defile the names and ideology of the men and women of '98 and 1916, and should stay away. By the same token anyone contemplating entering Leinster House and prepared to take an oath of allegiance, and to uphold the partitionist parliament as the legal powers of this client State should discard the Sinn Féin label that they have attached to themselves. It is a serious and cynical misrepresentation of the name of Sinn Féin and should never be paraded through Leinster House.

“I must also take this opportunity to send greetings and express our solidarity to all political prisoners, especially those who have remained true to the Republic. Our thoughts are especially with Josephine Hayden, the only woman political prisoner in the Free State. Josephine is in Limerick prison and has recently developed a serious heart problem, which required urgent hospital treatment. Despite her condition she has been returned to Limerick prison and to conditions which are not conducive to recovery. We here today demand an immediate and unconditional release on humanitarian grounds and to that end Republican Sinn Féin's POW Department has launched a national campaign to exert pressure on the prison regime to comply

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with basic human dignity and order her release. In that effort they require and deserve all of our full support.

“It would be remiss of me to leave this place today without recalling 150 years ago this year the people of Ireland were in the midst of the worst disaster to befall a hapless people. Black '47 and terrible images of hunger, disease and death. Evictions, coffin ships and the workhouse were the lot of the Irish dispossessed. Over a million died, how many emigrated or perished in the new world or crossing the Atlantic, we shall never know. We, all of us, know about the famine and the curse which of course was the blight. But we also know that ships laden with corn and grain were leaving Irish ports every day for England – while the people who produced the grain were dying in the streets, roads and bogs from hunger.

“This was the worst crime of all the countless crimes committed against the Irish – and despite the revisionists' and apologists' attempts to rewrite the history of the 'Great Hunger' the truth is beginning to emerge. Even Tony Blair (Irish Times, June 6, 1997) has begun the process of acknowledgement of British guilt when he describes the famine as a 'defining moment in Irish history' and attributes much of the tragedy to British 'neglect'

“Yet in 75 years of its existence the Free State failed to alert the Irish people to the most terrible aspects of the famine. Not one monument has been erected to the memory of the one million dead by a State body. We must never forget our innocent dead, we are duty bound to honour their memory and their suffering not only in word but also in stone.

Therefore we call on the Irish people to commit themselves to establish fitting memorials to the victims of hunger – that will last throughout the decades and centuries to come. That is the least they deserve.

“The Free State is a failed entity. They have failed miserably to address the deep economic divergences in the country which, in the middle of a so-called 'boom', can boast of unprecedented riches for the few and can also tolerate 34% of the population living below the poverty line. Is this the Free State interpretation of how to 'cherish the children equally'?

“They have failed to resist the creeping imperialism of the new European Super State, the inclusion of this country in a proposed political, military and monetary union of some European States can only be to the detriment of the Irish people and must be resisted by all means at our disposal.

“They have failed miserably to confront the British State either to demand that they recognise the right of the Irish people to national self determination or even to guarantee civil rights and basic civil liberties to the northern nationalists.

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“Finally, I would remind you of Tone's call to the men and women of '98 'never to desist until the link with England was broken'. It was that call and that ideal that Irish men and women of the last 200 years have struggled for. In the last 200 years the Irish have paid a high price in lives and liberty. They have fought, they have endured – and they have been betrayed. They have been suppressed – but always have emerged to carry on, generation after generation. The sword, the hangman and the assassin, the common tools of tyrants have failed to quench the thirst for freedom and they never will. We demand freedom – now.

It is inevitable and we are resolute. Break the link we will.

“It was for this – all that blood was shed,” he concluded.

An Cathaoirleach (Chairperson) Cathleen Knowles, thanked all those who attended, especially the bands from the occupied Six Counties. She said that it was more important than ever that Republican Sinn Féin does not lose sight of its objective, “that we stand together uncorrupted and incorruptible, remaining loyal and true to the cause we hold dear – the cause of the Irish Republic, for which countless Irish Republicans have died. There must be no weakening in our resolve to attain our legitimate goal and no lowering of the flag.”

She concluded by saying: “I am heartened to see so many young people present here today. We must harness that youthful energy to reinvigorate our organisation, and as more and more people are beginning to see that the so-called ‘Peace Process’ is looking like the ‘Emperor’s Clothes’, we can, I am sure, become an unstoppable force – a catalyst for change.