

Republican SÍNN FÉIN Poblachtach

Aitheasc an Uachtarán



102Ú Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 2006

Presidential Address to Ard-Fheis 2006 from Ruairí Ó Brádaigh

A Chathaoirligh, a Theachtaí is a Cháirde ar fad,

Fearaim céad mile fáilte romhaibh go léir ag an Ard-Fheis seo n 102Ú de chuid Shinn Féin. You are all most welcome to this, the 102nd Ard-Fheis of Sinn Féin.

The past year has been an extremely busy one for our members. No sooner was the Christmas period of collections and fund-raising over for the dependants of the Republican Prisoners. – and this was very successful I am glad to report – than we were faced with a proposed Loyalist-march through the centre of Dublin.

This situation was debated at the monthly Ard-Chomhairle meetings in December, January and February. Most insensitively the march was scheduled to pass by Parnell Street, Talbot Street, Sackville Place and South Leinster Street which were the scenes of no-warning bombings which killed many innocent civilians. These were perpetrated by Loyalist death-squads operating in collusion with British forces of occupation in Ireland.

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In the armed struggle for Irish national independence since 1969 more than 1000 members of the British forces and over 400 Republicans were killed. The nationalist community lost in excess of 1000 innocent and uninvolved people due to deliberate assassinations carried out as a matter of policy by the Loyalist death squads.

The Sunday Business Post of September 4 last year stated that of the 698 members of the unionist community killed "340 died at the hands of loyalists". It went on: "Since the first ceasefires in 1994, the vast majority of Protestant (their term not ours) victims have been killed by loyalists in internecine feuds". It would appear, then, that the sponsors of the Dublin march should have been marching on the UDA and UVF headquarters in Belfast.

Keenly aware at grass roots level of the rising tide of disquiet and concern in Dublin and beyond, Republican Sinn Féin sought to give this debate a political focus by mounting a peaceful protest picket on the route of the proposed march. We did not seek to stop it and we departed the scene when the march was abandoned.

Republican Sinn Féin asked publicly if nationalist parades of whatever kind, would be allowed through Belfast's Royal Avenue or the centre of Portadown. The British forces would certainly block them.

Those who failed to have this loyalist march forced through the centre of Dublin at the end of last February had claimed a near-monopoly of suffering for themselves and ignored the sacrifices of the nationalist community over the past few decades. Republican Sinn Féin would not allow such a distortion of events to go unchallenged through the centre of our capital city.

Further, we acted in solidarity with the beleaguered nationalists of the Garvagh road, of Ardoyne, the Lower Ormeau Road, Dunloy and other areas which have had triumphalist loyalist marches imposed on them year after year. In contrast the 26-County Administration and others had turned their backs on these communities by collaborating with the attempted loyalist march.

When the British government finally leaves Ireland and loyalist marches will no longer be a question of supremacy of unionists over nationalists, then all interests will be welcome and free to parade wherever they choose. On that day in Dublin Republicans stood under a banner which quoted Wolfe Tone's immortal words: "Unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter ... to break the connection with England".

Among the leaflets distributed was the pamphlet An Address to the People of Ireland which makes a special appeal to people of unionist persuasion. The text asks "everybody to consider again our ÉIRE NUA programme for a four-province federal Ireland with optimum devolution of powers down to community level".

Of course, our statements, press conferences and political appeals issued since mid-December due to our awareness of the situation were ignored by the 26-County

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media. Only the northern press, radio and television took notice of our concerns. When the Dublin media finally reacted it was much too late. They deplored the situation which they had deliberately ignored for months. We stated that the march was ill-advised but they would not listen.

Similarly, Republican Sinn Féin will oppose politically the proposed official visit of the Queen of England to Dublin, the first such visit since 1911 – 95 years. There is nothing personal in this attitude. Republicans simply contest and reject the claim of the English Establishment to style her “Queen of Northern Ireland”. That is all. When that claim to part of Ireland is relinquished, then the crowned head of England will be received just as any other head of state. But not until then ---

This past year has been the 25th anniversary of the H-Block hungerstrike deaths in 1981. Republican Sinn Féin's ceremonies were worthy and respectful. They kept to the letter and the spirit of what the 10 hunger strikes died for and began with a very fitting event at the graves of Frank Stagg and Michael Gaughan in Ballina, Co Mayo in February.

May saw the Bobby Sands commemorative parades in Dublin and Galway on the 6th and at the grave of Raymond Mac Creesh in Camloch, Co Armagh on the 21st. On that occasion it was stated that “the bogus claim made by the Provos that the Stormont Agreement of 1998 was a logical succession to the hunger-strike deaths of 1981 was equivalent to the Free Staters' assertion that the 26-County State arose out of the Easter Rising of 1916.

“Both claims were fraudulent. The partitionist and collaborationist 26- County State came from England's Government of Ireland Act and Treaty of Surrender in the early 1920s. The present Six-County Statelet, with or without Stormont, was an instrument of British rule here and a denial of all Raymond Mac Creesh, Bobby Sands and their comrades suffered and died for”.

In June and July Joe Mac Donnell was honoured at Carrick-on- Shannon and Martin Hurson in Longford-Westmeath . A most inspiring event was held at Dungiven in honour of Kevin Lynch and the other Co Derry hunger-strikers on the last Saturday in July.

Other commemorations were held farther south; those in Mooncoin, Co Kilkenny and Cahersiveen, Co Kerry were particularly successful. The annual parade with bands through Bundoran, Co Donegal at the end of August for all the hunger-strikers was the biggest and best since 1981. Increasingly people were coming to realise that the so-called “process” led only into a cul-de-sac – it simply made British rule here stronger and the Movement weaker.

Seán Maguire's address at Bodenstown 2006 quoted two telling points from notable Englishmen. A.J. P. Taylor, Professor of History at Oxford University wrote in 1973 in the

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course of reviewing a book on Roger Casement: "Here is Casement's message for the present day. There is no Irish problem without solution. The problem that had marked Ireland for centuries is the British presence in Ireland. That problem can only be solved by British withdrawal". Of interest also is the quotation from General Macready, British military commander in Ireland, in a memorandum to the British Cabinet, May 23, 1921; "I am convinced that by October, unless a peaceful solution has been reached, it will not be safe to ask the troops to continue there another winter under the conditions which obtained during the last". So much for the claim that the IRA was exhausted at the Truce of 1921.

In this connection one can only speculate as to what the British cabinet papers of the past 20 years will reveal in the future regarding the collapse of the Provisional IRA while still intact, still in the field and still holding the initiative. This took place under the direction of a leadership which employed duplicity and treachery as they lusted for office administering British rule in Ireland.

Meanwhile they seek to join the ranks of the enemy forces Such a course will involve persecuting their former comrades and the nationalist population in general. Who is there to cry "Shame, Shame" now? Mo náire sibh agus airmneacha na stailceoirí ocras in bhúr mbéil!

Eventually, in April last, following on 22 years of diligent research came the publication of the biography of the President. It has been launched each month since at different venues in the four provinces and in the United States. The various historians, academics, journalists and community workers who have performed the launching ceremonies have all agreed that this is an important book.

They have stated that it is deeply researched and documented, that it is essential reading for a knowledge of the past 50 years of Irish history and that it presents the basic Republican viewpoint on the historic Irish Question. They have rated it as one of the half-dozen really serious works on the period.

On behalf of all of you I wish to express appreciation to the author Robert W White for his labours, to Indiana University Press for a fine publication and to Ed Moloney, formerly of the Irish Times and the Sunday Tribune, for writing the Foreword. It must be borne in mind that while the facts were checked with the subject of the biography, the assessments, judgments and conclusions reached were essentially those of Professor White.

This book, taken together with the original source material lodged last year with the James Hardiman Library in the National University of Ireland Galway, provide a valuable basis for the study of Irish Republicanism in that period of history by journalists, historians, students and all interested parties. It is useful to have the record set down and available to all.

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Incidentally, when the subject of the biography sought a Visa to visit New York for a weekend to attend the book launch there, his application was referred to the State Department in Washington and refused at the last minute. As happened under the Clinton Administration the grounds for refusal under the Bush regime were the rejection by your President of the current British process which seeks to copper-fasten English rule in our country for all time. However, a message was sent to be read out and we were ably represented there.

The year now drawing to a close has marked the 90th anniversary of the historic Easter Rising of 1916. This event brought about the birth of the world-wide anti-colonial movement, caused the renaissance of idealism in Ireland and broke the imperial myth that the Irish people could not resist English occupation in arms.

Every Easter since 1916, faithful Republicans have commemorated and celebrated this momentous action, have distributed the Easter Lily and worn it proudly in memory of the men and women of Easter Week and of all, in every generation, who have died for Irish freedom.

True Republicans have had their commemorations banned and attacked by British and 26-County forces, the public display of the national flag prohibited and have suffered imprisonment for insisting on honouring 1916. On the other hand, the 26-County State has ignored and denigrated the memory and legacy of 1916 for 35 years – more than a generation. This year they rushed to claim ownership of the 90th anniversary and the centenary celebrations. They accused faithful Republicans who have never abandoned 1916 of hijacking its legacy. Was there ever such brass effrontery by those who banned commemorations of 1916, jailed the organisers and baton-charged participants on Dublin's O'Connell St.?

The Proclamation of the All-Ireland Republic, 1916 declared "the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland to be sovereign and indefeasible". That right, it stated could not "ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people". On that ground we in Republican Sinn Féin take our stand.

"Civil and religious liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities" were guaranteed to all citizens, yet one in seven children in the State were in consistent poverty (Central Statistics Office 2003). More than one fifth of the population were functionally illiterate. The English government still rules the Six occupied counties and two-thirds of the laws in the other 26 Counties are enacted by the EU in Brussels. All this is a far cry from the situation visualised in the Proclamation.

All of our commemorations last Easter showed a marked increase in attendance. Noteworthy were the unveiling on Easter Monday in Bundoran of a number of plaques at the Republican Memorial Garden there and the ceremony outside the Dublin GPO on the weekend anniversary by date of the Rising. The booklet Our Own Red Blood, by Seán Cronin, first published in 1966 and re-issued in 1976, was brought

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out again this year by Irish Freedom Press. Its last sentence makes the point for all to see; "Accordingly, the promise of the Easter Rising, as enunciated in the Proclamation, remains unfulfilled".

Very far removed from the spirit of 1916 was the decision of the GAA in 2001 to allow members of the British forces of occupation in Ireland to join the association. The Daily Ireland newspaper of August 29 last described that decision as "the GAA bowing to massive political pressure" and noted that although five of the six county boards in the occupied area were opposed, Mary Mac Aleese and Bertie Ahern both spoke publicly in favour of the occupation forces being admitted.

The change to the 117-year old policy came "just weeks after the RUC came to be known as the PSNI". The paper recorded that "throughout the conflict GAA members travelling to and from games were targeted by the RUC, Ulster Defence Regiment and the British Army". It took until 2005 for the RUC/PSNI cadets team to be admitted to the Sigerson Cup students competition, while "their senior counterparts have found it more difficult to find opponents", the paper went on. Daily Ireland followed with an interview with "GAA pundit" Joe Brolly who declared that he would be playing with his team, St. Brigid's in Belfast, in a match against the RUC/PSNI two days later. He described this as "playing a match against the cops". Republican Sinn Féin Vice-President Des Dalton, himself a member of the GAA, replied in a statement that such activity was "simply part and parcel of the ongoing campaign by the political establishments in both the Six and 26 counties to normalise British rule in Ireland".

The harsh political reality was that by hosting such games the GAA is sending out a signal that the British colonial military and police are a normal part of Irish society, he continued. The British military and police presence was abnormal and the root cause of conflict in our country.

Such games were an attempt to encourage young Irish people join the forces of the British Crown in Ireland by instilling in them the notion that the RUC/PSNI are a normal police force, policing a normal society, he concluded.

How long will it be before the naming of GAA clubs, teams and grounds in honour of Irish patriots is forbidden by the GAA? During the same month of August, the hunger strike martyr Kevin Lynch who had captained the Derry under-16 All Ireland hurling champions in 1972, had the local GAA park in Dungiven and a senior hurling club named in his honour. Is not the premier GAA stadium in Ulster named after Roger Casement?

Throughout the Six Occupied Counties repression is visited officially on faithful Republicans while unofficial loyalist gangs prowl the streets in some areas targeting ordinary nationalists for mayhem and even murder. During June Republican homes in Co Fermanagh were raided by British Crown Forces in the Lisnakea area. In one area all members of the family were put out on the street while the house was

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minutely searched. The father, a member of the Ard-Comhairle of Republican Sinn Féin was and taken to Antrim barracks for interrogation before being released.

In another instance the family were herded into one room while the house was ransacked. A computer, all documents and papers dealing with family finances and the business in which they are engaged were seized. No supervision of the raiding in either case was permitted. The name of the RUC has changed but otherwise these aspects of British rule remain the same.

The sectarian murder of 15-year old Michael Mac Ilveen who died on May 8 following a beating by a loyalist gang in Ballymena, Co Antrim the previous day was another barbaric reminder to nationalists of how little has changed. A companion who had visited a local cinema with him was chased by the gang and fortunately escaped. A well-known political commentator (Susan MacKay) writing in the Irish Times Weekend Review of May 13 stated: "British rule in any part of Ireland is unstable and bound to rely in the final analysis on sectarianism. The ideology that drives unionist sectarianism is based on its semi-detached relationship with the British state. The Stormont Agreement served only to institutionalise sectarianism, forcing people to adopt sectarian labels to describe themselves politically".

Indeed, given the absence of the national question from publicised debate in the Six counties since 1998, the incidence of segregated housing and sectarian attacks has increased greatly. A DUP councillor (Roy Gillespie) said publicly that young Michael Mac Ilveen "won't get into Heaven unless he is saved". An Irish flag with the murder victim's name inscribed on it was burned on a loyalist bonfire locally, but there were no prosecutions under the much-lauded British legislation outlawing "Incitement to Hatred". All-Ireland democracy with maximum local power, as provided for in the ÉIRE NUA programme, is the sure antidote to such excesses.

The findings of the Barr report into the John Carthy siege at Abbeylara, Co Longford in April 2000 were published last July. They exposed a complete lack of humanity and basic common sense by the 26-County police in their failure to deal competently and compassionately with a mentally-ill young man. The report cannot be just shelved by the Dublin Government but must be acted on to ensure that similar tragedies do not happen in the future.

Taken together with the Morris findings into the disgraceful conduct of members of the Gardaí in Co Donegal, we have seen a totally unaccountable force with its Emergency Response Unit being allowed by the 26-County State to act with impunity against ordinary citizens. This is something to which Republicans can only too well testify. Members of the force have been exposed "planting" explosives, arms and ammunition for "discovery" later on both sides of the Border. Surely it is past time to place police in a clearly-defined, independent and publicly accountable framework.

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Similarly, the Barron investigation into the Dublin–Monaghan bombings of 1975 has been obstructed in its work by the total refusal of the British government to cooperate with it. In addition, relevant files have been “missing” from the 26-County Department of Justice and also from Garda headquarters. To date Barron points at “probable collusion” between the British forces and loyalist paramilitaries but finds its work blocked at political and official level by both British and 26-County states.

In the case of the cross-border murder of Séamus Ludlow in 1976, there was another downright refusal by the British forces to cooperate despite significant evidence pointing at four perpetrators. The Ludlow family were treated very badly by the 26-County forces and the name of Séamus himself was smeared when he was dead and no longer able to speak for himself. The British security service, – the MI5 – was believed to be heavily involved in such cross-border bombings and assassinations in the 1970s.

It is relevant to note that in the new Stormont proposals the M15 – and not the RUC/PSNI – will be responsible directly to the British Cabinet for so-called “national security” in the Six Occupied Counties. Whitehall and Downing St. will continue to hold the whip-hand in such matters.

Even as we deliberate here this weekend a massive new headquarters for the M15 in the Six Counties is being built in the greater Belfast area – a portent of things to come.

Agus muid i dtreo chomóradh an chéid d'Éirí Amach 1916, tá sé thar am again muid fíne a Ghaelú agus plean céimnithe deimhnithe a leagan síos chuige sin. Má Glactar le scéim chuimsitheach de phleananna grádaithe chúig bhliana i dtosach. Bíodh gach plean chúig bhliana i bhfoirm moltaí; roghnoidh in bhallraíocht trí chinn ar a laighead asta seo, siad sin na baill i ngach brainse de Ghluaiseacht na Poblachta. Déanfar é sin a a mhonatorú agus é dá chur i bhfeidhim.

Thiocfadh liosta eile moltaí le roghnú as ón Ard-Oifig faoi cheann cúig bhliana agus mar sin ar aghaidh ar feadh 32 bhliain go dtí 2048, Comóradh Éirí Amach 1848. Faoi'n am sin bhéadh na seanfhondúirí nach bhfuair seans í a fhoghlaim – sna Sé Chontae nó sna 26 Chontae – básaithe, agus cuid mhaith dínn-ne ina measc siúd. Beidh an-mhéadú ar scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge ar fud na tíre faoin sprioc-bhliain le Cúnamh Dé. D'fhéadfadh sé go n-eireodh lena leithéid seo de phlean. Cuirimis chuige, in ainm Dé

What is being advocated, as we approach the centenary of 1916, is a definite step-by-step programme to Gaelicise ourselves and our Movement. This could take the form of a comprehensive scheme of Five Year plans over a 40 year period.

For instance small steps to begin with, e.g. in the first five years the membership would pick at least three from five recommendations: (1) five per cent of all written material

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emanating from us to be in Irish; (2) that the “fada” or long accent be included in all Irish words (Seán, Séamus, etc); (3) no translations of phrases like Sinn Féin , Bord na Móna, Páirc Uí Chaoimh or C I É., as if Irish was a lesser language; (4) that the ridiculous expression “chair” be dropped in favour of “Cathaoirleach” and “A Chathaoirligh” when addressing that person; (5) that each member would cease saying “thanks” or “thank you” and that “Go raibh maith agat” or “Go raibh maith agaibh” when speaking to more than one would be used instead.

Members would be asked to pick three of these. They are so simple that I would hope all five would be chosen. Practical steps such as these would be so much more attainable than passing pious resolutions which do not require us to do anything concrete. Our national draw tickets, for example, already exceed the five per cent in Irish suggested. This year 2006 marks the centenary of the birth of Máirtín Ó Cadhain, the most acclaimed writer of prose in Irish in the 20th century. An active Republican for many years, on his release from the Curragh Concentration Camp in 1944 he devoted the rest of his life to writing and campaigning for the Irish language. His novel, Cré na Cille, was chosen by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, for translation into several European languages.

Máirtín famously said on one occasion that while it was possible to shame Fianna Fáil in the matter of neglect of the Irish language it was very difficult to embarrass Fine Gael. Now while the predecessor of the latter party, Cumann na nGaedheal, did good work in regard to the language in the first ten years of the Free State from 1922 to '32, Fine Gael has led the climb down in that regard since 1961. Their election manifesto in that year marked their turning point.

An earlier move by others in 1957 was the dissolution of the Coláisti Ullmhúcháin and the consequent deterioration in the standard of proficiency in Irish of primary teachers. Now Fine Gael seeks to water down Irish in the Leaving Certificate examination. Their founders argued in favour of the Treaty of Surrender in 1921–22 by saying that it gave control of education and that the Irish language could be restored with such powers. At the present time with Gael-scoileanna – fully Irish primary schools – increasing steadily in numbers, Fine Gael seeks to sabotage and cut off the good work at the far end of secondary education.

A chairde, the Irish language is central to our being; it is an essential part of the Irish nation. Just as the national territory cannot be abandoned, even by referendum, an Ghaeilge cannot be thrown away even by plebiscite. To do so would be treason to the Irish nation and would be a giant step towards its destruction – something we in Republican Sinn Féin will never tolerate. It is time to embarrass Fine Gael for its creeping treachery to our Irish language. On the international scene the imperialist war in Iraq, begun by England and the United States in defiance of the United Nations, has continued with the number of Iraqi civilians killed now numbering more than 600,000. The Dublin government keeps providing Shannon Airport as a feeder

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base for the war. Even with the Guantanamo Bay barbarity and the Abu Graib brutality, no measures are taken to ensure “rendition” flights do not avail of facilities at Shannon.

The United Nations rapporteur on torture, Manfred Novac, stated on the Pat Kenny Show, RTÉ radio on May 9 last: “flights through Shannon should be inspected including private aircraft used for State purposes”. But no, the 26-County establishment will not assert Irish neutrality. For our part we must continue to support anti-war protests.

Ar chósta thiar na h-Éireann, i gceantar Iorrais, Co Mhuigheo tá agóid ar bun le sé bliain anuas i nGaeltacht Ros Dumhach. Teastaíonn ó mhuintir na h-áite go ndéanfar gás na “Coiribe” a scagadh amuigh ar an bhfairrge in ionad é a dhéanamh i measc an phobail ag Béal an Átha Buí. Cúrsaí sláinte agus slandála atá ag déanamh tinnis dóibh ach chosnódh bealach oibre na ndaoine níos mó ar chomhlacht Shell. Sin é croí na ceiste.

At our last Ard-Fheis we were addressed by Máire Harrington, a local schoolteacher in Drumhach, Co. Mayo and a leader of the “Shell to Sea” protest there. She explained the local people’s opposition to the Shell project which sought to have the raw gas refined among the community at Bellanaboy. The locals wanted the gas refined at sea for reasons of health and safety. The Shell Company was treating the local community in much the same manner as it dealt with Third World people.

Ten years earlier at our 1995 Ard-Fheis we protested against the executions of Ken Saro-Wiwa and seven other members of the Ogoni community in Nigeria. The military dictatorship there had acted in collaboration with the same Shell Company which was exploiting oil deposits in the Ogoni homeland.

Similarly, the 26-County police were deployed in support of Shell at Ros Dumhach and against the local people. Early each morning they escort the Shell contractors into the proposed terminal site at Bellanaboy. We witnessed on television the same Máire Harrington being deliberately knocked down and hospitalised by the Gardaí. We pledge our continued support to the Shell to Sea protest. A campaign spokesman accurately described the police action as “a co-ordinated assault designed to delegitimise and criminalise local opposition to Shell’s project in Mayo”.

In the same manner Irish Ferries, Gama and other big companies seek to exploit workers, both foreign and native. Our members took part and carried banners in protest marches against the action of Irish Ferries in displacing Irish workers by making them redundant and replacing them by foreign operatives for much reduced wages. Gama was found to be exploiting foreign workers in a most outrageous fashion.

An urgent problem facing the entire international community is the question of global warming caused by the emission of greenhouse gases. It is difficult to envisage

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this being countered without the cooperation of some of the world's largest carbon dioxide emitters, e,g, the US and China. These two countries are not bound by the 1998 Kyoto Protocol which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to levels lower than those in 1990. Indeed the US which has 4 per cent of the world's population continues to emit 25% of world greenhouse gases. Washington refuses to be bound by Kyoto on the grounds that the agreement would damage the US economy.

So do we just wait until much greater damage is done to the whole world by rising coastal waters and flooding in winter, drought in summer, storms, falling crop yields, heat-related mortality and death of species. Here in Ireland we saw a short-sighted decision not to introduce carbon taxes and the growing use of "gas-guzzling" SUVs (sports utility vehicles) even where there is no economic necessity for such.

The growing use of private transport, commuting to work and development of roads rather than of public transport have contributed to the likelihood that the State's emissions will be 16 per cent above the Kyoto target by 2010.

The result will be substantial fines on the State and the purchase of credits for emission from low-discharge countries. Greater use of renewable energy (wind, wave and solar) in electricity generation and biofuels in transport plus the encouragement of heat-retaining measures in house construction should help our performance.

A matter that has touched the hearts and minds of Republicans in recent months has been the protest campaign by the prisoners in Maghaberry Jail, Co. Antrim. They seek political status, won by the hunger-strikers in 1981 and abolished under the Stormont Agreement of 1998.

The right to wear their own clothes was retained and earlier protests in 2001 and 2003 won back the right to abstain from penal labour and separation from loyalists and ordinary prisoners.

But in their separate accommodation they have been victimised and treated in many ways worse than ordinary prisoners. "FreeAssociation" on landings has been completely removed and is replaced by "controlled movement". Prisoners have been made to choose between daily exercise and education. They are denied facilities to organise their own education and the right to spend their time in prison constructively. They are locked in their cells for alternately 21/23 hours per day while the Governor has power to punish by taking away remission of sentence.

This capacity of prison governors was banned by the European Court of Human Rights in 2002 but was later reintroduced specifically for Republican prisoners. Access to a doctor is available only once per week. Irish language and cultural items including handcrafts made relating to the hunger-strikers are confiscated or destroyed by prison warders. Easter Lilies are banned to prisoners and their visitors.

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Breaking this rule means punishment for prisoners, but of course British Poppies are on sale in the prison shop.

Parole entitlement has been reduced to half that of other prisoners and parole for funerals of immediate family members is often restricted to six hours or less. Prisoners returning from parole are put in punishment cells for 48 hours. Family visits are closed, i.e. they take place through a Perspex screen. The abuse of a sniffer dog routine has resulted in priests and pensioners alike being refused visits. Use of the canteen for meals is denied and prisoners were forced to eat in cells which also contain toilets. Protests on the outside by family members and supporters gained no publicity. Accordingly on June 19 Republican prisoners embarked on a programme of non-cooperation with the prison regime. First, television sets were removed from cells to the landing. Then education and gymnastics were abandoned. This was followed by a refusal to eat meals in the cells. Whatever eatables were available from the prison shop were purchased in order to sustain life. This, of course, is not adequate and the prisoners have been losing weight steadily.

The first phase of protest continued for a month but despite constant press releases no publicity whatever was gained. Then during July the prisoners embarked on a 24-hour hunger strike once a week, later increasing to a 48-hour strike and eventually stepped up to a 72-hour or three-day strike every week. In this action they were supported by Republican prisoners in Portlaoise prison who went on a similar hunger strike each week in sympathy with their comrades in Maghaberry.

On the outside support demonstrations for the protesting prisoners were stepped up. White-line pickets, public meetings and leafleting were engaged in. The Republican Prisoners Action Group (RPAG) deserves great commendation for its work in producing leaflets, organising events and co-ordinating activities with Republican Sinn Féin in this regard.

Outstanding in this series were the demonstrations in Belfast on July 8 and September 2, in Lurgan on August 19 and Newtownbutler on September 23, while the Eve of the All-Ireland Rally outside Dublin's GPO on September 16 was very successful.

At all hunger strike commemorations on both sides of the Border the statement of June 20 from the OC Republican POWs in Maghaberry announcing the commencement of the protest was read. But there was a complete media black-out in the 26 Counties on the plight of the prisoners and their consequent protest action. In the Six Counties publicity has been minimal – confined to a few scanty references in the two nationalist daily papers. Speeches from speakers who travelled from south of the Border, including Des Dalton, Vice-President and Des Long of Limerick, went unreported.

In order to break the media black-out, members of the Republican Prisoners Action Group travelled to St Andrews, Scotland, during the recent meetings there in

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October. Despite police harassment they succeeded in getting to within a mile of the venue, where they unfurled a large banner. Police action hindered the media from approaching them, but there was a mention on Sky Television that evening. The protesters are to be complimented on their imaginative and spectacular action in support of the prisoners.

On the international scene, activities took place during October from the United States to Glasgow, to Sweden. Members of the National Irish Freedom Committee staged a demonstration outside the British Consulate in New York. Leaflets were distributed and storyboards carried depicting the political status struggle from 1981.

In Sweden, the Ireland Information Group held pickets outside the British Embassy in Stockholm, the capital and outside the Consulate in Gothenburg, the second largest city. Members of the Francis Hughes Cumann of Republican Sinn Féin and the local Republican Prisoners Action Group distributed thousands of leaflets and sold copies of SAOIRSE outside the Celtic Football Ground in Glasgow.

The five demands of the protesting prisoners are: the Right to free association; an End to controlled movement; the Right to fulltime education; Separate visiting facilities; and the Right to organise their own landings. It will be noted that Free Association – always an essential part of political status – is strictly denied to Republican prisoners. The commemorations this year of the 25th anniversary of the H-Block hunger strikes by those who accepted the criminalisation of Irish Republican prisoners under the Stormont Agreement of 1998 is indeed an act of sickening hypocrisy.

At this point certain matters need to be emphasised and brought to people's attention. First of all, the protest campaign in the prison was decided on, and embarked upon, by the prisoners themselves and by them alone. Their statement of June 20 says clearly: "The protest which we now embark upon will not end until our demands are met." The conditions under which the protest will end will be a matter for the prisoners themselves and for them alone. Accordingly, we here this weekend salute the Maghaberry prisoners on their stand and on the action they are taking, and we pledge ourselves to continue our actions in support of them. We can do no less and still regard ourselves as true and faithful Republicans.

Also during October came the St Andrews Agreement between the British and the 26-County governments. It was described officially as the "basis for an agreement" and "a formula to restore Stormont". Ireland was initially partitioned by the Government of Ireland Act 1920 of the British parliament. The undoing of Partition and of English rule in our country thus required a decision of Westminster. Far from evolving towards Irish National Independence, subsequent legislation of the British Parliament put additional locks on any movement in that direction.

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By the Ireland Act 1949, passed in Westminster, a decision by Stormont as well as by the British parliament was made necessary. Then the enactment by Westminster of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1998, embodying the Stormont Agreement, enshrined the Veto on a free and united Ireland in the artificial and local Unionist majority in the Six Occupied Counties. In this manner was the triple lock on progress towards Irish Independence put in position.

Now following on the St Andrews Agreement between London and Dublin, Paisley was able to announce that there was a “DUP Veto” on the much-vaunted cross-border bodies. A Westminster Veto, a Stormont Veto, a Unionist Veto and the latest a DUP Veto. So much for evolution or the gradual working out or development over 85 years in the direction of an end to British rule. It has, in truth, been the reverse. Further it has to be borne in mind that in the end of the day, the British Cabinet is master and has power to overcome all vetoes.

In 1986, 20 years ago, we were told that the Provos would “never, never, never” enter Stormont or Westminster. Now, having, so far as was in their power, stopped the war of national liberation and destroyed all arms under their control, they propose to accept and join the British police in Ireland. Some commentators, while admitting that Republican Sinn Féin forecast all of this, really doubted that we could have seen how far they would go at St Andrews.

We could and did. And they will go even further. When they don the Black-and-Tan uniform and take up the Black-and-Tan gun and point it at us, and at the nationalist population generally, does anyone think they will hesitate if ordered by their British masters to shoot? The sheer logic of the situation demands such an outcome. They will protect their illgotten gains, just as history teaches us.

This is the stark reality behind Gerry Adams’s words when he tells a meeting in Belfast that he ‘accepts policing’. We all accept policing but not British policing in Ireland. This is the harsh actuality behind the Provo Ard-Chomhairle’s ‘qualified acceptance’ of the St Andrews proposals. Let no one say that they were not told the plain unvarnished truth of the matter.

But history also teaches us that there is no final settlement short of British disengagement from Ireland. No matter what Blair and Hain, Ahern and Kenny, Adams and Paisley tell us, that is the situation. While the British government remains in Ireland, the historic Irish Question continues to be unsettled with all the consequences of that position.

Those who ignore such realities have blinded themselves as to the way forward. The best hope in the wake of British disengagement lies in a nine-county Ulster, as part of a new four-province federation, with power and decision making shared naturally – not artificially – according to local majorities.

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All sections would, we believe, feel comfortable in such a New Ireland.

Victory to the Irish people!

An Phoblacht Abú!