



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Féin: "We must broaden the
Republican basis" an interview

Ireland info (I.I): What is your view of the local election results
in Northern and Southern Ireland ?

Gerry Adams (GA): We had objectives in the case of both elections, and we achieved those in both parts of the country. In the Six Counties of the North we wanted further to reinforce our position, and that is what we did. Before the elections we knew that the SDLP would have to sit around a table with Sinn Féin, though John Hume did not see things that way. But that is what happened. In the 26 Counties of the South where, for obvious reasons (including the impact of an ultra-conservative Church and State on the population) progress is slowest, we had deliberately kept our aims low. We thought we could get 40 seats and we got 39. Dedication by the grass-roots was tremendous and we have reaped the fruits of this. I am satisfied with the results.

I.I: How do you explain the different development of Sinn Féin
in the North and the South ?

G.A.: It should be pointed out, first of all, that Sinn Féin's scores and development in the North were possible only thanks to strong grassroots already existing there. What we have done in the North was to give those grass-roots a solid structure and a clear political line. We have succeeded in this in spite of the bad light in which the media always view us. You just can't pull the leg of Republicans and Catholics who live in the North. Every day they feel to their cost what "apartheid" means. They know better.

Apart from a number of clear but isolated areas, those Republican grassroots do not (yet) exist in the South. Furthermore, in more than ten years no serious attempt has yet been made to collect these existing Republican strongholds into a well-structured party organisation. In addition to this, the slow development in the South, is still the heritage of all those years when all that the struggle in the South involved was more or less passive support for what was happening in the North. Our progress in the South is slower, but that will be beneficial in the long run by building up Sinn Féin on a competent, reliable, relevant basis. We are already working on that now.

I.I In some areas of the North the SDLP is compelled to cooperate with Sinn Féin. In others there is a clear separation. Do you think that the growth of Sinn Féin exposed the division in the SDLP?

G.A. The division in the SDLP has always been there, but it has become more obvious in the last few years. The SDLP was originally set up as a pro-establishment Nationalist party in a social-democratic guise. A coalition of moderate politicians of various shades. Its voters consisted of the old Nationalist grass-roots. While changes occurred at the level of the party leadership the Nationalist roots in rural areas were retained. The result was that there was no more contact with the grass-roots. Now that Sinn Féin has developed into one of the major electoral forces in the North, there has been more cooperation with the SDLP on a number of issues affecting the whole Nationalist population. On the other hand, the SDLP's "enthusiasm" must be brought into perspective. Opportunism has more often been the corner-stone on which "political consciousness" was built. You see, the struggle in the North has always included a "classes and castes" aspect as one of its reasons. And when Sinn Féin put its radical point of view before the electorate, the

SDLP's policy of mediocrity was clearly exposed. Now the SDLP is setting itself up in Dublin as the party with which to talk and cooperate with to get away from the IRA. Even in its own ranks the people are not blind. They see that in the last two years Sinn Féin has had more to offer them than their own party.

Editor's Note - Since 1983, when Sinn Féin began to thrive, the Government in the South has woken up. It suddenly felt involved in what had been happening in the North for 15 years. It felt obliged to do something as well to solve the "Ulster problem". It did so by cooperating with the British and the SDLP. Many SDLP voters felt betrayed.

I.I: What do you think will happen to the voters who saw a solution in SDLP policy ? Will the lesson they learn bring them to support the armed struggle ?

G.A.: That depends on how Sinn Féin continues to develop. I am, besides, not too sure that everyone in the North who is anti-Unionist (against the British/~~editor's~~ note) will come around to supporting the armed struggle just like that..

What I do know is that Sinn Féin as a party must be able to offer them an alternative to the SDLP. That question will be answered in due course. But everyone who has the welfare of Irish independence at heart must admit that 15 years of SDLP loyal to the British crown for 15 years are not the right way to peace and justice. Certainly not during the last two years. That, in other words, an alternative has to be found.

I.1 In recent times there have been a lot of articles in the media about the Republican movement. In May and June there was talk of disunity. Can you clarify this ?

G.A.: The journalists responsible for those articles are Chris Ryder and Barry Penrose; for years they have been providing anti-Republican propaganda for the British.

Their inventions are useful to the British in that they may cause confusion and disunity. They did not succeed, as the articles were too much like scoops, their content was too far from reality, and no proof could be provided. But they did create a bad atmosphere. They mentioned "executions" and a "crisis in the IRA and Sinn Féin leadership". When that failed, they alleged that Martin McGuinness (Sinn Féin elected Member for Derry) was the commander-in-chief of the IRA. Then it was my turn. I wonder who they now think is the IRA commander-in-chief. It's all ridiculous, but in this way they do create an atmosphere in which Martin and I could at any time be shot dead by the British or Loyalist para-militaries.

I.1: But was there really talk of disunity ?

G.A.: Disunity is something normal. If we had a movement which consisted of clones, the situation would be unbearable.

There has to be constructive criticism, and all views and differences can be discussed in an atmosphere of disciplined comradeship. But far-reaching differences or splits ? No. There's nothing like that. If it was the case, I would not be denying it, because it would be obvious within three months that I had been lying. That has not happened.

I.I: What is Sinn Féin's strategy in the coming year, and what would you yourself like to see resulting from this year's Ard-Fheis ?

G.A.: Our policy is first and foremost aimed at linking all local forces with their own problems (consumers, the unemployed, trade unionists, the women's movement, young people) to our national problem, an independent united Ireland. Local and national problems are inseparable. Carrying on a correct, principled struggle against the partition of our country, with full knowledge at socio-economic level.

After this Ard-Fheis I would like to see us continuing work in the present manner, with a continuation of the lively debates we have had over the years.

I.I: Thank you, and see you during 1986. Anything you want to add?

G.A.: (Mc)Guinness is good for you.