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Martin McGuinness Address To Morning Session

20 April 1997

PRIORITIES AND ELECTIONS

Sinn Féin's priorities coming out of this Ard Fheis are primarily the rebuilding of the Peace Process and increasing our mandate in the forthcoming elections on both sides of the border.

Our election manifesto will lay out in clear terms Sinn Féin's policies to effect political, social and economic change. But these cannot be fully achieved without a lasting political settlement being put in place first. Therefore the main priority must be the rebuilding of a new and credible process of peace negotiations.

We gather here at a time of great uncertainty, a time when we are facing into three elections, elections which present us with an opportunity to take our message and analysis of the political situation to the electorate. The elections also provide the electorate with the vehicle by which they can deliver a powerful message to both governments to initiate truly inclusive negotiations without delay.

A strong mandate for Sinn Féin in the forthcoming elections will make it extremely difficult for either government to ignore our democratic right to represent our electorate in negotiations.

These are crucial elections in which Sinn Féin can change the political landscape in this country forever. A strong mandate for Sinn Féin will reverberate throughout the corridors of power in Dublin, London and Washington as well as in European capitals. It will bring untold pressure to bear on the incoming British government and the Irish government to engage in a credible process of inclusive peace negotiations.

The refusal of the SDLP to even discuss electoral pacts with Sinn Féin has been widely greeted with disappointment by the nationalist community. But we have selected the best team of candidates to fight this election and provide a strong effective voice for nationalists in future negotiations.

It will be hard work but remember, there is no substitute for old fashioned door to door canvassing. You cannot be censored at the door. We must knock on every door possible and impress on people the importance of their vote and explain that they as individuals can make a difference in these elections.

We must convince them that their vote can make a major contribution to the rebuilding of the peace process. We must impress on them that a vote for Sinn Féin is of greater value

than a vote for any other party. Because a vote for any other party only encourages intransigence in the unionists and procrastination in the British government, it is interpreted by the British government as a vote for the maintenance of the status quo. It is a vote for no change.

We must target traditional non-voters. We must convince them that not voting is the same as giving two votes to the opposition. Every vote for Sinn Féin increases the pressure on the incoming British government to engage in a process of real and credible negotiations involving all of the parties. If we can do that, then the eventuality which the British government and the Unionist leadership have been trying to postpone will be brought closer. That is the prospect of having to sit down across the negotiating table from Sinn Féin.

Sinn Féin is an Irish Republican Party. We are committed to ending British domination, to ending British injustice, to ending conflict and all violence in our country for ever. We are committed to ending British jurisdiction in any part of our country. In these elections we will, without apology, put in the arena such issues as national self-determination, release of all political prisoners, nationalist rights, equality of treatment, an end to discrimination, and the removal of all impediments to progress in negotiations. We also want those negotiations to take place in a peaceful atmosphere. We will play our full part to make that happen. Others must also play their part.

We must not allow ourselves to be unnerved by the electioneering rhetoric of career politicians. Many things will be said in the heated atmosphere of election campaigns. But what all of these politicians realise is that no matter how intemperate their comments in an attempt to gain political advantage, come May 2nd, in the cold light of reality, we will still be here with a strengthened mandate and they will have to talk to us.

A good result in the Westminster and Local government elections in the north and in the General election here will hasten the decline of Paisleyism in the North and creeping partitionism in the southern establishment as more and more frequently expounded by John Bruton and Prionnsias De Rossa. In the Westminster election, I have no doubt, that although there is still work to be done, we will elect a number of MP's. Sinn Féin is winning in West Belfast, Mid-Ulster and West Tyrone. And we are also laying claim to the North Belfast constituency. In the elections for Leinster House, expected towards the end of May, we are also targeting a number of constituencies in this part of our country, including Cavan/Monaghan which should see the return of a Sinn Féin T.D. for the first time since the Hunger Strikes of 1981.

Let us resolve here and now to put in that extra bit of energy which is required to achieve our goal - the largest political mandate our party has received since re-entering electoral politics in 1982.

You will hear various speakers throughout the day talking about various subjects which affect our party and society as a whole. But let us not take our eye off the goal of a reconstructed peace process, which this time, will be inclusive of all the parties to the conflict. Because without lasting peace the other societal ills cannot be properly and adequately addressed.

So the challenge for us in 1997 is to increase the Sinn Féin mandate in Westminster and Local government elections in the Six-Counties and at the general election in the 26 counties. The republican message is being heard and accepted by more people than ever before. There is much public goodwill for our party and the role we are playing in trying to rebuild the peace process.

Let us continue to build on that acceptance and goodwill. By so doing we will continue to ease the pressure on both governments and make it impossible for them to deny us our democratic right to represent our electorate in peace negotiations.

Many people look to Sinn Féin to fulfil their hopes of lasting peace and real change. We cannot do that alone. But republicans are the leading advocates for change - political, constitutional, social and economic. Achieving lasting peace and real change requires increased political strength for Sinn Féin. That is our task in the months and years ahead. Lets get on with it.

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