

Tithe an Oireachtais
An Chéad Dáil Éireann, Comóradh 90 Bliain, 20 Eanáir 2009

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin TD
Ceannaire Dála Shinn Féin

Ar son Sinn Féin is ábhar bróid dom labhairt ar an láthair stairiúil seo chun an Chéad Dáil Éireann a chomóradh.

Ar an láthair seo 90 bliain ó shin tháinig ionadaithe tofa mhuintir na hÉireann le chéile mar tionól náisiúnta agus d'fhógair siad neamhspleáchas Phoblacht na hÉireann. Sa Faisnéis Neamhspleáchais cuireadh an Phoblacht ar bun agus sa Teachtaireacht chun Saor-Naisiúin an Domhain d'iarr Dáil Éireann ar na náisiúin aitheantas a thabhairt do neamhspleachas mhuintir na hÉireann. Sa Chlár-Oibre Daonlathach bhí cuspóirí soisialta agus eacnamaíochta na Poblachta curtha os comhair an phobail.

Mar sin is cuí an rud go dtagann muid le chéile inniu chun an lá sin a chomóradh. Ach ní hamháin comóradh atá ann. Tá dualgas orainn obair an lae sin a leanúint lenár linn fhéin. Ní féidir na cáipéisí a glacadh leo ar an 21ú lá Eanáir 1919 a léamh gan a rá go soiléir: 'Tá daonlathas náisiúnta fós

le bhaint amach in Éirinn. Tá tír agus pobal le hathaontú. Agus fiú 90 bliain ar aghaidh níl an Clár-Oibre Daonlathach curtha i bhfeidhm.’.

“Never was the past so near, or the present so brave, or the future so full of hope.”

These were the words of a young republican, Máire Comerford, who was present in this Room 90 years ago on 21 January 1919. She shared with her generation the sense of their historic mission, their selfless courage and their faith in the potential of the Irish people to flourish in freedom.

They were inspired by the ideals of the men and women of Easter Week 1916. Their sights were set on the Irish Republic proclaimed in arms on the streets of this city. They had seen the executions of 16 of their comrades by the British government. They had seen hundreds of people interned without trial in the aftermath. They had experienced British military rule. And the men and women of that generation gave their answer to imperialism by rallying to the flag of Sinn Féin.

In successive by-elections in 1917 and 1918, Sinn Féin triumphed. In October 1917 here in the Round Room of the Mansion House the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis adopted a new Constitution which was committed to achieving the independence of the Irish Republic and to opposing British rule in Ireland by any and every means at their disposal.

The British government tried to impose Conscription on the Irish people in 1918 and it was met by the determined resistance of a people's movement. In April 1918 the one-day General Strike Against Conscription led by the Irish Trade Union Congress dealt the fatal blow to the British government's plan. It is appropriate that we remember here the legacy of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union which this month celebrates its centenary. It played a pivotal role in the struggle for national independence, workers' rights and socialism in Ireland.

The overwhelming victory of Sinn Féin in the December 1918 General Election was on the basis of a Manifesto committed to the establishment of the Irish Republic. That was the mission of An Chéad Dáil Éireann. The Declaration of Independence adopted in this Room ratified the establishment

of the Republic and pledged the Teachtaí Dála and the people to make the declaration effective by every means at their command.

Dúirt an Ceann Comhairle Cathal Brugha go raibh siad ag cur deireadh le riail Shasana in Éirinn. Dúirt sé go raibh deireadh le ráiméis. B'shin an tuiscint a bhí aige agus ag a chomh-Theachtaí. Bhí dóchas acu go mbeadh dualgas idirnáisiúnta ar Rialtas Shasana neamhspleachas na hÉireann a aithint. Ach bhí siad ullamh chun troid ar son na saoirse sin má bhí gá le troid.

It was an All-Ireland Dáil that assembled here, a Dáil united in opposition to the intention of the British government to partition Ireland. We know the tragic outcome. Dáil Éireann was suppressed by the British government which waged war on Irish democracy. Our country and our people were divided and the mass movement so strongly manifested here in January 1919 was split apart in January 1922.

We salute all those who struggled for Irish unity and independence since the First Dáil Éireann met. We recall all those who suffered imprisonment and who gave their lives in the struggle for freedom, as so many of the first

Teachtaí Dála did. No-one can credibly deny the spirit of freedom that links, to take but two examples, the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, TD for Mid-Cork who died on hunger strike in 1920 and the TD for Cavan-Monaghan Kieran Doherty who died on hunger strike in 1981.

Equality was the basis of the Democratic Programme adopted here 90 years ago. The Programme set out progressive social and economic goals based on the principles of the 1916 Proclamation and articulated by Pádraig Mac Piarais and James Connolly. Its key section stated that the sovereignty of the nation “extends not only to all men and women of the nation, but to all its material possessions; the nation’s soil and its resources, all the wealth and wealth-producing processes within the nation and we reaffirm that all rights to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare”. It declared “the right of every citizen to an adequate share of the produce of the nation’s labour”.

The Democratic Programme said it was the duty of the government of the Republic to ensure that no child should suffer hunger, cold or homelessness and should be provided with proper education and training. The Programme promised to ensure that the aged and infirm would be “no longer regarded as

a burden but rather entitled to the nation's gratitude and consideration". The Republic also had the duty to "safeguard the health of the people".

The Programme pledged to build Ireland's economy and reinvigorate industries which would be developed "on the most beneficial progressive co-operative industrial lines".

After nine decades the Democratic Programme remains to be implemented.

If over the past decade the public right and welfare had been placed above the interests of private profit and property then our economy would not now be in recession.

No Government truly committed to the sovereignty of the people over all the resources of the Nation and their development for the benefit of the people would have given away the massive Corrib gas reserves off our west coast. And a Government taking seriously the duty to ensure that no child should suffer from poverty, that all should share in the Nation's wealth and that the health of the people should be safeguarded, would never preside over the inequality and division in Irish society today.

Níl sé mar obair againn na ceisteanna sin a phlé go mion inniu ach ní féidir an Chéad Dáil Éireann a chomóradh gan an fhírinne a rá faoi sochaí na hÉireann lenár linn. Is fíor freisin nach gcuireadh i bhfeidhm cuspóirí na Poblachta ó thaobh na Gaeilge de. Ba i nGaeilge a rinne an Chéad Dáil a obair ar an gcéad lá sin. Caithfear a admháil nach bhfuil an Dáil agus an Seanad ag tabhairt an cheannaireacht ba chóir. Is le pobal na Gaeilge an cheannaireacht san obair chun an teanga a chothú agus molaim iad as an obair sin. Ba chóir go mbeadh sé mar rún againn inniu teanga na Céad Dála a chur ar ais in a áit ceart mar teanga náisiúnta na hÉireann.

The sovereign will of the Irish people was denied by British imperialism in 1919. In its Message to the Free Nations of the World the Dáil looked forward to a new era of national self-determination and the ending of what it called “military dominion for the profit of empire”. But the hopes of subject peoples across the globe, including the Irish people, were dashed as the British and French empires reasserted their control after the First World War. Those two powers divided the Middle East between them and ensured continuing Western domination of the region. We see the terrible legacy today in the region’s many conflicts and I take this opportunity to extend

solidarity in particular to the dispossessed people of Palestine whose agony the world has witnessed in recent weeks.

Our purpose today should not be simply to commemorate. The work begun on 21 January 1919 remains unfinished. Today should provide an opportunity for all of us to reflect on the need to end the division of our country and of our people. We are all mandated to work, by peaceful and democratic means, to bring about the unity of Ireland.

We in Sinn Féin hold that as our central task. We take very seriously the need to address the fears and apprehensions of unionists. Our engagement with that community is very real and is ongoing. For the first time republicans and unionists are sharing power in the North-East of our country. The Good Friday Agreement is working, though much remains to be fulfilled. There is a new political dispensation. We have moved beyond the conflict of decades and have built a peaceful path forward. For us that path leads to a democratic Ireland, a nation built on unity and equality.

As we mark the 90th Anniversary of An Chéad Dáil Éireann we look forward to the day when the elected representatives of all the people of our country will once more gather in the national assembly of a United Ireland.

Creidimid go dtiocfaidh an lá sin agus is ar a shon atáimid ag obair. Is é sin ár gcuspóir. Is é sin an dóchas a bhí anseo 90 bliain ó shin agus atá fós ann. Agus is é sin an bealach ar aghaidh do phobal na hÉireann uile.