



REMARKS: In an interview with *An Phoblacht* former Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams claimed his generation was the first to have the chance to 'peaceably bring about Irish unity'  
PICTURE: David Young/PA

# No armed struggle was needed to deliver peaceful route to Irish unity vote

**I**N AN interview with *An Phoblacht* last weekend Gerry Adams claimed his generation was the first to have the chance to "peaceably bring about Irish unity."

Hmm.

If that is true, then why an IRA campaign that lasted from 1970 to 1998?

His response to that question is an interesting one: "We won that [a peaceful route to unity] in negotiations. We won that on the back of struggle. We won that by staying true to democratic and republican objectives – and building support for those objectives. We have the chance to end the union and out of that to build towards the republic that was proclaimed in 1916. We are going to get that chance to vote. Everybody should face up to the fact we are going to get that chance to vote."

But there's something he didn't bother mentioning. Something particularly important. As far back as November 1971 (yep, 50 years ago) a British government made it clear that a vote on unity would remain an option if demographic/electoral evidence suggested the pro-union status quo no longer reflected majority opinion.

Edward Heath, prime minister at the time, set out the government's position in a speech:

"Many Catholics in Northern Ireland would like to see Northern Ireland unified with the south. That is understandable. It is legitimate that they should seek to further that aim by democratic and constitutional means. If at some future date the majority of the people in Northern Ireland want unification and express that desire in the appropriate constitutional manner, I do not believe any British government would stand in the way."

The speech enraged unionists, many of whom viewed it as 'their' government backtracking on support for the union, as well as 'encouraging the SDLP', which had been formed 15 months earlier. Four months later Stormont was prorogued,

Alex KANE



followed 7 months afterwards by a White Paper which stated that an 'Irish dimension' would be recognised and accommodated in all future British policy for Northern Ireland.

The Sunningdale Agreement (1973), Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985), Downing Street Declaration (1993) and Good Friday Agreement (1998) all contained a variation of Heath's words from 1971, guaranteeing legislation to facilitate a change of constitutional status for Northern Ireland if that was the wish of the majority. Indeed, the 1993 declaration went significantly further, claiming the British government had "no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland".

The only significant difference between the GFA and a raft of other agreements, deals, declarations and understandings was a commitment to facilitate a border poll if the NI secretary of state thought it "likely... a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be

*Adams is wrong to conclude that Sinn Féin and the IRA somehow paved the way to a border poll by negotiation and struggle. They didn't*

part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland". But since the definition of 'likely' is non-existent and there are no terms and conditions set out for how potential support for unity is to be measured, I'm not sure how Adams, let alone anyone else in Sinn Féin, could claim it as some sort of triumph of negotiation.

The blunt fact of the matter is that no armed struggle was required by the IRA to deliver a peaceful route to a free vote on Irish unity. That route has been clearly signposted for fifty years. It was a route the SDLP recognised when it was formed in August 1970. Anyway, there had been a border poll in March 1973 (boycotted by the SDLP and all but 6,463 nationalists/republicans) and it seemed inevitable there would be another one at some point – to reflect electoral, political and demographic shifts.

It took Sinn Féin (and by extension the IRA) until July 20, 1997, the date of the IRA's second 'complete cessation of military operations', to conclude that democratic practices and principles were probably the best way to 'peaceably bring about Irish unity'. But Adams is wrong to further conclude that Sinn Féin and the IRA somehow paved the way to a border poll by negotiation and struggle. They didn't. That route has been available for a very long time, albeit dependent on a lengthy process of demographic change. To pretend otherwise is utter, utter nonsense.

And yet it is the sort of nonsense at which Sinn Féin excels. It's not so much a case of rewriting history as retelling it to suit their very specific audience: which is an audience with no interest in the efforts of others (particularly the SDLP) to promote change in Northern Ireland. All victory is theirs and theirs alone. But, in fairness to them, it's an approach which has now placed their collective grip on the door handles of the first minister's office in Belfast and the taoiseach's office in Dublin.

## ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 29 1971

### Hume Echoes Carson

CARSONITE war cries were hurled in the face of Unionism when the Assembly of the Northern Irish people met for the first time in a County Derry ballroom. It was an intense, determined meeting under the glare of TV floodlights in Dungiven Castle ballroom. It ran smoothly and quietly and Derry MP Mr John Hume captured the mood of the 100 or so delegates when he recalled Lord Carson's cry: 'I do not care tuppence if it's treason or not'. Said Mr Hume: 'Today we do not recognise the authority of the Stormont Parliament and we do not care tuppence whether it's treason or not'. He went on to remind delegates that, like Carson, they were not afraid of illegalities.

### RUC Station Demolished

SIX policemen and seven civilians were injured last night when a thirty pound gelignite bomb demolished the front of Larne police station. Two policemen were 'seriously injured'. An elderly woman was also seriously ill.

### Funeral of Shot Sisters

THOUSANDS watched in silent sorrow as two Belfast sisters met for the last time at the junction of Falls Road and Whiterock Road yesterday. The funeral cortege of Mrs Mary Ellen Meehan (31), mother of four of Bantry Street in the Clonard district, merged with that of her sister, 19-year old Dorothy Maguire of Westrock Drive. The sisters were killed when Army bullets riddled the car in which they were back seat passengers at Cape Street in the Lower Falls early on Saturday morning when they were on vigilante duty as troops raided a house in the street.

And as thousands made their way from the cemetery, four motherless children, having paid their last respects to their mother, went home to Bantry Street.

### Faulkner Appoints Catholic Minister

THE appointment of Mr Gerard B. Newe, a Catholic, as Minister of State at the Department of the Prime Minister, was announced yesterday by Mr Faulkner. The PM said he was asking Mr Newe 'to consider how best to establish and maintain contact with the various elements of the Catholic population' and 'in doing so I am recognising the importance of letting it be clearly seen that the point of view of the religious minority in NI is adequately taken into account by the Government'.

Mr Newe said he recognised that he had no mandate from anybody. (Though it soon ran out of steam, the Dungiven Assembly symbolised the withdrawal of nationalist consent for Stormont rule. Faulkner's appointment of the unelected GB Newe was seen as a stunt by a desperate Premier. The two sisters shot dead by troops in disputed circumstances were members of Cumann na mBan.)

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX  
e.phoenix@irishnews.com