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Sinn Féin 6 County Assembly Election Manifesto 1998

For Real Change - Building a New Ireland

Introduction

Last month, the people of Ireland took an historic step towards freedom, justice and democracy. There are many more steps to be taken, however, before we have the new future we all desire.

The Yes vote in the referendum was a vote for change. It was a vote for a new beginning. We now face the challenge of delivering on that change and turning hope into reality. That will require inclusiveness and partnership and equality.

We need a wholehearted commitment to ensuring political, social, economic and cultural rights;

We need a partnership based on equality, which will empower and improve the quality of life of all citizens by being open, inclusive and democratic;

Equality must be central to all aspects of life - in political institutions, in the judiciary, in the civil service, in public bodies and in a new policing service.

Vote Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin is standing in these elections on our record in the Peace Process and on our record of strong and effective representation, locally and nationally. The real change that a strong Sinn Féin team has generated at local council level can be built upon and expanded by the election of a strong Sinn Féin team to the assembly, the executive, and

most importantly, the all-Ireland body.

In the last twelve months, Sinn Féin has secured the highest vote in its modern history. Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin was elected in Cavan and Monaghan, Gerry Adams regained West Belfast and Martin McGuinness won Mid-Ulster. These elections have already transformed the political climate on this island.

People voted for Sinn Féin's peace strategy and our commitment to building a lasting peace settlement through inclusive dialogue. Now the Multi-Party Talks are over, but the Peace Process continues as we enter a most difficult period.

Recent events have shown that the days of unionist intransigence and obstruction are not over. There is much hard work ahead if we are to deliver change in this transitional phase. Sinn Féin intends to push the Good Friday document to its outer limits and beyond.

Sinn Féin is an Irish republican party. We see a 32-county republic as the best way to eradicate the range of political, social, economic and other inequalities that affect the people of this island. We see this agreement as part of a transitional process to Irish unity and independence. We are looking beyond the present situation and identifying the type of society that we want to create.

We want to build a society in which people are united. Our vision of the future is based on equality, respect for difference and the protection of the weak and vulnerable.

Our vision is of a future in which people, whatever their social or economic status, are part of a society that affords them opportunity, dignity and the right to participate in the processes of power that affect their lives. It is a vision that is economic as well as political.

Nationalist unity

We believe that it was the positive unity of purpose between Hume/Adams and the Irish government that brought the peace process to this point. We are calling for nationalist unity to continue in the forthcoming elections in order to maximise nationalist strength in the assembly and on the All-Ireland Ministerial Council.

Nationalist unity is essential if the gains achieved so far are to be consolidated and developed and effective change secured;

Support the Sinn Féin team in your constituency and continue your preferences for nationalist and pro-dialogue candidates who are co-operating with Sinn Féin to manage the essential change which has to take place.

Ready for Government

Sinn Féin's aim in relation to this whole process and to all of the new institutions is one based on rapprochement, cooperation and democracy. We view the Good Friday agreement as a basis for advancement. It is transitional in character.

Sinn Féin is committed to:

Working every aspect of the agreement;

Playing a full and active part in the Assembly, the Executive and the all-Ireland Ministerial Council;

Taking our seats in all of these bodies;

Striving to work with unionists towards constructing a fair society where there is equality for all citizens;

Seeking the establishment of a Department of Equality to promote and reinforce the equality agenda, given the inequalities that permeate society in the north.

These new institutions can be the power houses that will shape a new political future for all the people of this island. Sinn Féin will be at the centre of power and we will play a meaningful role on all of these bodies. We will adopt the same pivotal approach that we displayed during the negotiations. We intend bringing the republican analysis into the heart of institutional politics across this island.

All-Ireland representation

In the new political situation that is developing, Sinn Féin is working to build a bridge to unity and independence. In this transitional phase, it is vital that institutions in the 26-County state play their full part.

It was Sinn Féin that first raised the demand for the strengthening of citizens' rights by extending to people in the Six Counties the right to participate actively in the political life of the whole island. This is a logical and democratic proposal and we have succeeded in putting it high on the political agenda. We advocated it at the multi-party negotiations and since in discussions with the Irish government.

It is the responsibility of any government to ensure full and equal rights for all its citizens. Partition and the British presence does not restrict the Irish government from ensuring that full and equal rights are extended to citizens in the Six Counties.

We urge that:

Those elected at parliamentary elections in the Six Counties should have the right not only to attend but to participate in the proceedings of Leinster House;

Citizens in the Six Counties should be given the right to vote in referendums and presidential elections, which are currently held on a 26-county basis.

Sinn Féin and the economy — Putting People First

Sinn Féin's core economic objective is to realise an entirely new social and economic order in Ireland,

one which cherishes all our people equally and prizes equality and justice. The unfortunate reality of today's Ireland, both north and south, is that we remain some distance from such transformation.

Ordinary people and entire communities within urban and rural Ireland endure entrenched unemployment, poverty, emigration, multifaceted disadvantage, social exclusion and endemic inequalities.

At the core of our policy is a commitment to eradicate the causes of these prevailing injustices. In order to fulfil this vision, we see the need for five main elements to be pursued:

The creation of an all-Ireland economy;

The transformation of the Six-County economy;

The elimination of the economic distortions of partition;

The development of economic justice across Ireland;

The introduction of economic democracy.

The creation of an all Ireland economy

It is our belief that the continuation of economic division within Ireland will simply sustain the failures of the past and frustrate our efforts to maximise economic and social benefits for all on the island.

It is now widely accepted that an all-Ireland economy would bring considerable benefits.

The all-Ireland executive bodies outlined in the Good Friday agreement are a crucial first step in the process of institutional change and the development of democratic all-Ireland economic institutions.

Sinn Féin will strive to ensure that these embryonic bodies have a clear all-Ireland dimension.

The transformation of the Six-County economy

In the Six Counties, the aim of economic policy under the Stormont and British administrations was one of discrimination and distorted economic planning aimed at maintaining the inequitable

status quo rather than planning for economic democracy or unity.

Existing structures have failed to provide economic justice in terms of economic security, freedom from discrimination, equality of treatment, access to employment, social services and quality of life for a substantial number of people in the Six Counties.

Sinn Féin has in recent years deplored the cuts in spending in social services, health and education, while we have yet to see a commitment from the British government to transfer spending from the military war economy to a peace dividend.

Sinn Féin welcomes the additional £315 million "Framework for Prosperity" spending package announced by Gordon Brown last month. It is a positive first step to correct the imbalances created by the years of Tory cuts. Sinn Féin believes that all public sector spending in the Six Counties must be "equality proofed". We propose the following measures be adopted:

The British government needs to show that local areas and discriminated against communities will have a substantial role in allocating and designing any new funding schemes;

The Framework for Prosperity must have an all-Ireland dimension. The Six-County economy cannot be developed in isolation;

Six-County businesses qualifying for the £100 million of tax concessions should be required to fulfil a rigorous examination of their fair employment record. Any firm with a history of discrimination should not get funding;

North American firms bringing new investment should be asked to commit themselves to the MacBride Principles;

Part of the funding of Brown's £315 million package will come from privatising Belfast Port. Sinn Féin believes privatisation of state resources is a flawed policy;

Major investment programme is needed West of the Bann to reverse years of social and economic discrimination.

The elimination of the economic distortions of partition

Divided between two jurisdictions, the border region experiences grave distortions to its economic political and social life. Border communities have to contend with extensive British army fortification, systematic infrastructural underdevelopment, a stunted local regional economy and two conflicting tax regimes.

Sinn Féin calls for specific grant aid to help develop the region's indigenous industries as well as its social and economic infrastructure. We also propose the establishment of a Cross Border Development Commission, which would:

Reverse the peripheralisation of the region;

Create democratic participation for all in the development of the region;

Give strategic direction to cross border economic and social initiatives.

The development of economic justice across Ireland

For generations, Catholics in the Six Counties have been discriminated against by successive unionist and British governments. Thirty years after the Civil Rights Movement campaigned for an end to discrimination in employment and after 24 years of fair employment legislation, Catholic males are still more likely to be unemployed than their Protestant counterparts.

British Secretary of State Mo Mowlam promised in March that she would initiate "the biggest overhaul of employment legislation in nearly a decade" to "promote equality of opportunity".

Sinn Féin believes that the British government must:

Set goals and timetables for the reduction of the Catholic-Protestant employment differential;

Initiate a co-ordinated and integrated strategy involving legislation, social and economic policies;

Support the MacBride Principles;

Immediately remove sections 42 and 57 of the

1989 Fair Employment Act, which institute political discrimination against members of the nationalist community.

The European Dimension

Sinn Féin is deeply concerned at the promotion of the Six Counties as a low-wage, low-cost economy within the European Union. Social insurance provisions in Britain and the Six Counties are the lowest in the EU. This might mean cheaper costs for inward investors, but it also means that these costs are borne by Six-County workers.

Sinn Féin believes that:

Everyone has the right to a living wage;

Employment created through subsistence wages is not a solution to the economic problems of the statelet.

The use by successive British governments of their opt-out clause from the commitment of the Maastricht Treaty's Social Chapter as a means to gain competitive advantage over other EU states is deplored by Sinn Féin. It is a further attempt to erode the rights of workers in the Six Counties.

The promotion of genuine economic democracy

Economic democracy is central to Sinn Féin's political programme. We believe that people and local communities have to be at the centre of economic development policy.

Sinn Féin believes socio-economic change must be shaped by the needs and expectations of ordinary people. We contend that the establishment approach to economic planning and development has contributed to the range of economic difficulties in Ireland, north and south, and more specifically at the level of the local community.

We must begin to change economic planning by:

Redefining the process by which decisions are made and change is affected;

Local communities becoming centrally involved in planning and making decisions about economic development programmes that directly affect them.

Education

In our ever-changing world, access to education and training is essential, not just as a gateway to employment but in preparing young people for the world in which we now live. There are many key challenges to be faced if we are to reverse the critical underresourcing of education from pre-school level right through to third level.

Sinn Féin advocates:

Priority funding of pre-schools in disadvantaged areas;

Decreased class sizes;

Increased funding towards Community Education initiatives;

Realistic student grants;

Official recognition for Me-nscoil Dhoire and the bunscoileanna not yet funded. An end to the present unrealistic criteria for recognition;

A planned approach to the setting up of pre-school, primary and secondary education through Irish;

Legislation to recognise Gaeloiliúint as the representative Council for Irish medium education. It should receive statefunding for this purpose and realistic powers and responsibilities;

An end to the 11+ system of selection.

Health

Sinn Féin supports the formulation and implementation of a 'health for all' policy. This is premised upon equal access for all citizens to good health and quality health and medical care, irrespective of where they live or their economic circumstances. In recent years, the lack of adequate funding for health services has had a detrimental effect on many people, particularly those most vulnerable in our society.

To deliver an effective health policy Sinn Féin advocates:

A major investment in the health service to

modernise our hospitals and upgrade their services;

An ending of the policy of "opting out " and of setting cash limits on general practitioners and doctors;

Opposing management bids for trust status, given their negative impact on quality of service and employment;

Greater emphasis on preventative health care, ie. intensive education and public awareness campaigns;

Proper resourcing of community care programmes and home help services;

Retention of Acute Services at Mid Ulster and South Tyrone hospitals;

Targeting of key healthcare areas for special attention: drugs, cancer, the disabled;

The location of telecommunications masts to be strictly controlled and only erected with the agreement of the local community;

Additional resources to support Carers.

Irish language and culture

Sinn Féin was to the fore in promoting Irish language and culture during the negotiations. The Irish language community must enjoy parity of esteem with English speakers. The Irish language should be given official status reflected in appropriate legislation, including the right to allow Irish speakers to deal with all levels of government and local government administration in our own language.

Sinn Féin representatives will conduct business through the medium of the Irish language with and within the new institutions

To deliver parity of esteem for the Irish language, Sinn Féin proposes as a first step:

Ratification of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages by the British government with respect to Irish;

Legislation to give official status to the Irish language along the lines of the Welsh Language Act (1967) and the Welsh Language Bill (1993);

The establishment of an Irish Language Board (Bord Gaeilge) for all Ireland with adequate powers and funding to co-ordinate the promotion and provision of Irish-medium education throughout the island;

A bilingual policy in every aspect of the functioning of the state in order to treat Irish on a basis of equality;

Financial support for Irish language programming and publications;

Funding for Irish cultural and sporting organisations from public bodies should be made available according to appropriate agreed criteria;

Action to ensure that Teilifís na Gaeilge can be received throughout the Six Counties.

Environment

As we approach the new millenium, there is increasing concern about our failure to tackle growing environmental problems. While we cannot hope to eradicate our 'consume-and-throw' society overnight, we can begin by making changes at home and in the workplace.

The aim of environmental policy must be to create less pollution, use energy wisely and to reduce, reuse and recycle waste. We cannot continue to rely on landfill as the primary method for the disposal of waste. We must have a co-ordinated approach to environmental policy and begin to integrate industrial and environmental policy, ensuring that there is effective enforcement and monitoring of environmental standards. The public sector can take a lead in this area and make council contracts dependent on compliance with environmental standards.

Sinn Féin advocates:

Closure of Sellafield

An end to nuclear dumping in the Irish Sea

All-Ireland policies to tackle environment concerns

on the island

Local community involvement in the discussion, planning and running of waste management projects

Priority consideration for community-led projects from EU and government recycling funds

Use of composting schemes, such as that initiated by Down District Council, for the collection of green kitchen and garden waste

The introduction of kerbside recycling collections

Use of eco-taxes to reduce pollution and waste levels

Use of nonbiodegradable plastic

Encouragement for the development of organic farming and a ban on genetically engineered food

Prioritising the control of water pollution in coastal water and in rivers

Rural Regeneration

Rural areas throughout Ireland have a long history of political and economic marginalisation, with many communities isolated from centralised decision making processes. On the one hand, we have the ever increasing growth of our large urban centres, while on the other, rural communities are fighting to retain essential services in order to survive. It is clear that agriculture alone can no longer sustain rural communities and without adequate employment rural depopulation will continue unabated. Now is the time to create new policies and initiatives aimed at rejuvenating rural communities.

Sinn Féin believes that the objective for rural areas should be a healthy and diverse economic and social environment where quality of life is enhanced by equality of opportunity. To begin this process we advocate that we :

Initiate an integrated strategy for rural development

Encourage agricultural diversification into small industry and processing of quality foods targetted at niche markets

Prioritise rural tourism

Improve rural infrastructure - transport, telecommunications, water, sewerage

Accelerate the location of industry outside of main industrial centres

Encourage the decentralisation of state services

Maintain rural services - schools and health

Agriculture

Agriculture is one of the cornerstones of the Irish economy and its development and growth is vital for all of us. Over the last 20 years, however, employment in the agricultural sector has declined by 30%. With larger farmers now responsible for an ever increasing amount of production, more and more families are leaving the land every year. Thousands of farmers have found themselves either in debt or working holdings that have been deemed economically unviable.

Sinn Féin believes that agricultural policy must be directed towards:

Retaining the maximum number of active farmers in rural Ireland, with particular assistance for young farmers

Overcoming the BSE scare and rebuilding credibility in the quality of Irish food through aggressive overseas marketing

Developing a rural investment bank with low interest loans to assist small farmers

Retaining CAP supports until an improved structure has been put in place

Targeting regional spending at areas of greatest need

Women

Although women now have formal legal equality in most areas of public life, they are a long way from having real equality. A minority of married women work outside the home. Employed women earn less than men, their employment choices are more restricted and there is little recognition of the

valuable work women do in the home.

Women are grossly underrepresented in politics and in most other areas of public life.

The physical and sexual abuse of women is increasing in Irish society.

To achieve real equality for women, Sinn Féin advocates:

Measures to achieve equality of representation both in political life and in appointments to all public bodies;

The setting of timescales to achieve equality of outcome in employment structures, education and training;

The provision of childcare facilities and subsidies for childcare;

Screening for breast cancer and smear testing for cervical cancer to be freely available to all women;

Adequate funding for women's organisations;

A multi-faceted approach to eradicate violence against women, including counselling services, education projects and community initiatives;

Support of educational initiatives that combat sexism and sex stereotyping in our society.

Youth

With a large proportion of the population under 25 years of age, Ireland has the youngest population in the EU. According to recent figures, almost 25% of those receiving unemployment benefit in the Six Counties are under 25. This, however, does not reflect the true extent of youth joblessness due to the manipulation of unemployment figures through various training schemes. Young people also bear the brunt of the worst social and economic conditions as well as harassment by British Crown Forces.

Sinn Féin advocates:

Real jobs and quality education and training for young people. They should not be forced into dead end schemes to massage the unemployment

figures

An adequate allowance for young people while in training schemes and the right of trainees to join trade unions

Greater funding for youth services and recreation facilities

Community management of youth facilities

Empowering Communities - The Fight Against Drugs

The growing prevalence of drugs in our communities is something requiring urgent attention. A failure to introduce the measures necessary to tackle drug abuse will lead to the type of problems that communities in Dublin have faced for many years. There must be co-ordinated measures, political, social and economic, if we are to prevent drugs gaining an increasing foothold in our communities.

Sinn Féin has a track record of campaigning against drug abuse. In October 1996, we launched a comprehensive set of recommendations to tackle the drugs problem on the island.

Sinn Féin advocates:

Working with young people and parents to develop drug awareness programmes;

Encouraging local communities to play a direct role in drug prevention;

Establishing community drug teams involving local GPs, social workers, voluntary and community agencies in areas already affected by the problem.

Justice and Policing

In order to build a lasting peace, there has to be fundamental change across the political spectrum. Nowhere is this more necessary and immediate than in the areas of policing and the judiciary.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary is entirely unacceptable. It was established to uphold this

state in the interests of the British government and its members exclusively serve the interests of one section of people who live on this island - the unionists.

In their day-to-day dealings with nationalists, they display sectarian attitudes and behaviour. They have been indicted for torturing detainees, for killing people with live and plastic bullets, for colluding with loyalists like agent Brian Nelson and for refusing to publicise the Stalker and Samson inquiries.

Sinn Féin are working towards the disbandment of the RUC and the establishment of a new, unarmed and acceptable policing service. This new service must:

Be drawn from all sections of the population, with a minimum of 40% nationalists in its ranks

Enjoy the support of and be accountable to the people it serves

Include cross-community and gender quotas

Exclude those current members of the RUC who have been responsible for human rights abuses

Similarly, the justice system, which has been abused over the years to facilitate a culture of repression by successive British governments, must be changed.

Sinn Féin advocates:

The repeal of all repressive laws

Fundamental judicial reform

The immediate banning of plastic bullets

The establishment of an inquiry into collusion between British forces and loyalists

Contentious Parades

A small number of contentious Orange parades present a threat to the Peace Process.

Sinn Féin recognises the right to march as a valid expression of political and cultural identity. Sinn Féin equally recognises the right of local

communities to live free from sectarian harassment, intimidation and triumphalism.

With the marching season already under way and tension mounting following the actions of the Orange Order and the RUC on the Garvaghy Road last month, it is even more urgent that we find a resolution to this issue.

It is unacceptable for march organisers to refuse to speak to people democratically chosen by their communities

It is unacceptable to force a parade through an area where it is clearly not wanted

Where there are objections to a parade, it is incumbent on the Loyal Orders to enter into dialogue with local residents

Irish Political Prisoners

With 274 Irish Republican Prisoners of War held in jails in Ireland, Britain and the United States, the release of political prisoners is one of the most central and pressing aspects of the current peace process. During negotiations, Sinn Féin argued that the release of political prisoners must be an integral part of any agreement. The Good Friday document allows for the release of all political prisoners within two years. Sinn Féin wants to see this happen sooner than that and will work vigorously towards that goal.

Sinn Féin advocates:

Immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners held as a result of the British/Irish conflict

Pending this:

Immediate transfer of all the remaining Irish political prisoners from British jails back to Ireland

No extradition of Irish citizens charged with political offences