The recent attempt on Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams' life highlights the importance and effectiveness of Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland. Apart from successes in Belfast and Derry, Sinn Fein has polled well in local elections in 26 counties. Here, ALR publishes extracts from Gerry Adams' address to the Sinn Fein Annual Conference.

I would be fitting and appropriate for me to take this opportunity to make a few personal observations regarding my election as president of Sinn Fein.

When I heard of Ruari's (Ruari O'Bradaigh) reluctance to stand for re-election, and when my associates commenced lobbying me to stand for the leadership position, it will come as no surprise to many of you to learn that I was extremely reluctant to let my name go forward. My reluctance does not stem from any false sense of modesty, but from what I believe are practical problems coupled with some personal observations. I already have a heavy workload and feel that the leader of this party, at its present stage of development, needs to be able to give the many tasks facing us, his or her undivided attention. The emphasis needs to be upon the 26 counties and thus I would have a preference for a leader who was based in this area.

My election as president has, as is to be expected, led to media speculation of a 'Northern takeover' or domination of Sinn Fein, and to quiet little rumours that I am about to lead you into Leinster House. My election means neither of these things. There is, of course, as is natural given the nature of our struggle until now, a predominance of Sinn Fein people from the six counties in the public eye, but we are not a Northern nor a Southern party. We are an Irish republican party organised throughout Ireland, and we are the only party with a membership in all thirty-two counties.

We have broadened our struggle, and we must continue to broaden it so that our party can become the focal point for all those who suffer under British rule. That suffering is not restricted to the victims of direct British military involvement. Linked with the victims of plastic bullet murders, or show trial and hired perjurer strategies, or the victims of shoot-to-kill policies, are the victims of a decadent social and economic system which is geared not in Irish interests but in the interests of foreign and native capitalists or in the military and strategic interests of a British government and its super-power allies.

I would like to take this opportunity to appeal to those Protestant people in the six counties who have justifiable, if misguided, fears about their future in an independent Ireland.

I know the leaders of loyalism will dismiss my appeal, as will even the leaders of the SDLP, but nonetheless I direct a sincere appeal to working-class Protestant people who have been badly served and misled by these same leaders over the years.

We seek the unity of all our people in an independent Irish democracy shaped by all its citizens to fulfil their needs. We, as republicans, have a decided preference that this society should be a democratic socialist republic, but we accept that, in a post-British withdrawal situation with Irish democracy restored, we will be bound by the democratic wishes of the Irish people.

Political Protestantism is based partly on the fear that Irish 'Home Rule is Rome Rule'. Protestants need to be reminded that the Catholic Hierarchy has seen fit to attack Sinn Fein more often this past year than it has ever attacked rabid anti-Catholic demagogues such as Ian Paisley.

Republicans do not seek a sectarian state. On the contrary, we seek a secular, or at least a pluralist, society. We in Sinn Fein remember with pride that our republicanism grew from the separatist roots of the mainly Presbyterian United Irishmen. They are as much your heritage as ours, and much more our common legacy than...
the Siege of Derry, or the Battle of the Boyne. We have, despite the imposed divisions, tragedy and suffering of the last 60 years, more to unite us than to divide us.

The twenty-six county state, partitioned to suit British interests, for all its constitutional declarations, failed to establish an ability to act independently in the interests of its people.

The centrality of partition to the maintenance of that evil social and economic system is not alone highlighted by constant republican rhetoric. Figures recently released by the Dublin Forum estimate the cost to the Free State of maintaining partition over the last 14 years to be £2,300 million. How much in the same period was spent in attempting to end partition?

In the economic area the Free State also lacks the will to pursue an independent course. Having thrown itself open to the multinationals with the most abject pleas and attractions of fiscal allurements, the Free State entered the EEC on the coat-tails of Britain. The people of the Free State are now reaping the whirlwind. The multinationals have followed a predictable pattern, using up their benefits, pillaging natural resources, and then pulling out for pastures new, leaving jobless and demoralised communities behind them.

Agriculture, which was to be the golden miracle of EEC entry, has foundered. Money may have gone in large quantities into the pockets of the few hundred big ranchers, but the twenty-six counties is not allowed the independence to process its own food in a so-called agricultural state. It has so little control over its own economic destiny that its farming sector is in such chaos that it not only cannot feed itself but has potatoes as one of the largest Irish food imports.

How far have we come in this so-called independent state? Not even a potato republic!

The social system which exists amidst all of this is one which has as its values the alien values of capitalism. So the 196,309 official jobless, up again this month by 3,070, are not allowed to get to work building homes or hospitals or providing education or supplying health services but must stand idle in the dole queues whilst one third of the population lives below the poverty level in need of all these basic social rights and plagued by such symptoms of that poverty as drug abuse and vandalism.

Also in the social context, useless Victorian notions imported and accepted a century ago as economic and social controls of the subject nation remain enshrined in conservative confessional brainwashing which inhibits the natural spirit of the Irish people.

The disenslavement of women, the right to family planning and contraception, the question of divorce and marital breakdown, the invidious social distinctions which surround the question of illegitimacy, one-parent families and so on, are questions which we should be mature enough as a people to decide and settle for ourselves, without fear of croziers waving in the background and without pretending that such problems cannot exist in Ireland.

Life in Northern Ireland is a constant state of war.

What hope then have the people of the twenty-six counties who are faced with Tweedledum and Tweedledee parties as alternative governments?

Even as unemployment continues to creep up, and even as public spending is throttled to the tune of 500 million pounds, the political preachers of financial belt-tightening and monetarist rectitude cynically awarded themselves salary increases of 19 percent to cushion their already-cushioned and luxuriously pampered lives.

At the same time, workers at Clondalkin Paper Mills are thrown out of jobs, cheated by false promises and forced to take the terrible and ultimate form of protest — the hunger strike. Workers such as those at Ranks doggedly attempt to stem the tide of redundancy, and vital centres of work around the twenty-six counties, like Dunlop's in Cork or the Snia factory in Sligo, close with immeasurable damage to local communities, but with hardly a shrug from those responsible.

Furthermore, I believe we should also be mindful of Connolly's clear understanding of the need for republicans, socialists and progressive nationalists to find unity on democratic republican demands. We must be mindful of the dangers of ultra-leftism and remember at all times that while our struggle has a major social and economic content, the securing of Irish independence is a prerequisite for the advance to a socialist republic society.

Gerry Adams is president of Sinn Fein.