

Liz O'Donnell TD's Dáil Address: Irish Unity and New Nationalism

3rd November 2005

Speaking during Private Member's Time in Dáil Éireann, Liz O'Donnell addressed a Sinn Féin motion on Irish unity.

I wish to address the issue of reunification and in particular my perception of what it and the new nationalism should constitute following on from the Good Friday Agreement.

Last night Deputy Ó Caoláin stated that there could be no possible excuse for the DUP not engaging with Sinn Féin, as the decommissioning of weapons has commenced. This is perhaps five weeks after the IRA eventually decommissioned its weapons. It now expects the DUP and the Unionist community in Northern Ireland to completely change their trust perspective and forget the past 30 years of history, which included breaches of promises from Sinn Féin during the peace process.

It is important that we have this debate and that it should be respectful and honest.

The new nationalism is quite different from Sinn Féin's version. Having read the Sinn Féin Green Paper on reunification and listened to its contributions last night in the House, it appears the party's version of nationalism has gone out with button boots. It is backward looking, narrow and self-deluded. As the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy McDowell, stated, it is dishonest, sectarian and everything that the Good Friday Agreement is not.

The new nationalism embraces all the diversity in the New Ireland. This includes Chinese and Polish people as well as the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. All these people are minorities on the island, and the new nationalism must take account of this progressive new Ireland.

New nationalism should not deny what we know is a tragic history. However, this history, along with the Good Friday Agreement, must be built upon. New nationalism should look to the future positively. It learns the lessons of our tragic past. It does not glorify war or those who killed for Ireland with no mandate or legitimacy.

The new nationalism is not an ideology that looks down on those who don't speak as Gaeilge, or who use it as an instrument of Gaelic ascendancy.

New nationalism respects the people's wisdom in voting for an honourable settlement with the British Government and the Unionist and Loyalist communities and their leaders in honest negotiations.

All Deputies will agree with the Minister's comments that reunification is a legitimate aspiration, but it should not be an aggressive policy for any Government. The deal contained in the Good Friday Agreement recognised that the constitutional future of Northern Ireland is in the hands of the people there. This principle of consent was fundamental to the agreement, and if it did not exist, the agreement would not have been possible even with moderate unionism.

It is important that those of us who aspire to the reunification of our people respect the unique sensitivity among Unionists on this issue. It is not appropriate to air the issue at this time, when we have so recently and eventually dealt with the matter of arms. We do not have the institutions envisaged under the Good Friday Agreement running, and we do not have Sinn Féin participating in policing in Northern Ireland.

None of these factors is occurring, yet Sinn Féin is aggressively pushing forward the unification of Ireland. This was stated in the Good Friday Agreement to be a legitimate political aspiration, but one to be achieved over time. A mechanism exists in the agreement for the matter to be worked on when the time is right. It is important that this is communicated honestly to Sinn Féin at this stage.

We should not have to receive lectures from Sinn Féin about the meaning of nationalism. I will tell the Deputies what nationalism is or is not.

The new nationalism accepts that unity is a legitimate aspiration, which may be achieved by democratic means, not an aggressive policy agenda. Not something to be waved around carelessly as they do our tricolour out of black taxis. We do not want the import of sectarianism or horrible parades on O'Connell Street with people banging drums or dustbin lids.

That type of tribalism has been dreadful to witness for years in Northern Ireland, and we do not wish to see this type of nationalism on the streets of Dublin.

The new nationalism will have no truck with Sinn Féin's bizarre notion of giving speaking time and voting rights to Westminster MPs of any hue in Dáil Éireann, particularly when those most interested in speaking in our parliament don't bother to speak in the place to which they are elected.

The constitutional parties in this House have worked hard to bring about a peace process and we will continue to have our view of nationalism. We will not take lectures from Sinn Féin.

The new nationalism is about standing up to those who got it all wrong, who destroyed thousands of lives without good cause and who, like all who have guilty feelings, protest their nationalist allegiance too much, regardless of the divisiveness they know it will cause.