

On the McCartney Murder

2nd March 2005

Speech by O' Donnell on McCartney Murder

PRIVATE MEMBERS' DEBATE ON THE McCARTNEY MURDER INVESTIGATION, SPEECH BY LIZ O'DONNELL, T.D., 2ND. MARCH, 2005.

With just a short time available I want to support the motion and make a few observations. In deploring the murder of Robert McCartney by members of the IRA and commending his families' remarkable courage in demanding justice for him, I think it's worth remembering there are two thousand other unresolved murders arising from the troubles in Northern Ireland.

What makes this murder so significant in its import for Sinn Féin is not that it cannot be wrapped in the immunity usually conferred by the 'struggle' - but that it has come at a time when that central question of IRA criminality is now the single obstacle to achieving a final settlement of the conflict as envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement.

Ceann Comhairle this was no drunken brawl. It was premeditated slaughter with a cover up by those who abused their power, a power which for decades has rendered the IRA immune from criminality and even disapproval in the eyes of their own community. Over the last few months Sinn Féin Leaders have found themselves refusing to describe past republican actions as crimes. To concede that label of criminality for IRA activities over thirty years would offend the integrity of what they perceive to be their struggle against injustice and occupation. In their minds it would be a slur, a diminishing of their version of history, which is noble and patriotic. Those republicans who killed and died for Ireland must from a Sinn Féin perspective, be retrospectively protected from the label of common criminality. One man's crime was another man's patriotic struggle for justice.

After years of protracted discussions there is still no shared or agreed view of the cause of the conflict; perhaps there never will be. What we had hoped for in the Peace Process was for the building of a shared vision for the future and a fresh start. Whatever about putting behind us the crimes of the past, post Good Friday Agreement, there cannot be any acceptance of ongoing criminality.

The Peace Process was built on the basis of acceptance of the integrity of the other side's quarrel. It was about burying the hatchet and working together to agree a settlement, which would remove the cause of the conflict. It required huge concessions from all sides; the release of prisoners, evacuating treasured constitutional positions, inclusion into democratic politics of former paramilitaries, the demilitarisation of a Northern/Irish society, reform of policing, of judicial systems, admissions of past failures, and a plethora of enquiries into the past.

For those ministers close to it has been an exercise of faith, hope and serial disappointment. It was a high-risk investment. As David Trimble said, a 'white-knuckle ride'. I reject the suggestion that the government turned a blind eye to criminality. The job of governments was to steer a ship through stormy waters, progressively building confidence amongst the

parties representing paramilitaries, which would result in an exodus from violence and the embrace of democracy and the rule of law.

Many of us had 'dark nights of the soul' about the risks being taken with fundamental democratic principles. We knew on Good Friday that the Agreement was just a start. Since then we have lurched from crisis to crisis but in the round, as Mo would say things are immeasurably better. I do not despair or recriminate that it has taken this long to come to the crunch decision for Sinn Féin on the issue of criminality. I do see it as a critical challenge and opportunity for that party. For so long we were stuck on the issue of weapons being decommissioned. George Mitchell once said it was the decommissioning of the mindset that mattered. We are at that mindset now.

Neither do I begrudge or question their mandate. The whole idea of the Peace Process and indeed of the Good Friday Agreement was that Sinn Féin would embrace politics. It's in all our interest therefore that politics works for them in achieving their political goals. But we never for a moment imagined nor can we accept now that thuggery and criminality would replace the military campaign as a modus operandi.

As one who engaged with Sinn Féin in good faith as Minister in respectful negotiations I would urge those in Sinn Féin and the many thousands of people who support them to be worthy of the trust which I and many others placed in them over the last ten years. Don't use weasel words in responding to the McCartney family. Seize the opportunity to take a new road for the republican movement.

Peace with justice is a Sinn Féin mantra. For too long justice has been a one-way street. Human rights was something they demanded; not something they ever imagined would be expected of them. How else could the barbarity of punishment attacks on young dysfunctional youths be squared with human rights? Why is it that the wider republican community has given the IRA immunity for those terrible crimes over many years?

The brave McCartney sisters are not only posing compelling and uncomfortable questions for Sinn Féin; they are posing the same questions to their own community. They are asking, do we really need protectors who are battering our own people to death if the mood takes them?. To see the people of the Short Strand rising up against IRA criminality is truly a defining moment. Mo Mowlam's dream of the Peace Process becoming a people's project is just starting to become a reality for the people of the Short Strand and the wider republican community. I hope the Sinn Féin Leadership has the courage to listen to the strong messages coming from within their own constituency. Perhaps we have come to a time when Sinn Féin and the rest of us can at least a shared understanding of what justice is.