

**REDEFINING REPUBLICANISM**

**—A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE  
Mitchel McLaughlin, MLA**

**—AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE  
Paul Arthur**

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**IBIS working paper no. 5**

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No. 5 in the lecture series “Redefining the union and the nation:  
new perspectives on political progress in Ireland”  
organised in association with the Conference  
of University Rectors in Ireland

Working Papers in British-Irish Studies  
No. 5, 2001

**Institute for British-Irish Studies  
University College Dublin**

Working Papers in British-Irish Studies  
No. 5, 2001

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ISSN 1649-0304

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## ABSTRACTS

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### **REDEFINING REPUBLICANISM— A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The core principles on which Irish republicanism is based include commitments to popular sovereignty and to unity between the people of the island of Ireland. The struggle of republican leaders in the past resulted ultimately in the Good Friday agreement, which presents republicans and others with a challenge for the new century. The republican vision of the future is one in which the goals of equality, democracy and the maximum welfare of the maximum number will be achieved, with due attention to the needs of the international community. It also implies rejection of British government interference; but it is inclusive in its definition of the new multicultural Ireland, which extends a position of great influence to the unionist community and a welcome to immigrants.

### **REDEFINING REPUBLICANISM— AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE**

The concept of “republicanism” has been a strongly contested one in contemporary Ireland. Some have argued that the Republic of Ireland, notwithstanding its name, fell short of the reality of republican status. Especially within Northern Ireland, “republicanism” acquired a meaning that was very different from the similarly named ideologies to be found in France and the United States. The theoretical development of Irish republicanism was strikingly limited, with advances in this area largely confined to recent decades. In particular, from the mid-1980s onwards, republicanism began to experience a fundamental redefinition, as the primacy of politics over violence began to be established. This culminated in a new relationship with constitutional nationalism and ultimately in the signing of the 1998 agreement, implying a new and more inclusive vision of the future.

#### ***Publication information***

This contains the revised text of two lectures presented as part of the seminar series “Redefining the union and the nation: new perspectives on political progress in Ireland”, organised jointly by the Conference of University Rectors in Ireland and the Institute for British-Irish Studies. The lectures were presented in UCD on 4 December 2000.

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## REDEFINING REPUBLICANISM— A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mitchel McLaughlin

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### I

It was James Connolly who said of Wolfe Tone that he united “the hopes of the new revolutionary faith and the ancient aspirations of an oppressed people”. Irish republicanism in the new century must perform a similar task. We need to identify the best in the republican tradition that we have inherited and to develop republicanism to meet the needs of our own time.

Irish republicanism is based on a number of core principles that are still relevant today. Simply restated they are:

- First and foremost there is the commitment to the sovereignty of the people, to democracy in its fullest sense;
- There is the commitment to unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter and the rejection of sectarianism of any kind;
- And there is the commitment to the unity of this island and its people, national self-determination, an end to partition and the establishment of a sovereign 32-County Irish Republic.

These are still the basic principles that motivate Irish republicans today. The term “Irish republicans” is often used in a narrow sense to describe members and supporters of Sinn Féin. I think a broader definition is required—one that embraces all who share the commitment to the complete freedom of the people of Ireland.

Flowing naturally from the basic principles I have outlined are other commitments. Our historical experience gave us an affinity with other peoples who are struggling for national self-determination. Thus Irish republicans have embraced anti-imperialism and internationalism.

Belief in what Pearse described as “the sovereign people” has led republicans to seek social and economic democracy as well as national political democracy. Connolly’s measurement of freedom as expressed in 1915—is just as relevant today: “In the long run the freedom of a nation is measured by the freedom of its lowest class; every upward step of that class to the possibility of possessing higher things raises the standard of the nation in the scale of civilisation.”

We cannot divorce these core republican principles from the struggle that they have inspired. We enter the new century at what will hopefully be the end of the longest period of continued organised resistance to British rule in the history of Ireland. This

has taken the form of armed struggle, civil disobedience, street campaigning, prison struggle, hunger strikes to the death, electoral politics, the mobilisation of international opinion and long and tortuous negotiations.

Through building political alliances, through dialogue and debate, through engagement with our political opponents and with our political enemies, republicans helped to chart a course which—if managed properly—will finally lead away from armed conflict and towards the peaceful resolution of the causes of the conflict. That is the basis of the peace process and of the Good Friday agreement.

## II

The institutions established under the agreement create an all-Ireland framework within which the common interests of all that share this country can be addressed. They need to be developed and defended from those who are attempting to erode and inhibit the outworkings of the agreement.

There are many challenges for republicans in the new century, and we need all the resourcefulness and commitment that has been shown by republicans in all the phases of our struggle to ensure that the agreement does indeed provide the vehicle for real change.

The story of this 26-county state is a story of how the hopes and promises of the years 1916 to 1921 were abused by those who claimed to honour them. The 1916 Proclamation's promise to "cherish all the children of the nation equally" has not been delivered. We must not allow this new opportunity to be lost.

The challenge for Irish republicanism in the new century is to offer the alternative to the corruption among sections of the political elite that has been exposed in this state as never before. The root of this corruption is the cosy relationship between big business and the major political parties. Is it any wonder that there is an unprecedented level of public cynicism about politics and apathy among voters?

We need to build a real coalition between republicans in the broadest sense of the term and all those campaigning for real and lasting change in our country.

- We need a coalition of all those seeking to end poverty and inequality through the sharing of the wealth in our economy;
- We need a coalition of people across sectarian and racial divisions and an end to racism and sectarianism in all their forms;
- We need a coalition of those in rural and urban communities who have not been allowed to take full advantage of increased prosperity;
- We need a coalition of environmentalists who will make the aim of a green, clean Ireland a reality;

- We need a coalition of those who cherish Irish neutrality and the sovereignty of the people of Ireland and wish to see them enhanced and not eroded through the gradual creation of an EU super-state.

Republicanism in the new century needs to embrace these diverse but progressive forces. It also needs to have a clear view of our place in the world. Are we to completely submerge Irish foreign policy within a giant EU state? Will we pursue an independent course, meeting as equals the poorer, formerly colonised nations with which we have so much in common? Or will we help to exploit them as part of one of the world's economic and political power blocs?

### III

To Irish republicans the Republic has always meant more than a form of political administration. The vision of the Irish Republic that we seek encompasses all of Ireland and its entire people. It involves social and economic equality as well as political freedom. It values the Irish language and Irish culture while embracing cultural diversity in Ireland and internationally. Many people have sacrificed much to make this vision and this ideal a reality. I believe that our children will live in that Republic—your children, my children and, for the first time, all the children of the nation equally.

If we, as Irish republicans, are to understand anything about the struggle for freedom and independence, and if we are to advance and achieve our republican objectives, we must have a firm sense of what we are. This has to be rooted in our republican ideology, as well as our historical and collective experience and it has to be always looking forward while drawing from the lessons of the past to build the future. It lies in the words and deeds of Tone, McCracken and Emmett; of Lalor, Pearse, Clark and Connolly; and of many others. It lies in the words and deeds of Maire Drumm, of Bobby Sands and Mairead Farrell.

For me, it especially lies in the words of the 1916 Proclamation—almost 100 years old, but as advanced and as radical a political programme as you are likely to find anywhere in the world today. In 1916 Irish republicans produced a document that proclaims and guarantees “religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens” and which speaks of “cherishing all the children of the nation equally”.

So, let me suggest that for a brief few moments you join with me in looking to our future. What sort of future can it be? Imagine an Ireland in which there is no more war—no more conflict. An Ireland in which all the guns and the bombs are silent—forever; an Ireland in which the words of hate are silent—forever; an Ireland in which all the people of this island are at peace with each other and with our

neighbours in Britain. Imagine an Ireland wherein Nationalists and Unionists are united by a process of healing and national reconciliation.

Imagine the people of this island free from division, foreign occupation, injustice and conflict. Imagine the five million people of this small island applying our collective energy, our wisdom and our intelligence to building the future. Imagine an island economy thriving, working hard to produce the wealth that can reduce unemployment and improve the quality of life of all our people. Imagine an Ireland using that wealth to eradicate poverty, to build homes, to improve education, to protect the environment, to heal the sick, to help the weak, the aged—all the children of the nation.

George Bernard Shaw once said; “Some people see things as they are and ask why? I dream things that never were and ask why not?” Idealism is not dead in Ireland. It is alive and well and thriving within Irish republicanism. It is idealism with a vision for a better future. Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin a few years ago described Sinn Fein as the “voice of an idea.” It is an idea, an idealism that is both republican and labour, the idea of a free Ireland and a sovereign people.

#### IV

And in the last few years, for the first time in over two decades, people right across this country are hearing of that idea and recognising that idealism. But we need to build on our vision right across this island so that the democratic re-conquest of Ireland is realised in all of its social, economic, and cultural manifestations as well as in the political field.

Our task must be to articulate and to develop the core republican positions in a way that is reasonable and attractive to the broad mass of the people of Ireland. Citizens have the right to a real future as equals. But this will not happen unless Irish republicans and others grasp the challenge, take the lead and make it happen.

The core of republicanism, both philosophically and ideologically, is the people. The people are sovereign. That means government of the people by the people. But what ultimately is the point of republicanism unless it signifies not only political democracy, but also the maximum welfare of the maximum number? We seek an economic democracy as well as a political democracy. A genuine republic must entail not alone a new political dispensation, but a new social and economic order.

We should not, of course, lose sight of the internationalist dimension of republicanism. Our struggle is not only about winning independence from Britain but it is about asserting our sovereignty in terms of the promotion of an independent foreign policy and positive Irish neutrality. It is about standing alongside our impoverished and oppressed brothers and sisters throughout the world who face the burden of foreign debt and the daily reality of starvation, malnutrition and disease. According to the UN, 134,000 children die each week from malnutrition and preventable dis-

ease. We have a responsibility to do all that we can to help them, and to promote the principles of democracy, justice, equality and human rights globally.

But how do we do all of this? And how do we get our national democracy? What is our strategy? And how specifically does that strategy stand regarding the criterion that there can be no internal settlement to the conflict in the North? The constitutional reality is that the British still hold jurisdiction over a part of Ireland, although that has been significantly qualified by the repealing of the Government of Ireland Act. The political reality if we are to attain our goals requires a process of transition to a united Ireland.

As a consequence of the Good Friday Agreement we now have all-Ireland institutions and structures established, as ratified by the people, which we believe can lead to that end. But this will not happen of its own accord. Politics is never static. It will only happen if we make it happen.

The Good Friday Agreement is not for Irish republicans an end in itself, but an agreement with the potential to deliver a full national democracy in Ireland. It is an all-Ireland agreement with all-Ireland structures and institutions.

Sinn Féin cannot bring about all the changes in politics and in society that are required on our own. Therefore we must link up with like-minded forces and individuals, in other parties and in pressure groups, to put together an Alliance for a New Ireland—one which is free of corruption, and characterised by civic virtue and social justice.

## V

We have mapped out a course for the future, and we are taking the lead in charting that course. But let no one misrepresent what we mean by ending British interference in Ireland. Because Sinn Féin rejects the British government's interference in Ireland some unionists have said that their presence is under attack. That is no more correct now than it ever was.

Republicans have no desire to drive unionists out or to prevent whoever on this island wishes to designate him or herself as British from doing so. Nor would we prevent or even discourage anyone who so wishes from endeavouring to promote their cultural identity socially, culturally or politically by any legitimate and democratic method, including the possession of British or any other citizenship. We have the right to pursue our goals politically and democratically. Unionists clearly have the same right.

Rejecting British government interference signifies opposition to the assertion of sovereignty by the British government and parliament over any part of Ireland. We believe that that assertion of sovereignty by the British government is contrary to the democratic wishes of a majority of the people of Ireland. Irish sovereignty is a

fact in its own right and quite separate from the entitlements of unionists and those who categorise themselves as British.

At the same time as unionists increasingly become disillusioned and suspicious of London's intentions (and indeed they act as though they have as little faith in the British Government as republicans) more and more will come to see the benefit of asserting their rights as 20% of an Irish national democracy rather than remain as 2% of the United Kingdom.

The Good Friday Agreement is the foundation upon which new relationships between unionists and nationalists and republicans can be forged. Working the new institutions together harmoniously will be for the good of all the people of this island. This engagement, properly functioning, will lead in time to a genuine process of national reconciliation.

## VI

Sinn Fein aims to reach out to everybody on this island on the basis of equality and the sovereignty of the people in order to persuade them of the value of an agreed Ireland with agreed institutions. Sinn Fein will undertake its full part in that process, especially given the lack of real choice that the electorates face otherwise. There are already all-Ireland dynamics in operation and structures have now been erected to foster and expand them.

It is, however, a matter of political fact, that it is not enough for us to will the end, the goal, the objective; we must also will the means. This calls upon all the creativity, principle, and determination that we can muster as a people. What is essential is no less than a vision. Those who fought for an independent Ireland in the last century had one. We must map out ours in this century, appropriate to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The Ireland of the new millennium will be more outward looking, and have a mix of civic and cultural Irishness. It will be pluralist, urban, multi-lingual, and, going on current immigration trends, also multi-racial. The republican concept of citizenship has always been inclusive. Republicans totally repudiate the hostile and racist attitude being shown to asylum seekers, mainly here in the 26 counties.

Those who complain the loudest about refugees seem to have forgotten our own history. In years gone by we suffered racist abuse in our own country from colonial occupiers, and we were subjected to racial discrimination in other lands. It is not so long ago that signs saying: "No Irish—No Blacks" were displayed on boarding houses in England and America. It is not so long ago that thousands of young people of Ireland departed our shores for the US to work illegally.

But it is important to point out that racism does not grow of its own accord. Everywhere it has taken hold it is because some unscrupulous people in politics and

other spheres have nurtured it for their own cynical short-term interests. They must be opposed.

## VII

Lastly, I have referred to civic and cultural Irishness. By civic Irishness, I mean commitment as a citizen to an Irish society that is one of responsibility and not narrow individualism, of ethical standards rather than greed and venality, of a self-governing community through structures of empowerment, of reward by worth and not birth.

Beyond that, cultural Irishness is a matter of choosing among a number of influences. Sinn Féin is wedded to the Gaelic as a primary, but not sole, font of inspiration, and not in an exclusionist or supremacist way. It seeks to convince, not to compel. Such civic and cultural Irishness can also be another bridge to unionists. It allows for acceptance of an Irish democracy, without insisting on cultural sameness.

Clearly, it is an Irish democracy in which Unionists can play a role out of all proportion to any they have played in these islands over the past 80 years. In other words, what is entailed is the construction of a new and inclusive nation with varied, but not incompatible, definitions within it. How that will evolve over time, only history can tell.

In working towards this we must keep sight of where we want to go and avoid the dangers of being mesmerised by the day-to-day tactical or other considerations of struggle.

We are living through a time of great hope, great risk, and great opportunity. But a time also to remember as Seamus Heaney puts it "that a further shore is reachable from here".

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## REDEFINING REPUBLICANISM— AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Paul Arthur

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### I

In this paper I propose to look at the past before reviewing the future, as is inevitable when we deal with this question. I want to set my remarks in the context of several short quotations.

The first comes from the distinguished French jurist, Roger Errera: “One of the sound foundations of a political society is a true knowledge of its past ... But the affirmation of the rights of memory does not mean that the past must become the only, or the main, value” (Errera, 1999). Here we have a warning that in dealing with the past we need to keep it in some perspective. And, if you like, the obverse of that occurs when society looks at its past, and because there are things in the past we don’t like, we engage in erasure, in silence. I think in terms of, for example, Colm Toibin’s recent work on the Irish Famine where he quotes the literary critic Terry Eagleton: “If the Famine stirred some to angry rhetoric, it would seem to have traumatised others into muteness. The event strains at the limits of the articulable, and is truly in this sense an Irish Auschwitz” (Toibin, 1998). In that respect it fits into the concept that some things are “unthinkable” in the framework of Western thought. In his analysis of the slave-led Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) Trouillot states: “The unthinkable is that which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternatives, that which perverts all answers because it denies the terms under which the questions were phrased” (Trouillot, 1995: 106). So in looking at the past we need to be aware of how we structure (or ignore) the facts.

I want to move from here to look at how we perceive the term “republican”. In a Dail debate on proposed family planning legislation the Progressive Democrat leader, Desmond O'Malley, said:

I am certain of one thing in relation to partition—we will never see a Thirty-Two County Republic on this island until, first of all, we have a Twenty-Six County Republic in this part we have jurisdiction over today, which is really a Republic practicing real Republican traditions. Otherwise, we can forget about persuading our fellow Irishmen in the North to join us. “Republican” is perhaps the most abused word in Ireland today ... There is an immediate preconceived notion of what it is. It consists principally of Anglophobia. Mentally, at least, it is an aggressive attitude towards those who do not agree with our views on what the future of this island should be. It consists of turning a blind eye to violence, seeing no immorality, often, in the most awful violence, seeing immorality only in one area, the area with which this Bill deals (quoted in Walsh, 1986: 74).

O'Malley was one of those politicians in the Republic in the 1980s and 1990s who began to re-vision what “republican” was supposed to be in an Irish context. It was

a process that began probably with the New Ireland Forum in 1983-84; and his remarks about the awfulness of violence remind us of our capacity for erasure, of our ability to ignore unpalatable facts from our own past.

My final quotation comes from the Israeli political scientist, Yael Tamir, when she commented that “inherent in nationalism is a recognition of the existence of others. It is the way in which the national group treats these others that distinguishes polycentric nationalism, which respects the other and sees each nation as enriching a common civilisation, from ethnocentric nationalism, which sees one’s own nation as superior to all others and seeks domination” (Tamir, 1995: 430).

## II

Now I think we should hang on to every word of this quotation because it seems to me that as a result of the past terrible 30 years we are beginning to move from ethnocentric towards polycentric nationalism. Two or three points arise from this quotation. One is to highlight the existence of the “other”. EM Forster once famously said: “Only connect”. What we have failed to do in this country is to make that connection. What we have failed to do is to engage with the “other”, and that has been, until recent years, one of republicanism’s main failings. We can come up with reasons why we failed to make connections when we put it in the context of Ireland’s dreadful history.

One of the themes in Joe Lee’s magisterial history, *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* was a “dependency syndrome which had wormed its way into the Irish psyche during the long centuries of foreign dominance”:

The Irish mind was enveloped in, and to some extent suffocated by, the English mental embrace. This was quite natural. A small occupied country, with an alien ruling class, culturally penetrated by the language and many of the thought processes of the coloniser, was bound in large measure to imitate the example of the powerful and the prosperous (Lee, 1989: 627).

The end result was that “absorption in the British model gravely limited Irish perspectives. When allied to the elusive but crucial psychological factors that inspired the instinct of inferiority, it shrivelled Irish perspectives on Irish potential” (Lee, 1989: 629). It led to an attitude based on a reading of history which emphasises victimhood and resistance: “there is no place in Irish political culture for greatness outside the ‘heroic’ model. Greatness is defined in terms of defiance of the external enemy” (Lee, 1989: 406). Republicans were exponents of this mentality.

So we start with a dependency culture that was long on retrieval but short on projection. It is interesting to note that one of the most positive aspects of Mitchel McLaughlin’s presentation (see elsewhere in this paper) was that it dealt with projection and did not dwell on retrieval; and it is the academic who has been concentrating on the latter (but that, I would argue, was necessary in the context of this lecture). It fits in with Sean O’Faolain’s comment: “the policy of Sinn Fein has always been, since its foundation, that simple formula: Freedom first; other things af-

ter” (cited in Patterson, 1989: 12). That has been the republican project until fairly recent years.

But, as Mitchel McLaughlin says, we need to broaden that definition of republicanism and to begin to look at it in the context of Plato’s republic with its emphasis on justice. We have taken our lead from the past and wrapped ourselves in several layers of ambiguity, so that sometimes the distance between the constitutional and the physical force traditions have not been that far removed. Take, for example, a comparison of the opening words of the 1916 Proclamation with the preamble of the 1937 Constitution. There you have a political culture laid out in one simple statement: a profound sense of piety, a deep sense of history and of grievance, and an essential sense of the contemporaneity of the past. It is a narrative of dispossession overlaid by a fundamental religiosity secularized by a doctrine of manifest destiny. It is what has sustained Irish republicanism through centuries of failure. Perhaps one should say Irish *nationalism*; I am aware that I may be conflating both terms but that is generally what has happened. Norman Porter rightly declares that “it is mistaken to regard republicanism as a species of nationalism, it is similarly mistaken to regard it as a species of either liberalism or socialism” (Porter, 1998: 31). We have lost those distinctions a long time ago and we are only beginning to realise that we have lost them. That realisation occurred at the earliest in the mid-1990s, and I want to say a few words about that.

### III

Our culture is one based on intimidation, is one based on failure. If you look at the way we have used political violence I would argue that violence in Ireland has not so much sent out people to kill but to die. It is a violence based on martyrology and on the notion of attrition. It is a violence based on a very strong moral dimension—that the more of us who die, the more the people will realise that ours is a just cause. It was at the heart of the hunger strikes in 1980-81.

It is from that time, I believe, that republicanism as an ideology begins to place itself in comparison with its great variants in the French and American models. One of the interesting facts about Irish republicanism is that it has not produced any great narratives or great texts. There is nothing akin to Mao’s little red book. There is no equivalent of what Carlos Guzman did with Peru’s Shining Path movement. What has been done in Ireland has been to base everything on action, and we struggle to find route maps of what the republican project is about. It is there to some extent in the 1916 Proclamation and in the writings of Wolfe Tone, but we need to make the jump from 1916 to 1986—in fact to the publication of Gerry Adams’s *The politics of Irish freedom*. Here we find the beginning of a route map because Adams is critical of the very organisation that he leads. Adams contends that in the past the republican movement was a separatist movement with a radical tendency; whereas in its current embodiment the radical tendency is in control for the first time. Now that is an important statement. He maintains, too, that since the 1930s there has been no real effort to map out what type of a republic was aimed at.

I am suggesting that from the early 1980s Adams and his associates began to map that route. Unlike the men of 1916 they started with some advantages. In *The politics of Irish freedom* Adams makes the connection between the men of 1916 and the “barricade days” of the civil rights movement. In other words, the republican movement had moved beyond being a vanguard, a revolutionary elite, to being a popular force. By the 1970s republicanism was sufficiently rooted in the people that it could not succeed without the support of the wider community. Once the northern contingent had taken control, that gave them the self-confidence to move along their political project. Adams had written about the three tendencies—militant, conspiratorial and political—within republicanism: now was the time for the last to assert itself. This began particularly after the 1981 hunger strike, which was a classic example of the Pearsean religion of violent nationalism—“the cults of blood, youth and sacrifice, and the concepts of generational witness, historic roles and the supremacy of the gesture” (MacDonagh, 1983: 89).

#### IV

But afterwards there was a need to move beyond this. The first foray was into electoral politics and the phase of “the ballot box and the armalite”. Republicans were to realise that that was, in fact, the ballot box versus the armalite. While their politics was still the politics of community and of territoriality they began to recognise that the “other” had to be embraced. It began with the dialogue with the SDLP between March and September 1988. It was then that Sinn Fein ceased being a sect full of moral certitude and became a political movement. There were also some private dialogues with Protestant academics.

These made it possible to move beyond the past and away from insularity. Their earlier decision (at the 1986 Ard-fheis) to contest and take their seats in Dail Eireann had been truly revolutionary in terms of republican evolution. Having made that leap, and brought their people along with them, other things became possible. Compare, for example, Sinn Fein’s 1988 policy document, *Towards a strategy for peace* with their 1992 document *Towards a lasting peace In Ireland*—even the titles are revealing—and look at attitudes towards Europe. By 1992 Sinn Fein is beginning to place Irish republicanism in the context of European republicanism and the impact of the French Revolution. They were moving beyond the narrow ground and adapting to a proper sense of time scales.

#### V

If I were to judge how far we are moving towards a true republicanism I would refer to the “Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations” on Good Friday 1998, where the signatories “recognise the birthright of all people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, *or both ...*” (italics added). That is what redefining republicanism in the 21st century has to be about.

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