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Bodenstown: 200th Anniversary of the Founding of the United Irishmen

The Workers'Party

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Bodenstown

October 1991

**200th Anniversary of the
Founding
of
The United Irishmen**

*LESSONS FOR
TODAY*

**Cllr. Tomás
MacGiolla T.D.**

Introduction by Cathal Goulding

INTRODUCTION

When I was asked to write an introduction to Tomás Mac Giolla's October 1991 Bodenstown speech I accepted the task with pleasure. Tomás Mac Giolla has been one of my closest comrades and valued friends for over thirty years of struggle. In considering his Bodenstown speech I began to think about Tomás Mac Giolla's unique and unforgettable contribution to

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LESSONS FOR TODAY

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Bodenstown is a wellspring of the fundamental ideas of freedom. It is a place of reflection and renewal. It is a chance to focus again on the timeless ideas Tomá passed on to us - the uniting of the poor against privilege and property, how Republicanism means, above all, brotherhood, the liberating force of

INTRODUCTION

When I was asked to write an introduction to Tomás Mac Giolla's October 1991 Bodenstown speech I accepted the task with pleasure. Tomás Mac Giolla has been one of my closest comrades and valued friends for over thirty years of struggle. In considering his Bodenstown speech I began to think about Tomás Mac Giolla's unique and unforgettable contribution to the life of our party and country.

Tomás Mac Giolla blazed a lot of trails for socialism and for authentic Republicanism in this country. For Mac Giolla, its been a 40 year job.

The hallmark of his contribution to the Workers' Party has been and remains an unshakable integrity. It is a quality that the party should treasure.

What Mac Giolla says comes from an analytical mind of the first order, and from an idealism that never dimmed. Clarity and straightforwardness come natural to him. In my opinion, this speech is one of the finest assertions of political belief that I have heard at Bodenstown.

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Bodenstown is a wellspring of the fundamental ideas of freedom. It is a place of reflection and renewal. It is a chance to focus again on the timeless ideas Tone passed on to us - the uniting of the poor against privilege and property, how Republicanism means, above all, brotherhood, the liberating force of

secularism and the importance of Tone's sort of humanity in revolutionary politics.

Tomás Mac Giolla was the first Workers' Party councillor elected to Dublin Corporation in 1979. He was among the first of our TDs. Decades ago, he was among those who led the Republican Movement into an organised socialist approach. Mac Giolla has pointed us relentlessly towards involvement in the daily struggle of the working-class for dignity, and for opportunity and equality in their lives.

Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than Tomás Mac Giolla's last address as Party President to the 1988 Workers' Party Ard Fheis. In that speech Mac Giolla spelt out in detail the necessity for a revolutionary organisation to accept change and what change means to a party of the working class. Despite the great upheavals over the past two years in parts of the world, most particularly in Eastern Europe, culminating in the disappearance of the Soviet Union, Mac Giolla's analysis and conclusions concerning the role and importance of a party of the working class remain as guiding principles for the party in the years ahead. A few extracts from that particular speech, are I feel worthwhile repeating.

He says "*A party of the working class is the political instrument of those who both need, and want, to change the world.*

That is a job description of the Workers' Party. And like all job descriptions it is continually challenged by capitalism. So every day it has to be written out again, negotiated again, fought for again, consolidated again and every day the Party must prove itself all over again because every day is a different day and every day the world is changing and every day it

needs to be looked at carefully and studied because it is not the world as it was yesterday.

Then he says *"The Workers' Party has long since learned that if you want Freedom, you must accept the necessity to change. Always throughout the long years of struggle, we kept our eyes on the prize - Freedom. Of course the prize is still before us to be won but we have forged the weapon to seize the prize. That weapon is you and I and all of us united in the Workers' Party. As we strengthen and advance and become the ideological battering ram of our class, no Bastille in this country will be safe.*

And there is no shortage of Bastilles which imprison our class in this society, crippling lives with material poverty and the poverty of the mind, where generation after generation are told by the class of power and privilege "Thus far shalt thou go and no further, that is your lot, accept it", where lives become mere existences and those mere existences become a scramble to survive; where job and learning and expression and hope and cultural self-fulfilment and happiness itself are the private property of those who own the wealth, of those who think they own our lives.

The prize is freedom. Oppression is the enemy. Our weapon is the people through the Party."

And again he returns to the objective of a Revolutionary Party *"The objective of the Workers' Party is freedom - freedom from oppression. To achieve that we need democratic control of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Economic freedom must guarantee the right of an individual to be free from want; we must then guarantee the right of free expression, social and cultural freedom and the right to fulfilment in people's lives. This means lifting a whole series of lids of oppression. It is for this we have been drawing on the great sources of thought and vision and*

action at home and worldwide in Tom Paine, Tone, Davis, Marx, Davitt, Connolly, Mellows, Frank Ryan and Billy McMillen, to help us forge our ideology and organise our Party. With them we hungered to right wrongs, we engaged in struggle, some of our comrades died, all for that vision of true Freedom."

In his concluding remarks Mac Giolla brings to our attention why the principles and aims of the greatest event in human history still remain valid *"The French Revolution was the first great peoples' assault on economic oppression. It swept away the parasites in a wave of hunger for freedom. It was the time of birth for the socialist way, for modern humanism, a binding beacon of hope for the dispossessed and abused of the world. Unity makes the unfree free, it said. Tyranny has no walls high enough when the tyrannised combine, it said. Poverty and oppression may break your back, but stand together and you will stand tall, tall enough to see the road to liberty.*

And it unleashed upon the world a mighty ideal, a thunderclap of democratic intent: "Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!" Democracy and socialism were born.

For revolutionary socialists this idea still remains to be pursued. No revolution or revolutionary, no philosopher or freedom fighter, no progressive or progressive movement remained or can remain untouched by this first flowering of Republican belief which made socialism possible.

Tone brought this revolutionary creed to Ireland, not alone as a weapon against king and prince and the aristocracy's extensive machine of exploitation, but as a healing agent among the masses, driven by faction and religious hate. And they marched to the Marseillaise, northern Protestant and southern Catholic, some of them up to the mouth of the enemy cannon, shouting for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity with their dying

breath. They had adopted an "alien philosophy" and made it their own.

The reverberations from that first organised uprising by humanity against the dictatorship of wealth in France are still sounding around the world today. Chou En-lai, the great Chinese socialist, when asked just before his death in 1976, what he thought was 1789's greatest contribution to world history, replied: "It's too early to say." It is certainly a bit too early to say in Ireland. The great democratic and secular freedoms opened up to the masses by the French Revolution are still a closed book to the so-called Republicans in Ireland today."

Lastly he brings to our attention one of his own and our party's fundamental concerns, the future of the Protestant people of Northern Ireland which as he points out is basic to the future of our country "The Protestant people of Northern Ireland are entitled to ask any party that wants to talk to them to produce its credentials and its cards. We can produce them with pride. We are the only party in Ireland whose papers are stamped with peace, whose cards show us to be paid up members of that union of minds and hearts which is our only protection against civil war, whose record of resistance to terrorism and tribalism are written in the blood of its members.

So as you examine our documents you will be turning the pages of twenty years of history. Years of hardship, years of heroism; years of sorrow, years of struggle; years of pity, years of pride . . .

The best years of of our lives.

For twenty years now, we have lived in the shadow of civil war. For twenty years we in the Workers' Party have struggled to prevent the shadow of civil war becoming the substance of civil war. For twenty years now butchers in balaclavas and sectarian savages tried to terrorise our people into civil war while we have helped open the narrow pass of peace so that the people

of Ireland, Protestant and Catholic, might pass through to a better land.

For twenty years now we have stood against sectarianism, alone, abused, and often abandoned by those whose vision could not see through the long night. For twenty years now we have, like Cuchulainn, tied ourself to the stone of liberty so that we might not fall or fail our people, and the best and bravest in our party have given their lives to hold that pass of peace.

For twenty years we never left our post. For twenty years we survived and held the pass to peace and democracy as Billy McMillen told us to, and now we think that you the Protestant people of Northern Ireland should move forward into the sunlight, move proudly to the forefront and lead us through that path to peace.

So I appeal to you the Protestant people of Northern Ireland. Do not wait on change. Rush forward to grasp it. Go back to your roots as we did, and discover they are embedded in Liberty and Democracy. Bring forward these truths to every conference table and confront hypocrisy. I have no doubt of your ability to give leadership in the struggle for peace and democracy.

No surrender!

This 1991 Bodenstown speech is then a very timely and most important follow on to Tomás Mac Giolla's 1988 Ard Fheis Speech, for in this Bodenstown address Mac Giolla, once again as he has done so often in the past, brings us back to the basics, the fundamentals.

It is almost three years now since a small clique organised around Eoghan Harris attempted to divert the party into Social Democracy. I am optimistic that in the longterm the party will reject any of Eoghan Harris's legacy and will retain its principles and aims of Socialism. Certainly there are problems for radicals, all progressives,

Socialists and Communists not just in Ireland but throughout the world, and we must set about tackling these problems but in a realistic and calm manner.

The past few years have given us many shocks and setbacks but they have not lessened nor nullified the need for and the ultimate triumph of Socialism. The new world order of George Bush becomes more openly oppressive and dictatorial. There has to be a revival and strengthening of International Solidarity as practiced by Tone and supporters of the French Revolution and there has to be and must be a disciplined organised force a party of the working class to oppose and defeat this "New World Order". In his speech Tomás Mac Giolla clearly points the way this can be done.

History has many examples of capitalism's apparent victory and of the defeat of socialist ideas. One such example was immediately after the outbreak of the First World War, when the leaders of the Socialist International betrayed their members and supporters and the Socialist International was shattered. At that time only a few could be found such as Lenin in Russia and Connolly in Ireland to oppose their Governments and the Socialist International leaders participation in the war.

I'm sure that at that time the situation appeared bleak and depressing and yet through principle and commitment the forces of Socialism were rallied and were able to build a significant force against war and capitalism which led to the great victory of 1917. If in later years that victory was betrayed and lost it is not the fault of the philosophy or ideas which motivated the masses to achieve 1917, but that of small

minded and arrogant men and women who could not think for themselves but meekly followed a so called strong man who was able to feed their prejudices and their petty desires and fears, and in so doing, distort and corrupt the ideals and principles of socialism.

We have many lessons to learn and equally as important, many lessons to apply. In this regard as so often in the past and now today, to look again as we need to continuously look at the wellsprings of the fundamental ideas of freedom and our basic political philosophy, there is no better man than Tomás Mac Giolla.

If this introduction is somewhat long I make no apology for that, for we are concerned here with the future of our party and our people.

Cathal Goulding
Executive Political Committee
The Workers' Party

Bodenstown

20th October 1991

Cllr. Tomás Mac Giolla, T.D.

It is good to be here for this the most significant anniversary in Irish Republican history. Tone and his brilliant Society of United Irishmen have always been the sheet anchor of my political philosophy and the base on which I built my ideology. It is therefore a great honour for me to stand here to-day at Tone's grave just 200 years after the inauguration of the Society on the 14th October 1791 and their first meeting on 18th October at which 28 members were present. It was in Belfast that the Society was born 200 years ago and it was primarily on the anvil of the realities of that proletarian city that we hammered out our revolutionary creed of anti-sectarianism and the unity of the working class against the land owning and business class - the unity of the people of no property against the property owning class. And it is there in Belfast, more than anywhere else to-day, that we live out those beliefs against all the odds.

The United Men as they became known, lit a torch of reason in a dark night of confusion, religious hate and feudal exploitation. Throughout the latter half of the 18th century many sectarian terror gangs sprang up around the country, Oakboys, Steelboys, Whiteboys, Ribbonmen, Peep-o-Day Boys and Defenders. The Society of United Irishmen were an anti-sectarian force who confronted these sectarian gangs with reason and politics. Tone himself describes how himself and Neilson rode to Rathfriland, Co. Down, on July 18th, 1792, with the purpose of ending sectarian clashes between Protestant Peep-o-Day Boys and Catholic Defenders. They succeeded in

establishing a truce which broke down in two weeks. Against advice Tone returned again on August 11th with Keogh and Neilson on what he called "*my expedition among the Peep-o-Day Boys*". This time they had to beat a hasty retreat. Making light of his anti-sectarian battle, Tone describes the event humorously as "*my valorous entry into and famous retreat out of the city of Rathfriland*".

I mention this to show that from its inception the Society of United Irishmen embarked on one of the momentous acts in Irish revolutionary history - they stepped back from the carnival of tribalism which had engulfed the country and set out to unite the people in a fight to overthrow an entrenched order of privilege, greed and oppression. The weapons in their battle in those early years were reason and politics. They embarked on what was the first ever civil rights campaign to confront the Kings and Popes and Princes with a demand for religious freedom and complete enfranchisement.

The torch of reason which they lit still lights our way in our long march towards a genuine democracy in Ireland, towards a relevant socialism, towards a freedom which will transform the lives of every Irishman and Irishwomen on this island as they live out their daily lives.

Without the United Irishmen and the enduring core principles which they took from that earth shaking explosion of democracy in France in 1789, we ourselves would not be who we are and what we are and where we are! We would not be socialists. We would not be secularists. We would not be liberated in ourselves by humanism. We would not be the free, anti-sectarian democrats we are to-day who can point the finger at sectarian terror, orange and green, and at all those who deal out death and misery,

in uniform or otherwise, military or paramilitary.

The United Irishmen came together to get rid of the chief enemies of peace and progress - the futile treadmill of bigotry and sectarian atrocity and the tyranny of a small, corrupt aristocracy of wealth. The Workers' Party to-day are their true heirs and successors still engaged in the same daily struggle. We are the fighting living breathing expression of their magnificent democratic vision which we carry into the Council chambers North and South, to the unions, on the streets and on the floor of the Dail and the European Parliament. We carry on that struggle not because we have any duty to those long dead or because we owe any debt to the past but because we have a revolutionary duty to the living, as they had in their time, a duty to the dispossessed, the exploited, to those who are unfree, politically, socially or economically.

A central goal of Tone and the United Irishmen was to end the bloody and sterile sectarian warfare, to render it irrelevant and to crush it with the politics of peoples unity, the politics of liberty, equality, fraternity. I believe therefore that it is a screaming outrage that the Provisionals who are a throwback to the pre-republican 18th century Defenders and other secret societies who are engaged in a fratricidal sectarian war, I believe it is an outrage and an affront to republicans and democrats to see them march up here annually to debase Wolfe Tone and claim his blessing on their fascist bombs and ideological shambles. As for the new aristocracy who graced his grave this morning I think Tone himself would have a good belly laugh as he lowered another mug of porter.

The Workers' Party cannot hand the generous and open republican tradition of Tone and the United Irishmen over to sectarian killers. We

cannot shrug our shoulders and turn away from that battle. We cannot let the Provos kidnap that tradition and kill it as they do daily with their flesh and blood victims. We cannot let the authentic republican tradition become associated in the minds of the people with bodies dumped in ditches or white sheets over prone figures in squalid alleyways. We cannot let a man like Tone be tied to the graveyard tears of baffled, grieving children, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, lovers, friends in this country, in Britain or anywhere else. We cannot let a tradition which has so much to offer the struggle for peace and brotherhood be linked to death and blackhearted malice.

We are proud of and cherish our roots in radical Irish Republicanism. These traditions fortified us in the long difficult path to where we stand now as a modern, socialist, secular political party with a detailed political programme for social justice and equality, alert to the needs of a rapidly changing Ireland in a rapidly changing world.

The central demand in Northern Ireland at this time is Peace. This requires an end to sectarianism and an end to terrorism. This cannot be achieved by security measures alone. It cannot be achieved by allowing security forces to operate outside the law. It cannot be achieved by repressive legislation or by further restriction on civil liberties. It can only be achieved by a combination of political, economic and social measures and by dialogue between the opposing political groupings to see what political progress, even on a limited scale, could be made. If talks take place on an open agenda the prospects for peace will increase enormously. The desire for peace is now so widespread that it can be harnessed as a motivating force for great political progress. Direct rule from Westminster could be ended. New political structures could be established. The demands of

the great Civil Rights Campaign could be given recognition in a Bill of Rights which would be the basic constitutional framework under which all traditions and political aspirations would be given expression. In an atmosphere of peace and democracy, working class unity would grow and socialism would grow under the "*common name of Irishmen*".

Our young people will no longer accept the politics of hypocrisy, corruption and decadence. They want honesty and integrity in public life. They want a new concept of patriotism. A patriotism based on a love of humanity and concern for all citizens rather than one based on a law of the jungle concept of nationalism. We need a new morality in public life. Setting up offshore companies for the purpose of avoiding or evading taxes must be made criminal offences punishable by jail sentences plus substantial fines. Similarly the asset strippers who close down companies putting the workforce on the dole and then sell off the assets at a huge profit must be made guilty of criminal offences and punished by law. People want to see the real gangsters, thieves and robbers who deal in millions, punished by prison sentences.

It is a contradiction in terms to call our society a free society while we have such huge numbers of unemployed along with such massive emigration of our young people, and one third of our people living below the poverty line. We cannot consider ourselves to be free unless we have jobs for all our people and unless we enjoy the most basic freedoms such as freedom from fear and freedom from want. Is it not a terrible indictment of our governments that as the twentieth century draws to a close tens of thousands of working class people, whose parents or grandparents fought for freedom for this country, are still today struggling for that most basic of all freedoms - freedom from want

- want of food, want of clothing, want of shelter, want of health care, want of education.

Comrades, The Workers' Party is needed today more than ever before. Its revolutionary tradition is needed as never before. Its honesty, its consistency and its integrity are needed as never before. In commemorating today the 200th anniversary of the founding of democracy in Ireland let us pledge ourselves to continue the fight to protect that democracy and to extend it to all areas of life so that it doesn't again fall into the control of an elite group of politicians and owners of property as it was in 1791.





Tomás Mac Giolla was born in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary in January 1924.

A graduate of U.C.D. he is a fulltime public representative. He became President of Sinn Féin in 1962. He was one of those actively involved in formulating and developing the new social, economic and political policies of Sinn Féin/Republican Movement in the early sixties. These policies led in turn to the development and formation of the Workers' Party.

Elected to the Dáil in November 1982 he retained his seat in the elections of 1987 and 1989. He retired as Workers' Party President in 1988 but has continued his active involvement in politics since then. He is party spokesperson in the Dáil on Education and Energy.