

Oration delivered at the graveside of

# Séamus Costello

Bray, Co. Wicklow, Sunday, 3rd October 1982

by Jim Lane, IRSP, Cork.



1939

*Séamus Costello, IRSP*

1977

"The fact that our party recognises that the success of the national liberation struggle is an essential prerequisite for the greater development of the class struggle does not mean that all our energies go into national liberation and that class struggle be put in abeyance. Important and all that it is, national liberation struggle, which has all the appearance of being a protracted struggle, must not be conducted at the expense of other areas of struggle. National liberation struggle and the struggle for socialism must proceed at the one time, supporting and stimulating each other".

**Jim Lane in his Oration to Séamus Costello, 1982**

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**G**athering beside the graves of our patriot dead is a long-established custom for Irish revolutionaries. In doing so, we honour our dead and seek strength and inspiration to help further the cause for which they struggled. Such strength and inspiration derives not alone in recalling the deeds of our dead patriots, but also in restating and clarifying our political philosophy, in terms of existing conditions. The deeds of our dead comrade, Séamus Costello, republican socialist and founder member of the Irish Republican Socialist Party are legion. This year in a fitting and timely tribute, such deeds have been recorded with the publication of a book by the Séamus Costello Memorial Committee. For an insight into the contribution that Séamus made to the revolutionary socialist struggle in Ireland, it is required reading, guaranteed to strengthen our resolve and provide inspiration. Therein can be found not alone an account of his life, achievements and writings, but an excellent collection of tributes from his friends and comrades. No words of mine spoken in tribute could match theirs.

Nora Connolly-O'Brien, recently deceased daughter of Irish socialist republican martyr James Connolly, considered him to be the greatest follower of her father's teachings in this generation and hoped that his vision for Ireland would be realised in this generation.

For Tony Gregory, Séamus "personified more than any Irish man or woman, at least of our generation, the republican socialist – the revolutionary activist who organised and worked in tenant organisations, trade unions, housing action committees and cultural organisations."

From the young men and women of the republican socialist movement, to whom he was friend and mentor, came the following tributes:

Gerry Roche – "Like Lenin, he was pragmatic in his tactics, and while recognising the corruption of the courts and parliament, he was quite prepared to use them as a platform while remaining totally inflexible in his politics."

Seán Doyle – "Séamus Costello was a man of the people. He got his degree in working-class involvement, on the streets with his people, campaigning with them for justice."

Niall Leonach – "He had an irrepressible dedication and energy to carry on with the struggle, to learn new lessons and to break new ground."

Íte Ní Chionnaith – "Bhí a fhios aige in gcónaí go raibh a bheatha i mbaol agus go mbeadh, an fhaí is a lean sé den obair a bhí ar bun aige ach níor lig sé dó sin cur as dó. Ba chailliúint gan áireamh é do phobal na tíre seo, thuaidh agus theas."

And it was Miriam Daly, first chairperson of the Séamus Costello Memorial Committee and a member of the Ard-Chomhairle of the IRSP when Séamus was murdered, who highlighted the point that made him stand out as a republican socialist, when she said he never divorced

the national question from the class oppression and deprivation in Ireland. Like Séamus, Miriam Daly too was to die in the cause of national liberation and socialism, murdered by agents of British imperialism at the height of the H-Block/Armagh Campaign in which she was so deeply involved. Séamus Costello, it was often he said, “I owe my allegiance to the working class”; and of the party he helped found, he said:

We are a revolutionary party and our objective is to create a revolutionary socialist state in Ireland. Part of the struggle for a socialist state entails resolving the national liberation struggle and ending British imperialist intervention, whether military intervention, political intervention or control of aspects of the economy. This is the basic position of the party. We see the ending of British imperialist intervention in Ireland as an essential prerequisite for development of class struggle between left and right in this country. The class forces in Ireland have never developed properly in the last 50 years basically because of imperialist intervention and because of the fact that the national struggle remains incomplete.

Here we have a clear exposition of the primary objective of the Irish Republican Socialist Party – a revolutionary socialist state in Ireland. To achieve this objective, part of the struggle entails resolving the national question. “Part of the struggle” – it is important for us all to reflect on this. It implies, that in the present period of struggle, when so much effort is being put into the struggle for national liberation, that our party be also involved in all other areas of struggle in the interest of the working class, the class to whom Séamus Costello pledged his allegiance exclusively. To a great extent, our party has been greatly inhibited in its efforts to wage struggle in working-class and other oppressed peoples’ interests. Since the party’s formation, it has been under relentless attack from government, both North and South, as well as from a variety of agents of British imperialism. These attacks have included the seizure of party offices; the burning of office files; the arrest of leading members of the party on trumped-up charges in connection with the Great Train Robbery at Sallins, Co. Kildare, later admitted by the IRA; the arrest and detention of members of the party in Belfast, Derry, Strabane, and elsewhere in the North, on the word of police informers. Even when we participate in the electoral process, we are subjected to harassment – so much for free elections. The assassination of party chairman Séamus Costello in 1977, following on the murder of several members of the party a few years earlier in Belfast, was a major blow to our effectiveness as a party. The assassination of Miriam Daly, Noel Lyttle and Ronnie Bunting added further to our problems. Our history has indeed been a turbulent one! However, to attribute the aforementioned attacks on our party as the sole inhibiting factor in our inability to play a more meaningful role in the class struggle would be dishonest and misleading. In terms of proletarian revolutionary struggle, there is within our movement some non-socialist ideas. Such ideas greatly hinder the application of the party’s correct line, which requires its members to be involved in all areas of struggle in support of working-class and oppressed people. One such incorrect idea is that the national liberation struggle take precedence *at all times* over political struggle among the working class, almost to its virtual exclusion on occasions. The fact that our party recognises that the success of the national liberation struggle is an essential prerequisite for the greater development of the class struggle does not mean that all our energies go into national liberation and that class struggle be put in abeyance. Important and all that it is, national liberation struggle, which has all the appearance of being a protracted struggle, must not be conducted at the expense of other areas of struggle. National liberation struggle and the struggle for socialism must proceed at the one time, supporting and stimulating each other. Another non-socialist idea is represented

by those best described as ‘left-republicans’. Affecting to be socialists, the ‘left-republicans’ are basically anti-partitionists who realise the importance of having the working class on their side in the struggle for a united Ireland. Not having the interests of the workers at heart, they are easily identifiable to class-conscious workers because of their methods of work. As a rule, they lack consistency of involvement in struggle, tending to flit in and out. In when the issue is popular and promising in results; out when the hard graft is required. The idea of using workers in such a manner has nothing in common with socialism. Both the idea which puts class struggle in abeyance until after the resolution of the national question and the idea of using workers on beck and call were laid bare in all their nakedness during the H-Block/Armagh Campaign. Only in areas where republican socialists had previously engaged in class struggle alongside workers, explaining to them the relationship between the national liberation struggle and the fight for socialism, did we win appreciable support. For the republican movement, which has a preponderance of such non-proletarian ideas, allied to traditional republicanism which eschews socialism, the results were disastrous. I should add that it was in the 26 Counties’ area that our failure, to relate the significance of the prisoners’ struggle against British imperialism to that of workers’ oppression by capitalism and the fight for socialism, really showed up. There were undoubtedly huge demonstrations, largely composed of workers, but demonstrations organised as “workers’ days of action” were generally poorly attended. This is a cause for great concern to all engaged in anti-imperialist struggle in Ireland.

We in the Irish Republican Socialist Party see in these incorrect ideas the root cause of our inability to create more impact among the working class. Though these ideas do not have great support within the party, they nevertheless have sufficient support to create confusion and undermine the proletarian character of our party. The IRSP is committed to waging a concerted and determined struggle against such incorrect ideas. The party’s correct line must be upheld. We are, of course, mindful that in a young party with such a turbulent history as ours, ideological schooling has been inadequate. Our party developed out of a republican tradition and it was not unexpected that some members would carry with them the remnants of that ideology with all its prejudices, traditions and habits. Séamus Costello and his comrades faced the problem of building not only a new organisation, but an organisation on entirely different lines than that they had broken from. A pity that this fact is not more appreciated! Because of the fundamental ideological change that was required of new members who came to the party from nationalist and traditional republican backgrounds, it was necessary that they undergo ideological schooling. But, because of the attacks on our party, already described, it was not possible to provide adequate schooling. There are those, particularly on the left, who say Séamus Costello was wrong on one point or another, when he helped form the IRSP. All too often, this criticism is levelled without taking into account the problems just mentioned. James Connolly, in his day, was likewise criticised and even today the job of knocking Connolly still goes on. I am not saying that anyone is above criticism, only that much of it lacks objectivity and is carried out for the sole purpose of avoiding commitment. However, in relation to the matter of ideological schooling, this is an area to which we attach the highest priority today, the results of which should provide us with roots so deep among the Irish working class that we can never be dislodged.

Presently, there is much confusion among anti-imperialists concerning the forthcoming Assembly Elections to be held in the North. For us, the position has been clear from the

outset and our response was to call for a boycott. Standing here today, beside the grave of Séamus Costello, it is of interest to recall his advice on the question of elections. He said, “There are circumstances and conditions under which it might be desirable to abstain and, if we felt that it was tactically desirable at any particular point of time in either the North or South to abstain from parliament, we would do so. If a situation existed, for instance, where there was a possibility of large dissatisfaction on the part of people, then abstention on our part would be legitimate. We are however not abstentionist in principle.”

Such is the situation with the proposed scheme of ‘Rolling Devolution’; no one from the right, left or centre has any illusions in the latest attempt at a British-imposed solution. So great is the dissatisfaction on the part of the people, that even the SDLP have been forced into abstention. In fact, it was only the result of clever scheming and manoeuvring that enabled the leadership to outflank the rank and file who were calling for a total boycott. We have gone further than abstention and called for a boycott because we believe there is nothing to be gained by the people of the North by participating in this farce. If we felt that by contesting on an abstentionist basis that it would expose the British scheme to maintain imperialist rule, we would have done so. But we find that there is absolutely no reason to do this as the people are well aware of the true nature of this cynical ‘solution’. The oppressed people of British-occupied Ireland are the most politically aware people in Europe and they have already rejected Prior’s plan on the streets. We see a direct relationship between struggle on the streets and the presence of people in parliament. The people on the streets of the North reject Prior’s plan – the IRSP reject ‘rolling devolution’. During the H-Block/Armagh Campaign, we continually brought up the question of anti-imperialist unity. We put forward many resolutions and statements to that effect. The successes of the campaign were gained through unity. The united anti-imperialist forces could have posed a threat to British imperialism, but because our unity was not achieved in a hard political fashion, but was only a unity of action and issue, we were not in a position to use those gains to the full. The initiative was lost and many fine people now find themselves immobilised. The same is true of the forthcoming Assembly Elections. In early June, we put out a call for a boycott by all anti-imperialists. Had such a boycott taken place, the SDLP would have been further exposed in their collaboration with British imperialism. Unfortunately, this did not happen, partly because no discussion had taken place among anti-imperialists.

The IRSP believes that one of our many tasks is to work for unity of as many people as can be mobilised behind the demand that Britain end its presence and interference in Ireland. We propose that all unite in an Irish Anti-Imperialist Front, mindful of the success achieved during the H-Block/Armagh Campaign. The primary objective of the front would be to mobilise the maximum degree of support for its declared objectives. We hold that the political demands would include that Britain renounce all claims to sovereignty over any part of Ireland or its coastal waters; the immediate disbanding and disarming of British Forces and withdrawal from Ireland; and the release of political prisoners. The goal of the IRSP is the creation of such a front which can successfully forward these demands.

