



Sinn Féin submission to multi-party talks

Hope of a new beginning

Opening Remarks by Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams MP to Strand Two of the Peace talks

7 October 1997

A Chairde,

Bobby Sands writing on the first day of his hunger strike said: 'I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world.'

We too stand today on a threshold. A new century, a new millennium beckons to us all, holding out the hope of a new beginning for the people of Ireland and of these islands. What we need is the courage and the vision to work together, in partnership within this process, to reach a democratic peace settlement acceptable to all the people of this island.

If the participants around this table can meet these challenges, today will mark the commencement of the transition from conflict and division to peace and democracy. This places an onerous responsibility upon us all. We will face difficulties but they must be overcome. The Irish government especially has an historic responsibility to proactively promote Irish national interests in an inclusive but assertive way.

Sinn Féin is absolutely committed to democratic and peaceful methods of resolving problems. We are determined to win an equitable and lasting agreement, which can accommodate diversity and provide for national reconciliation.

Building a new democracy

The task before us all is a difficult one; to remove the causes of centuries of conflict. Our starting

point must be the recognition, particularly by the British Government, that British policy in Ireland has manifestly failed. Partition has failed. The decades of unionist rule in the north have failed. Those days are gone forever. There is no going back to the failed policies and structures of the past, to the domination of a one-party unionist state supported by the British Government.

Today we collectively close the door on that part of our history. We are opening a new door.

President Nelson Mandela spoke of what this requires when he said:

'What challenges us, is to ensure that none should enjoy lesser rights; and none tormented because they are born different, hold contrary political views or pray to God in a different manner.'

So, we are tasked with looking to the future and in plotting a course for the future we must bring in change on constitutional and political matters, we must demilitarise the situation, and we must establish democratic rights for all of our people.

Sovereignty is the Key Issue

Sinn Féin enters these negotiations as an Irish republican party seeking to promote the broad nationalist objective of an end to British rule in Ireland.

It is our firm view that this Strand, which deals with north-south relations, is a critical area of

negotiation because the resolution of this conflict will only be found in an all-Ireland context. British policy at present upholds the union. It enforces the partition of Ireland. Democratic opinion in Ireland and in Britain must seek to change this policy to one of ending the union.

The issue of sovereignty, the claim of the British Government to sovereignty in a part of Ireland, is a key matter, which we will raise in the negotiations. Our objective is to achieve through dialogue an agreed Ireland. The political and historical evidence shows that political independence, a united Ireland, offers the best guarantee of equality and the most durable basis for peace and stability. An internal six-county arrangement cannot work.

Equality

There are many issues, which fuel the conflict. For example there needs to be equality of treatment in terms of employment, economic development and the Irish language and culture, as well as on the difficult issue of cultural symbols, of flags and emblems. In other words there needs to be equality in all sectors of society in social, economic, cultural, education, justice, democratic and national rights issues.

These issues do not require negotiation. They are issues of basic civil and human rights. The British Government should act on these issues immediately by outlining a programmatic approach, which delivers real change, which makes equality a reality and which builds confidence in the wider peace process. The immediate responsibility for equality rests with the British Government and there should be no artificial distinctions, no arbitrary barriers placed in the way of these rights.

But the Irish Government and Irish nationalists also have a responsibility; a responsibility to ensure that the concerns and fears of the unionist population are addressed and resolved through negotiation. A process of national reconciliation must secure the political, religious and democratic rights of the northern unionist population. That is not only the democratic norm but also a practical necessity if we are to advance the cause of peace in Ireland.

Demilitarisation

It is self-evident that peace requires the

demilitarisation of our society. The political climate in which these talks occur could be significantly improved if the British Government acted positively and speedily to demilitarise the situation.

Repressive legislation should end. The deployment of military and paramilitary forces by the British Government should end. The ongoing construction programme of new fortifications should end.

The issue of political prisoners must be fully resolved. There must be urgent movement on the release of all political prisoners.

Bridging the Gap of Distrust

I welcome the contribution of Senator Mitchell and his colleagues to the negotiating process. Sinn Féin has long argued for an international dimension to the search for peace in Ireland. The international dimension is one, which can play a crucial part in maintaining the momentum and dynamic through the negotiations.

There is a huge gap of distrust between nationalists and unionists. It must be bridged. We need to secure an accommodation based on equality.

Building peace is a collective responsibility. In setting out the republican position I also want to stress our willingness to listen to other positions and to see and to uphold the dignity of all sections of our people.

The British government also has a crucial and constructive role to play in persuading unionists to reach a democratic agreement on the issue of Irish national reunification with the rest of the people of this island and to encourage, facilitate and enable such agreement.

Transforming Irish Society

Sinn Féin is committed to a transformation of Irish society. We know that peace is not simply the absence of violence. Our vision sees beyond the present conflict and beyond the present phase of our history.

Our vision embraces democracy. It is economic, as well as political. We are for the redistribution of wealth, for the well being of the aged, for the

advancement of youth, for the liberation of women and for the protection of our children.

Our vision is for a free Ireland and for a free people. It is for an end to war.

It foresees the relationship between Britain and Ireland resting upon our mutual independence. It is this vision, which sustains our efforts to reach agreement and a new accommodation between all our people.

There is nothing complicated, or unreasonable about these goals or their achievement. But they will not be achieved without leadership and it is our collective task to provide that leadership.

The objective must be to bring about qualitative change. Substantial change. Effective change. Our task in the time ahead is to manage that change and to ensure that it is peaceful and constructive. It is time we opened our own chapter in the history of Ireland and wrote a chapter of which we can all be proud.