



A Bridge to the Future

A discussion paper

introduction by Gerry Adams MP

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INTRODUCTION

The discussion paper 'A Bridge to the Future' covers a number of critical areas at this time in the peace process.

In the first instance it sets out Sinn Féin's goals as an Irish republican party. Our political objective is a united Ireland free of British interference. Everything we do is intended to advance that entirely legitimate and realisable goal. We see a 32 county republic as the best way to eradicate the range of political, social, economic and other inequalities which effect the people of this island. We want to see the end of the union.

British government policy and unionism is opposed to this objective. No party other than Sinn Fein has a strategy to achieve this. So, this objective is unlikely to be achieved by May. Indeed even if everyone was agreed on it, it would take longer than that to sort everything out. Therefore the struggle for this entirely legitimate, democratic and desirable objective will continue beyond May.

In this context 'A Bridge to the Future' also identifies the central importance which Irish nationalists place on an alliance between Irish political parties and opinion, pursuing the objectives which look to the interests and the

well being of the Irish nation. And which seek to normalise the relationships between the people of Ireland and the people of Britain.

Nationalists are very conscious of the fact that all experience to date shows that a shared understanding and common positions between nationalists on the most advanced positions possible is needed to further the search for a democratic peace settlement.

I also sought to set out what we believe are the absolute minimum requirements for nationalists from any agreement.

Whatever agreement is produced by this talks process it will be judged on whether it effectively tackles and removes the causes of conflict, and whether it moves us all, as part of a rolling process, or on a transitional basis, towards Irish unity and independence.

Specifically this means fundamental constitutional and political change, a demilitarisation of the situation, including the release of all political prisoners, and the immediate implementation of the equality agenda. Without equality there can be no agreement.

These matters should be seen as a package and not taken individually or as a separate from the whole. Nationalists want a

comprehensive in root and branch approach.

Any kind of new Stormont or any effort to underpin partition is unacceptable.

Mr. Trimble has dismissed these propositions. He is making a huge mistake if he thinks that any nationalist party can sign up to any agreement which does not go as far as the fundamental changes which are required for a democratic settlement. These changes may fall short at this time, as I acknowledge, of Sinn Féin's objectives. We will continue to pursue these objectives and I am confident that they will be achieved. But Mr. Trimble is deluding himself if he does not understand the sea change within nationalism over the last thirty years.

This paper constitutes a significant political initiative. I would appeal to people to read it in full. It is offered as a substantive contribution to the search for a democratic agreement.

Gerry Adams MP

A BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

There are two main questions in the popular mind at this time. One is whether an agreement can be arranged by May, the time set by the two governments. The other is whether Sinn Féin will re-enter the talks.

To reassure those who may be vulnerable to the unionist driven proposition that Sinn Féin is currently involved in an exit strategy let me make it clear that we remain totally wedded to the search for a democratic peace settlement. This includes a commitment by us to play a full and positive role in representing our analysis and our electorate and upholding the republican view in the peace process. Sinn Féin has no exit strategy.

The unionist parties are raising a row about our forthcoming meeting with Tony Blair. They

want the length of our exclusion from the talks process extended. This is totally at odds with their other current allegation that we are operating an exit strategy. In both instances they are shadow boxing. This is little more than a sham fight. The real point is not whether there will be an agreement by May. It is about what kind of agreement is required to bring about a durable and lasting peace and whether this is the type of agreement the two governments are trying to put in place. I want to take this opportunity to explore the democratic needs and nationalist requirements of such an agreement.

Where does Sinn Féin stand?

Sinn Féin sees a 32 county republic, working through a new relationship with our nearest neighbours, based upon our mutual independence, as the best way to eradicate the range of political, social, economic and other inequalities which effect the people of this island. Others have a different view. British government policy and unionism is opposed to this objective and no party other than Sinn Féin has at this time a strategy to achieve it. So, this objective is unlikely to be achieved by May. Indeed even if everyone was agreed on it, it is unlikely that we could achieve this objective by that date.

Therefore the logic is that the struggle for this entirely legitimate, democratic and desirable objective will continue beyond May. It is on that basis that Sinn Féin will judge any outcome of this phase of the process.

We want to end the union. An Irish republic represents a model of society, on which the people of the island can build a new future for ourselves. There are other models. Which of these is to eventually replace the current set-up is a matter for the people of the island to decide, free from any outside interference or impediments. This is the democratic position. It is one supported by Sinn Féin.

Therefore the broad democratic view of the type of political agreement that will come out of

the current talks process is that it must be based in an explicit all-Ireland context. So that even while there is disagreement on the shape of a new Ireland there should be agreement on the peace objective of making the island a better place for all the people who live here. There must be a commitment to the shared objective of removing the causes of conflict. That is one of the stated objectives of this process and will be a litmus test of any agreement.

In coming to terms with all of this and in seeking to establish where popular nationalism stands, it would be a mistake to underestimate the effects of recent events and the significant erosion of confidence in the talks process among nationalists, and particularly within the republican constituency. This has been caused by the accumulation of developments which include unionism's continued refusal to engage, their tactical stance within the talks, the refusal of some elements to accept a comprehensive agenda and the particular difficulties which this caused before Christmas. Added to that, the loyalist killing spree, the publication of the Propositions Heads of Agreement document, emphasis on the promotion of a Stormont Assembly, and most critically the expulsion of Sinn Féin, have subverted the process. The appointments to the Parades Commission and the Lee Clegg affair have accentuated that trend in recent days.

Central to all of the above is the system, the 'permanent government' of civil servants, seurocrats and the judiciary which have governed the north for almost 30 years. Their influence on and ability to set the agenda is a matter of grave concern.

The vast majority of people want peace. Nationalists, despite their reservations about the talks, process want to exhaust every possibility of achieving peace and they wish to see their representatives concentrating their efforts to bring about a just and lasting settlement.

The vast majority of this constituency support the objective of a United Ireland and therefore would like to see a democratic agreement which transcends partition, and which makes a difference to them in their daily lives. They want an effective, peaceful, political strategy to give effect to that objective as quickly as possible. They want to see an alliance of Irish political parties and opinion, pursuing objectives which look to the interests and well being of the Irish nation with the aim of normalising relationships within the island of Ireland and between Ireland and the people of Britain. They wish to see the Irish government playing a leadership role in all of this with a common position worked out between Dublin, the SDLP and Sinn Féin.

Nationalists are concerned that there should be no internal six county settlement - no partitionist settlement. Many are worried about exactly how this will be interpreted by the different parties. They understand the need for an agreement to be forged with unionism but insist that it has to be based upon equality. They are extremely worried that the situation could slip back into all-out conflict. They realise that those who engage in armed actions have a responsibility for those actions and their consequences. But more than everbefore they see nationalist parties, the Irish government and establishment, and the British government and others as having a huge responsibility for averting this by building, consolidating and pro-actively promoting an effective peace process.

They are increasingly confident and assertive that a peace agreement must produce justice. They know that the prisoners must be released. The RUC disbanded. They want fundamental political and constitutional change in the British jurisdiction and they are nervous about any change in the Irish constitution. They expect an Irish government to uphold the constitutional imperative of pursuing Irish unity. They are adamant that no one has the right to negotiate away Irish nationality or Irish nationhood.

They know that after May, even if an agreement is cobbled together, that if the RUC or the British Army are still patrolling the streets, or if triumphalist marches go where they are not wanted, or if the equality agenda is still only a 'wish list', then there has been no real agreement. They know that equal treatment for symbolic political expression is politically important in itself but are not prepared to substitute symbolism for substance.

They want deeds not words.

Most nationalists see the cause of the conflict in Ireland as a result of British policy and the unionist veto. They want to live in peace with their unionist neighbours and many, though not all, understand the difficulties faced by unionists. They resent deeply the denial of nationalist rights and the influence exerted by the political leaderships of unionism.

They would also feel that partition and the development of two different political realities on the island has compounded their difficulties. But they also have a sense that if nationalists in the north are united on political fundamentals and common demands that the Irish government will support this, whatever the party composition of the government. In my view, as we approach the next phase of this process, this is what nationalist popular opinion wants throughout the island and internationally. This presents a huge challenge for the leadership of the SDLP and Sinn Féin and for the Irish government.

Ten years ago in 1988 the SDLP agreed with Sinn Féin that the Irish people as a whole have a right to national self-determination. There was also firm agreement that an internal six county settlement is not a solution and that the real question is how do we end British jurisdiction in Ireland in a manner which results in a stable and peaceful Ireland. We also agreed that every effort must be made to get the agreement of northern protestants and unionists in the constitutional, financial and political arrangements needed to replace

partition; and that the civil and religious liberties of northern protestants must be guaranteed and protected.

There were differences between the two parties. These centred around:

- * the role of the British government;

- * the unionist veto;

- * improvements of conditions for nationalists in the six counties.

Despite other discussions since then it has not been possible so far to resolve these differences or to get the type of common approach which in my view is not only possible, but necessary, to make advances for the broad democratic position. Electoral and other rivalries have so far stunted this potential. It remains Sinn Féin's intention to overcome these difficulties. Strengthening the nationalist position demands this.

All experience to date shows that a shared understanding and common positions between nationalists on the most advanced positions possible is needed to further the democratic demand.

The aim should be to get the British government to change its policy towards Ireland from one of upholding the union to one of ending the union. Nationalist popular opinion knows the limits to the talks process but expects change in a whole range of areas and sees this as a rolling process.

Nationalist popular opinion is in favour of a united Ireland and has set its own markers by which it will judge the strategies of its political parties. It wants to see its representatives doing their best to advance the best possible agreement and it wants equality now.

The Sinn Féin view of all of this, as I make clear above and as our strategy clearly shows, is that common positions are essential. All experience to date also shows that the

absence of such common positions is detrimental to the democratic demand. It undermines the peace process. Experience also shows that any alliance between sections of Irish nationalism and the British government in the governance of Ireland can only culminate in an unequal partnership which serves the broad British government interest.

So what needs to be done? Even within the current flawed process of talks it is essential that the British government faces up to its historical and contemporary responsibilities. Britain is not a neutral, benign overseer of our affairs. The London government is a player with its own political interests. These and expediency determine its policies. Mr Blair's government is, of course, especially well placed to bring about fundamental change if he has the will and the mind to do so. The new government has brought a new approach in style though so far the substance of its position in relation to an agreement remains the same as the last government.

Of course, it has done positive things and I have publicly commended Mr Blair's decision on Bloody Sunday and other progressive developments. Mr Blair has said that the status quo has to be changed. The question he says is how much change? Even before dealing with this question it is fundamental, to any talks process, that all the parties should talk to each other on their own terms. How much longer therefore will the British Prime Minister allow the situation to continue that the UUP will not talk to Sinn Féin?

How much longer can it be said that there cannot be a United Ireland but that there must be a united British Kingdom ? Is consent to be forever interpreted as unionist consent, that is as a veto ?

What of nationalist consent ?

Nationalists and republicans have to take into account the position of unionists, but it is for unionist leaders to put these forward. This is not to underestimate or to downgrade their

importance. I do intend to return to this.

At this point I am trying to give a nationalist perspective on an agreement, within the present restrictions outlined by the two governments. This is without prejudice to Sinn Féin's position, because even the full implementation of the Framework Documents would present a huge challenge for us since we accept it only as a basis for discussion. Our party wants much greater change. We remain totally committed to our republican objectives and we will view any agreement in this phase as being part of a transitional process to Irish unity and independence.

However, in trying to establish the wider nationalist view it seems to me that the first test of any position put forward by the two governments must be that it ensures that there is no return to unionist domination. As I have detailed above it must be a bridge into the future. Any kind of new Stormont or any effort to underpin partition is unacceptable.

Therefore, from the broad nationalist view, transitional arrangements need as a minimum to achieve:

(a) Powerful all-Ireland bodies

- * exercising significant and meaningful executive and harmonising powers alongside consultative functions,
- * with direct responsibility for policy decisions and the implementation of policy,
- * with the range of functions to be discharged or overseen initially designated by the two governments.
- * operating independently,
- * immune from the veto of any proposed six county institutions,
- * with no limit on the nature and extent of their functions,

- * with the dynamic and ability to grow,

(b) Constitutional

* The least nationalists want to see is fundamental constitutional and political change in British jurisdiction, while in any Irish constitutional change:

- the definition of the Irish national territory should not be diluted,
- the constitutional imperative should remain,
- there must be no diminution of the rights of Irish citizens.

On the contrary citizens rights should be strengthened. Irish citizens in the north should if they wish have the right to elect their representatives to the Irish Parliament and should have voting rights in Irish Presidential elections and referendums.

(c) Equality

* The securing of equality, rights and justice needs to be visible and immediately tangible.

* 'equity' of treatment must be replaced by 'equality' of treatment,

* this should not even be a matter of negotiation and all provisions must be statutory, and must cover all aspects of life. For example, policing, human rights, the legal system and the administration of justice should come within the remit of north/south institutions,

* economic development, fair employment and an end to discrimination are other important areas,

* cultural rights are central to any settlement,

* Equality needs to be accorded to the Irish language. Bi-lingualism needs to be pro actively encouraged and statutory provision

made,

* a human rights commission should be established on an all-Ireland basis to ensure that the principle of equality applies in all areas of government and social life.

* the establishment of a Bill of Rights and an all-Ireland constitutional court responsible to a north/south council is essential, combined with changes in the administration of justice.

(d) Demilitarisation

The six counties is a highly militarised zone. A complete demilitarisation of the situation is required. Immediate transitional steps should include;

* The EPA and PTA and all other repressive legislation must be repealed.

* A proper policing service must be created to replace the RUC which must be disbanded. It must have a minimum of 40% nationalists in its ranks.

* This should be achieved in an agreed timetable in the context of specific affirmative action measures.

* Pending the disbandment of the RUC, British political and cultural symbols and the paramilitary trappings of this force must be removed. Interrogation centres must be closed.

* A screening process must be initiated to remove officers with a record of human rights abuse.

* The British Army must be withdrawn to barracks as a first step in overall demilitarisation.

* The Royal Irish Regiment must be removed permanently from contact with the civilian population pending the early disbandment of

its locally deployed units.

* All political prisoners must be released.

CONCLUSION

Opponents of the peace process or those who are intent on minimising change will balk at such measures. Yet they are some of the minimal requirements if a level playing pitch is to be established. Sinn Féin is intent on bringing about more fundamental changes and I offer the above therefore not as a precis of Sinn Féin's position but in an effort to set a marker from the broader nationalist and democratic perspective on current discussions and to answer the first question posed in my opening paragraph.