



Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

Sinn Féin Submission to the Forum on structures in the Six Counties

16 June 1995

"A just and lasting peace in Ireland will only be achieved if it is based on democratic principles. It is clear that an internal settlement is not a solution." With these words Gerry Adams and John Hume reaffirmed in August 1994 the underlying intent of the Irish Peace initiative. Their joint statement reaffirmed their assessment 15 months earlier that 'an internal settlement is not a solution because it obviously does not deal with all the relationships at the heart of the problem.'

At the core of our analysis is the belief that partition has failed, that British rule in Ireland has failed. The Six County statelet set up on the basis of a sectarian headcount, an entity which institutionalised and propagated discrimination and exclusion often by the most violent methods possible, has failed. The result of this failure has been that many unionists have been locked into endorsing a culture of apartheid that nationalists have both endured and resisted.

Therefore a discussion on future internal structures in the Six Counties must take place in the context of the acceptance that the Irish people as a whole have a right to national self-determination and that the exercise of self-determination is in the words of Hume-Adams in April 1993 "a matter for agreement between the people of Ireland"

We note that the Framework for Accountable Government document published in February 1995 by the British government and the new Framework for Agreement document together with the December 1993 Joint Declaration will for many of the participants at the Forum be the starting point

for this discussion.

However we want to include a broader range of issues which are integral to the discussion here today. They are:

1. the question of the nature of local democracy in Ireland today
2. the role of the British government as so called 'neutrals'
3. the need to remove the unionist veto in order to proceed to negotiation of democratic structures for the island of Ireland.

We will also raise issues relating to the content of the three documents already mentioned above.

While new structures are a matter for agreement by the Irish people we believe that local government - that is local councils/authorities and its agencies and administration should provide the maximum distribution of power and decision making to people in their local communities. This would mean a highly decentralised governmental structure for the whole island.

A potent empowering local democracy has always been at the core of Sinn Féin's policy. Such structures have been advocated in recent years by Dr. Tom Barrington and Professor Joe Lee as a means for addressing problems such as rural decline, urban planning, environmental protection, local development and job creation. The current review of the funding policies of local government

in the 26 counties offers an excellent platform for creating an all Ireland transformation of local government structures. The scope of the review could be extended to consider the structures and relationships between local authorities and central government throughout Ireland, especially in the context of EU community support funds.

The creation of vibrant democratic local government structures also offers a viable means to overcome many of the fears unionists have of participating in an inclusive Irish society.

Any new structures, whether transitional or long-term must take into account the experience of the last 74 years which shows that partition and the divisions which it exacerbated, has failed to produce a just and peaceful Ireland.

The Six County statelet is not and since its creation has never been a peaceful democratic society. Since its creation 74 years ago, the governance of the Six Counties has been a matter of crisis management. This has always been dependent on the existence and exercise of repressive legislation, coercion and discrimination.

By 1923 the unionist government had abolished proportional representation in local government voting. Together with the company voting system and wholesale gerrymandering nationalists were effectively excluded to only a nominal representation in local councils.

In 1929 proportional representation was abandoned for Stormont elections. This created a scenario where nationalists and others were excluded and further marginalised in that statelet. By 1933 over one third of Stormont seats were uncontested highlighting the farce that the unionist created electoral system had become.

The statelet effectively collapsed in 1969 because it could not and would not guarantee basic rights to housing, one citizen one vote, to fair employment and to freedom from repressive legislation.

The wholesale denial of democratic rights implemented under the Stormont regime has not been restored in the 23 years of direct rule despite the promise of Harold Wilson in 1969 that 'every citizen of Northern Ireland is entitled to the same equality of treatment and freedom from discrimination.'

The current system of direct rule by the British government through the NIO is clearly a failure. Its 23 year history of political vetting and denial of funding to nationalist groups and organisations does not show British democracy in a favourable light. Its refusal to recognise Irish cultural rights in terms of language and sport is a damning indictment.

The fact that in local councils across the Six Counties Sinn Féin councillors have to take lengthy and costly court action to achieve the most basic representational rights is another indictment of the current British created internal structures. The ongoing exclusion of Sinn Féin from their right to participation in many local council bodies in the Six Counties and the British government's failure to act on this exclusion questions their claimed bona fides as neutrals.

The consequences of partition in terms of the denial of democracy has not only eroded each individual's human, civil and national rights both in the Six and 26 counties it has also damaged their economic welfare.

This has affected not only national trade, industry and agriculture but by association all parts of the Irish economy and society leaving them worse off. Employment, health and education systems have been marginalised and underfunded. The people of Ireland have been the victims of this process, condemned to at best being removed from a role in their local communities decision making bodies while enduring lower living standards through the economic consequences of partition. At worst they have been condemned to persecution, unemployment and poverty.

It is in the text of the Downing Street Declaration that the London and Dublin governments make a commitment to seek "through a process of political dialogue, to create institutions and structures which, while respecting the diversity of the people of Ireland, would enable them to work in common interests".

In the subsequent London and Dublin governments February 1995 Framework Document, the commitment to new structures is broken down into three sections:

- structures within the six counties

- all Ireland structures
- east-west structures

The Framework Document promises that the two governments will work together with the parties to achieve a comprehensive document.

In their document for Accountable Government the British government makes a further commitment to "encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of agreement over a period through a process of dialogue and co-operation based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland".

Sinn Féin welcomed the publication of the New Framework for Agreement document. It is undeniable that it embraces an all Ireland character and that it deals with the general notion of one island, social, economic and political structures and that also is to be welcomed. The documents publication should have cleared the path for inclusive peace talks as it promised. It should have moved all parties into the next phase of the process, with everyone at the table and everything on the table.

The failure of the British government to fulfil its commitment to "encourage and facilitate the achievement of agreement" exhibits a credibility gap in their ability to create any new structures which would enjoy the agreement of all.

Take for example page four of their document Framework of Accountable Government. The last paragraph tells us that "Based on its discussions with the Northern Ireland parties ... the government believes that there would be a broad measure of agreement for an outline framework for new political institutions in Northern Ireland". Sinn Féin, as an all Ireland party, has not been included in any of these discussions. As the fourth largest party in the Six Counties that omission seriously undermines the British government's claim that there would be a broad measure of agreement for new Six County structures and prejudices the outcome of all party discussions.

We can only conclude that there is not broad agreement and that British proposals were driven by short -term needs to pacify Westminster unionists and are contrary to their stated position of

'neutrality'. Even more constricting is that the British belief in 'a broad measure of agreement' is built on the support for a unionist veto on any new agreements. The unionist veto is a negative power, a power only to say 'no'. It is a major barrier to the consideration of democratic options that would include all the people within an agreed framework.

The unionist veto is no more than a British government device. We believe that so long as unionists in the Six County statelet are assured a veto over change, then there is neither reason nor incentive for them to move towards an accommodation with the rest of the Irish people. In our view, the guarantee of a veto to unionists has inhibited political movement in Ireland for over 70 years. It is clearly a failed policy and has perpetuated the cycle of division. What is required is a new and imaginative approach which tilts the balance away from the prohibitive and negative veto towards the positive power of consent, of seeking consent, of considering consent, of negotiating consent.

In summary it must be stressed that an internal settlement within the Six Counties, is in our view, no solution. The Irish people as a whole have a right to national self determination and any new structures will have to reflect and promote that right. Agreement is being prohibited by the British refusal to enter dialogue and by not fulfilling the most basic of obligations that they committed themselves to in the Framework Document. This refusal to engage in dialogue has been compounded by the continued maintenance of the unionist veto which can only have negative damaging consequences.

To conclude dealing with the issue of internal structures, we must address the real truth behind the creation of the Six County state. The so-called mother of all parliaments, the banner carrier of parliamentary democracy, left Ireland like so many other colonised peoples locked in a cycle of repression and division which they created. The British government of the time created their artificial entity through a contrived majority and ensured that ultimately, only their interest would be served. The people of Ireland have been the victims of this drastic self serving act.

We must consider when dealing with the issue of internal structures are we actually being asked to endorse the sectarian, divisive anti-democratic

border in perpetuity. What nationalists can do however, is to assure unionists that we have no wish to coerce them into anything and we have no wish to dominate them. As victims of domination, we know that these inspire hostility rather than agreement, conflict rather than stability, division rather than unity. A just settlement cannot be built without their input and we invite them to join with the rest of the people of Ireland in formulating an agreed future.