



# Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

## Sinn Féin Submission to the Forum on the need for all Ireland institutions

19 May 1995

Uniting the people of Ireland is at the very core of republican politics. Sinn Féin has a vision of the future which, as well as cherishing the existence of diversity, challenges the negative and poisonous influence of division. Structures and institutions may not of themselves create division and conflict, but they can and do sustain it. In Irish politics, the divisive legacy of partition is all too clear.

Seventy five years on, it is universally accepted that partition has damaged the economic and social development of Ireland. It has distorted not only trade, industry and agriculture but the development of other vital areas including employment, health, education and the social welfare systems. The people of Ireland, on both sides of the artificial border, are its victims.

Partition has had particularly damaging effects in the border counties. This region, which comprises approximately 20% of Ireland's total population, has suffered both socially and economically. The commercial infrastructure of many communities along the frontier has declined in tandem with a breakdown in everyday contact between people, causing an erosion of regional cohesion.

The removal of partition should be the priority objective for all those who want to find an agreement that is based on the unity of our people rather than on the maintenance of division. Sinn Féin would welcome the creation of all Ireland institutions as a step towards this objective. These should be open ended in character, capable of evolution and of dealing with wider and wider areas of public policy. Their objective should be to

diminish the negative impact of partition, encourage co-operation, common purpose and united action throughout Ireland in economic and social areas. To ensure accountability and public confidence, it is vital that these bodies should have a democratic rather than a bureaucratic mandate.

We therefore believe that today's discussion on the creation of all Ireland institutions should be approached in a positive and constructive manner so that this Forum can translate its vision of reconciliation into practical steps which will remove division. Such steps threaten nobody, but would provide the foundation for a future free of mutual hostility and suspicion. In this regard, we are happy to welcome the small but nonetheless significant step taken by the government here in extending the benefit of free travel to elderly visitors from the Six Counties.

Paragraph 25 of the Framework document envisages the creation of institutions which should immediately establish the 'range of functionally related subsidiary bodies or other entities ... to administer designated functions on an all island or cross border basis'. All Ireland institutions should be capable of swift and flexible evolution in terms of dealing with wider areas of policy and administration. Habits of trust and mutual co-operation will inevitably grow over time. It is crucial that we continue to produce fresh ideas to which the British government will be obliged to respond. If we in attendance at this Forum adopt a passive or non urgent attitude, we can expect that the British will do little themselves.

Much of the impetus for the creation of all Ireland institutions comes from a range of studies commissioned by the governments, employers organisations and public bodies and from independent academic research. Areas such as industrial development, tourism, financial services, electricity generation, trade and manufacturing have all been identified as sectors where all Ireland institutions would have a positive impact both in lowering budgetary costs and in promoting greater efficiency.

After partition the two economies pursued separate economic strategies. However, by the 1960s both the six and twenty six counties faced economic stagnation, rising unemployment and mass emigration. Both began programmes of industrial development, centred on attracting multinational industries to locate in Ireland. This led to the creation of the IDA and IDB competitive organisations involved in an unseemly scramble to win potential investors. For their part, the multinationals have undoubtedly been influenced in their choice of location by tax concessions and inflated grant aid. With an all Ireland body, such companies could be attracted at less cost and this would, in turn, free up funds that should be directed towards the development of domestic and community run businesses.

This however, is only one part of the equation. Sinn Féin believes that achieving administrative and cost efficiencies is merely the first step for all Ireland institutions. The overriding need is for bodies that democratically represent the public interest. At present, the IDA, Forbairt and the IDB are centralised bodies whose executives are appointed by and answerable to central government. There is little or no role for the democratic involvement of communities, nor for the elected representatives of those communities. Sinn Féin is convinced that any new all Ireland industrial development body should be responsive to the views of the community in areas of planning and the framing of policies for industrial development.

The tourism industry provides another example of the potential benefits which a democratic approach would provide. The tourist agencies were perhaps the first to see the potential of the peace process as an opportunity to develop an all Ireland marketing strategy. This partnership has already demonstrated a capacity to increase tourism revenue and generate employment. We look

forward to the further development of this co-operation to the point where the logic of having a single authority will be generally accepted. It is essential that any dividend for the tourism industry should include a guarantee that the rights of employees in this sector will be protected. Currently the tourism agencies are not geared to address the issue of low wages nor the absence of community involvement in deciding tourism strategies. A democratically accountable all Ireland body should be constructed that will ensure responsiveness to such issues.

The same requirements for inclusive democratic structures should apply to all areas for which all Ireland institutions are created. Sectors such as the fishing industry, agriculture, research bodies, health and social welfare benefits, environmental control, education and many more, are areas in which progress might be made. The establishment of an all Ireland Arts Council could have clear benefits in terms of the pooling of resources and the extension to the Six Counties of a tax free environment for artistic income and tax breaks for film makers. Artists have traditionally shown an ability to transcend the limitations of borders. Art structures should surely follow that imaginative lead.

Apart from statutory agencies and government departments there is a major role to be played by the voluntary sector and by cultural organisations in breaking down the barriers between the people of this island. This Forum must give a lead in this, and encourage such organisations to invite participation from throughout Ireland rather than confining their activities to only part of it. Social contact between ordinary people provides the best opportunity to overcome ignorance and suspicion.

As in so much else the potential to set up all Ireland institutions is largely dependent on the attitude adopted by Britain. The Framework document envisages a situation where unionists might refuse to participate in all Ireland institutions. In the past, we have seen how unionist negativity effectively destroyed any hope of establishing a Council of Ireland and the views expressed by modern unionism give little reason to hope that this view has altered. Unionism's refusal to countenance a constructive relationship with the rest of the people of Ireland has rested on Britain's guarantee for their position. Here again, we see the absolute necessity for Britain to change its policy and to

adopt a pro-active role, persuading the unionist community to engage meaningfully in the development of an agreed future with the rest of the Irish people. By adopting a pro-active role, the British government will avoid the implied threat in paragraph 47 that in the event of failure to agree, all Ireland institutions will be imposed by the two governments.