



Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

Address by Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams on the convening of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Dublin

28 October 1994

While the causes of conflict remain in our country, it would be foolhardy for any of us to claim that there is peace in Ireland, but great work has been done and there is great and justifiable expectations for the future.

Seamus Heaney has described this new promising situation as:

"a space in which hope can grow"

It is our responsibility to widen that space, to deepen it and to nurture that hope.

To make peace a reality is the challenge facing us all. It is also Sinn Féin's main function as a political party. I thank Mr. Reynolds for this invitation for us to attend these proceedings. I am pleased that Sinn Féin is here today to engage in this Forum and I extend good wishes to all the other parties here and also to all our activists and supporters, to the political prisoners and to all who have struggled for Irish freedom and an end to conflict in our country.

This chance to build a permanent peace began in the north and evolved into the Irish Peace Process. Despite the negativity of the British government and the unionists and others, the commitment of nationalists in the Six Counties, coupled with the positive engagement of the Irish government, as well as Irish America, has ensured that the peace process remained on track.

However, it was the historic announcement by the IRA leadership on 31 August, which made the

potential for a real and lasting peace more realisable than at any time since partition. This placed the onus firmly on the British government and the loyalists. I welcome the loyalist response and I regret the slowness of British Prime Minister, John Major, to engage fully in the peace process.

It is now our collective responsibility to bring this process to a democratic settlement and to transform our partitioned and divided nation and people into a united, democratic, prosperous and peaceful Ireland.

I look forward to constructive and informative debate and discussion in this Forum. This will not be limited to political parties. It will include other submissions from social, cultural, women's and community organisations and from individuals. Such inclusiveness should be encouraged. The future of Ireland is too serious to be left solely to politicians.

Sinn Féin is an Irish republican party. We believe that British rule in Ireland should end. Our primary objective is the creation of a national democracy on this island with a new national constitution with safeguards for all our people.

But how do we achieve this? By dialogue. By agreement. By addressing the need for fundamental constitutional and political change. By seeking to overcome all our fears and suspicions and misconceptions. By making change our friend rather than our enemy.

It is a matter of regret and a measure of the work

which lies ahead that an important section of our people is not represented here today. The two major unionist parties are absent from this chamber not because they are disenfranchised or precluded by undemocratic preconditions, as is the experience of nationalists under British rule, but rather because the unionists feel that this forum does not serve their present political interest.

The unionists have as much right to the island of Ireland as we have. I appeal to them to join us in the search for a settlement acceptable to all the Irish people, a settlement which will leave conflict permanently behind us.

In this context I welcome the participation of the Alliance Party representing one strand of unionist opinion.

The Forum also gives, for the first time, a voice to a large section of nationalist opinion.

If the sense of abandonment and disempowerment which nationalists in the occupied area have experienced for 75 years is to be overcome this Forum must listen carefully to their voices and address the injustices and inequalities which have fuelled conflict for decades. This Forum must make it clear that these injustices are no longer tolerable and that those responsible can no longer act with impunity.

British policy in Ireland has clearly failed. Partition has failed. The decades of unionist rule in the north were exclusive and partisan. 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 state and the inertia of the British government underpinning an unacceptable status quo. There can be no return to the abuses and bitterness which marked the Stormont period.

In all of this, we must face up to the need for London to join fully in the peace process. We all have a duty to face up to our own responsibilities. Irish nationalists and republicans have suffered greatly in our struggle for justice, but no one has a monopoly on suffering. Others have suffered also and I acknowledge the hurt that republicans have inflicted. I salute the courage and generosity of Senator Gordon Wilson, and of all bereaved families. We must build a peaceful future together, through dialogue, through engagement and through accommodation, through a healing

process - a process of national reconciliation. We do not seek to forget or to ignore the hurt but we need to learn the lessons of the past - not to recriminate, for as William Butler Yeats said:

"We need not feel the bitterness of the past to discover its meaning for the present and the future."

The role of the British government must be to facilitate the achieving of consent and of agreement. It should exercise its authority and influence and fulfil its commitments by ensuring that discussions are held between all of the parties sitting as equals, with no one having special privileges and no group holding a power of veto. We all need to move forward, without undue delay, to substantive talks led by both governments and involving all the parties.

The British government should seek to persuade the unionists that their future and best interests are served in the building of a new society with the rest of the Irish people. We need a total transformation of Irish society.

In this Forum, as in our discussions with the British government, Sinn Féin will articulate the need for the British jurisdiction in Ireland to end and be replaced with a functioning Irish democracy. Central to this is the right of the people of this island, without external influence or impediment, to exercise our right to national self-determination. How we do that will be a matter for discussion and agreement.

Most certainly we must have the right to shape our own future according to our needs and wishes.

Irish freedom, democracy and peace is in the interests of people in both states on this island. This is not a northern issue only. Partition affects all of us. The people of Ireland from every corner of this island, have expressed the yearning for democracy and peace.

They are watching this Forum with heightened expectation and are demanding that we rise above narrow sectional political interests. They have a justifiable expectation that this Forum will set our country and our people on the road to justice, equality and democracy.

We must set our sights firmly on achieving these

goals. There is compelling urgency about this task and nothing could be more irresponsible than if we were to waste this opportunity or to permit the British government to squander it.

Failure is inconceivable. There is no room for intransigence or self-interest. We must build a new beginning. We need to be persistent and pragmatic.

Despite the divisions of the past and the difficulties which lies ahead we look forward with confidence and optimism. In 1980, the leader of the Republican prisoners in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, Bobby Sands wrote:

"Our victory will be the laughter and joy of people, our revenge the liberation of all."

Bobby Sands expressed through his poetry his vision of the future, the vision which sustained his own humanity, dignity and generosity through the horrors, the bitterness and the inhumanity of the H-Blocks.

His vision in the face of such adversity should be an inspiration to us all.. We must have a vision of the new Ireland which we seek to build - an Ireland free from divisions and bitterness; free of outside interference and conflict; an Ireland in which equality and prosperity becomes a reality; which encourages the talents and creativity of our people; which outlaws discrimination, on the basis of religion, or of gender, or of sexuality, or of disability, or of language; in which all forms of prejudice and discrimination become unacceptable. An Ireland which permits its children to live here in peace and prosperity rather than condemn them to prison cells, early graves or involuntary exile across the world. Every Irish man and woman must own a share of this peace and the political and economic benefits which will inevitably flow from it.

This is the work which is ahead of us. Seo an obair atá le deanamh againn.