



Sinn Féin submission to multi-party talks

A Sinn Féin Submission to all three strands of the peace talks

19 January 1998

The goals which Sinn Féin set ourselves in developing our peace strategy, and which are the basis of the peace process, were; to remove the causes of conflict, to overcome inequality and injustice, to put behind us the failures of the past, and to build a lasting peace based on freedom and democracy and justice. These are the criteria for a lasting settlement. These are the criteria against which we must judge any propositions for moving in that direction, including the 'Propositions on Heads of Agreement' presented by the two governments last week.

Partition is self-evidently a failure which cannot provide stability; a political cul-de-sac which perpetuates the conditions for conflict. Partition is a British imposed arrangement which has damaged the political, social, economic and cultural development of this island. The northern statelet is a failed entity which has depended on an absence of real democracy to survive. But that survival has been at an enormous cost, both human and material.

Propositions which result in the copperfastening of this disastrous arrangement cannot work. An internal settlement self-evidently cannot bring peace.

The status quo is not an option. There must be a transformation. We need an imaginative leap forward. The outcome of the negotiations must create a bridge out of the conditions for conflict, not a U-turn back into them.

When we became aware of the thrust of the

document we left both governments in no doubt about our opposition and our firm belief that it was a mistake. The two governments chose to place the paper on the table.

For many nationalists it is seen as a pro-unionist document. The perception that the unionists have secured an Assembly, amongst other things, is a source of grave concern among nationalists. The tabling of the 'Propositions on Heads of Agreement' paper was not a move to inspire republican and nationalist confidence in the approach of the two governments. It is a position which we are opposed to, and which we will challenge.

Sinn Féin has received a significant mandate to negotiate. We will fulfil that mandate, whatever the obstacles or hurdles placed in our path. Sinn Féin has outlined the broad issues which we believe need to be addressed if the causes of conflict are to be removed and a lasting peace settlement found. These are;

1) Demilitarisation

This can and should be acted on immediately. Real progress is necessary on demilitarisation and justice issues including; the release of those imprisoned as a result of the conflict, the presence of British troops and military installations, policing and Bloody Sunday, collusion and the many other related matters.

2) An Equality Agenda, encompassing rights, safeguards and justice issues.

In some cases action on these issues may require the urgent implementation of existing British government policy or the fulfilment of manifesto commitments made by it while in opposition. In other cases it will require going far beyond this in terms of policy, legislation and other measures. These are issues of basic human and civil rights. They do not require negotiation. They are non negotiable. These are matters which effect people's daily lives and it is crucial that positive change begins to impinge on their lives now. What is required is the urgent implementation of a program of measures to ensure political, social, cultural and democratic rights.

3) Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the power to enact domestic legislation and to make international treaties. The conflict in Ireland is fundamentally linked to the issue of sovereignty, the British government's claim to sovereignty over Ireland and subsequently the 6 north-eastern counties of it, and the right of the Irish people and nation to sovereignty. This issue goes to the heart of the political difficulties we are attempting to resolve.

4) The Constitutional Status of the 6 counties

This derives from the failure to resolve the sovereignty issue. Specifically, we need to remove British legislation underpinning the union, i.e. the Act of Union 1800, the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the Northern Ireland Constitution Act, 1973.

5) New Arrangements arising from the resolution of the sovereignty and constitutional issues

In Sinn Féin's view the most efficient and logical model is a unitary state, with a central government

and under this the maximum decentralisation of powers to local democratic structures. We have proposed a system of regional councils with further decentralisation below these. It is our firm opinion that a 6 county assembly is neither necessary nor desirable, particularly given the history of unionist abuse of power under the Stormont Parliament, and the contemporary evidence that this abuse would continue, most graphically illustrated in the experience of nationalist councillors in every unionist controlled district council (see, for example, the appended report on the Belfast City Council).

Our particular view of how all these issues should be resolved is contained in the papers we submitted on the various agenda items since September 15 last year.

In these negotiations Sinn Féin will continue to rigorously assert national and democratic positions and objectives. If the two governments seriously believe that their propositions meet the criteria established for the peace process, then they need to show that this is the case.