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Gerry Adams Presidential Address to Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 1994

Welcome to you all. I extend greetings and solidarity to the families of republican prisoners and to the prisoners themselves here in Ireland, in Britain and throughout the world.

We are meeting here this weekend at an historic juncture in the struggle for Irish democracy. The events of this past six months have moved at a breath-taking pace as change unfolded rapidly. At the centre of the whirlpool of developments is the prize of peace, much sought after by all sensible people in both these islands. For the last quarter of a century, the political landscape has been frozen over — those with real power to thaw out the situation seemed to be in a permanent state of paralysis.

But the ice is beginning to thaw and much has been done in the last six months to create the climate wherein a real debate, open-ended and inclusive of everyone, can take place. But a lot more needs to be done before certainty of purpose can replace the atmosphere of suspicion and doubt on all sides. I want to extend a special welcome to the scores of journalists who do not usually attend our Ard Fheiseanna, in particular the media from outside Ireland. Your coverage of this Ard Fheis will assist the search for peace in the same way your coverage of events in South Africa, Palestine and elsewhere has contributed to internationalising those conflicts.

For 25 years and longer, the British government misled the world about their involvement in Ireland. Their power and influence in the world made it easier for them to portray themselves as 'honest

brokers'. Their censorship laws and exclusion orders silenced the voices of reason. Your presence here can help to break the wall of silence which the British have built around their involvement in Ireland.

Censorship

I welcome RTÉ into the debate for the first time in 23 years. You and your listeners and viewers are welcome to the real world of republican politics. You will notice that we are not demons, nor demagogues, but ordinary people like yourselves, pledged to complete a task begun by previous generations of Irish nationalists.

The RTÉ management have still a long way to go to rid themselves completely of the ingrained effects of state censorship and we in Sinn Féin have a long way to go to reverse the effects of 20 years of revisionism, propaganda and disinformation, but a start has been made. I commend Michael D Higgins for his stand on this issue and for restoring to citizens their right to information. I congratulate all those groups and individuals who campaigned for this over the years. I call upon the British government to follow the example of the Dublin government and to restore to listeners and viewers of the British broadcasting services their rights to information, and to our electorate, its right to freedom of speech.

I want to turn now to those issues which have dominated our activities and the wider political and public agenda here, and at times abroad, this last year. Your presence and the attention being paid to

our deliberations this weekend is ample evidence of the potency of this party and of the struggle to which we have committed ourselves. The strength of this struggle today and its potential for growth is a measure of the courage, self-sacrifice and tenacity of republicans. The last year has been a hectic and historic one. It was a year in which the heart-felt desire for peace in Ireland was meaningfully and widely demonstrated. It was a year in which an opportunity to attain peace was created. It was a year also, tragically, of continued war, when many people died in the conflict which has been part of our history for the past 25 years and for many years before this.

Ní bhaineann an Ard Fheis seo sásamh as bás ar bith. Leoga, is ionadaithe sinne do phobal a d'fhreastail ar i bhfad barraíochta sochraidí. Pobal a d'fhulaing an iomarca. Tá bá againn le daoine eile atá ag fulaingt mar tuigimid dá dtaithí agus dá mbrón. Nuair a dhéanaimid comhbhrón, déanaimid go hionraice agus go f'reannach é.

This Ard Fheis recalls all those who died in Ireland and in Britain, whether in Warrington, or the Shankill Road, in Greysteel, Castlerock or Kennedy Way. We remember them all and extend solidarity to all the families of the victims of the Anglo/Irish conflict.

We remember our own members who died and extend solidarity to the families of Alan Lundy and Peter Gallagher, both victims of the loyalist death squads. We extend best wishes also to the families of the many other Sinn Féin activists who were injured or whose homes were attacked as part of the British-sponsored campaign of terror. In particular, I would like to single out the family of Belfast city councillor, Bobby Lavery and Val, whose son, Seán, was killed in an attack on the family home last August, on the evening that republicans reclaimed Belfast city centre in a joyous, peaceful demonstration of goodwill and celebration. Sections of the establishment media often attempt to project the struggle as a sectarian one, composed in the main of tit-for-tat killings. They seek to portray republicans and loyalists as opposite sides of the one coin. They should listen to Bobby Lavery's words as he buried his son:

"I don't blame the people who shot my son. I blame the people who taught the killers that they were right to do so, the teachers knowing better. They are taught that we are subhuman and it is quite

understandable that they would want to kill us".

Bobby's words are an awesome inspiration. His family are an example to us all. Many republican families have been targeted by the loyalist and British forces. All of these families have our solidarity, from the Maskeys, the McGuigans, the Austins and Armstrongs to the Carahers, the Fullertons, the Foxs, the Daveys, and all the rest. To the women especially, the strong, gentle women who carry this struggle and their partners and their families, this Ard Fheis extends love and admiration. We recall too the two IRA Volunteers who were killed, Jimmy Kelly and Thomas Begley. Jimmy Kelly was killed with workmates by loyalist gunmen in Castlerock, Co Derry, and Thomas Begley died on the Shankill Road in Belfast, along with nine innocent victims of an IRA bombing.

I sympathise with all the families bereaved in this conflict and especially with the innocent victims of IRA actions. I have pointed out on behalf of republican Ireland our attitude to IRA actions like the one on the Shankill Road, but our disapproval does not mean that I will abandon young Volunteers or their families for the gratification of Fleet Street. We extend solidarity to these families also.

This Ard Fheis takes no satisfaction from any death. Sinn Féin represents a section of the Irish people who have had to attend too many funerals and who have had to endure too much suffering. Our solidarity with other victims is founded in our own experience and in our own grief. Our expressions of sympathy are genuine and heartfelt.

I want to deal now with the relentless campaign of the loyalist death squads. Since 1988, when the South African weapons were brought into Ireland by Brian Nelson, with the knowledge and approval of British intelligence, 198 people have been killed by loyalist death squads, 176 of these were sectarian killings. These bereaved families receive a minimum of media attention. Nationalists in the North are murdered, buried and their families are left to grieve in isolation. Nationalists feel that in death, as in life, they are treated as second-class citizens. Attacks by loyalist death squads, even when they are against civilians at funerals, or in bookmakers shops, or against individual Catholics, or the families of Sinn Féin activists or SDLP members, are not as indiscriminate as they are often portrayed.

The objectives are specific and clear. One of these is to terrorise. For this reason, as in similar situations in South Africa, Palestine or parts of Central America, where minorities resist democratic change, noninvolved civilians, families, women and children are the premeditated targets. The aim is to terrorise as many people as possible and to make all perceived opponents feel that they could be the next victim.

The weapons and propaganda of loyalism today may be modern. The intent and the reason for its existence and behaviour and its sponsors and backers remain as before.

It is important also to understand that while the loyalists have their own agenda, their attacks also fit into British counterinsurgency strategy. This is why there has always been collusion, both at an official and unofficial or personal level. Examples of this collusion are many, from the Dublin and Monaghan bombings to the Brian Nelson affair. They predate this phase of the conflict. Attempts by the British to distance themselves from, or to deny involvement in loyalist terrorism are totally at variance with the historical and contemporary record. Collusion between elements of the British military and intelligence community and the loyalist death squads is a fact of life and death in Ireland.

We are told that loyalist actions are reactive. Yet the first major post-war riot in Belfast in 1964 was incited by Ian Paisley. The first murders of Catholics - just because they were Catholics - in this period occurred on the Shankill Road in Belfast in 1966, where the first RUC man was killed some years later. Loyalist violence was used against the early Civil Rights Movement and the first bomb explosion was the work of loyalists. The activities of loyalist death squads have been most intense during suspensions of IRA activity in 1972 and 1975 - a complete contradiction of assertions that loyalist violence is simply reactive to the IRA.

Loyalist extreme reaction occurs when there are signs of political progress, of the croppies getting up off our knees. This is the reality of the situation. It has been so for a very long time now and it will continue to be so while one section of our people believe that their selfish interests can only be advanced by the repression of another section. From its inception, the Six-County statelet was stamped with the mark of sectarian violence and its unionist leaders were, and are, all politically on the

extreme right. That statelet is still the greatest political monument to religious sectarianism in Ireland and its unionist politicians feel no shame in appealing to the most backward sort of religious prejudices when it suits them.

Yet they are supported, and have been supported, by the British ruling class. Of course, British politicians and others would be anxious to deplore bigotry and indeed some may be genuinely embarrassed by some cruder aspects of unionist sectarianism. They like to disassociate themselves from these expressions of their principles but they know that this is a fundamental ingredient of grass-roots unionism, and not the sole prerogative of Paisley and his bellowing bigotry, or in Jim Molyneaux's tight-lipped service to reaction. They also know, though they may not like to admit it, that the Anglo/Irish problem is compounded by the support which the British government gives to unionism and the inability, therefore, of unionists to come to a democratic accommodation with the rest of the Irish people.

The British government supports the union and the unionist minority in our country.

This is the nub of the problem between Ireland and Britain.

Loyalism is part of the British way of life in Ireland. It, like unionism, is a child of the British connection. Its extremists will be redundant when that connection is severed and when the Protestant section of our community can shake off the shackles of unionism. The development of democracy in Ireland is smothered by the union.

Democracy demands Irish self-determination.

In the struggle to achieve this and in the face of such terrorism, republicans must always be aware of the justness of our cause and the intentions of our opponents. Our task is to frustrate these intentions, not to serve them. We must never sink to their level. The loyalist death squads, and their masters, are yesterday's people. We must aim towards tomorrow, not yesterday. We can take succour from the truth that their peculiar and utterly irrational blind bigotry cannot survive for long when the political circumstances which breed it and which nourish it are removed. Any movement towards a peaceful settlement of the conflict must therefore aim to remove these circumstances. That

is our firm intention. It must also become the intention of the British government.

First and most reasonably - and immediately on the opening of any serious talks - that government must deliver a convincing indication of their sincere intent to pursue an attainable formula for a lasting peace. That means them withdrawing political support from the unionists.

The unionists must be relieved, by those who have supplied them for so long, of the delusions that have sustained them. The unionists must be told plainly that, contrary to their illogical belief, the Six-County area does not belong to them. It belongs to all our people equally, irrespective of falsely created majorities and minorities.

Protestants need to be encouraged to recognise that they share a common history with their Catholic fellow-countrymen and women in the common territory of Ireland. They need to be encouraged to look at the traditions of which we can be proud, and in this regard, where else need we look but to the long tradition of Protestant participation in the democratic struggle of the Irish people for self-government?

I want once again to assure northern Protestants, that the republican demand for British withdrawal is not aimed at them. It is directed solely at the British government's control in Ireland. It is a demand that the people of Ireland, and that includes the essential contribution and participation of northern Protestants, be allowed to control our own destiny and shape a society which is pluralist and reflective of the diversity of all our people.

Agus sinn ag meabhrú ar tráidisiúin uaisle na bProtastúnach san Eirinn Nua cuimhn'mis fosta gur mÚ sa chéad seo caite a rinne a sinsir féin ná dream ar bith eile le déanamh cinnte nach gcaillf' ár n-oidhreacht Ghaelach. Mur bé obair na bPréisbitéireach sin, i mBéal Feirste ach go háirithe, seans nach mbeim's ag ceiliúradh céad bliain de Chonradh na Gaeilge anuraidh ar chor ar bith. Droichead i dtreo a nEireannachais a bh' sa Ghaeilge sa chéad seo caite, níl fáth ar bith nach mbeadh an scéal sin amhlaidh ar's inniú.

It is also time that the Protestant people heard the voice of reason and sanity from their leaders. They need a De Klerk to lead them and us into the next century. John Mitchel of the Young Ireland

Movement, a Protestant Ulsterman, writing an open letter to the Protestants of the North in 1848, put it like this:

"There is now no Protestant interest at all; there is absolutely nothing left for Protestant and Catholic to quarrel for: and if any man talks to you now of religious sects, when the matter in hand relates to civil and political rights, to administration of government, or distribution of property - depend on it he means to cheat you."

These words are even more valid now than they were in Mitchel's time. The Protestants of the North have been cheated for long enough. They have been cheated by being ensnared into that sectarian trap prepared for them by British imperial administrations. They can be released from that trap if peace negotiations are allowed to follow a realistic course.

Peace process

The republican struggle has often been described as ineffective, out-of-date or counterproductive. Such claims are no more than the wishful thinking of our political opponents echoing the political propaganda of our enemies.

Twenty-five years ago the nationalists of the North were an impotent, suppressed and largely apathetic section of the Irish people, locked against our will, without our consent, into a vicious sectarian state. The British government, as much as the bigotry of unionism, was responsible for this, and successive Dublin governments allowed this unjust situation to continue. There is no avoiding the fact that it was the policies, or lack of policies, of both governments, respectively, which contributed so much to the terrible tragedy with which we are now living. In December, the leaders of these two governments were moved to address republicans directly through the Downing Street Declaration.

This effort to address republicans directly is a fundamental shift in policy and in contrast to strategies which aimed to ignore republicanism as part of a policy of marginalising and isolating us. Like all other initiatives, this one marks the failure of every strategy which preceded it. It is also specifically, a direct response to the developing, and increasingly effective, peace strategy which Sinn Féin publicly launched almost seven years

ago and which we are totally committed to bringing to a positive conclusion.

Sinn Féin's peace strategy is now the central plank of party policy. As well as the public promotion of this strategy, there has been protracted internal discussion. Promoting our peace strategy has also involved us in external discussions with a wide spectrum of political and religious opinion in Irish society. The inter-party talks with the SDLP in 1988 were part of that, as were all subsequent discussions and exchanges between myself and SDLP party leader John Hume. Likewise, we approached the protracted contact and dialogue with, and initiated by, the British government, in the context of our peace strategy. So too, other discussions and exchanges which have either been made public or privately reported to the Ard Chomhairle.

All of these initiatives arose because of the strength of our struggle, the resilience of our support and the durability and credibility of our analysis. Some of them occurred also because we took the initiative and because we had the confidence to engage our opponents in a meaningful way. This is an area of struggle for us. It is an area of struggle as important as any other one and one which we must collectively apply ourselves to developing.

To the degree that our resources have permitted, we have engaged in an amount of international work on our peace strategy also, particularly in the United States and Britain. We have also taken some limited first steps to do this in the EU. Sinn Féin believes that a lasting peace can be achieved by the eradication of the causes of conflict.

We have reasonably and rationally held up the democratic and universally accepted principle of national self-determination as the route through which that can come about. We have argued that both the London and Dublin governments should adopt this as their policy objective, to be achieved within an agreed timescale - in other words, as part of a process. Again, both reasonably and rationally, we have argued that this be accomplished in consultation with all the parties involved, and the consent of the unionists must be actively sought during this process, a process during which national reconciliation can begin, a process of negotiations culminating in a negotiated settlement.

In all of this we have correctly identified the British government as the major player. They have the power and responsibility to move things on. Their policy in Ireland casts them, either in the role of keepers of the status quo or as key persuaders in forward movement towards a lasting peace, founded on democratic principles. We have also correctly recognised that a united Irish nationalist/republican voice in support of such an end and a process for its achievement, as being a potent political force, not just in Ireland itself but in Britain and internationally.

The sub-theme of that, of course, is that Irish republicans, by ourselves, simply do not possess the political strength to bring about these aims. While that situation obtains, it must continue to influence the political and strategic thinking of Irish republicans. However, we do possess the ability to create conditions which can move the situation towards these aims and we have the power to prevent another settlement on British government terms, which would subvert Irish national and democratic rights.

We fully accept and acknowledge that there is no quick-fix to this. A peace process has been set in train. Our immediate and ongoing task is to move this process onwards. With the evolution of policy and in particular, our thinking on Sinn Féin's peace strategy, we aimed to provide a broad strategy, a momentum and a framework which took on board both the political reality confronting us and our desire, despite the many difficulties this represented, to advance our peace strategy. It is in this context that we should examine the potential of any proposal put before us.

Our strategy has been both politically defensive and offensive. We have defended our own political and organisational integrity and cohesion, and you will recall that most of this recent period has been marked by murderous attacks on us and our families against a background of propaganda and reactionary agitation by well-funded right-wing minority groups. It is worth noting that this was the period when we improved our standing, and our support, against all the odds, in the local government elections in the North. Comhghairdeas to all involved.

We also endeavoured at all times to communicate, in an effective way, with our membership and base

in order to prevent confusion, especially on the developing situation. Our own shortcomings, organisationally and politically, and media hype, can aid establishment efforts to divide us. We are conscious at all times of the need to prevent this. At the same time, we have attempted to reach out, to engage with our opponents and enemies and to explore and influence any potential to create a genuine peace process.

Members of our national leadership were given specific areas of responsibility in this regard. Let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to those who were charged with a direct responsibility to conduct dialogue or negotiations and to the others who formed the advisory committees which dealt with these discussions. Everyone involved conducted themselves with integrity and amidst all the pressures, with political discipline and commitment. Members and officers of the outgoing Ard Chomhairle played a special role and I want to thank and commend the entire Ard Chomhairle for its patience and discipline and for the latitude it allowed me in what were, at times, very trying and taxing conditions. Tá mé buíoch daoibh go léir.

Our party paper, *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland*, clearly places the onus on the two governments to secure change. It especially calls on the British government to 'join the persuaders' and on the Dublin government to persuade the British that partition is a failure, the unionists of the benefits of Irish reunification, and the international community that they should support a real peace process in Ireland.

The prolonged contact between Sinn Féin and the British government, which began in late 1990, must be seen in this context. I will deal with this only in summary form here. It is by now a matter of detailed public record, but because of the controversy which marked it, I would like to extend a special word of appreciation to our representatives and the others involved in this specific aspect of our project. They served the cause of Irish democracy and peace with distinction.

The British government is not in contact with us at this time. It unilaterally ceased communicating with us in November last year. However, I am confident that this is merely a temporary, though totally intolerable, tactical manoeuvre and an

unacceptable standoff. It is my confident prediction that we will be in dialogue again, either with John Major's administration or with his successors. For our part, we are ready to recommence talks at any time. The British should move speedily to engage with us. They were right to talk to us in the past and should be commended for this. There cannot be peace without dialogue.

None of this movement would have happened, of course, without your involvement in struggle. We would never have moved the British to engage with us if we had been the isolated, nonrepresentative group depicted by its propaganda machine. Our advances are a testimony to your endeavours and resilience. Never allow anyone to tell you anything different. You are in the front line and all the gains in this struggle have been and will be won by people like you.

I wish to deal only with one part of the dialogue with London. At the beginning of last year, the British government proposed delegation meetings between Sinn Féin and its representatives. We negotiated the preliminary procedures for these discussions. In order to assist this process, the IRA responded positively to a British request for a temporary suspension of operations. The British then moved away from this position. Fair enough. Such to-ing and fro-ing in negotiations is not unusual.

But the British government had decided that it dare not admit that it had made a proposal which met with a principled, flexible, but positive response from both Sinn Féin and the IRA. So, John Major threw this back in our faces and, in order to cover his own failure to engage meaningfully in a dialogue for peace, he abused the line of communication and tried to lie his way out of it.

Why do the British government behave in this way? Why the exclusion order against me? Why, more recently, their hysterical opposition to an inclusive peace conference in New York? Why the lies, omissions, falsifications, forgeries, diversions and distractions? And remember, London did not confine itself to dealing only with Sinn Féin in this way. Our dialogue with London was conducted against the background of the developing Irish Peace Initiative and both governments were kept fully informed of all developments at every stage of my discussions with SDLP leader John Hume, before and after these discussions became public.

The British government knew, for some long time before its existence became public knowledge, that the Irish Peace Initiative represented a real opportunity for peace. John Hume told them this privately and publicly. Yet John Major denied any knowledge of its contents. We told them this privately and publicly. John Major denied being in contact with us. The Dublin government told them also. (As did public opinion, in both Ireland and Britain, with the exception of the unionists.) The British government's attitude to peace proposals from nationalist Ireland, whether represented by Albert Reynolds or John Hume or Sinn Féin, has been despicable, devious and damnable. It has been marked by stalling tactics, refusals to engage meaningfully in the peace process, diversions, lies and petty manoeuvrings. This phase of our history, when the opportunity for peace was so near, is one of the most shameful in 25 years of conflict, or perhaps since the partition of this country. It is a story which must, in the greater interests of the peace process, remain largely untold at this time. Suffice to say, that at all times in its dealings with nationalist Ireland, the British government sought to insist on its position, tried to apply pressure, to create and win a contest of wills, to mislead as to its bottom line and to demand concessions and one-sided gains. It sought victory on its terms, not peace on democratic terms, and it aimed at all times to fragment the consensus around the Irish Peace Initiative.

Observers and apologists for the London government may seek to discount these allegations and I have provided no evidence. Fair enough. But let us not forget, that in the battle of the documents, Sinn Féin's version of the exchanges with the London government was proven to be the correct and truthful one. So when we witness the stalling tactics of the British since the Downing Street Declaration, remember this stance goes back beyond 15 December, through its dealings with us, to Major's very public rejection of peace-making efforts by John Hume, to the exclusion order imposed upon me, to Major's Tory conference speech, to his dependancy on the unionists and his own right wing. If you are concerned at British responses at this time, then remember the distractions, the diversions and the lies which marked British attempts to sideline the Irish Peace Initiative at all times since its conception.

So, we must be patient. Making peace is a very

difficult business and we must persevere with our efforts, despite the British government's stance. We have to always see this against the failure of British rule in our country. But there are positive aspects to this situation. For example, no government on these islands can ever again claim that there is any popular support for a policy of excluding Sinn Féin. We have always known this. We knew there was never any principle involved in the British stance. The pompous, self-righteous rhetoric of British government officials and of John Major that he would not talk to us, has been totally exposed as cheap political manoeuvring. People support inclusive dialogue. Even the British House of Commons supports dialogue with us, despite all the posturings of the past by all of the parties in that establishment. Now they tell us they want peace. We shall look for the evidence of that. We are keen to find it. We will seek to do so in indications of a clear and irreversible British strategy for peace, one indication of which must be their public recognition of the legitimacy of the Sinn Féin electorate, their public recognition of the legitimacy of the electoral mandate bestowed upon Sinn Féin by our voters.

The Irish Peace Initiative

My talks with SDLP leader John Hume have been the most significant element in the peace process so far. As is now well known, we reached agreement on a process based upon a set of principles, containing the political dynamic which could create the conditions for a lasting peace and a total demilitarisation of the situation. This was dependent on the adoption of these proposals by the two governments and a positive attitude from the leadership of the IRA.

John Hume has been subjected to a lot of villification for engaging in this dialogue and initiative. It has been a risky enterprise for him. I am sure republicans, for totally different reasons, have also been mindful of the risks from our perspective and I have no doubt that there must have been, (maybe there remain), and there may be again, occasions when some of you will be justifiably nervous about what is, or is not, going on. After all, Sinn Féin and the SDLP remain locked in electoral, as well as ideological battles and we have lots of reasons from our respective experiences to be distrustful of each other. John Hume and I have never attempted to disguise the political differences between our parties. What we have

attempted to do is to put the cause of peace and a negotiated settlement before narrower party political considerations.

My republican analysis is, of course, not identical with that of Mr Hume on all the issues of the day. For example, I would not agree with his views on the out-of-datedness of the nation state, which we regard as the basis of democracy. Also, we do not believe that we are living in a post-nationalist world. But we are at one with him in holding that 'an internal settlement is not a solution' and 'that the Irish people as a whole have the right to national self-determination', and 'it is the search for that agreement and the means of achieving it on which we will be concentrating'.

It is obvious that the Irish Peace Initiative - and particularly the agreement between Mr Hume and myself - acted as a major catalyst, not only on Irish nationalist opinion, North and South, but also on focussing the two governments on the issue of peace in Ireland in an unprecedented manner.

There would have been no Hume/Adams Initiative without John Hume. We have yet to realise the prize of peace that all our people desire, but when it is achieved there will be no doubt of the central role that John Hume has played in bringing this about, despite the petty nastiness of 'Independent' newspapers and the orchestrated barrage of reaction from Dublin 4.

Credit must be given also to Albert Reynolds. No matter about our opinion of the Downing Street Declaration, or of government policy on many issues, Mr Reynolds is the first Taoiseach to have taken the steps he has taken to address the core issues of a negotiated settlement. Sinn Féin's recognition of the central role of the Dublin government in the creation of a peace process was a major shift in the traditional republican (and northern nationalist) attitude to Dublin. Our involvement in this process and the time and energy we have committed to it is an illustration of our seriousness. I acknowledge that the present Dublin government shares this commitment to find a settlement. This is evident, for example, from Mr Reynolds' efforts to provide the necessary clarifications for us, from his perspective, of the Downing Street Declaration. His attitude to the issue of clarification has been a commonsense one, while the attitude of the British government throughout, has significantly added to an already

difficult situation. In addressing these matters, Mr Reynolds has resisted the antinational malevolence of the Harneys, MacDowells, de Rossas and Brutons, all of who, despite their hypocritical protestations of wanting peace, would like nothing better than that the whole peace process should be sidelined, with Irish republicanism politically isolated.

It is in this context, in the context of the ongoing development of our peace strategy, and of the Hume/Adams Initiative, and the Irish Peace Initiative, that the Downing Street Declaration was produced.

British government says no?

The process of examination and consultation within Sinn Féin, and at a wider community and political level, is being conducted in the most adverse and difficult of circumstances, particularly because of the belligerent, arrogant and provocative attitude of the British government. London's interpretation of the Downing Street Declaration is also politically at odds with the Dublin government's interpretation and there is now a general acceptance that the document itself is riddled with ambiguities, contradictions and confusion.

Despite recent efforts by British spokespersons to put a different, more positive, spin on their utterances, it is little wonder that the declaration is a disappointment to many nationalists, especially when one remembers the way in which expectations were raised in the runup to Christmas and when they examine John Major's clarifications to Jim Molyneux in the British House of Commons, within hours of signing the document.

These comments caused Jim Molyneux and Eddie McGrady to remark that there was nothing in the declaration which threatened unionists, and little to benefit the nationalists. The subsequent statements by both governments and the actions, particularly of the British government, with their Select Committee and their new boundary commission recommendations - both sops to unionists - have created an ambiguous and contradictory situation adding to the already ambiguous text of the declaration itself.

This has led to an ambiguity of responses to it, which is reflected, for example, in the diverse character of the submissions to the Sinn Féin

commissions.

What is in the declaration?

It is not my intention to examine here all the significant words and phrases in the declaration. You will all have done this yourselves, even if only by way of mine-sweeping. That is an exercise which must be done, for nobody in this world is so adept as the British civil service in the laying of documentary booby-traps. But because it is, I believe, the most important single issue the document raises for republicans, I feel I must deal with the way the issue of self-determination and, allied to it, the question of a veto for unionists, is treated. That the declaration addresses the issue of Irish national self-determination at all is a significant departure from an attitude of the British towards Ireland which has endured for centuries.

However, the serious flaw in the document is that having declared that the Irish are entitled to exercise the right to self-determination without external interference, they then proceed, or so it seems to me, to interfere. This is at odds with the meaning of self-determination. A nation cannot have a half right, or a quarter right to self-determination. There can be no justification for trying to instruct the people whose right to self-determination you have just conceded, how they are to use it.

Yet the British government appears to be prepared to accept our right to national self-determination only in the context of its claim to sovereignty over all "persons, matters and things in Northern Ireland", (Section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act).

There is no suggestion by the British prime minister of the need for British constitutional change. And remember, in British constitutionality, the parliament is sovereign. The British parliament has the authority to change any act of that parliament without reference to anyone outside the parliament. Yet there is not even a hint of any proposed change in the Government of Ireland Act. It is not even mentioned. On the other hand, the Taoiseach pledges changes in the Irish Constitution in the context of an overall settlement.

It is worth repeating again that how Irish national self-determination is exercised is a matter for the Irish people to decide. It is not the business of the

British. In my discussions with John Hume we accepted "that the Irish people as a whole have a right to self-determination". We went on to say, "this is a view shared by a majority of people on this island, though not by all its people. The exercise of self-determination is a matter for agreement between the people of Ireland. It is the search for that agreement, and the means of achieving it on which we will be concentrating. We are mindful that not all the people of Ireland share that view or agree on how to give meaningful expression to it. Indeed we cannot disguise the different views held by our different parties. As leaders of our respective parties, we have told each other that we see the task of reaching agreement on a peaceful and democratic accord for all on this island as our primary challenge."

This remains the challenge. It is a challenge for all of the Irish people without external interference. Having addressed the issue, the British should now move to permit the Irish people to take up that challenge and they should seek to persuade the unionists that their future lies in that context.

There are other issues of concern which many people have brought to my attention. For example, northern nationalists are not even explicitly mentioned in the declaration, though there are numerous references to the unionists. John Major tells us why this is so saying: "I have gone to great trouble to ensure that the constitutional guarantee is firmly enshrined in the Joint Declaration, so that there can be no doubt that those people who care about the union - and we are primarily concerned about the people in Northern Ireland who care about the union - shall have it within their own hands, with the full support of the government, to remain within the union for so long as that is their wish".

Are nationalists invisible, Mr Major?

Yet at the heart of northern nationalist concerns are fears about loyalist violence and unionist bigotry, the intimidation of nationalist communities by the British army and the social deprivation and job discrimination. Also, there is the denial of full and equal recognition of Irish cultural rights within the Six Counties.

Many nationalists are concerned that Britain remains unwilling "to join the ranks of the persuaders". Major says no and refuses to embark

on a policy of working to undo the wrong of the partition of Ireland. Why? There is an assertion of British "neutrality" between the nationalist Irish majority and the unionist Irish minority but Mayhew now says the British government will be "persuaders for an agreement", without it necessarily being Irish unity, as if Britain has no independent, self-interested views of its own about the Irish boundaries of the United Kingdom state. Is that credible? It can only be tested in practice, and that is one of the challenges ahead.

On the positive side, Major says that Britain has no longer any "selfish, economic or strategic interest" in staying in Ireland. In a general sense that may be true as a result of the ending of the Cold War and the unlikelihood of a war in the North Atlantic. He fails to say that they have no political interest. Indeed he asserts that his interest is to uphold the union.

The British government certainly has a political interest in remaining, at least for the present. They remain politically committed to the union. They may see the weakening of the union as the first stage in the disintegration of the United Kingdom. John Major has said that he does not wish to oversee the disintegration of the United Kingdom. In the shorter term, Major depends on Molyneux and his own right wing for his majority. As "back to basics" scandal follows "back to basics" scandal on the British political scene, Major comes to need unionist support ever more desperately if he is to hold on to office. It will not be so for too long of course. But it could be for the next two to three years. That is the reality. It is part of the more general present reality within which republicanism needs to adapt its political strategy and tactics in the period now opening up.

The Downing Street Declaration marks a stage in the slow and painful process of England's disengagement from her first and last colony, Ireland. It may be a small step, as was the Hillsborough Agreement of 1985, which - leaving aside justifiable republican criticisms - gave Dublin, for the first time, a 'foot inside the door' in the Six Counties. That door, which is now slightly ajar as a result of the struggle and sacrifices of the past 25 years, culminating in the advances made possible by the Irish peace initiative, needs now to be pushed wide open to let the clean, fresh and invigorating air of Irish democracy blow through the politically stagnant atmosphere of the Six-County

prisonhouse which so many of us have to endure and which we are so anxious to get rid of.

Nationalist nightmare

Neither Hillsborough nor Downing Street have brought the northern nationalist nightmare to an end. The pointers to how that nightmare can in reality be ended can only come in the process of clarification on the ground which republicans and nationalists require if they are to be confident that the way ahead will improve our position, not disimprove it.

This is why it is essential that the British government use the channels of communication it possesses, and which it has used before, to spell out the implications of a fundamental demilitarization of the situation. That is if the British government is serious about real peace and expects to be taken seriously by republicans or, presumably, by its Irish counterpart.

The clarifications required relate fundamentally to the position of northern nationalists. What are Britain's long-term intentions regarding Ireland? What guarantees are there or will there be that there will be no return to bigoted orange supremacy in northern nationalist communities pending final British disengagement? What about security issues? What about collusion? What about equality and parity of esteem for nationalists in all areas? What about an end to electoral gerrymandering - the recent Boundary Commission - to keep nationalists down? What about the prisoners? The devil is in the details, as the phrase goes. But the details must be provided if republicans are to take British protestations of goodwill and good intentions seriously. And republicans and public opinion generally are entitled to these details.

The British government, the IRA and Sinn Féin

Last year, in response to questions from journalists, I made it clear that if a peace package is produced, that I am quite prepared to take this to the IRA. I am, of course, seeking a package which would allow me to make definitive proposals to the IRA in relation to the future conduct of its campaign. It would then be up to the IRA to decide. I am quite confident that the IRA would respond positively to a package containing the principles, process and dynamic which were presented to the

British government as a result of the initiative undertaken by John Hume and I.

To the best of my knowledge the IRA's door remains open and the IRA leadership has outlined its positive attitude to these proposals in a series of public statements. Why does London say no? If a formula of words was all that was required one has to presume that we would have had peace two decades ago. The reality is, of course, quite different. There is a conflict. We, therefore, need a programme to end it. The governments cannot argue that they have a basis for peace unless they can produce and explain what it is.

The Dublin government has been concerned to do this but both governments need to do this because while Sinn Féin remains committed to building a real peace process, as I have said many times before, we cannot do so without the cooperation of the British government. Given the historic and current stance of that government this will not be an easy task. As I have said before I will not mislead the IRA. Neither will I mislead others about the IRA.

The British are in no doubt, I am sure, about the capacity and commitment of the IRA. If this is the case then it appears to me that the utterances of British ministers, including Mr Major, especially since 15 December, are deliberately provocative. They persist with their stubborn refusal to recognise the validity of Sinn Féin's electoral mandate. They refuse to admit that our call for clarification is a reasonable one. Yet all other parties receive clarification on request and there appears to be no end to clarifications of a provocative and negative nature, about 'decontamination' periods, about 'no amnesty for political prisoners, about an 'IRA surrender of weapons'. The London government also demands an IRA surrender, as a precondition to dialogue with Sinn Féin. Yet, for over three years, the British government was involved in contact and dialogue with Sinn Féin without such preconditions. The declared purpose of that contact was to explore the possibility of developing a real peace process. Now that they say they have such a possibility they cut the contact. Why?

Incidentally, on the question of clarification, on a number of occasions in the course of this contact, and in both written and oral messages, the British side stated that it was 'ready to answer specific

questions or to give further explanation'. Now when it claims to have the basis of a peace settlement it refuses to do this. Such a cynical attitude suggests that John Major is simply playing games with the demand for peace, responding to public pressure but with no intention of developing a real peace process.

Sinn Féin's experience in direct contact and dialogue with the British adds weight to this view. On 10 May last year, as I have outlined above, the IRA responded positively to a British government request for a short suspension of military activity to assist intensive talks between Sinn Féin and the British government. This is an indication that republicans were prepared to take considerable risks in the search for a lasting settlement. The response of the British was to walk away from their own proposal. This, and their subsequent abuse of the line of communication, is the context in which the IRA will almost certainly judge any proposition put to it. Why can London not go the extra mile to accept the proposals put to it and to which the IRA gave a positive response?

One also has to ask does anyone really expect the IRA to cease its activities so that British civil servants can discuss with Sinn Féin the surrender of IRA weapons after we have been 'decontaminated'? Anyone who wants me to put this proposition to the IRA has little real interest in developing the peace process. Yet this is what John Major is demanding of me and he is threatening dire consequences if I do not acquiesce to his ultimatum.

Sinn Féin is committed to a lasting peace

It is against this background that Sinn Féin is being asked to judge the Downing Street Declaration. Clarification of this declaration is necessary, not just because republicans are asking for it but because there are valid questions which need to be answered.

I have publicly acknowledged the efforts of the Dublin government to provide clarifications to us. This week I made a detailed and considered response to Mr Reynolds' recent letter to me and we seek to build upon the positive attitude he has taken on these matters.

On Thursday, Mr Reynolds asked us to clarify our position on the unionists. I am happy to provide this

clarification. Republicans have never argued that the unionists could or should be coerced into a united Ireland. We have consistently, as I have again in this address, demanded an end to the unionist veto but we acknowledge that consent and agreement of all sections of our people is necessary and essential in the building of an agreed and stable Ireland. Our proposal that the British join the persuaders is in fact the logical extension of this position. It is our firmly held belief that the consent of the unionist community is realisable in the context of a clear policy change on the part of the British government and there is an onus on all of us, on everyone interested in achieving a lasting settlement, to join in this process of democratic persuasion.

Sinn Féin has long accepted that northern Protestants have fears about their civil and religious liberties and we have consistently asserted that these liberties must be guaranteed and protected. Sinn Féin seeks a new Constitution for a new Ireland. This Constitution would include written guarantees and a Bill of Rights. What is required is an approach which creates political conditions in which, for the first time, the Irish people can reach a democratic accommodation, in which the consent and agreement of both nationalists and unionists can be achieved, in which a process of national reconciliation and healing can begin. Unionist participation in this is essential.

In the meantime, the onus is clearly on John Major to clarify his position. He should be mindful of the advice of one of his own:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyages of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures"

- Brutus, Act IV, Scene 3, Julius Ceasar

Mr Major continues to hold the key. Until that key is turned he has locked us all into a stalemate and he is preventing any real movement on the issue of the Downing Street Declaration.

Despite this, Sinn Féin remains committed to a lasting peace and to developing and promoting the peace process until this is achieved. Mr Major may hope that his refusal to provide clarification and his

efforts to stall the momentum will have the effect of defusing the peace process and thus let his government off the hook. I can assure him that this will not happen. The search for peace and the need for peace in Ireland is too serious an issue to be sidelined in this way.

Since the Downing Street Declaration, there has been a lot of other sideline and unhelpful debate and statements from many quarters which are distracting attention from the central issue. It should be self-evident that the most important element in creating a lasting settlement is the attitude of both governments and the principles and process to which they commit themselves in order to achieve such a settlement.

It is with both governments that the main responsibility and authority rests. That is why we have consistently concentrated on trying to focus the governments on these issues. That is why we have refused to be sidetracked by the many distractions. One such distraction is whether Sinn Féin accepts what has been called the principle of consent.

There is much unnecessary confusion, as well as deliberate misrepresentation of the republican position on this point. We subscribe to, and I have no hesitation in reaffirming, the classical, democratic position of Irish nationalism. It was Britain that partitioned Ireland, turning the Irish unionist minority into an artificial majority in the Six-County area. Unionists are not - and do not claim to be - a nation with a right to national self-determination, as this is universally recognised in international law. Unionists are an Irish national minority, a religio/political minority, with minority rights not majority ones. Unionists can have no veto of British government policy or Irish government policy either for that matter.

The unionist position is in fact logically and politically an absurd one, for they in effect claim to possess a unilateral right to union with the British state, the majority of whose people do not want them, when there can only be unilateral rights of separation, never of union.

At the same time, while nationalists deny that unionists have any right of veto over British or Irish policy directed at seeking to dissolve the Union, most nationalists and republicans recognise as a matter of pragmatism that it is desirable in practice

that the consent, or assent, of as many unionists as possible should be obtained to the steps that would be practically required to bring about the ending of partition and establishing a united Ireland.

These steps relate, of course, to the complex financial, constitutional and legal aspects of a final all-Ireland settlement, as well as other details and the time-scale involved. Republicans recognise that the national interest demands that the consent, or assent, of as many of our unionist fellow countrymen and fellow countrywomen as possible should be obtained to these steps. We believe indeed that the consent of the majority of present day unionists could in fact be won over time to these steps to reunification, provided that the two governments, and primarily the British government, made that the basis of their policy. That is why nationalists want Britain to 'join the ranks of the persuaders', to base their policy on encouraging the coming together of Protestants and Catholics, not underwriting our continued separation; as up to now.

My joint statements with John Hume have made very clear that the ultimate objective of the peace process in which we are involved seeks agreement among the divided peoples of Ireland, an agreement that must earn the allegiance, an agreement of all traditions and that both governments and all parties must be involved in this process.

The underlying assumption of these joint statements is that the only interest to be accommodated and the only problem to be resolved would be the division between the two main sections of the people who inhabit this island and that there would be no selfish British interests involved. But as the whole world knows, the view of republicans and nationalists, and it is a view which is historically correct, is that there are more serious elements in our problem and that these laments are selfish British interests.

British imperialism created the problem in the first place and has maintained it ever since. If we are now being told that this is no longer the case, that Britain has no longer any selfish interest in Ireland, and that the only problem today is the legacy of that past - the divisions among the people in Ireland - then it is obvious that this division can only be healed by agreement and it must be an agreement which earns the allegiance of all

traditions, to quote again from my joint statements with John Hume.

But in these circumstances, is it not also reasonable for democrats to seek from the British government, given not only its responsibility for that legacy and its authority in the present situation that it should commit all its resources to heal that division and to promote agreement among our people?

Is it unreasonable to ask the British government what process, time-frame and frame-work it proposes for reaching such agreement?

Is it unreasonable to ask in advance what would be its reaction if any section of the people who inhabit our island refused to seek such agreement given the cost of disagreement not only to the Irish people but to the British people as well? And are these not reasonable requests, given that unionist politicians have never faced up to the central problem of reaching agreement with the rest of the people of this island and, in fact, have acted in collusion with the loyalist death squads to prevent such agreement?

Ba mhaith le poblachtúirí síocháin a bheith ann. Ba mhaith leis an ghlún seo de phoblachtúirí an gunna a thógáil amach as polaitíocht na hEireann go deo. Má tá Rialtas na Breataine sásta a thacaíocht iomlán a thabhairt do chur chun cinn an pholasaí atá leagtha amach agam anseo, déanfaidh poblachtúirí amhlaidh. Caithfidh ár gcuid fuinnimh agus ár gcuid áiseanna ag iarraidh réiteach a bhaint amach. Agus nuair a bhainimid amach an réiteach sin, leanfaimid linn ag baint úsáide as gach áis atá againn le príiseas na síochána a chur chun cinn. Déanfaimid ár ndícheall leis na cnéacha idir ár muintir a leigheas chun gur féidir iad a aontú i sochaí nua a chosnaíonn dínit, cearta sibhialta agus oidhreacht gach duine againn.

Republicans want peace. This generation of republicans seeks to see the gun taken out of Irish politics forever. If the British government commits itself to embracing and promoting the policy I have outlined here, then we republicans will commit all our energies and resources to reaching such an agreement. And, when such an agreement is reached, we will continue to use all our resources to promote the healing process that will be necessary to unite the Irish people in unity that will protect the democratic dignity, civil rights and

heritage of all our people.

The cost of war and dividends of peace

The compelling logic of our situation and the climate of international opinion demands a democratic and negotiated settlement of the Anglo/Irish conflict. The alternative locks all of us into a perpetuation of conflict. Is this what the British government wants?

Since 1969, the war has cost 3,290 lives. Most of the deaths have been in the Six Counties but almost 100 have occurred in the 26 Counties and 118 people have been killed in Britain. The London government and others have tried to blame all the killings on the IRA. The IRA is in fact responsible for 53% of the total deaths, having killed over 1,000 crown forces, over 30 loyalist activists and more than 100 persons working in direct support of the British crown forces. One hundred and one IRA Volunteers have lost their lives in premature bomb explosions. A further 230 civilians have died as a result of premature explosions or in engagements between crown forces and the IRA.

The British themselves are known to be directly responsible for 370 deaths and loyalist groups, with or without the assistance of crown forces have killed 915 people. At least 80% of these have been uninvolved Catholic civilians, 18 members of Sinn Féin and 43 civilians in the 26 counties. Thirty three of these were killed with the assistance of British intelligence in the Dublin/Monaghan bombings, the worst day of atrocities in all of the past 25 years. Loyalists have killed 12 members of the crown forces and four times that number of their own membership have died in loyalist feuds. Of the British killings, more than 54% of the victims have been civilians. One hundred and twenty one IRA Volunteers have been killed by crown forces.

Thirty three and a half thousand people have sustained injuries as a result of the war. Two thirds of the injured are civilians. This is the reality of the conflict in human terms. It needs to be ended. Unconditional inclusive dialogue is required, leading to a durable settlement, a total demilitarisation of the conflict and a healing programme of national reconciliation.

Financial costs

In the six counties, the economy is heavily geared

to the war. Military occupation, policing and prisons directly employ over 35,000. This is equivalent to more than a third of those employed in what is left of the north's manufacturing industry. There is now one member of the crown forces for every 3.5 nationalist male aged 16-44. Every year the British spend £9,500 policing each and everyone of these.

The war-related costs of British intelligence, the British army, the RUC, the juryless courts and the prisons now stand at £1,200 million a year. This is about the same as the North's education budget, two and a half times what is spent on industry and employment, and five times the amount spent on housing. Fifty thousand jobs in manufacturing may have been lost in the Six Counties because of the war. In many other smaller ways the financial burden of the war is felt in compensation costs, financing British propaganda abroad, for example in the fight against the MacBride lobby in the States, the extra resources put in to promoting tourism and securing inward investment, delays at border and other checkpoints, private security costs, health service costs, payments for informers, the money used to contest extraditions and cases brought under the European Convention of Human Rights.

In the Six Counties alone, the British have spent nearly £18 billion (£17,800 million) on this war since 1969. It is not known how much of this is spent on hiring actors to speak for Sinn Féin.

The costs of the war are increasing in Britain itself; the Prevention of Terrorism Act; other policing costs such as security for politicians; damage to property; higher insurance premiums; the proliferation of closed circuit TV; and the disruption of commuter traffic. These costs now run to billions each year. Sealing off the city of London has been priced at £100 million, with recurring costs of £25 million a year. The war has cost Irish governments an estimated £2.5 billion over the years. The North costs the 26 Counties £200 million a year now. It is a sad and expensive irony that tax payers here pay two to three times more to maintain the border than their counterparts in Britain.

Peace dividends

Ireland and Britain have much to gain from peace. A lasting peace in Ireland is as much in the interests of the British people as it is in Irish interests. The billions now spent on war can

become investments in peace. Investment in jobs, in housing, child care, transport, health and education, Britain's subvention to the Six Counties has now reached £4 billion a year. But most, if not all, of this could be saved within the North and in Britain if a lasting peace could be agreed. With no other changes in economic policy, the unification of the economies will generate tens of thousands of jobs. Peace will release a tide of new economic activity and investment. A proper peace process will involve a plan for economic transition and reconstruction, including an international aid package. The logic of economic and social development lies with Irish unity, not in union with a declining British economy, nor with the escalating costs of war.

This is now recognised by even the most conservative elements of Irish society, by the bankers and business community, as the 1983 Report of the New Ireland Forum put it:

"The division of the island has been a source of continuing costs, especially for trade and development in border areas, but in general also to the two separate administrations which have been pursuing separate economic policies on a small island with shared problems and resources.

"(We) conclude that partition and its failure to provide political stability have resulted in extra costs in many sectors and have inhibited the socio-economic development of Ireland, especially in the North. Division has had an adverse effect on the general ethos of society and has contributed to a limiting of perspective, North and South. Had the division not taken place, or had the unionist and nationalist traditions in Ireland been encouraged to bring it to an end by reaching a mutual accommodation, the people of the whole island would be in a much better position to benefit from its resources and to meet the common challenges that face Irish society, North and South, towards the end of the 20th century".

Thus the full benefits of integrating the two economies can only be realised by ending partition. Last January, the official unemployment figures in Ireland totalled 468,000. While there is no official record for emigration in the Six Counties, in the 26 counties last year, 12,000 people became economic exiles. This was against the background of record profits for the banking community and of get-rich-quick sales of shares in Greencore and Irish Life in the South, and the continued sell-off of

the hospitals and health services in the North.

Economic democracy does not exist in Ireland today. Inequality reigns. Take the recent controversy about property tax which affects around 12,000 people here. This was put at the top of the media agenda and led to a Dublin government climb down on the issue. Yet the voices of 300,000 unemployed in this state are marginalised and virtually silenced and there is little media attention on the Dublin government's plans to tax unemployment benefits for part-time and seasonal workers.

As republicans, we recognise that creating an island economy without creating democratic structures will leave the economy in the hands of a minority of financial institutions and business interests. Democratic control of any economic initiative is required.

Recognising that a new national economy must reflect everyone's interests democratically, we believe that for anti-imperialists building this must be part of the process of building a new Ireland. We struggle for an economic as well as a political democracy, and for functioning democratic structures to promote economic regeneration throughout Ireland.

Today the debate about Irish self-determination and the fight to end partition takes place within a political, social and economic context that has been fundamentally altered by the creation of the European Union. The fight against the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty has been lost, and the reality is that Ireland will remain in the European Union for the foreseeable future. We face new challenges as a result, but the fight for national self-determination is if anything more urgent, more relevant, than it has been at any time since partition.

The European elections in June will be another opportunity for republicans to revitalise the debate and to reiterate our commitment to genuine democracy, both within Ireland and in the international arena. There is also, and this brings us back again to the search for a lasting peace, a popular consensus, reflected even by some governments, that Irish reunification is not only inevitable but a prerequisite on the road to a durable peace. It is essential that the Dublin government galvanise that opinion and translate it

through the political mechanisms of the EC, into practical proposals. Already various EC reports have recognised the 'anomalous' status of Britain's remaining jurisdiction in Ireland.

The political and economic transformation of Europe provides a golden opportunity for Ireland to finally resolve its British problem and embark on a process of economic and political reunification and transformation to the benefit of all its people.

The United States dimension

A recent editorial in the Dublin Sunday Business Post commenting on my recent visit to New York asked, "..... what might be achieved if the Irish Government made a coherent attempt to galvanise Irish America in support of national policy?"

This is something Irish republicans and nationalists need to think about. For the outcome of the visa controversy showed that for the first time ever in Anglo-American relations, Washington, faced with a choice between Ireland and Britain, chose Ireland. And it would not have happened either but for the extraordinary effort of lobbying and campaigning by leading members of the Irish-American community, including political leaders, business leaders, trade unionists and media people or without the support of people in Ireland. Full credit to everyone involved. Of course this could only have happened in the new international political context where, with the Cold War over, Britain's value as America's principal ally against Russia is no longer relevant.

What the coming together of progressive political forces over the visa issue demonstrated was the potential and possibilities of what can happen if Irish nationalism unites and wins powerful allies. It might seem a relatively minor matter - obtaining a visa for one Irish republican. But what was achieved was of enormous symbolical and political importance. It also illustrated that international interest and concern can play an important and constructive part in the development of a viable peace process. There has been a consistent need for the international community to exercise its good will and influence to help end conflicts worldwide. This is generally recognised and at times acted upon. It has not however, been a factor in the Anglo-Irish conflict. This situation needs rectified.

There is a widespread interest in, and concern

about Ireland within public opinion in the United States. This stems from the historical links between our two countries and the large Irish American community in the USA. The potential has, therefore, always existed for the US to play a part in the construction of an effective response to human rights abuses and this has been done particularly in the MacBride Campaign for Fair Employment. It is only proper that this potential is realised in the wider search for a lasting settlement and while I acknowledge and applaud the efforts that have been made, I would appeal to all those in civic, political and industrial leadership in the USA to apply their energy in this direction.

The US government can play a significant and positive role in encouraging the peace process by helping to create a climate which moves the situation on. It can do this by facilitating free exchange of information and in this context I commend President Clinton for the waiver on visa denial which allowed me to address the National Committee on American Foreign Policy. I welcome the committee's concrete contribution to the search for peace in Ireland and the substantial and significant support which has been generated on these matters in the past several weeks in the USA.

The British have been bent on damage limitation since. But don't believe anything they say in this regard. They have a difficulty you see. London still believes that it rules the world. It doesn't. One thing is clear, however, we must apply ourselves to finding ways to enable wider allies to be won, and won more firmly and solidly in the US, in Europe, in Britain and internationally.

Moving Forward

So in all of this we need to make advances. We cannot stand still. The struggle must be developed. This, of course, must itself be balanced by the equal reality that we are not dealing with a simplistic black and white situation. Indeed we may be in a situation of such potential political fluidity that no one - not us, the British or Dublin governments - can accurately predict the outcome. The catalyst effect referred to earlier, and the effect of the strategies employed by the various parties, will all bring their own influence to bear on that. There is a high risk for all involved but Sinn Féin, for reasons already stated, is taking a greater risk than any of the others.

But what is clear, and has been made abundantly clear in the past several months particularly, is that we need to bring all-Ireland nationalist opinion with us. In all of this, we in Sinn Féin have a responsibility to build on the progress which has been made.

In the political conditions in which we struggle, as I outlined earlier, an ongoing defensive/offensive strategy is required. The major difficulty with this, of course, is our strength. We are the weaker party to the conflict. An offensive strategy by its nature is more risky than a defensive one. There is a direct relationship between political strength and the willingness to take political risks; a direct relationship between the value of the objective being pursued and the degree of political risk any party is willing to take.

For us in the short term, at least, we must take risks, without being cavalier, to compliment our strength, as it is, in relation to the stronger positions of our opponents and enemies. We must use what we have to offer in conjunction with accurate analysis, appropriate strategy and whatever political skills we possess. No matter about the short-term effects and validity of the above there is no substitute for political strength, which of course, can be built as a consequence of this. So where do we go from here?

In essence, Sinn Féin should be attempting to reconstruct a broader, deeper, sustainable Irish political consensus on the basis of the principles, dynamic and process contained in the Irish peace initiative, to politically reinforce commitment to such a consensus and to sustain political action based upon it so as to create a significant and possible irreversible political movement towards a lasting peace. Sinn Féin has accepted that the Irish Peace Initiative could form the basis for a lasting peace. Nevertheless, we are politically and morally bound to consider the Downing Street Declaration in the context to our own peace strategy and with a view to determining what contribution it has to make to the development of a peace process aimed at delivering a lasting peace.

Again, as stated, we have publicly committed ourselves to a process of internal and external consultations on our own peace strategy, the broader peace process and on the declaration and we have established a commission for that purpose.

A peace strategy

As has also been shown, Sinn Féin has a clear view of what is required to achieve a lasting peace founded on democratic principles. We have a clear peace strategy aimed at moving the situation in that direction.

It is my view that Sinn Féin should attempt to keep building on the conditions created by our peace strategy and the Irish peace initiative and to seek to ascertain what role there is for the Downing Street Declaration in advancing the peace process.

This would involve Sinn Féin in bringing into play, in a very direct way, what we have to offer. Theoretically, what we have to offer is our electoral mandate, our total commitment to establishing a lasting peace in our country and whatever political influence we have to secure a political package so that the IRA can make judgements in relation to future conduct of its armed campaign.

The reality is, however, that the IRA will take its own council on this. We are not the IRA. Sinn Féin is not engaged in armed struggle but we have helped to formulate proposals which have been enough to move the IRA to say publicly that their acceptance by the British government could provide the basis for peace. The rejection by the British government of this offer has made our task more difficult. Nonetheless, we must seek to move the situation forward and we must do so in conjunction with those who formed the Irish Peace Initiative.

And indeed, we must do this regardless of the outcome of our assessment as to whether or not the Downing Street Declaration represents a first step in the direction of peace for the British government. In essence, Sinn Féin would be attempting to reconstruct an Irish political consensus on the basis of the principles, dynamic and process contained in the Irish Peace Initiative, to politically reinforce commitment to such a consensus and to sustain political action based on it. What is additionally required are narrower, more specific short-term and intermediate-term objectives to advance the possibilities which our established peace objectives have provided.

The political reality of all this is that there can only be advance, continued advance, if we grasp the opportunities of the times. This means working

together, even though we are rivals with other parties. It means winning and maintaining the backing of the Dublin government for the long neglected northern nationalist people and cooperating together to obtain the powerful international allies the Irish nationalist cause needs.

In the short to medium term we need to advance the position of northern nationalists in every conceivable way. This means strengthening the nationalist agenda.

It means no return to unionist domination over local nationalist communities in the Six Counties. What is abundantly clear, and the political representatives of unionism must tell themselves and their supporters, that there is no going back to the days of Stormont and unionist rule.

It means local republican activists being able to represent and speak for our communities in conditions of peace, uninterfered with by the British military or the RUC, free of personal harassment and free from the threat of the death squads.

It means the real ending of job discrimination against Catholics, who are up to 3 times more likely to be unemployed than Protestants.

It means full recognition of the rights of gaelgeoir' and an equality of status for the Irish language including proper funding.

It means the speedy release of all long-term prisoners pending a full amnesty for all political prisoners.

It means an end to all repressive legislation.

It means an end to collusion. Political concessions of this kind from Britain will not be won without a hard and disciplined struggle.

It will require unity between republicans and nationalists in the North, such as the Hume-Adams initiative presaged.

It will require the support of the government in Dublin. And it will require the support of the powerful allies abroad, within the USA, the EU, in Britain itself and internationally.

Irish Freedom Charter

To ensure that the demands and interests of northern nationalism are given maximum weight and brought to bear fully on the British government in the period ahead, it is essential that public opinion all over Ireland, but particularly in the 26 Counties, presses the government in Dublin to give wholehearted support to the democratic cause, and helps to obtain allies for this cause all over the world. This is the main political task for republicans in the South in the period ahead. There are powerful reactionary interests in this part of the country who resent deeply the efforts on the northern issue made by Mr Albert Reynolds' government in the past few months in response to the Hume/Adams Initiative. The West Britons, the slave minds, the neo-unionist and anti-nationalist people on the opposition benches in Leinster House and in Dublin 4 are all deeply dismayed at the success so far of the Irish Peace Initiative. They are biding their time and will do everything to turn Dublin again in an anti-national and anti-republican direction. To revert to a position of bolstering the British government's failed strategy for victory. That is why all republicans and nationalists need now to consider how best to advance the basic national demands in the new conditions and possibilities opening up before us. We need particularly to consider how we can appeal to the national sentiment that is strong particularly at the grassroots of Fianna Fáil, among the ordinary members of and voters for that party, but also among many Labour Party people, and more widely among those disenchanted with, or uninvolved in, party politics.

They need a political focus for their aspirations and activity. They need something around which they can build political unity and concrete common action that will appeal to all true Irish patriots. That is why I use this occasion to suggest the need for nationally minded people to consider the possibility of launching of an Irish Freedom Charter - A Charter for Justice and Peace in Ireland - around which the broadest sections of the Irish people can rally and unite. This would consist of the most fundamental national demands and aspirations, relating to Irish politics, the Irish economy and our society as a whole, which the widest range of nationally minded Irish people can support and which can provide not only a focusing point but a rallying point as well.

The demands of this Freedom Charter should be directed at the British and Irish governments and appeal to international support. I suggest that the first proposition of such a charter should be an adaptation of the first principle of the Freedom Charter of the South African National Congress, which guided their long and inspiring freedom struggle that is now coming to fruition in a free South Africa. It would read 'Ireland belongs to all who live in it', just as South Africa belongs to all who live in it.

I would like to discuss the possible character of such an Irish Freedom Charter with nationally minded people all over Ireland in the period ahead and I would welcome suggestions as to its possible content and mode of launching from all Irish nationalists and friends of Ireland abroad in the coming months. I believe such a development, if made a focus for national unity and joint political activity, can play a valuable role in advancing the peace process from its present position. It can also advance the cause of Irish unity and independence.

For the first time in 20 years there is tangible evidence throughout Ireland of increasing self-confidence and awareness among nationalists. Every effort must be made to harness this energy, to build upon it, and to direct it in a way which will advance the peace process and secure a negotiated settlement based on democratic principles.

This year marks 25 years of British crown forces being redeployed on Irish soil. They have been traumatic, mind-bending years of human tragedy for all caught up in the conflict. Patrick Galvin, the poet, had a word for it:

"When you came to this land
You said you came to understand.
Soldier, we are tired of your understanding,
Tired of British troops on Irish soil
Tired of your knock on the door
Tired of the rifle butt on the head
Soldier, We are tired of the peace you bring
To Irish bones.
Tired of the bombs, exploding in our homes
Tired of the rubble, growing in the streets
Tired of the death of old friends
Tired of the tears and funerals -
Those endless, endless funerals."

In other parts of the world, conflicts which were formerly deemed intractable are moving towards resolution. To the people of South Africa and the Palestinians, we extend our warmest greetings and best wishes for the future. Their struggles may be more politically developed than ours but what is at the core of all our efforts is our will to be free. This makes the impossible possible. We are into a new and final phase of struggle which will allow us to put the legacy of conflict behind us. It is that time in our history.

"We dream here.
We dream that this land is our land.
That one day Catholic and Protestant
Believer and non-believer
Will stand here
And dream as Irish men and women.

We dream
Of a green land
Without death
A new silence descending
A silence of peace"

The republican struggle is strong, confident and will continue for as long as it needs to. We have come through the years of vilification and marginalisation. We are never going back to that. We are moving forward. This is the clear message from this Ard Fheis to all our comrades in struggle and to our opponents. There are no backward steps, no standing still - there is only one way - and that is forward.