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Gerry Adams Presidential Address to Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 1996

Fearaim Fáilte Romhaibh chuig an Ard Fheis seo.

Bliain eile, Bliain crua de streachailt. Ach tá muid laidir, agus ta muid ag dul ar a ghaigh.

As we are all aware the City of Dublin is steeped in history. The city centre in particular and this general area was the scene of many historic events. So too is the venue of our Ard Fheis this year. The Rotunda Rink has played a central role in some of the most defining moments of Irish history. Sinn Féin was founded here in the Rotunda on the 28th November 1905. In addition this venue has hosted meetings by the United Irishmen, the Young Irelanders and the Home Rule League. It was here that Thomas Francis Meagher presented his French silk flag of orange, white and green. And it was here too that the Irish Volunteers were formally inaugurated in 1913. After the 1916 Rising, Seán Mac Diarmada and Tom Clarke spent their first night in captivity in the grounds of the Rotunda Hospital.

Eleven years later when Countess Markievicz, a champion of the poor, a socialist, a feminist, a nationalist and a republican died, permission for her lying in state in the City Hall or the Mansion House was refused by the state. Her remains were brought here to the Rotunda where over 100,000 people filed by her coffin to pay their last respects.

This Easter also marks the 80th anniversary of the 1916 Rising. There are plans for a national commemoration here in Dublin on 27 April. We all need to ensure that this is a fitting commemoration to the sacrifices of the men and women of that

time.

On other occasions we have analysed the developments in Ireland and between Ireland and Britain in the period since then. It is not my intention to do that in any detail today though it is worth noting that the potential and the intent of the 1916 Proclamation has yet to be fulfilled and that Irish society today sadly lacks the social, economic, cultural or political freedom which underpinned the Proclamation of an Irish Republic which was declared only yards from where we meet.

Taking Risks

I do intend however to attempt a more modest review of more recent developments. On writing this speech I discovered to my surprise that it is 13 years since I was elected president of Sinn Féin.

At that time I tried to set out the course which I felt our party should take. In so doing I examined the course we had taken in the years before that, particularly since the mid and late 1970s. That was the period when, for many reasons, anti-imperialist politics and the struggle for Irish independence had become, to a large extent, isolated and restricted to its active base. At that time I noted that there was an unconscious slipping into 'spectator politics'.

I also referred to the isolation, at times the self-isolation of Sinn Féin, reinforced in the 26 Counties by censorship. I argued that we needed to end our isolation in a determined and planned fashion and for the need, indeed the duty on those of us who

are striving to build radical and revolutionary alternatives, to put our policies before the people in the clearest and most understandable terms.

Just over a week from now our vice president Pat Doherty and John McCann will be representing Sinn Féin in by-elections in Donegal Northeast and in Dublin West. We wish them well. We know that these are difficult contests, but 13 years ago I said; 'If Sinn Féin stands on the side lines, separate from and isolated from the people we cannot hope to attract support for what looks like a vague utopian image of some perfect Eire Nua of the future. The solution is for Sinn Féin to get among the people in the basic ways that people accept....this means new approaches and difficult and perhaps risky political positions have to be faced up to by us'.

I argued that we needed to reconstruct our organisation so that it could absorb a new and expanded membership in the future and that we required tough practical policies which gives leadership now and which provides results even in the present partitionist states. At the same time I asserted the radical nature of our republican objectives and our opposition to partition, to the British presence and our commitment to an independent Irish democracy. I pointed out that we have a decided preference for a democratic socialist republic, but in a post-British withdrawal situation, with democracy restored, we will be bound by the wishes of the people of Ireland.

I insisted that while our struggle has a major social and economic content that 'the securing of Irish independence is a pre-requisite for the advance to a socialist republican society and that we should avoid all forms of ultra-leftism'.

Is iomaí rud a tharla ó thug mé mo chéad aitheasc mar uachtarán ar Shinn Féin. San am sin, thug láidreacht agus neart ár mball ardó spioraid dom i gconaí. Thug tacaíochta an phobail phoblachtach cian dom. In achar gearr, chuir muid an troid seo níos faide chun cinn ná ariamh agus tá ár dteachtaireacht anois ag dul chuig n'os mó agus n'os mó daoine in óirinn agus tríd an domhan.

A Crossroads in Our Struggle

In so doing we have encountered many dangers and we have indeed faced up to 'new approaches and difficult and risky political positions'. All of this has brought us to what many see as a crossroads

in our struggle and in the welter of different influences and the fluidity of a fast moving situation there is an understandable amount of confusion and apprehension. I want to address all these matters in this part of my speech.

First of all let me reassert the centrality of our goals in whatever strategy we pursue. Let me also reassert the legitimacy and achievability of these goals. Some may think that this is a very defensive thing to do. Maybe it is. But it is necessary in struggle at all times to defend the struggle. It is necessary to uphold the possibilities, to give hope, to be confident in our own strength. It is also necessary to know our own weaknesses.

Some years ago in trying to tease out these matters I compared our struggle to a journey, the destination of which was an Irish Republic. I compared this to a journey to Cork. We may not have the ability to go so far on our own. There needs to be enough of us prepared to make the full journey. We need a vehicle. The bus to Cork. Maybe there are others who will go part of the journey with us, from bus stop to bus stop, or from strategic objective to strategic objective. It is obvious that the more people we can get to make the journey the further we will go and the more able we will be to overcome difficulties on our way.

The Battle of Ideas

All of this brings us to our current strategy. This has been underpinned for some years now by the policy position Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland ú the vehicle ú which was ratified by the 1992 Ard Fheis. Apart from the serious commitment to develop a feasible peace process which this contained, and we have seen the effects of this commitment in recent years, this departure involved a key and relatively new element. That was a decision by us to engage our opponents on the question of peace and to stand up to them while reaching out for allies on this fundamental issue. In other words we decided to go on a political offensive, to take initiatives, to go toe to toe with them in the battle of ideas. This was at a time when our struggle was on the defensive. When the British were seeking yet another pacification pact with Dublin. Our political offensive wrong footed them. The initial success of our strategy may also have wrong footed some of our allies and confused some activists. In a struggle like ours there will always be fears of a sellout - of a leadership going

soft. The greater the dependency there is upon a leadership and the more political underdevelopment there is among activists the more these fears will grow to be exploited by our opponents, to cause confusion and division.

Fortunately, we have avoided this so far and to the degree that any confusion exists this can be easily dealt with in open and comradely discussions. Of course there is always a danger of us being out manoeuvred. This is all the more so if our struggle is reduced to a high wire act with a minimum, as opposed to a maximum participation by our activists and allies. In other phases of the struggle many nationalists and republicans depended upon the IRA to go toe to toe with the British on their behalf. But as we in Sinn Féin sought to advance our peace strategy all of these old certainties were removed and in the fluidity of that situation we could look to no one else to deliver for us. We had to rely upon our own skills, our own judgement, our own ability. For many Sinn Féin activists that was a new experience, bringing new pressures and new challenges.

The Strength of our Message

Our party has responded valiantly to those challenges. In forcing the British government to seek a new settlement, in which they will obviously attempt to secure their own interests, we have pushed open the door to change. We must therefore recognise the opportunities and the potential, as well as the risks, inherent in this situation. Yet we should not exaggerate our successes.

We have changed the political climate but there is still a lot to be done in all aspects of our struggle. We remain in many ways underdeveloped politically while at the same time we are potentially the most potent and progressive political tendency in Ireland today. This potential is rooted in the strength of our message and our commitment to it, in our skill in promoting that message and in our ability to reach out and to join with others in developing and strengthening our struggle. This is an individual as well as a collective responsibility for us all. It is important also to know what we are up against and to be able to differentiate between those who oppose us ideologically and those who may for other reasons not agree with us or even not agree fully with us. We need to learn how to make alliances. We need at all times to rise above

sectional, local or narrow concerns. We need to develop an overview. We need to think strategically and not just tactically.

Our goal remains an Irish socialist republic. Our primary objective at this time is an Irish national democracy. This requires a democratic and a negotiated settlement of the conflict in our country. Our strategy is to create political conditions which tilt the range of possibilities in that direction or which makes movement in that direction irreversible.

We are back to the bus to Cork. To getting the right vehicle and getting the maximum number of people aboard to go the furthest distance. There is no guarantee that we will be successful. That is one of the high risks involved. That however is equally true of any big strategy. It is in this context that we set the strategic objectives which have guided us for some time now. In the course of this we learned that negotiations are an area in struggle which we use to further our overall objective.

No Bottom Line

Our opponents also have their strategies and their objectives. We should not be confused about this. The British government remains the continuing source of the major political difficulty endured by the people of this island. That government is involved in a real negotiation but its objective is not a democratic peace settlement. Its negotiation is with Dublin, the SDLP and the US administration in an effort to outflank us. That is with bigger players who it hopes will accept less. London's overall aim is to pacify Ireland and to concede the minimum possible. The maximum which London will concede is directly related to the amount of political influence which can be created. In this spectrum of possibilities the British government has no bottom line.

Nevertheless, its objective is a lasting political settlement on its terms. If they succeed, no matter how imperfect this settlement may be from the Irish viewpoint, the British will aim to sell it as a lasting settlement. For example, the partition of Ireland by British government standards represented a lasting political settlement, a flawed one, but one which suited London.

A Defining and Dangerous Point

So we are at a very defining and dangerous point in our struggle and the stakes are very high. In essence our immediate tasks are democratic ones. The Six-County statelet is not a democratic entity. In fact it is a failed political and economic unit. The establishment of democracy throughout this island is therefore of primary importance. Democracy means equality and it is a variety or form of society which formally recognises and guarantees the equality of all its citizens and the equal rights of those citizens to determine the structure and administration of the state. Our urgent priority therefore is to assert equal rights for all citizens. In the debate and argument with all of the protagonists to this conflict and in a proper all-party format we, along with others, can win the argument for democracy. It is however imperative that there must be no preconditions to that debate.

To set any parameters on the negotiations for democracy is a contradiction. From a republican perspective proper all-party talks have a definite potential to create a democracy within which the struggle for the republic can be pursued. I know that many republicans have become extremely sceptical and suspicious of the very concept of all-party talks especially if these are limited to a partitionist framework. Republicans also know that a lack of focus and attention by Dublin, or a refusal to pro-actively seek the shared objective of an Irish national democracy or a failure to marshal all available resources will mean that the result of negotiations will fail to produce the change necessary to provide stability and a permanent peace.

People Power

However, the democratic instincts and aspirations of popular opinion throughout the island of Ireland, if mobilised, can provide an effective counter to all that. But only if mobilised, only if people power becomes an active ingredient in the negotiations; only if the people own the process. For all these reasons, even in an optimum situation, international assistance is required to tilt the balance of possibilities towards the democratic conclusion. In particular this means Irish-America and the US administration.

Equally important is political and popular opinion in Britain itself and this is one area about which our

party needs to develop thoughtful strategies similar to our US initiatives.

It is the type of real negotiations proposed by Sinn Féin - inclusive, everything on the table and everyone at the table, no vetos, no pre-determined outcomes and with an agreed time frame in which the British and the unionist leaderships have been attempting to prevent since the inception of the peace process. Their opposition to negotiations is in line with their political objectives. The unionist leadership, supported by this British government, do not want change. They are conservative in their instincts and in their politics. They want to maintain a status quo which perpetuates supremacy, inequality and repression. But real negotiations inherently imply change - political, constitutional, social economic and cultural change. A negotiated settlement clearly requires change. John Major, David Trimble and Ian Paisley know, as history has proven that change can only be in the direction of democracy, of equality, of justice and of freedom.

They know that at the end of a process of inclusive dialogue, of real negotiations, the union with Britain cannot be strengthened, only weakened, that their demands for a return to Stormont become ever less and less realisable, that equality and justice become inevitable. Conservatives always fear the consequences of change. They fear that change, once started, will become unstoppable. They fear that change will leave them behind.

As democrats, as nationalists and as republicans, real all-party talks, as the first step on the road to a negotiated settlement, remain an important objective for us to achieve. We need to break the political log-jam which has sustained the British presence and unionist hegemony in the Six Counties for 75 years. We wish to see change. We are not afraid of the prospect of inclusive and fair negotiations. A successful conclusion will only be achieved if all involved reach an agreement. There are three main areas which have to be dealt with. These are:

1. Constitutional and political change
2. Demilitarisation
3. Democratic Rights

Constitutional and Political Change

If we are to restore the peace process there must be a concrete prospect and facility for substantive change. There is a need for fundamental constitutional and political change if we are to bring a peace process to a democratic conclusion. Sinn Féin's objective is to replace the British jurisdiction in Ireland with a new and democratically agreed Irish jurisdiction. We know that others hold a different view. New relationships will have to be forged between all the people of our country. This will be difficult. It demands honest dialogue and a process of inclusive negotiations without preconditions and without any predetermined outcome.

Demilitarisation

The British have successfully militarised an essentially political problem. There needs to be an end to all forms of repressive legislation; an end to house raids; arrests and harassment. There needs to be a decommissioning of all the British crown forces, including the disbandment of the RUC. British spy posts, whether in housing estates, sports fields, farming land, on hill sides ú wherever they are they should be dismantled. If we are to agree a lasting peace then there needs to be the permanent removal of all of the guns ú British, loyalist, unionist, as well as republicans.

There needs to be a speedy release of all political prisoners whether in Ireland, Britain, Europe or the USA. However, instead of taking a progressive attitude to the prisoners issue and building confidence the British government's attitude is punitive and negative. This is most graphically and tragically illustrated by the treatment of Paddy Kelly who is now terminally ill with cancer. That he was denied proper medical treatment at any time is reprehensible. That this occurred in the course of an IRA cessation is barbaric. John Major should immediately authorise Paddy Kelly's release.

At a wider level, the British attitude to the political prisoners, and in particular their blocking of transfers of POWs in England, underlined their failure to move away from the old agenda. What prospect was their of a good faith or positive engagement from a government on the wider constitutional and political issues when their attitude to individual prisoners and their families remained so bitter and vindictive.

Democratic Rights

It could be argued that some of these issues I have mentioned need careful management, or that they are part of the give and take of negotiations. The same thing cannot be said of the need to restore democratic rights. The absence of democracy and the presence of religious, political and economic discrimination, of cultural discrimination, has contributed to the conflict. This needs to be rectified immediately.

Our struggle has been about securing the changes necessary to a lasting peace. Our struggle has been the engine for change in this country over the past 25 years but we must also recognise that real negotiations are the only democratic mechanism for change. Change is, in fact, implicit in any process of democratic negotiations. I know most republicans and nationalists have little confidence in John Bruton and less trust in John Major. This is understandable but we cannot wish or wait for different governments. We cannot suspend our strategy. We have to deal with the objective reality of the situation. No matter how difficult it is we need to help to create, to encourage, to welcome and to engage in the mechanism for change. Despite our reservations, our experience and our instinctive caution, we should welcome any real movement towards inclusive peace talks. It is only our opponents who fear a real process of democratic negotiations.

A Cessation is Not Peace

If anyone doubts this the last 18 months provides ample evidence. On 31 August 1994 the IRA announced its historic complete cessation of military operations. This was the decision which presented everyone, but particularly the British and 26-County governments, with a unique and unprecedented opportunity to build a lasting peace. That potential for peace was most effectively summed up by the Nobel laureate Séamus Heaney when he described the promise of the new situation as a 'space in which hope can grow'. We tried to deepen that space.

We tried to widen it and to nourish that hope. Our goal then was to turn that moment of pause into a permanent settlement, a lasting peace. We set ourselves the task of building with others a new beginning for all of the Irish people.

But a cessation is not peace. The mere absence of war is not peace. So, sadly, that new chapter has for the moment been ripped from the pages of our history by a British government unwilling to seize the opportunity which the Irish peace process represented.

Anglo-Irish history and the international experience, teaches us that the road to peace is often tortuous. It is dangerous and fragile, fraught with tremendous challenge. It demands that we take risks.

We face perhaps the greatest challenge of our history - how to overcome the fear, the suspicions, the lack of trust and confidence which has been deepened by the British government's attitude to the peace process. To achieve that we need to look at the lessons of August 1994, at what persuaded the IRA to call its cessation and at the elements of the peace process which offered so much hope for the future.

A Political and Diplomatic Package

The package which I had worked out with Mr Hume, the Irish government, under Mr Reynolds, and key elements of Irish American opinion was a political and diplomatic alternative which aimed at removing the causes of conflict in our country. That package would not have been possible had it not been for the willingness of President Clinton to ignore bad advice from London and to implement, for the first time, a new US policy towards Ireland.

The alternative we presented sought to effect new agreements on constitutional change and political arrangements and a new dispensation which would be acceptable to all the people of the island. It sought to bring about democratic rights and to remove issues of inequality and injustice in the north and the total demilitarisation of the situation including the removal of the apparatus of war and the release of prisoners.

It was the argument that a determined approach on these matters by the breadth of Irish national political opinion with the public commitment by both governments that negotiations would commence after a specified period of three months, without pre-conditions, vetos or any attempt to pre-determine the outcome, which delivered that IRA cessation.

What we have seen in the intervening 19 months has been delaying, obstruction, convolution, contortion, dilution and dishonesty. At times, if this were not so serious, the responses of the British have bordered on farce - proximity talks 400 miles apart and only this week a proposal for a 'broadly acceptable' elective process which is acceptable to no-one and confusing to everyone.

The breaking of the commitment to negotiations by the British undermined one of these two key elements of the peace process. The second element, the commitment on the Irish side to a consensus approach to addressing the causes of conflict was significantly weakened by the collapse of the Reynolds led government and election of a new Taoiseach, John Bruton.

Once the basis of the cessation had been removed through the reneging on the negotiations by the British and the breaking of the nationalist consensus by the current Irish government, the collapse of the peace process became inevitable.

In his recent speech to the Fine Gael Ard Fheis Mr Bruton addressed the collapse of the peace process. There is no doubt a temptation for political leaders or their advisers to seek to absolve themselves from responsibility from the present difficult situation. While this may be satisfying in party political or propaganda terms much more is required from all of us if we are to face up to the challenge of restoring the peace process.

For that reason I have studied everything John Bruton has said and I have tried to be very measured in my responses to his comments. I know that successful peace-making requires that each of us must try to see the situation from a different viewpoint. It is in that spirit that I direct these comments to Mr Bruton.

If we are to restore the peace process - and in my view we must restore it - the Irish Taoiseach cannot act as a facilitator. He has to reach beyond his party political analysis and represent the interests of the Irish nation and he must understand that the Irish nation extends beyond the state which he governs.

He must also face up to the British government so that that government understands that it has to play a full partnership role in the search for peace. The reality is that this has not happened and this has

eroded confidence in the peace process and contributed directly to the ending of the IRA cessation.

Almost immediately after the IRA cessation ended John Hume and I met and pledged to do our utmost to restore the peace process and to redouble our efforts to talk to everyone who could help to bring this about. We decided at that time, as part of our wider initiative, to seek a meeting with the IRA leadership.

At that meeting John Hume and I were told that the Army leadership would explore any viable alternative strategy to bring about justice and that they would embrace a real effort to end the conflict through inclusive negotiations without preconditions.

Clearly what is required is an effective political process which removes the causes of conflict and delivers the changes necessary to a lasting political settlement. This must involve:

Agreement by both governments to initiate inclusive and comprehensive negotiations, without preconditions or vetoes and with no attempt to predetermine or preclude any outcome. For instance, the Government of Ireland Act must be on the agenda;

There must be specific and unambiguous assurances that these real negotiations will begin at the earliest possible time and be conducted with an agreed time frame. There should be clear procedures which prevent obstacles being erected around any issue;

International assistance and guarantees are required to ensure that commitments given are honoured;

In the context of negotiations, an Irish democratic strategy should be agreed to:

guide the negotiations;

secure democratic rights in the transition period;

remove the consequences of conflict;

to establish agreed structures to implement this Irish democratic strategy and the employment of all available resources in pursuing it.

The objective reality is that peace in Ireland can only be achieved through honest dialogue and democratic negotiations based on equality. This is not a military problem. It is a political problem which was militarised by the British. It needs a political solution.

Clearly these are extraordinary times and we face extraordinary challenges. There is no single simple policy which can meet these challenges; there is no grand or magic formula for peace. Genuine peace, real peace, must be dynamic, changing to meet the many challenges confronting it.

A peace process must be at its core a way of solving problems, democratically and on the basis of equality and understanding.

John Major's Responsibilities

Let me be very frank about John Major's handling of the peace process.

For the last number of years Mr Major has embraced the rhetoric of peace-making but avoided the real challenges. In doing so he has blamed the unionists and everyone else. It isn't just that he has failed to meet the challenges. That would be bad enough but he has gone further by pro-actively seeking to frustrate every positive effort to tackle the causes of conflict.

He, more than anyone else, bears the greatest responsibility for the current impasse. Think back on the opportunity that has been wasted; reflect on the expectations which greeted the IRA initiative of 1994.

This universal sense of hope has been dashed by Mr Major's refusal to convert a cessation into a permanent process for justice and peace.

Could it be that it is not only because the Tory establishment does not want to preside over the type of change that is required in our country but that they also resent the fact that all the initiatives originated from nationalist Ireland and initially from myself and John Hume.

Having said all of this I must also make it clear that if John Major is prepared, even at this juncture, to engage properly in the necessary honest dialogue to restore the peace process then we will meet him halfway. Peace-making is a two-way street.

Political leaders cannot dodge their responsibilities. Most politicians measure risk in terms of popularity, party political considerations or electoral concerns. Peace in Ireland requires much more of political leaders.

Crucially we cannot have peace in Ireland unless the British government wants peace also and is totally committed to bringing it about and sustaining it through risky and dangerous times. I regret the ending of the cessation. My heart goes out to those who died or were injured in the London bombings, and to their families. To the families of Inan Ul-Haq Bashir and John Jeffries I extend our sincerest condolences. No words of mine can ease the pain which they are enduring.

I extend our condolences also to the family of IRA Volunteer Edward O'Brien. His death was a particular source of sorrow. For generations Irish men and Irish women have resorted to armed actions in protest at British involvement in Irish affairs. Volunteer Ed O'Brien's family were unaware of his IRA involvement. His death, and the circumstances in which he died therefore was doubly shocking for them. There was much tabloid commentary about this young man but little attempt to understand why he was moved to act as he did. The lesson for all of us is clear. If we are to get an end to armed actions we must build an alternative.

There will be some commentators who will read this speech for signs that the IRA is going to resume its cessation. They should know that this would not be the vehicle for such announcements. I want to see an end to all armed actions and I am working for that end but there needs to be an understanding of the difficulties which British bad faith has created for all of us. There are efforts by both John Major, John Bruton and others to scapegoat Sinn Féin. The last 18 months have been a learning process and there are lessons for us all. One thing is clear. The IRA cessation should not be devalued. It is real evidence that despite provocation, and a clear lack of positive involvement by the British government, that the IRA's commitment stretching over a year and a half to enhance a real opportunity for peace is a genuine one.

Closing doors to dialogue will not bring peace sooner. On the contrary it undermines the search for peace. Moreover, removing the causes of conflict is bigger than any one person or party.

Making peace must be the sum total of many acts. It is a risky enterprise and must be a collective effort.

For our part Sinn Féin stands for peace. That is our conviction; that is our commitment to others. Our record in the peace process will stand scrutiny from even the most doubtful. We have demonstrated a real and determined commitment to democratic negotiations and debate.

I assert the democratic and electoral integrity of Sinn Féin and of our electorate and of our right to be treated on the same basis as all other parties. We are not second-class citizens and we will never accept anything less than equal treatment.

We believe in the resolution of conflict through negotiation. Our party remains willing to enter into dialogue without preconditions. We do not want a veto over the agenda for negotiations or the outcome of those negotiations.

I want now to address the unionist section of our people and I would like to do so at two levels. That is at the level of organised unionism and at the community level. I am making this distinction because I believe different things are happening at these two levels.

But before I do, let me say to unionists I am speaking to you in a spirit of openness, honesty and frankness, I know you are listening and I'm choosing my words very carefully to ensure there is no confusion in your minds about republican intentions.

We want to make peace with you, we want to end the centuries-old conflict, we want to be reconciled with you; this is your country every bit as much as it is ours and we want to share it with you on a democratic and equal basis. We take no comfort from the fact that you live in fear about your future, that you feel besieged by Irish nationalists on one side and on the other side you are distrustful of the British government. We know this instills a deep sense of insecurity and that this makes movement difficult.

I am concerned that you appreciate our commitment to reconciliation with you on the basis of respect for your beliefs, your tradition and your hopes for the future. It isn't easy for either nationalists or unionists to trust each other. I'm not

going to ask you to forget the past nor to forgive republicans for the pain we have visited on you. At the same time I don't expect nationalists or republicans to forget what you inflicted on us. However the wrongs of the past must not paralyse us. We must not be trapped in a web of suspicion and doubt about each other.

We need to open up our minds unconditionally to one another. In this way we can learn more about each other; in this way we will find common ground and a shared understanding will emerge about the future.

Sinn Féin is making its contribution to this process of understanding by engaging on a weekly basis with unionists. I'm certainly satisfied that these exchanges are leading to a better and clearer understanding among republicans of the unionist outlook and vice versa. Those republicans directly involved find these engagements both stimulating and challenging.

I am also satisfied that the meetings reflect a mood among many unionists for a negotiated settlement and that this mood is being ignored by the unionist leadership.

David Trimble and Ian Paisley like the rest of us have a moral responsibility to give positive leadership to their people. They have a responsibility to instill confidence in their people, not to fan the flames of uncertainty. They have a responsibility to lead them into the future not lead them back to 1912. They know that change is on its way and they should be leading the debate among their people not leading Orange parades through the Garvaghy Road or the Ormeau Road or denying nationalists freedom of assembly in Lurgan.

The republican tradition is a democratic and progressive one. It was founded by Irish presbyterians. It is nonsectarian and pluralist. It sought and it still seeks to unite the people of this island around a common set of democratic principles and ideas which embrace the diversity of our people.

This is not the 1790s and much has happened since then to blur the vision of the men and women of those times but they left us a legacy which remains viable today. In my view it will provide the foundation upon which we can build a new Ireland,

an agreed Ireland for all the people of this island.

As well as engaging in dialogue with unionists we have also developed our contact with governments and political parties throughout the world.

There has been considerable focus on our engagement in the USA. Let me say that I have been uplifted and gratified by the concern of Irish America for freedom and peace and justice in Ireland. These sentiments are not confined to our old friends in Noraid or Clann na Gael. There is a new and increasing consciousness throughout the breadth of Irish America. I must pay tribute to the Friends of Sinn Féin, to Mairéad Keane who heads up our mission in Washington, to the others who lead our organisation and to our many friends and allies.

We have also established a presence at the European Union under the tutelage of Tony Catney and while this work is much slower than the US engagement, a very good start has been made. Sinn Féin representatives have also visited other part of the world from Australia to Italy.

For me a visit to South Africa last summer remains the highlight of that year. Rita O'Hare, Richard and Chrissie McAuley and I travelled as guests of the ANC. We met President Nelson Mandela and the ANC leadership, as well as the other parties, including the National Party, to learn about their process of negotiation. It was like going home. I am therefore very pleased to extend a céad m'le fáilte to Ian Phillips, the ANC delegate and to all the other fraternal delegates and visitors present at this Ard Fheis.

We need to be confident about our own strength. Republicans have been at the receiving end of so much vilification, marginalisation and sheer state oppression that many observers are surprised, and our opponents are disappointed that we have never succumbed to the pressure.

Our task is to articulate the core democratic republican demands in a way which is reasonable and attractive to the broad mass of the Irish people. In so doing - and we have had some measure of success in that regard - we will reverse the years of revisionism, censorship and isolation. We will heighten national consciousness and nationalist confidence and we will put the British and their allies on the defensive.

Sinn Féin has the potential to join with others to build a mass movement for an Irish democracy throughout this island. Many of those who are our potential allies have yet to be persuaded about how British disengagement can be brought about. It is up to us to outline our strategy and our tactics in a manner which is relevant to the mass of people.

One of the most significant advances of recent times is the widespread acceptance that an internal Six-County settlement is not a solution. Some have come to this position because they recognise the failure of partition, and the reality that it is not only the governance of the Six Counties which has been the problem ó it is the existence of the statelet itself.

We want to see an end to partition and our strategy between now and the ending of partition should be based upon the widely-accepted view that there can be no internal solution, that there has to be fundamental change and that during a transitional phase there must be maximum democracy. There has also to be equality of treatment and parity of esteem.

The achievement of equality of treatment for nationalists in the North will erode the very reason for the existence of that statelet. The unionist leaders know this. That is why they so dogmatically turn their faces against change. Unionists traditionally support the union because it enables them to be 'top of the heap' in the Six Counties. A level playing pitch will make this impossible for them in practice and much of unionism will be left without any rational basis. Apart from this, all citizens have the right to equality of treatment. We do not seek preferential treatment or privilege for any section of our people. We have always demanded equality. The northern state was founded and is sustained on discrimination. It was and is underwritten by policies determined by London.

Unionists can no longer be blamed for London's failure through 24 years of direct rule to effectively tackle economic and structural political discrimination against Catholics; unionists alone cannot be held responsible for the continuing cultural discrimination which denies Irish children their right to be taught through the medium of Irish, our national language; it is British policy which labels nationalists generally and Sinn Féin voters in particular, as inferior and second-class. None of

this can be tolerated any longer.

The British need to remove all anti-nationalist symbols and appearances from the Six-County statelet by providing 'parity of esteem' in that area and by eliminating as far as possible all obvious and visible difference between there and the rest of the island of Ireland. They need to bring about legislative change to improve the position of nationalists while protecting the rights of other citizens.

Democratic rights include national rights. Nationalists in the occupied area are not an ethnic minority living in a foreign country. We are Irish citizens living under foreign rule without our consent in our own country.

The Dublin government also has a responsibility, indeed a moral and political imperative, a constitutional imperative, to uphold the rights of citizens in the North.

There is a pressing need for physical, legislative and practical expressions to deliver positive proof that nationalist rights, identities and allegiances are guaranteed actual parity.

There is a need for:

Equality of opportunity in employment;

Equality of treatment for the Irish culture and identity;

Equality of treatment of elected representatives and voters;

Equality in the provision of education, particularly through the medium of Irish;

Equality of treatment in economic development.

Can we restore the peace process? We have to. Can it be done through the proposals presented by London and Dublin? This is a time for clear heads and steady nerves. It is my firm conviction that we will get a peace settlement but I cannot say when this will happen or whether indeed it can happen under the present administrations.

The 'framework for an elective process' released by John Major on Thursday provides yet more evidence of his concern to stay in power and of the

protracted effort to subvert and frustrate a meaningful restoration of the peace process. That the Irish government permitted the British government to take such decisions is not encouraging.

It took over 50 years for Stormont to be overthrown. There is no way that Sinn Féin will be party to any restoration of that kind of institution. Our preference would be to boycott both the election and the elected body. However, we live in the real world. We will be guided therefore by whether it is necessary to defend our vote or to uphold the rights of our electorate. Some of you may have hoped that towards the conclusion of this speech that I would have been able to look forward to a more trouble-free future for our party and for the rest of the people of this island. The last 18 months have shown everyone what the future could be like. It was a good 18 months and as people embraced the new possibilities they became incredulous as other politicians rejected every meaningful offer to talk. The people of our island have the right to peace.

We have the right to shape our own future. We have the right to develop an economic democracy which tackles unemployment, bad housing and which provides a proper health service and an open education system for all citizens. We deserve a nonsexist, pluralist, democratic Ireland. An Ireland which cherishes all the children of the nation equally.

No British government has the right to condemn us to continued conflict and division. But we have to face up to the reality that John Major has frittered away the best opportunity for peace in 75 years. In developing a strategic overview and in seeking to restore the peace process, this fact cannot be avoided. For years we were told that the British government was neutral, that it had a benign attitude towards Ireland, that an IRA cessation would be met with a generous and flexible response. We were the ones who were sceptical about this. I was the one who insisted, even as the IRA announced its cessation, that the struggle was not over. Sinn Féin's vision of the future is both realistic and obtainable. There is no doubt that the peace process can be restored if the energy and concern that exists within nationalist Ireland and internationally can be structured and organised. In this context the Dublin government have a weighty responsibility.

Nationalist Ireland and the Irish diaspora possess considerable political and economic strength to move us out of conflict. This power and influence can be utilised and nationalist Ireland can be energised in the search for peace based on democratic principles. But the lessons of the last few years must be learned if we are to be successful. There is also an onus on Irish republicans to use all our resources and influence to reach out and to develop a viable strategy to address the core issues at the heart of the conflict. It is not going to be easy.

Our party has matured. We have faced up to all the challenges positively and with dignity and confidence in our cause and in our analysis. We will face many other challenges. Our party has an absolute commitment to a transformation of Irish society and to a negotiated and democratic settlement of the conflict in our country. We know that peace is not simply the absence of violence. Real peace ó a lasting peace ó is based on democracy, justice, freedom and equality. Our vision sees beyond the present conflict and beyond the present phase of our history. Our vision foresees the unity of the people of this island. East with west, north with south, urban with rural, Catholic with Protestant and dissenter.

Our vision is for the redistribution of wealth, for the well-being of the aged, for the advancement of youth, for the liberation of women and for the protection of our children.

Our vision rejects forced emigration and unemployment, the destruction of the environment, cultural oppression, sexism and inequality.

Our vision embraces education. It embraces democracy. It is economic, as well as political. Our vision is for a free Ireland and a free people. It is for bread and roses, as well as an end to war. It foresees the relationship between Britain and Ireland resting upon our mutual independence. It is this vision which sustains our struggle. It demands that we take risks. It demands that we persevere in our efforts to reach agreement, to reach agreement and a new accommodation between all our people.

Our last Ard Fheis was the first one in 25 years without conflict so we are well schooled in the politics of repression but we know also that we need to be generous and flexible. So we extend the hand of friendship to our enemies as a sign of our

strength and our willingness to be inclusive.

There are lots of reasons for republicans to be bitter. But bitterness is a wasted emotion. This time 15 years ago Bobby Sands was on the 23rd day of his hunger strike. He had lots of reasons to be bitter. He knew the difficulties which he faced yet he was resilient and coherent and thoughtful in what he had to do. After five years in a prison cell, smaller than the average bathroom, denied any mental or intellectual stimulation, naked except for a blanket, he wrote his thoughts on cigarette papers with the refill of a biro pen which he secreted on his person. He wrote once about revenge. "Let our revenge be the laughter of our children". That is the sense of the future which we seek to emulate.

We are united, we are stronger than ever, we are more experienced. We face the future confident of our own strength and conscious of our weaknesses and prepared for the work which we need to do.

There are no partial solutions and there can be no partial negotiations about the future of the people of this island. The position has now moved on beyond such arrangements.

All the main players know that and as John Major casts about for other ways to keep himself in power we must continue to press forward with the democratic option, that is, for an end to the British connection and for a lasting peace in our country.