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# A Bridge to the Future

Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams MP

## A Summary

(522122)

Sinn Féin is totally wedded to the search for a democratic peace settlement. This includes a commitment by us to play a full and positive role in representing our analysis and our electorate and upholding the republican view in the peace process. Sinn Féin has no exit strategy.

- The real point is not whether there will be an agreement by May. It is about what kind of agreement is required to remove the causes of conflict and bring about a durable and lasting peace, and whether this is the type of agreement the two governments are trying to put in place. The broad democratic view of the type of political agreement that will come out of the current talks process is that it must be based in an explicit all-Ireland context.
- Sinn Féin see a 32 county republic, working through a new relationship with our nearest neighbours, based upon our mutual independence, as the best way to eradicate the range of political, social, economic and other inequalities which effect the people of this island. British government policy and unionism is opposed to this objective. So, this objective is unlikely to be achieved by May.
- The logic is that the struggle for this entirely legitimate, democratic and desirable objective will continue beyond May. It is on that basis that Sinn Féin will judge any outcome of this phase of the process.
- In coming to terms with all of this and in seeking to establish where popular nationalism stands, it would be a mistake to underestimate the effects of recent events and the significant erosion of confidence in the talks process among nationalists, and particularly within the republican constituency.
- The vast majority of people want peace. Nationalists support the objective of a United Ireland and therefore would like to see a democratic agreement which transcends partition, and which makes a difference to them in their daily lives. They want an effective, peaceful, political strategy to give effect to that objective as quickly as possible.



They want to see an alliance of Irish political parties and opinion, pursuing objectives which look to the interests and well being of the Irish nation with the aim of normalising relationships within the island of Ireland and between Ireland and the people of Britain. They wish to see the Irish government playing a leadership role in all of this with a common position worked out between Dublin, the SDLP and Sinn Féin.

Electoral and other rivalries have so far stunted this potential. It remains Sinn Féin's intention to overcome these difficulties. Strengthening the nationalist position demands this.

All experience to date shows that a shared understanding and common positions between nationalists on the most advanced positions possible is needed to further the democratic demand.

- Nationalists are concerned that there should be no internal six county settlement - no partitionist settlement. Many are worried about exactly how this will be interpreted by the different parties. They understand the need for an agreement to be forged with unionism but insist that it has to be based upon equality.

- They want fundamental political and constitutional change in the British jurisdiction and they are nervous about any change in the Irish constitution.

- It is essential that the British government faces up to its historical and contemporary responsibilities. Britain is not neutral. The London government is a player with its own political interests. These and expediency determine its policies.

How much longer can it be said that there cannot be a United Ireland but that there must be a united British Kingdom? Is consent to be forever interpreted as unionist consent, that is as a veto? What of nationalist consent?

- At this point I am trying to give a nationalist perspective on an agreement, within the present restrictions outlined by the two governments. This is without prejudice to Sinn Féin's position, because even the full implementation of the Framework Documents would present a huge challenge for us since we accept it only as a basis for discussion. Our party wants much greater change. We remain totally committed to our republican objectives and we will view any agreement in this phase as being part of a transitional process to Irish unity and independence.



However, in trying to establish the wider nationalist view it seems to me that the first test of any position put forward by the two governments must be that it ensures that there is not return to unionist domination. As I have detailed above it must be a bridge into the future. Any kind of new Stormont or any effort to underpin partition is unacceptable.

Therefore, from the broad nationalist view, transitional arrangements need as a minimum to achieve:

**(a) Constitutional;**

- The minimum nationalists want to see is fundamental constitutional and political change in British jurisdiction, the Union of Ireland Act 1800 and related legislation such as the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the N.I. Constitution Act 1973.

They want to see balanced change in the Irish constitution so that in any Irish constitutional change,

- - the definition of the Irish national territory should not be diluted,
- the constitutional imperative should remain,
- there must be no diminution of the rights of Irish citizens.

On the contrary citizens rights should be strengthened. Irish citizens in the north should if they wish have the right to elect their representatives to the Irish Parliament and should have voting rights in Irish Presidential elections and referendums.

**(b) Powerful all-Ireland bodies;**

- exercising significant and meaningful executive and harmonising powers alongside consultative functions,
- with direct responsibility for policy decisions and the implementation of policy,
- with the range of functions to be discharged or overseen initially designated by the two governments,
- operating independently,
- immune from the veto of any proposed six county institutions,
- with no limit on the nature and extent of their functions,
- with the dynamic and ability to grow.

**(c) Equality.**

- The securing of equality, rights and justice needs to be visible and immediately tangible,
- 'equity' of treatment must be replaced by 'equality' of treatment,
- this should not even be a matter of negotiation and all provisions must be statutory, and must cover all aspects of life. For example, policing, human rights, the legal system and the administration of



- justice should come within the remit of north/south institutions, economic development, fair employment and an end to discrimination are other important areas,
- cultural rights are central to any settlement,
- Equality needs to be accorded to the Irish language. Bi lingualism needs to be pro actively encouraged and statutory provision made,
- a human rights commission should be established on an all-Ireland basis to ensure that the principle of equality applies in all areas of government and social life.
- the establishment of a Bill of Rights and an all-Ireland constitutional court responsible to a north/south council is essential, combined with changes in the administration of justice.

#### (d) Demilitarisation.

The six counties is a highly militarised zone. A complete demilitarisation of the situation is required. Immediate transitional steps should include;

- The EPA and PTA and all other repressive legislation must be repealed.
- A proper policing service must be created to replace the RUC which must be disbanded. It must have a minimum of 40% nationalists in its ranks.
- This should be achieved in an agreed time-table in the context of specific affirmative action measures.
- Pending the disbandment of the RUC British political and cultural symbols and the paramilitary trappings of this force must be removed. Interrogation centres must be closed.
- A screening process must be initiated to remove officers with a record of human rights abuse.
- The British Army must be withdrawn to barracks as a first step in overall demilitarisation.
- The Royal Irish Regiment must be removed permanently from contact with the civilian population pending the early disbandment of its locally deployed units.
- All political prisoners must be released.

Opponents of the peace process or those who are intent on minimising change will balk at such measures. Yet they are some of the minimal requirements if a level playing pitch is to be established. Sinn Féin is intent on bringing about more fundamental changes and I offer the above therefore not as a precis of Sinn Féin's position but in an effort to set a marker from the broader nationalist and democratic perspective on current discussions and to answer the first question posed in my opening paragraph.