

27 October 1997

Peace in Ireland

Freedom, Justice, Democracy, Equality

A Sinn Féin response to

"Strand Three - A New Agreement.

A consultation paper by the British and Irish Governments."

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Introduction.

Sinn Féin welcomes the commencement of the consultation by the two governments on Strand Three of the negotiations. We agree that, as the paper states;

"The issues in this paper cannot, of course, be fully resolved in isolation from the other issues involved in the negotiations as a whole. It is common ground between the participants that any agreement, if it is to command widespread support, will need to give adequate expression to the totality of the relationships covered by the negotiations. The inter-relationships between different parts of the comprehensive agenda are, therefore, of crucial importance".

Meetings in Strands One and Two are presently dealing with opening papers on each of the agenda items. To date the parties have submitted papers on Items One, Two and Three of the agendas in Strands One and Two. Only an initial discussion of these positions has occurred. Completion of this process of submitting papers on each of the Agenda items will take another 2 weeks at least. Until this process has been completed, and indepth discussion and negotiations on these issues has begun, the views of the parties on the corresponding items in Strand Three cannot be definitive. This reality unavoidably affects our response, and, presumably, that of the other parties to your consultation paper.

It is clear however, that the two governments need to drive this process forward, and we welcome the urgency with which you are approaching the Strand Three discussions and the opportunity to respond to your first discussion paper on Strand Three issues.

Principles and Requirements.

Sinn Féin believes that any political agreement reached in the negotiations must be reflected also in a new agreement between the British and Irish Governments. This is the purpose of the Strand Three negotiations. We believe that such an agreement and the wider relationship between Ireland and Britain should be, and would be best, based on sovereignty, independence and mutual respect. We share the objective of seeing peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement between all the people of Ireland.

In the paper which we submitted to Strands One and Two of the negotiations, we outlined in detail our view of the Principles and Requirements which should underpin a lasting peace settlement.

These are, in summary;

1. A lasting peace and stability must be based on justice and equality.
2. There can be no internal six-county settlement.
3. Britain's policy of maintaining the union between Britain and the six-counties is a direct impediment to and interference with the right of the people of Ireland alone to determine their development.
4. Agreement on how the principle of national self-determination is to be exercised is a matter for the people of Ireland alone to determine.
5. A new Ireland can come about only through agreement and must have a democratic basis.
6. Consent must be universally applied to the people of Ireland. Universal application of consent precludes any sectional approach.
7. Equality of treatment is of the essence. Equality – political, social, economic and cultural – is a fundamental right.
8. The validity of both the nationalist and unionist identities in Ireland and the democratic rights of every citizen on this island must be accepted and upheld.
9. Agreement on an overall settlement will require a democratic accommodation of the differing views of the two main traditions, which takes full account of the conflict of identities.
10. A sovereign, united and independent Irish state offers the best and most durable basis for peace and stability.

Constitutional Issues.

Sinn Féin submitted a paper to Stands One and Two which dealt with our view on constitutional issues. However there is general consensus that the status quo has failed. Our collective involvement in these negotiations is a recognition that present constitutional and political structures and arrangements have failed. An internal six-county arrangement cannot work. There has to be fundamental constitutional and political change. The partition of Ireland has failed. The political settlements imposed by the Act of Union 1800 and the Government of Ireland Act 1920, subsequently reinforced by the Northern Ireland Constitution Act, 1973, have failed the people of Ireland and the peoples of these islands. They have failed the fundamental criteria of providing lasting peace and stability.

In summary, therefore, Sinn Féin holds that the negotiations need to address and resolve the issues of;

1. Sovereignty;

2. The constitutional status of the northern statelet and the constitutional legislation which underpins it;
3. Britain's policy on this core issue;
4. Unionist participation, involvement and agreement;
5. The exercise of national self-determination by the people of the island of Ireland.

Nature, form and extent of new arrangements.

It is our view that new arrangements should be developed on the basis of the principles and requirements and in the constitutional context outlined above. In the context of the Strand Three discussion, arrangements between the British and Irish governments must be based on the right of the Irish people to national self-determination, on the right of the Irish nation to sovereignty and independence and on mutual respect and equality between the peoples of Ireland and Britain.

New arrangements should, in specific ways serve the broad objectives of removing the causes of conflict, setting aside the failures of the past and reaching agreements which will provide lasting peace and stability for the people of Ireland and normalising the relationships between the peoples of Ireland and Britain.

They should in the best interests of all the people of Ireland, aim to,

- advance a process of national reconciliation
- underpin political democracy
- promote and develop economic democracy
- recognise fully the diversity as well as the unity of the people of Ireland
- reverse not only the effects of partition but also the effects of decades of neglect of the areas of greatest need in urban and rural Ireland
- uphold irrevocable guarantees for the protection of the rights and liberties of every citizen on this island including communal and cultural rights
- involve an integrated approach by all relevant government institutions to produce policies which effectively transcend the divisions of the past.

Relationship with other arrangements.

Clearly these are totally dependant on the nature, form and extent of the other arrangements. However, it is common ground that there can be no internal settlement and that the totality of relationships needs to be addressed and resolved in the negotiations. The discussions in Strands One and Two will examine these issues and as we reach agreement on these we can then begin to relate these to any proposed new arrangements worked out between the two governments.

Rights and Safeguards.

Sinn Féin will be formally tabling a paper on Justice issues and Rights and Safeguards to the talks process in the next two weeks. The following commentary is consistent with the detail contained in that paper.

1. Equality – political, social, economic and cultural – is a fundamental right. This must be at the heart of any new agreement but cannot be contingent on reaching an overall agreement. There must be adequate safeguards to uphold, assert and protect this fundamental right.
2. There must be comprehensive, systematic, effective and entrenched protection of human rights – civil, political, economic cultural and social. Human rights should be guaranteed, including, if necessary, internationally, on a basis of equivalence throughout all of Ireland, for example, by incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the enactment of a comprehensive Bill of Rights into domestic law, irrespective of the constitutional context and of any possible future changes to it. Critical issues in this regard, will be the administration of justice and policing – specifically, the development of changes and reforms which will secure the unequivocal support, participation and confidence of all sections of the community.
3. The validity of both the nationalist and unionist identities in Ireland and the democratic rights of every citizen on this island must be accepted and upheld.
4. The two Governments, and the political agreement itself, must ensure that, in regard to the people of the six-counties the constitutional changes should be such as not to diminish in any way their existing citizenship rights and their birthright to be accepted as being British or Irish – or both – as appropriate and desired.
5. Agreed arrangements must reflect as fully as possible the rights of both major traditions, and promote cooperation between them. They must evenhandedly afford both traditions parity of esteem and equality of treatment in all spheres. They must enhance and facilitate the development of a truly pluralist ethos throughout the island of Ireland.
6. Particular attention must be paid to the protection of the rights and identity of any community which finds itself in a minority position. It should be the duty of the state in such a situation vigorously, imaginatively and sensitively to protect and promote the interests of such a community, while also upholding the equal rights of the majority tradition.
7. In the matter of schooling, parental choice should be respected and facilitated, including the preferences of those parents who choose

integrated and Irish-medium education for their children.

8. The achievement of greater and more equally-shared prosperity, the promotion of equality of opportunity and fair participation in the labour market, the eradication of discrimination, and the empowerment and inclusion of marginalised and deprived communities and groups, are not only vital in themselves, but also have the capacity to create a more stable social environment in which new political arrangements are more likely to take root and command public confidence.

These goals should be, and must be, vigorously pursued as a fundamental and essential element of a lasting political settlement.