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A Chéir

As you are clearly very aware events over the last week in the 6 county statelet have been traumatic. For nationalists their worst fears have been realised by the capitulation of the British government to the campaign of mass intimidation, murder, violence and threats of violence orchestrated by the political leaderships of Unionism and Loyalism.

This has many profound implications. If we are to successfully rebuild a peace process which has any hope of achieving a real peace settlement then I firmly believe that there must be a wholesale review of the peace process, of our respective handling of it and there clearly must now be a new, coherent and viable strategy developed.

Sinn Féin is already taking this issue. With the greatest respect I believe this Irish government must also conduct such a fundamental review and work out a clear strategy for peace on this island which learns the lessons of the last two years and the much more immediate and profoundly damaging events of the last 6 days.

This requires that a number of core issues be looked at afresh.

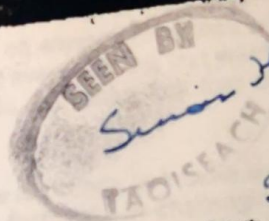
The Unionist Veto

The events on the Garvaghy Road, and in the days before that, prove beyond any lingering doubt, that the unionists cannot have a veto over any aspect of the talks, their conduct or their outcome, or over any other matter. Such a veto is not only undemocratic, a point we have made repeatedly, but it is wholly counter-productive and means in effect that there will be no equality, no democracy and no political change. The two governments clearly need to stand up to Unionism and the Irish government needs to have a clear view of how this is to be done.

No one should have a veto.

The Equality Agenda

The commitment of the two governments to equality of treatment has been stated and restated as one of basic human rights which was to be acted upon immediately and effectively. Any notion that there is or can be equality of treatment within the political context of the 6 county state disappeared on the Garvaghy Road. This issue needs to be addressed directly.



*Simon Hare,
Is there a
response
to this?
(just asking!)*

15/7

The Mitchell Principles
The orchestrated campaign of mass intimidation, of violence and threats of violence, totally undermines the Unionist and Loyalist parties declared commitment to the Mitchell Principles.

It will clearly be immensely damaging if, while Sinn Fein remains locked out, the unionists are able to withdraw from talks, engage in an orchestrated campaign of mass intimidation and terror and then walk back into talks again. But this is clearly the intention of the British government. The last week has caused an almost total loss of confidence in the value of the Stormont talks. Pretending that the events of the last week did not happen, or that they have no bearing on the talks process, will make that loss of confidence complete.

The Irish government need to examine closely this issue and how it intends to handle the Unionist and Loyalist leaderships on this issue. You have been forthright in challenging Sinn Fein on our attitude to the Mitchell Principles. There needs to be equality of treatment and absolute consistency on this issue also.

If Dr Paisley and Mr Trimble requested a meeting with the Irish government I presume they would be met. And, of course, this is right. But the same facility should be available to Sinn Fein on the basis of our democratic mandate.

The Irish government should, therefore, meet Sinn Fein on the same level as all other parties.

The Legitimacy of the British Forces
Since the RUC attack on the people of the Garvaghy Road on Thursday, there has been a vicious and intensive onslaught by the RUC on nationalists. The level of violence inflicted on peaceful nationalist and catholic protesters and the ready use of plastic bullets contrasts with the scenes throughout the preceding week of RUC men mingling amicably with Orangemen blocking roads. The massive curfew on the Ormeau Road contrasts with the failure to protect catholic families even when this was obviously possible. The RUC have refused to give details of the number of plastic bullets fired in recent days despite the fact that they log each bullet fired. Clearly these figures are being concealed because they illustrate the scale of violence inflicted on nationalists and underline the disparity of approach between unionist and nationalist protesters. In addition the nature of the injuries are qualitatively different also. Our information is that most injuries to nationalists caused by plastic bullet are to the head and upper body. It is amazing that there have not been fatalities.

I have consistent reports from across the north of the RUC provoking nationalists and of the firing of these bullets in advance of any violent confrontation. I am sure you can verify these reports through your own sources.

The massive, excessive and at times unprovoked violence used by the RUC against the nationalist community must require a review of the Irish Government's position that the British forces, including the RUC, are legitimate with the implication that their violence is legitimate. There cannot be double standards on this issue. The RUC is totally unacceptable. It should be disbanded.

The Commitment of the British government to an agreed settlement
The role of the British government in the events of the last week has been disgraceful. Any credibility left in the argument that the British government is prepared to pursue

an agreed settlement based on equality of treatment disappeared when the British government caved in to unionist violence and allowed the rights of nationalist communities to be marched over. You have already pointed out clearly the damage done as a result of the British government's capitulation to Unionist violence.

A New Approach

If those who have seen violence work so successfully over the past week are not to draw the conclusion that violence alone brings political results, then the Irish government as the leadership of the Irish nation need to present a clear alternative strategy. A strategy for change which can move the British government and in which confidence can be built.

Two months ago in Finglas you correctly pointed out that, as Taoiseach, your responsibility extends to the entire Irish nation. More than at any time in the last 75 years you as Irish Taoiseach need not only to exercise this responsibility but to be seen to exercise this responsibility. If the anger now so evident in nationalist areas is not to deepen and find violent expression there needs to be clear evidence that there is a viable alternative, that nationalists are not again to be abandoned to unionist domination and that the leaders of nationalist Ireland will effectively lead nationalist Ireland.

Last night you appealed to nationalists to remain calm pointing out that the moral advantage achieved by nationalists over the last week must not be squandered. You directed this at those involved in street confrontations with the British forces. I have made the same appeal to nationalist youths but I make the same appeal to you. As leader of the Irish nation you also need to ensure that this moral advantage is turned to some positive and real advantage in terms of equality, justice and democracy. Most evidently there must be fundamental change. The Irish government must take the lead in bringing about that change and in developing a coherent and viable strategy to achieve that change.

If the moral advantage is to be employed positively this requires that all the diplomatic and political skills and resources of the Irish nation are activated around the need for a new approach. The Irish presidency of the European Union gives additional scope for this.

Until now when the peace process has been in difficulties the two governments, and particularly the British government, have engaged in a cosmetic band-aid crisis-management approach. Following the events of the past week and the collapse of the London government in the face of a Unionist revolt the peace process, as we have known it, is over. It needs to be rebuilt.

If a new peace process is to be rebuilt on a more stable basis than the last one, and it must be rebuilt, then there has to be recognition by London and Dublin that to date the unionist politicians have been rewarded for their refusal to engage in any meaningful way with the effort to bring about the type of changes which are necessary to anchor a peace process. It is now patently clear that a new peace process needs to be built on the basis of equality and without any preconditions or vetoes.

If there is to be peace there must be change. The unionists are opposed to change and they have tried to minimize that change. If we are to have peace the onus must go back on the governments to bring about that change.

There are two ways to go forward. One is that the governments begin proper talks with all the parties invited to take part with assurance to all the conflicting interests that there will be real negotiations within an agreed timeframe, without preconditions or vetoes and with the British government in particular initiating the kind of confidence

building measure which are so necessary at this time.

If the Unionists refuse to engage then the governments should proceed with those parties which are committed to building a real peace process and by so doing to create the conditions for the full involvement of all parties. It must be remembered that the Irish and British governments have agreed to do just this and that under paragraph 47 of the Framework Document, they have made commitments to move the situation forward.

The Irish government obviously has a responsibility to get the British government to face up to its commitments. Your public criticism of the British capitulation to David Trimble and Ian Paisley's threats was clearly necessary. The Irish government's position should be put clearly and unapologetically on the public record when the need arises. However this needs to be done in a more consistent and strategic way so that international opinion, including progressive opinion in Britain, can be mobilised behind the reasonable position of Irish nationalism.

I welcome the Irish government's forthright and well-publicised attitude to recent events but one of the flaws in Dublin's position is that the British government know that the Irish government shares its agenda of excluding those who vote for Sinn Fein. You should reconsider your position on this. It is entirely inconsistent.

Tomorrow senior members of our party will meet with your officials to discuss the current crisis. But the sense of injustice felt by nationalists can only be deepened by an Irish government which refused to accord Sinn Fein voters equality of treatment. I understand the difficulties for you but this is a difficult and risky time for everyone. After a week in which our party members have endured political abuse within our own communities as we try to keep the lid on an explosive situation, the continued victimisation of our party by your government can only be regarded as unhelpful.

Having said that we will approach this meeting positively and, given the seriousness of the situation, without any recrimination, and with the intention of examining thoroughly the issues discussed above. Now more than ever a viable peace process needs to be developed if we are to prevent the slide back to conflict which, given the alienation caused over the last week, can only be more vicious than that which went before.

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Gordon O'Hanlon

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