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Simon Howe

John Major, MP
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A Chara,

I am writing directly to you in an attempt to explore whether we can collectively identify a means to salvage the peace process.

I have said a number of times in the recent past that I believe that the opportunity to bring about a lasting peace settlement still exists. Clearly however this opportunity is diminishing and the slide back to conflict quickens.

Recent events have caused additional difficulties for all of us. Despite this I am convinced that we can devise a way out of the impasse which presently exists between republicans and the British government. I believe we can salvage the peace process before it is terminally damaged.

Recent IRA attacks in England have created grave difficulties for you. I do not attempt to minimise these but this is the reality which obtains at this time. This is not to excuse or justify these attacks. They are clearly a symptom of a deeper problem. The Sinn Féin peace strategy is about resolving all this and bringing armed struggle, from whatever source, to an end. This is the objective we have been pursuing.

Many people within the British government are sceptical about Sinn Féin's sincerity on this. But for the past 9 years the Sinn Féin leadership has been attempting to develop an approach which would

remove the gun permanently from Irish politics. In short we have been trying to develop a peaceful alternative to conflict and, while doing so, to bring a political constituency with us.

A slow and painstaking process of dialogue within nationalist Ireland and Irish America, coupled with the assurances which you and the Irish government gave that inclusive negotiations would follow an IRA cessation, allowed us to convince the IRA leadership that there was a real prospect for a negotiated political settlement. This led to the IRA cessation in August 1994.

While you may not agree with the republican or nationalist view of your stewardship of the process it is important that you try to see this from their perspective if you are to get an insight into the reasons for the deepening of distrust of the British government within the republican constituency and the subsequent end of the cessation.

Once the IRA announced their cessation, the peace process went into stagnation, primarily as a result of your government's reluctance to move, within a reasonable period, into all party negotiations and your introduction of the new precondition of decommissioning. At the very time when it was most necessary to build confidence in the peace process and in the efficacy of peaceful politics, confidence was being steadily eroded. This has in turn made the task of the Sinn Féin leadership much more difficult in our efforts to restore a collapsed peace process.

From my contact with representatives of the IRA it is clear to me that they view the stance of your government as the biggest obstacle to a restoration of their cessation. It is their view (and one which is shared by many others) that your government acted in bad faith, attempting to use the IRA cessation as a means of defeating the IRA. It is in this context that the demand for decommissioning in advance of a political settlement is viewed.

If we are to move forward it is imperative that these obstacles, because this is how they are viewed, are not resurrected and that assurances to that effect are provided. How this can be accomplished is a matter for discussion.

The meetings between Sinn Fein and the British government over the last few years have not had the required effect of moving towards an agreed settlement or in generating confidence in the commitment of your government to the search for an inclusive, negotiated peace settlement.

If the present talks underway at Stormont are the beginning of a serious effort, on your part, to move towards a democratic settlement, then you clearly have a responsibility to convince those who are sceptical of your intentions that their suspicions are ill-founded.

The most effective way of convincing Irish republicans of your good intentions is through direct dialogue with Sinn Fein. Such a dialogue between Sinn Fein and the British government could address and possibly overcome the deep suspicion and distrust which exists on the part of Irish republicans and which I am in no doubt exists on your side also.

With political will I am sure that an agreed means to bring this about can be achieved.

This is without prejudice to Sinn Fein's absolute right to be at the Stormont talks on the basis of the mandate we received on May 30. We will continue to assert this right.

I would urge you to give this matter your urgent consideration and I look forward to your response.

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Gerry Adams