



A NEW BEGINNING

REMARKS BY

MARTIN MC GUINNESS MP

SINN FÉIN CHIEF NEGOTIATOR

TO

OPENING SESSION

OF

STRAND ONE

OF

SUBSTANTIVE NEGOTIATIONS

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A Chairde,

Ba mhaith liom a rá, ar son Sinn Féin, go bhfuil athas orainn bheith anseo. Is lá stáiriúil é seo.

Today we enter into negotiations, the agreed outcome of which will inevitably mean far reaching change.

A democratic settlement acceptable to all the inhabitants of this island means that we need to approach these negotiations in the knowledge that the status quo has failed to deliver a society where all citizens are treated as equals.

A Democratic Peace Settlement:

There is no going back to the failed policies of the past. Partition has failed. The partition of this small island and the division of our people have created a failed political entity in the North of our country. The inequality and the discrimination against nationalists and the militarisation of this part of our country must end.

This requires a negotiated and democratic settlement of the conflict. We now, for the first time since partition, have the opportunity to negotiate that settlement.

Britain's policy which resulted in the undemocratic partition of our national territory, sustains division among our people, and it follows that our people cannot be united while our country remains divided.

We need therefore to direct all our energies towards reaching an agreed form of government to which all the citizens of this island can give their allegiance. It is our firm conviction that this can only be effectively realised in an all-Ireland context. We approach this strand of negotiations on that basis.

Our commitment is to an equitable and lasting agreement which will gain the allegiance of all our people by catering for diversity and working towards national reconciliation.

There Must Be Change

We enter into these negotiations as Irish Republicans but in a spirit of openness, flexibility and friendship. We are willing to engage in real and meaningful negotiations with those who come to these negotiations with a pro-Union agenda. Our objective is, through dialogue among all the people of this island, to achieve an agreed Ireland.

It is our view that Britain's policy is the root cause of the conflict in our country and therefore is the key matter which must be addressed in these negotiations.

All political, economic and historical arguments prove that a United Ireland offers the best guarantee of equal citizenship and the basis for stability and an enduring peace. History has shown that an internal Six-County arrangement is not a viable option. An 'arrangement' is not a solution.

Furthermore both the British and Irish governments and all of the Nationalist parties on this island are agreed that an internal settlement is not a solution.

More and more people now accept the need for fundamental constitutional and political change if we are to bring about a democratic conclusion to this process of negotiation.

This will not be easy. The road ahead will be difficult and dangerous and risky for all of us but working together I am convinced that we can succeed. It is my conviction that we will have a peace settlement. If we are resilient, if we dig deep, we can overcome all obstacles.

Overcoming Mistrust

We can empathise with the concerns of the unionist population about their position in an Irish national democracy. And in this process they must be addressed and resolved in a real manner. We need to reach an agreement which rejects exclusion for any reason. That is not only the basic concept of democracy but a practical necessity if we are to reach a settlement and an agreed peaceful Ireland.

Sinn Féin is aware that there is mistrust between republicans and the unionist section of our people. We realise also that dialogue and negotiation is the best way of dealing with that mistrust. We believe that this dialogue and negotiation can be the bed-rock on which, together, we can build a peaceful settlement to this age old conflict.

For too long we have fought with each other and talked past each other. It is time that we started talking and listening to each other.

Sinn Féin recognises that all sides have suffered and that great patience will be required in any process of reconciliation. We want to reach an accommodation with the unionist people of this island.

We want to overcome the mistrust which exists between us. But building trust and reaching accommodation is a shared responsibility. The unionists must also want to build trust and reach an accommodation.

The Dream Of Peace

Now is the time for this generation of political leaders to make real the promise of democracy. We have to rise above the failures of the past by seeking to fulfil the dream of peace for all our people.

The British government should exercise its responsibility in a positive way by encouraging unionists to participate in these negotiations in a serious and constructive manner. The British government should resist any obstructionist tactics. Progress must not be held hostage to narrow party political or individual interests. A democratic settlement must not be postponed because of selfish and sectarian goals.

The British government should encourage, facilitate and enable agreement to a democratic settlement. The achievement of Irish national self-determination and reconciliation is the most effective long-term solution to the conflict here.

Moving Forward Together

The reality is that the destiny of nationalists and unionists, of Protestants and Catholics and dissenters is inextricably intertwined.

The reality is that nationalist freedom is bound up with unionist freedom

The reality is that we cannot move forward alone - we can only move forward together. And as we advance together we must pledge that there will be no turning back.

Our very presence here today shows that present structures have failed and that change must take place. Our shared objective is for a new political settlement. Our task is to manage that change in a constructive fashion in order to bring about the kind of settlement to which we can all give allegiance and which will offer our children and our children's children a peaceful future in a new agreed Ireland.

Go raibth maith agaibh a chairde.