

SINN FÉIN DISCUSSION PAPER



**The nature of the problem
and the principles
underlying its resolution**

**SUBMISSION TO THE
FORUM FOR PEACE & RECONCILIATION**

**Dublin Castle
Friday 25 November**

1. **DEFINING THE PROBLEM:
THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION**

'No British government ought ever to forget that this perilous moment, like many before it, is the outworking of a history for which our country is primarily responsible... Our injustice created the situation; and by constantly repeating that we will maintain it so long as the majority wish it, we actively inhibit Protestant and Catholic from working out a new future together. This is the root of violence...

Dr. John Austin Baker, Anglican Bishop of Salisbury

British interference lies at the root of the political conflict on this island. We have a myriad of political, social and economic structures which sustain and encourage division, perpetuate the destructive politics of 'them and us' and feed the conflict that tears us further apart.

All of us share a degree of culpability for the unresolved conflict on this island and we share a responsibility to find the formula that will move us from that situation of conflict towards reconciliation, from a climate of disunity towards unity. But it is Sinn Féin's contention that the primary responsibility in all of this rests with Britain. It is because of British policy our conflict exists and only a change in British policy can create the atmosphere necessary to resolve it.

The conflict which we have inherited is not an accident of history, but is the legacy of a deliberate strategy adopted by Britain towards its nearest neighbour. Fearing the implications of Irish independence, successive London governments adopted the classic colonial tactic of 'divide and rule', undermining effective opposition by encouraging internal discord.

Even the British government would acknowledge that whatever about the present situation, that British policy on Ireland had been driven in the past by strategic military, economic and political imperatives. Partition is the product of that policy.

Currently the British government have amended their position by disclaiming any military or economic interest. However they have refused to declare that they have no 'political' interest.

Peace in Ireland cannot be denied because of selfish political concerns in Westminster. The British government should instead become persuaders for agreement on political structures in Ireland.

2. **DEFINING THE PROBLEM:
DIVISION, INEQUITY & INJUSTICE**

"We declare that we desire our country to be ruled in accordance with the principles of Liberty, Equality and Justice for all."

Democratic Programme of the First Dail

Ours is a divided society. In common with other peoples, we are divided ~~politicians~~, economically and socially, rich from poor, men from women, ~~politically~~

young from old. There is a regional divide also, with wealth and power concentrated in a narrow geographic corridor outside of which the crisis of powerlessness has encouraged a haemorrhaging of young people and the decline of rural communities. In our cities, tremendous wealth sits uneasily alongside dire poverty, and powerlessness has generated a sense of alienation and despair in many areas.

Inequity and injustice occurs, therefore, on many levels and it is our view that this Forum should, in the course of its deliberations, address the wider implications of inequality and the fundamental need for democratic control throughout Irish society.

As representatives of a section of the nation which has suffered collectively experienced marginalisation, discrimination and oppression, we are conscious of the absolute requirement for laws and political structures which will command the respect of all sections of our people. Our vision is the transformation of Irish society, the creation of a democracy built on agreement not conflict, unity not division.

3. DEFINING THE PROBLEM: THE ISSUE OF VIOLENCE

Political conflict has periodically resulted in armed hostilities. Sinn Féin recognises that the existence of injustice, allied to the absence of any real prospect of redress, made political violence inevitable. We acknowledge the selfless contribution which successive generations of Irish men and women have given to their country.

We are mindful also of the human cost of violent conflict and its potential to further exacerbate division. Families are left to mourn the loss of loved ones through death or imprisonment. Communities endure the persistent pressure of life in a war-zone, their lives disrupted by draconian laws which make little distinction between combatant and non-combatant, ever-conscious of the possibility of violent death. It is a dreadful and abnormal situation and we are all victims. Our determination is that never again will Irish men and women feel the necessity to confront oppression through recourse to arms.

The historic IRA cessation of 31 August and the loyalist ceasefire of 13 October, while providing a welcome boost to the process of finding an enduring settlement, is not of itself peace. A process that does not seek to resolve the deep political divisions that afflict our people and our country is doomed to ultimate failure. We are convinced that a lasting peace can only be built on principles of justice, democracy and Irish self-determination.

4. DEFINING THE PROBLEM: A DIVIDED SOCIETY

"As individuals and as a significant national minority, unionists have democratic rights which not only can be upheld but must be upheld in an independent Ireland. That is the democratic norm. That is an essential ingredient of peace and stability."

Sinn Féin policy document 'Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland'

Political division, with its attendant 'traditions', is evidence of a ruptured nation, not of two mutually exclusive peoples. In seeking to heal this rupture, our objective must be to identify and develop what we hold in common and to transcend what divides us.

Unionists will ask why they should abandon their political heritage. After all, the Union has had benefits. It bestowed a privileged status on a national minority. It gave that minority a disproportionate degree of social, economic and political power. And when it seemed that national self-determination could no longer be resisted, it gave unionists, through partition, their own state. All of this has convinced them that they have more in common with the people of Britain than they have with the rest of the people of Ireland. Attachment to the crown has strengthened that sense of difference and, by virtue of the crown's explicit sectarian basis, has deepened division.

Against that, dependence on Britain has ensured that unionists live in fear of sell-out. Always uncertain, expecting betrayal at every turn, unionism sees enemies everywhere. Far from being able to determine their own political destiny, unionists realize that their future rests in the hands of a government which, despite its rhetoric, does not have their interest at heart. They suspect that when it suits, Britain will leave Ireland, the union will end and they won't be able to stop it happening.

Apart from its relationship with Britain, unionism has had a troubled relationship with nationalist Ireland. Sinn Féin recognises that unionists fear domination and the loss of identity in a new Ireland. In terms of their attitudes, divisive and sometimes supremacist traditions have created a culture that views the rest of the people of Ireland with suspicion, hostility and even contempt. Separate development - a sure consequence of a political entity founded on sectarianism - in terms of where we live, where we socialise and where our children go to school, has reinforced this notion of difference.

Nationalists cannot reassure unionists that their constitutional position is secure, because we do not determine British policy either. Nor should we pretend that our objective is anything less than unity and national self-determination, because that would be a lie and unionists are not fools. Tampering with Articles 2 & 3, failing to articulate our political aspirations - lest they offend - neither course will provide adequate reassurance. Instead, their only consequence would be to reimpose the sense of isolation which northern nationalists have felt since partition.

What nationalists can do, however, is to assure unionists that we have no wish to coerce them into anything and we have no wish to dominate them. As victims of coercion and domination, we know that these inspire

hostility rather than agreement, conflict rather than stability, division rather than unity. A just settlement cannot be built without their input and we invite them to join with the rest of the people of Ireland in formulating an agreed future.

5. DEFINING THE PROBLEM: THE FAILURE OF PARTITION

"The failure of partition is the strongest argument for its abandonment"

Gerry Adams, Sinn Féin President

The border partitioning Ireland was contrived by a British government so as to ensure an artificially constructed unionist majority. The partitioned area had no basis in geography or history,

The foremost consequence of partition was that it institutionalised sectarianism. Those differences in outlook, religion and tradition which provide the diversity that makes a healthy society, became instead lines of conflict. With its own judiciary, police force and parliament, unionism — confident of British support — set about the creation of a 'Protestant state for a Protestant people'.

Partition affects every aspect of Irish society. In the North it has created a failed political entity marred by economic apartheid, political repression and religious intolerance. In the South the political division resulting from partition has stunted normal political, economic and social development. Both states are in a deep and permanent crisis.

Whilst no-one would argue that there would be a complete similarity between the political conditions in Ireland and in South Africa, it is obvious that lessons can be drawn.

For example, the proposal for a 'Whites' homeland was rejected in South Africa precisely because of a commonly accepted view that partition in Ireland had been a political and economic disaster. Even the White South African political parties accepted that an inclusive democratic settlement would not be achieved within such an arrangement.

The unionist veto is a negative power, a power only to say 'no'. It is a major barrier to the consideration of democratic options that would include all the people of Ireland within an agreed framework. The unionist veto is no more than a British government device. Sinn Féin firmly believes that so long as the unionists in the Six Counties are assured a veto over change, then there is neither reason nor incentive for them to move towards an accommodation with the rest of the Irish people. In our view the guarantee of a veto to unionists has inhibited political movement in Ireland for over 70 years. It is clearly a failed policy and has perpetuated the cycle of repression and resistance. What is required is a new and imaginative approach which tilts the balance away from the prohibitive and negative power of veto towards the positive power of consent, of considering consent, of negotiating consent.

6. TOWARDS A LASTING SETTLEMENT

A clear policy change by the British government would create the dynamic in which, for the first time, the Irish people could reach a democratic accommodation and in which a process of national reconciliation and healing could begin. A lasting peace requires that unionist consent, agreement and allegiance to new political structures is gained. In the same way, the gaining of nationalist consent, agreement and allegiance to new political structures is required if we are to have a lasting peace. This clearly requires an end to all vetos, to all preconditions and any attempt to impose a predetermined outcome to the exercise of national self-determination. Sinn Féin is willing to do all it can to advance the search for agreement and the building of trust in the context of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. Sinn Féin is convinced that the potential to further develop the peace process exists. The dynamic necessary to move us all out of conflict must be found in the principles, framework, timescale, procedures and objectives of a peace process and particularly in negotiation. The two governments and the political parties have a responsibility to ensure that this opportunity is not lost. We must all work to build progress and be prepared to demonstrate the courage and imagination necessary to advance the peace process.