

Risks for Peace - Now Peace at Risk

At first I was just stunned. The London bomb was a complete shock. Without any advance warning the IRA had snubbed all the efforts and risks taken by people and politicians throughout Britain and Ireland, not to mention our recent visitor, US President Bill Clinton - risks taken not only for peace, but taken to give Sinn Fein a route into democracy and political respectability.

The approach of the last three years had been based on the view that Sinn Fein could and would deliver permanent peace, if given a real chance to enter the democratic process. To provide a basis for this approach a set of fundamental principles was negotiated between the British and Irish Governments, and published as a Joint Declaration, at Downing Street in December 1993. In this

watershed
Declaration it
was accepted
that the
deciding
factor in the
constitutional
future of
Northern
Ireland would
not lie with
London or
with Dublin,
but with the
people of
Northern
Ireland. We
all felt
encouraged
by the
achievement
of such a
significant
agreement,
but from the
start there
was a
problem.
Sinn Fein and
the IRA
refused to
accept the
Declaration,
but they were
persuaded to
call a
ceasefire with
the challenge
of persuading
others to
come around
to their way
of thinking in
negotiations.

In fact however over the succeeding months the momentum continued to move away

from the IRA position. As I led the non-sectarian Alliance Party at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin, through many months of negotiations, the nagging concern grew. Sinn Fein was a full participant in those meetings, and most of the amendments proposed and accepted came from Sinn Fein. But we wondered were they securely on board the democratic process? Little over a week ago the Forum finally produced its report on the political way forward. It was very clear. Every other nationalist party in Ireland signed up to a commitment to the consent of the people of Northern Ireland for any decision about the future there. Alone amongst the participants Sinn Fein opted out of the Irish nationalist consensus and rejected the report when it was brought back to the plenary session on Friday 2 February, just a week before the fateful London bombing.

In retrospect another warning bell had already begun to sound a couple of weeks before with the Report from Senator George Mitchell's International Commission which included Canadian Defence Chief, John de Chastelain. That report proposed, as a compromise, that arms de-commissioning should take place during All-Party Talks. The Talks, which might well take place after an election, would be open only to those who accepted six simple principles of democracy laid down by Senator Mitchell and his team. That report, presented only a couple of weeks ago, was also acceptable to everyone, except Sinn Fein. So, both on democratic consent, and the de-commissioning of weapons, Sinn Fein had failed to win the argument by democratic means.

On Friday night however even the Sinn Fein leadership seemed genuinely shocked when news of the London bombing came through. It seems that the return to violence despite being a major strategic shift had not been discussed with the political leadership. The small unelected Army Council of the IRA had simply decided to go back to terrorism. They did not like the way things were going, so they set aside the elected representatives of Sinn Fein and any pretence of democracy, and restarted the violent campaign. The political leadership of Sinn Fein seems powerless to stop it, but most worryingly is unable even to voice reservations about it.

As the sense of shock subsides it is hard not to feel both angry and somewhat depressed. All the efforts of the past three years, seem to be of no value to the IRA. Either we all give in to them, or we feel the wrath of their bombs. Already the police check point is back in operation outside my house, and a pall of fear and gloom descends on Belfast which until six o'clock on Friday night was rapidly becoming a fun place to be. And the implications for the Peace Process are no less stark. If Sinn Fein is unable to abide by the discipline of democracy, and to challenge IRA terrorism, there may be little option for the British and Irish Governments but to return to their pre 1993 strategy of working together to create a settlement which has the support of the broad mass of the people on both sides of the divide. Sinn Fein then becomes like Hamas in the Middle East, or the hardliners in South Africa, unable to accept a fair and reasonable compromise, and setting themselves back outside the democratic pale. It's at such a time that the resilience of the ordinary people of Northern Ireland, so tested in a quarter of a century of terrorism, comes back to the fore. There is a determination

that Peace will come back, and next time it will be for good.