

POLITICAL POSITION PAPER FROM THE ARD-COMHAIRLE OF THE IRISH REPUBLICAN SOCIALIST PARTY AUGUST 1st 1999

The debacle that occurred in Stormont on July 15th was one that was easily predicted. The Good Friday Agreement was based on a number of false assumptions:

1/That Northern Ireland is a viable state subject to the normal process of bourgeois democratic government.

2/That Mainstream Unionism is prepared to break from Orange racism and enter partnership with nationalists and republicans

3/That the Provisional Republican Movement would swallow the establishment of a Northern Ireland Assembly, the watering down of the all-Ireland Bodies and the wholesale decommissioning of Republican guns.

Lets look at these three assumptions in detail for they are crucial to an understanding of the position of the Republican Socialist movement.

1/ Republicans have always argued that the partition of the island and the establishment of two separate states was a political, social economic and cultural disaster for all the people of Ireland. Two sectarian states came into existence stultified and stagnant. The churches controlled the educational systems and replicated their narrow visions onto the people. Whilst modernising influences grew slowly the economies were stagnant and millions fled the island since 1922.

Only in the last 11 years has the Republic begun to break away from the consequences of partition. A modern booming capitalist economy has been established that makes the state one of the most desirable places to live in as long as you are not one of the many hundreds of thousands poor.

However the North has endured bitter sectarianism, recurrent bouts of communal violence, armed attacks on the state and state institutionalisation of discrimination and sectarianism. Emergency legislation curtailed civil and human rights. Armed police and soldiers have been on the streets for most of the state's existence. Apartheid in housing, jobs, and schooling and in social living has grown, not lessened since 1922.

The abolition of Stormont in 1972 ended Unionist rule. The failures over nearly thirty years since then to establish any viable local regional power indicates that the contradictions are too great to be overcome within the parameters of the state itself. The state is a failed entity. It has brought only fear intimidation discrimination and violence to the working classes. The state itself must go. The IRSP has held to this view since the Party was established. We see no reason to change that view now.

2/ Mainstream Unionism now under the leadership of Trimble has appeared to have moved from its supremacist position held up to 1972 when they ruled the state. There is talk of inclusion of working together and of sharing power. But so far that is all it is, talk. Despite the spin doctoring and the charm offensive from some Assembly members mainstream unionism is still the Orange order at politics. That organisation is racist and sectarian regardless of the folksy image it sometimes presents.

David Trimble is an Orange man. He is not capable of making the genuine gestures of reconciliation to the Catholics of the north that would be expected from a First Minister designate. Having taken the anti-agreement unionists back into his negotiating team it is clear that he wishes to undermine the Good Friday agreement from within. Traditional unionism like the state itself can not adjust to reforms.

However we do not equate unionism, in its many forms with the protestant population. That would be to echo the error of the Good Friday Agreement. Whilst the Trimble unionists have wide support within the protestant population there are other voices. Remember the Orange Order is a minority movement within the protestant population not all of whom share its cultural or political views. For example the attempt to attach some significance to 'Orange culture' is insulting to the likes of writers like John Hewitt and Sam Thompson (to name but a few). They may have come from a British/unionist background but they certainly are not part of 'orange culture'. There is and there always has been, a radical stream that rejects the prevailing ideology of Orangism.

The emergence of the P.U.P. is a tiny hopeful sign within loyalism. Many have been impressed by the spokespersons for the PUP and the UVF's general holding to its cease-fire. Many republicans should acknowledge the radical role in the past that parties based on the protestant working class like the Communist Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party performed. They often kept the flame of socialism alight at times when the Republican Movement was itself rabidly right wing and anti-socialist.

But there is not yet sufficient evidence within mainstream unionism of a desire to see "Tenians about the place." Indeed the widespread feeling in nationalist areas is that Trimble's party still want a "a cold house for Catholics" Hence the stalling of the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement which we believe will continue until May 2000 unless the whole process implodes before then.

3/ Sinn Fein have changed their constitution to swallow changes that five years ago would have been anathema to the overwhelming number of its members. We believe they have been more than accommodating to the sensitivities of the Unionist Party. They have accepted a Northern Ireland Assembly and taken their seats in it. They have accepted the need for decommissioning and promised to work for it. They have indeed agreed to work an internal solution to the North's problems. These are indeed seismic shifts for republicans.

In return there has been the release of prisoners and the promises of the establishment of a Human Rights Commission, the Patton Report on the RUC, cross border bodies and a British and Irish Council. These gains we consider in the context of our history to be meagre. The issue of equality was a unionist bargaining chip. It should never have been on the negotiating table. Equality is a right and should be implemented separate from the Good Friday Agreement.

The IRSP in common with many republicans, socialists and nationalists do not and never have accepted that the armed struggle was worth this. But the overwhelming majority of people in Ireland voted for this and on this basis, and this basis alone, the IRSP persuaded the INLA to call a complete cessation to its armed actions on the 22nd August 1998.

We accept that for tactical reasons the Sinn Fein leadership have moderated their demands. That is indeed their right. But they do not speak for all republicans.

Given the changes added by Blair to the conditions of the Good Friday Agreement, namely that all-paramilitary guns are decommissioned by May 2000, the question has to be asked, who will ensure this decommissioning? Are Sinn Fein or the IRA going to guarantee the handing over of weapons by the INLA, the Official IRA, the Continuity IRA, the Real IRA or the Official Republican Movement?

The IRSP have been told in no uncertain terms that the INLA will not decommission. Furthermore those INLA prisoners still in gaol have made it clear they will do their full time rather than gain liberty at the cost of the handing over of weapons. The IRSP full accept this and in the light of the continuing armed ethnic cleansing of Catholics still taking place in specific areas of the North support this decision.

So any attempt to tie decommissioning with prisoner releases will not work. The truth is that Sinn Fein can only speak for their republican constituency not for any other. Nor is there any likelihood of either the UDA or the UVF disarming.

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It is a major error to tie in decommissioning with political progress. That was a flaw in the original agreement and now to make it obligatory on all para-military groups is to stand logic on its head. Many people within the differing communities feel they are vulnerable to attack and regard the forces of law and order as incapable of defending them.

They see no logical reason why in a time of great political uncertainty either republicans or loyalists should give up their guns. Many republicans and nationalists as well regard the existence of thousands of legal guns as part of the decommissioning problem. Where the legitimacy of the state is itself questioned then the issue of legal and illegal is not as clear-cut as many political commentators would have us believe.

Recognising this the leadership of the IRSP have revised a proposal they first put to An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahearn before. When we asked about Plan B, because as we then said Plan A, the Good Friday Agreement would fail because of its own internal contradictions, Bertie Ahearn denied there was a plan B.

We then proposed, that to prevent a drift back to war, as would inevitably happen if a political vacuum was created by the absence of a plan B, there could be a non-aggression pact between the representatives of all armed groups who accepted that peace was the desire of the people. Such a plan would instill confidence in the people, give the political organisations an opportunity to develop trust and remove barriers to political progress.

Much has been made of trust in all the negotiations. Surely such a non-aggression pact would create the basis for laying down trust based on the realities of our situation. Leaping separately or together will not breed confidence, only sore feet from hard landings!

We know that the INLA would be prepared to sign such a pact even now despite its opposition to the Good Friday Agreement. Even now despite the rising tide of dissident loyalist violence and unionism's begrudgery and mean spiritedness Republicans are prepared to engage in dialogue.

The signing now of a non-aggression pact by republicans and loyalists would obviate the need for instant or immediate decommissioning, give a boost to the primacy of politics on the island and give confidence to the thousands of working class people who fear they are going to be sucked back into a sectarian nightmare of murder..

The leadership of the IRSP is prepared to play its part constructively in helping to create a climate of mutual respect and tolerance at this critical time in our country's history. The way forward is through dialogue and agreement and by more radical thinking than has been evident up to now by the framers of the Good Friday Agreement.

Ard-Comhairle of the Irish Republican Socialist Party August 1st 1999