

FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION



**Sinn Féin contribution to the
preliminary discussions**

ENDING THE CONFLICT

Sinn Féin has welcomed the recent complete cessation of all military operations by the IRA as a significant and substantial contribution to the achievement of peace. Welcome, also, is the widespread approval from the international community for this development and their shared recognition of its significance. Sinn Féin believe that the situation has thus been positively advanced and that an historic opportunity now exists to progress the situation expeditiously and irrevocably in the direction of peace.

Sinn Féin urges the British government to make an immediate contribution to the new situation by responding positively to the IRA decision. It should immediately open formal talks with Sinn Féin representatives and begin the process of demilitarisation. Sinn Féin calls upon the loyalist paramilitaries to cease their attacks on the nationalist population in both parts of Ireland.

The ending of conflict by all parties to it is clearly required if we are to set the stage for the achievement of peace through a negotiated settlement.

It is clear that peace is not simply the absence of conflict. Rather, it is the existence of conditions in which the causes of conflict have been eradicated and where justice, equality and democracy prevail; where agreed political structures and institutions are a substitute for political conflict; where diversity is recognised and democratically accommodated. A process of national reconciliation is obviously a vital ingredient to the achievement of all of this.

The above underlies Sinn Féin's approach to all efforts to achieve a lasting peace in Ireland.

Sinn Féin obviously holds the view that all of this is best accommodated in the achievement of national reunification, independence and sovereignty in the context of an Irish national democracy.

FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Sinn Féin welcomes the setting up of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. Sinn Féin believes that the forum has an important part to play in furthering the peace process. It can advance the debate about the need for a new Ireland, an Ireland at peace with itself and with Britain.

THE FOUNDATION STONE

The search for a just and lasting peace in Ireland, based on universally-recognised democratic principles has been a central part of Sinn Féin's function as a political party for many years now.

Sinn Féin believes that the foundation stone of a lasting peace is to be found in the abiding and universally-recognised principle of national self-determination. The principle is an absolute one, set out in the United Nations Charter, in the CSCE and in the Irish Constitution. The exercise of that right is a matter for agreement between the Irish people ourselves. Sinn Féin believes that the search for that agreement must be a central objective of the Forum's purpose.

INCLUSIVENESS

A beginning has been made to a new situation. Inclusiveness must be a key element of that. Inclusiveness in the Forum itself through participation and access to its deliberations would be a clear signal, a marker, for the future new Ireland. Inclusiveness must mean giving the ordinary people of all Ireland, and particularly people in the Six Counties, the opportunity to have their voices heard, as opposed to only the voices of political representatives.

Community organisations and nongovernmental organisations alike must be included. Their voice in this debate will influence the destiny of the Irish people and the shape of the new Ireland. The terms of reference for the Forum should reflect this.

The grief, the fears, the injustices of all must be given a voice as a contribution to what can only be a painful healing process. So too, the acute sense of abandonment, political impotence and dispossession felt by many sections of our people. All must be aired and addressed if we are to discard the politically-partisan representation of these serious matters which has been a hallmark of the conflict, so as to leave them behind us and move forward.

In particular, every encouragement should be given to the unionist community and their political representatives to participate in this debate. There is nothing to be lost by dialogue.

On the contrary, the modest beginnings of a dialogue with the rest of the people of this island open the door of potential on more concrete possibilities, not least of which is the development of trust and the recognition of shared interests. For that reason, and regardless of initial responses to participation, the door must be kept open.

A COMPREHENSIVE DEBATE

Ireland and her people are riven by multiple fractures. Our country is partitioned. Our people are divided – nationalist from unionist, North from South. Civil War divisions remain evident in the structures of the political parties in the 26 Counties. The common thread to all of this is undeniably the influence and effect of British government involvement in Irish affairs. The divisions are a direct consequence of that.

The debate about the new Ireland must be comprehensive so as to address those divisions in a constructive way and point the way towards ending them as a contribution to the necessary healing process.

Accordingly, Sinn Féin believes that the debate and the issues under discussion should be as comprehensive as possible, embracing all relevant political, social, economic and cultural matters which contribute to the maintenance of the many divisions. Issues which are a barrier to peace, prosperity, national reconciliation and the normalising of relationships between the Irish and British people must be debated.

The removal of such barriers can be assisted by the goodwill which exists internationally towards Ireland and her people, especially amongst the Irish immigrant community and their descendants worldwide.

Sinn Féin believes that the debate should be guided by:

- Universally-recognised democratic principles;
- The recognition and democratic accommodation of diversity;
- The removal of all political vetoes;
- Parity of esteem;
- Equality of treatment;
- Equality of opportunity;
- Justice for all;
- An intense and proactive approach to the gaining of consent for fundamental political and constitutional change.

The terms of reference should reflect, accommodate and ensure a breadth of debate and prevent any narrowing of it.

Sinn Féin hopes that the Forum's deliberations will contribute to a new beginning and that it will lay the foundation for a lasting peace for all the Irish people.

PRELIMINARY CONSULTATION

Our preliminary consultations with government officials were found to be useful. Needless to say, these were not conclusive, definitive or detailed.

It is important that every reasonable effort is made to resolve all of this in advance of the forum's inaugural meeting. Some of the matters which need addressed are:

- What will the duration of the forum be?
- Where will it sit?
- Will sessions be public or private or both?
- How often will the Forum sit?
- Who will chair it?
- What research facilities will be provided?
- To whom will it report?
- How will its findings be measured?
- Will there be simultaneous English/Gaeilge translation facilities?

These and other matters clearly require attention. We look forward to the opportunity to make an input into all of this.