

## **Sinn Fein says the Peace Process is dead. Perhaps we should believe them.**

When John Hume issued a Joint Statement with Gerry Adams on 24 April 1993, he challenged conventional analyses. Prior to this it was believed that no settlement could be constructed that included everyone from Sinn Fein to the DUP, however, an agreement might be possible with SDLP, Ulster Unionists and Alliance, which, with majority support across the divide could marginalize extremism, and in time, create a stable peace. The new 'peace first' strategy described by SDLP, claimed that if Republicans were assisted into democratic politics, the gun could be removed from Irish politics. This better atmosphere would make possible a settlement satisfactory to everyone. When I discussed this approach with Albert Reynolds, he was emollient and reassuring. I agreed, that the 'principle of consent' was the only basis on which a settlement could be built, but I found it difficult to believe that Sinn Fein would accept what they would describe as 'partition and the unionist veto'. I also vividly recall a particular conversation with John Hume. In an ante-room in 10 Downing Street, prior to his leaving, and while I was awaiting a meeting with John Major, I expressed my concerns. He was completely confident however, and went outside to express in trenchant tones his conviction that peace could be achieved within a week.

I was troubled by an alternative explanation for the Republican Movement's new and confident language of peace. Perhaps they believed that if the violence was put on hold, they could build a Nationalist Consensus, including Irish-America, powerful enough to pressure the British, to 'persuade' the unionists into a United Ireland. In any case terrorism would remain available for use if required. (This is in fact strikingly similar to the strategy detailed in the TUAS document published recently in 'The Fight for Peace' by Eamon Mallie and David McKittrick)

At first all went well. Sinn Fein did not accept the Downing Street Declaration, but the ceasefire of August 1994, was followed by heightened hopes, and the establishment of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin. I decided, despite my reservations, to try to make it work to bring peace. I went into Talks with Sinn Fein and the Loyalists within weeks of the ceasefires, and, against advice from friends, North and South, took Alliance into the Forum. In extensive discussions between 1994 and 1996, I found Sinn Fein prepared to trade ambiguous words and phrases, but never any evidence of a compromise on the key issues. While this was disappointing, they were clearly dismayed that the Nationalist Consensus could not be constructed on the Sinn Fein agenda, as the draft Forum Report showed. The Mitchell Report dealt a further body blow when it required commitments to dismantle the IRA, destroy its arsenal, and accept the outcome of All-Party Talks, whatever the result. For Republicans the Peace Process was not about accepting the reality of the Joint Declaration, the Framework Documents, or any other accommodation with partition. They would only remove the gun from Irish politics if a United Ireland could be guaranteed through another means. At this point they announced the death of the Peace Process, quickly followed by the bomb at Canary Wharf, and the subsequent English campaign.

The 'peace first' approach hoped that with financial assistance, democratic respectability, political alliances, and enormous publicity, the Republican Movement would compromise on the fundamentals. The unwelcome evidence suggests that their espousal of politics was simply a tactic in the war. Future ceasefires will be similarly tactical, because Sinn Fein is not in a position to deliver the dismantling of the IRA short of a completion of their aim.

Lives have been saved by the ceasefire up until now, however following this path has not been without other costs. It is probable that if the political capital expended in these years had been devoted to reaching agreement across the broad centre, we would now have a settlement, and a people

united in squeezing the gun out of Irish politics. Instead our community is full of unrealistic nationalist expectations, profound unionist fears, and a depth of distrust and political polarization, unseen before in my lifetime, and astonishing after two years of relative peace. To continue with the strategy could make the situation dangerously difficult to retrieve. It is now less likely that the multi-party talks will reach full agreement than it was in 1992. Perhaps, if there is a major strategic shift, 'a sufficient consensus' of the parties could achieve a negotiated settlement, but if not, the only alternative to deepening division and the inevitable return of violence on a larger scale, is for the two Governments, after the elections, in 1996/7, to proceed to implement the Framework Documents. To follow such a path does not require that the doors to democratic participation be closed to anyone, simply that the focus moves away from the extremes. The Irish Peace Process was an attractive notion, but it depended on the belief that the Republican Movement was prepared to give, as well as to get. All we seem to have got for our trouble, is more trouble.

**Dr John Alderdice,**  
**Alliance Leader. 22 June 1996**

**To: Peter Murtagh, Sunday Tribune**

**From: John Alderdice**

**I understand that Paul McErlean was talking to you about the possibility of an article. I have just put this together last night and early this morning, so forgive the rough edges.**

**I trust that it is suitable.**