



# Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

## Address by Dodie McGuinness to Forum on Establishing Reconciliation and Mutual Trust in Ireland

29 September 1995

A Chathoirleach, Sinn Féin welcomes this opportunity provided by the Forum to debate what is one of the most pressing issues and one of the greatest challenges facing the people of Ireland. That is how we establish a meaningful process that will reconcile our divided people. It is a process that will remove the cycle of conflict which fuels the divisions and feeds the mistrust.

Removing mistrust and misunderstanding is a necessary element in reaching agreement. To this end, Sinn Féin has been involved in an ongoing process of dialogue with our political opponents since the mid-1980s. We have published a series of documents developing our views on how to bring about lasting peace on this island - 'A Scenario for Peace' (1986); 'A Pathway to Peace' (Gerry Adams, 1989); 'Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland' (1992) - in a serious attempt to address all the issues arising out of the conflict in Ireland, especially the relationship between nationalists and unionists.

Without fanfare or publicity - and long before the IRA cessation - our party has held a series of meetings with community activists, business people, religious figures and representatives of the unionist perspective. These discussions have been open, frank and honest, and were approached by all parties in a spirit of conciliation. They have provided an opportunity for republicans to listen and to learn as well as to convey our own thoughts and analysis. They have provided valuable lessons and have gone some way towards removing mutual misconceptions and fear.

In January 1994, we took the unparalleled step of organising a public Peace Commission to analyse the Irish people's response to the previous December's Downing Street Declaration. With meetings in Belfast, Derry, Cork, Dublin and Galway, the Commission, received a huge range of oral and written responses from both nationalist and unionist opinion showing Sinn Féin's desire to engage in public debate on the important issues facing all the people of this island.

Sinn Féin's willingness to engage in discussions with all parties - and without pre-conditions - in Ireland and abroad, is testimony to our commitment to engage constructively in talks.

In addition, our representatives on local councils across the Six Counties have worked with their counterparts from all parties and none in the administration and development of their areas. Faced at times with outright hostility, physical intimidation and actual violence, the positive contribution of Sinn Féin councillors is acknowledged even by their political opponents. Surely it is logical that those unionists who debate with us in council chambers would engage in dialogue with us in all-party talks aimed at reaching an agreed political settlement. We, of course, acknowledge that good work has been done on a number of levels by community and religious people who silently built and maintained contact during difficult years.

The IRA cessation - in its own words, "recognising the potential of the current situation and in order to enhance the democratic process and underline our

definitive commitment to its success" - was itself the strongest indication possible of republican commitment to building trust.

We have long recognised that reconciliation is a prerequisite for a peaceful and prosperous Ireland. The search for reconciliation should take place in a spirit of generosity, tolerance and understanding and with the will to share this country between us on an equal and democratic basis.

To begin a 'true process of reconciliation and mutual trust in Ireland' we believe that the issues that led to the division and mistrust must be tackled and democratic solutions sought. The partition of Ireland and the ongoing military occupation of part of it by British forces are the primary sources of conflict and resulting division. It is therefore essential that we face these problems and begin to work out a solution to them to the satisfaction of the overwhelming majority of the people of Ireland.

This month saw the 150th anniversary of the death of Thomas Davis. He was a man who, in his short life-span, embodied the diversity of the Irish people. Davis recognised that diversity could become the catalyst for a new pluralist identity for the people of this island.

Thomas Davis was a Protestant who brought to the nationalist cause his free thinking and joined with his Catholic liberal colleagues in trying to develop an inclusive concept of nationhood. The nationality to which he aspired is relevant to today's debate. Davis' basic tenet of a nation enriched by its diversity rather than divided by it holds as true for the Ireland of today as it did 150 years ago.

Sinn Féin welcomes the acknowledgement in the title of this debate of the need for a "true process of reconciliation and mutual trust in Ireland". The term reconciliation has been much used in recent years by those who treat the concept in a vacuum divorced from issues of justice; 'toleration' is the limit of their vision and their insistence on viewing everything through a sectarian lens can only have the effect of perpetuating and indeed reinforcing divisions in society. Reconciliation does not and cannot mean simply papering over the cracks, pretending that everything is grand (as the British government's current advertising campaign on our television screens would have us believe).

To view the work of the reconciliation process in

Ireland as simply the 'bringing together' of the nationalists and unionists in the North is oversimplistic. While important and desirable, this is only one strand in the overall process which will enable all the people of this island to live together in justice, equality and peace. In the opinion of Sinn Féin, the most fundamental change must occur in the political sphere: the removal of those structures which institutionalise division, injustice and conflict.

Structural change is itself predicted on the willingness of all concerned to engage in dialogue without preconditions. All political representatives need to recognise their responsibility in this. However, it is primarily the British government that has the power and immediate responsibility to address unjust and divisive structures. Regrettably, to date, the British government has abdicated its responsibility in this regard, and its commitment to this process remains questionable.

Sinn Féin's guiding principle is that of the founders of Irish republicanism: to break down divisions by uniting in what we hold in common and putting past dissensions behind us. It is pluralist philosophy, with its welcome for and accommodation of diversity, that holds the key to resolving the conflict on this island.

All of us share a degree of culpability for the unresolved conflict on this island and we bear 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, as stated earlier, it is Sinn Féin's contention that the primary responsibility in all of this rests with Britain. It is because of British policy that conflict exists and only a change in British policy can create the conditions necessary to resolve it.

The conflict which we have inherited is not an accident of history but the legacy of a deliberate strategy adopted by Britain towards its nearest neighbour.

If the British government is serious about wanting to remove the cause of conflict and encouraging agreement between the people of Ireland then it must become proactive in getting all-party dialogue underway and in removing the divisions which its predecessors' policy created and sustained. Will anyone here deny that unionist hostility to the concept of all-party talks today has increased as a result of British prevarication and obstruction? The

cautious optimism of many unionist politicians and and the unionist public following the IRA cessation has been replaced by a retreat to the trenches of "no surrender". By injecting negativity and preconditions into the peace process, the British government is closing the space that has been opened with one obstacle or another. The attitude expressed by the British government's recent emissary to the USA, former Six-County security minister, Michael Mates MP (that the British government "should call the IRA's bluff", even to the extent of a "short term return to violence") is a telling reminder that there are indeed many in the British establishment who are afraid of peace!

Sinn Féin has always emphasised the need for radical, political, economic and social change in Ireland. The sufferings of past centuries and in particular the past 25 years only served to convince us of the need for everybody to redouble their efforts to ensure that there are no more victims.

We in Sinn Féin call on everyone to do everything in their power to combat sectarianism. The burning of Orange halls, GAA clubs, churches and church halls must stop for all time. No group should parade where they are not welcome. Identity should not become a tool for further division.

We in Sinn Féin believe that it is foolish to expect people to accept differences which are rooted in injustice. There can be no reconciliation with injustice. There is a need to look at the real injustices, real events and real structures that divide people in Ireland. Together we need to examine those aspects of particular group identities that exclude and alienate others and to re-examine structures and events that have brought so many groups into violent conflict in recent years in Ireland. Dialogue without preconditions is the next vital step in this peace process.

Much new thinking is required on all sides if a process of reconciliation is to lead to a new Ireland where injustice and coercion are replaced with freedom and consensus.