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Sinn Féin

Submission to the Forum for Peace and
Reconciliation, May 5th, 1995

Aighneacht don Fhóram um Shíocháin agus
Athmuintearas, 5ú Bealtaine, 1995

Initial discussion of

'A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR AGREEMENT'

Forum for Peace & Reconciliation, Dublin Castle, 5th May, 1995

Fhoram um Shíochain agus Athmuintearas, Caisleán Átha Cliath, 5ú Bealtaine, 1995

1.1

After a long period of preparation which was marked by sustained prevarication on the part of the British government, the Framework document was finally published on 23 February last. Welcoming its publication, Sinn Fein accepted from the outset that, in so far as it refers to constitutional issues, the Framework is intended not as a blueprint but as a guideline for discussion. Our party's evaluation of the Framework has been guided by the principles outlined in the series of statements by John Hume and Gerry Adams and by our republican analysis of the way forward. Our internal discussions are ongoing and our comments today are intended, therefore, as a contribution to the process of evaluation and not its conclusion.

1.2

The timing and general direction of the document were undoubtedly influenced by the momentum established by the Irish Peace Initiative and by the positive climate generated through the IRA's cessation of armed activity. In broad terms, the Framework acknowledges that there can be no return to the failed policies and structures of the past and

stresses the need for agreement between the people of Ireland on their political future.

2.1

Apart from an explicit recognition of the need for 'agreement among the people of Ireland' (para 9), the document contains an implicit acceptance that such agreement will be found, in part at least, in an all-Ireland context. Despite this, it falls short of the next logical step; that both governments should become persuaders in the search for an agreement that will resolve forever the conflict that divides our people.

2.2

It is worth repeating that the conflict in Ireland and the conflict between Ireland and Britain is a consequence of divisions fostered by successive British governments in pursuit of their selfish strategic interests. It was in pursuit of those interests that the divisive policy of partition was imposed. Today, partition represents the institutionalisation of division between the people of Ireland and its removal must be the priority objective for all

those who are genuinely interested in finding an agreement that is based on the unity of our people rather than the maintenance of division. If the British government is serious about wanting to remove the causes of conflict and encouraging agreement between the people of Ireland then they must become pro-active in removing the divisions which their predecessor's policies created and sustained.

3.1

In paragraph 18, the Framework document emphasises the need for 'consensus among all the people of Ireland' in addition to the need for agreement. It goes further in recognising that the fundamental absence of consensus is an essential element in perpetuating conflict. Britain's traditional response to the absence of consensus has been to support the position of unionism, while either ignoring or suppressing the constitutional rights and institutional requirements of nationalists. A settlement which in any way seeks to confirm the forced inclusion of nationalists in a partitioned Six County state would be no settlement at all.

4.1

The need for the 'consent of the governed' is stressed in paragraph 10. Again, it has to be stated that Six County nationalists have been governed without their consent since the imposition of partition. Indeed, it often appears to us that the need for consent is only raised in terms of the necessity to win unionist approval for constitutional change. It is as if the consent of nationalists is of no consequence. In this, as in so many other aspects of British rule, we see the denial of parity of esteem and equality of treatment for nationalists.

4.2

Arguments in favour of a unionist veto are a subversion of the concept of consent. Veto by any one section of our people, as opposed to all-party consent, runs contrary to the recognition in the Framework document of the need for 'agreement among the people of Ireland'. If the British government wishes to demonstrate its 'determination to address in a fresh way all the relationships involved' (paragraph 12), then it is essential that they begin by rejecting the negative and destructive power of veto and replacing it with the positive and enabling power of consent. The slogan "Not an inch!" would no longer provide a brake on movement towards a political settlement and

unionists would be encouraged to join with the rest of us in re-evaluating the mistakes of the past in light of new realities and a shared determination to reach a just and lasting settlement.

5.1

There is widespread acceptance that in addition to the need for consensus on constitutional issues the institutions of government also need to command broad support. The historical record is clear on the failure of British government-imposed institutions in Ireland. These have tended to produce exclusivity, domination and conflict, rather than agreement. Sinn Fein has absolute faith in the capacity of the people of Ireland, freed from outside interference, to establish institutions which will meet the requirements of all our people. Liberated from the legacy of colonialism which distorts political life throughout this island, contemporary Irish society is capable of establishing healthy and pluralist institutions essential to normal political life. Our collective anxiety within this Forum and outside to engage unionists in constructive dialogue is a mark of that inclusiveness.

6.1

Recognising the central role which the British government plays in sustaining division, Sinn Fein rejects the thesis that the conflict in our country is fundamentally about relationships between the people of Ireland. Nonetheless, we accept that those relationships must be addressed if a solution is to be found. To that end, our party is actively and positively engaged in a process of dialogue which is, we believe, vital to breaking down barriers of distrust in Irish society. At the same time, we make no apologies for continuing to focus on the negative influence of the British government. We remain convinced that agreement between all sections of our people is dependent on Britain recognising that a process of constructive disengagement is the only constructive contribution it can make to the resolution of conflict in Ireland.

6.2

On the day that the Framework document was published, Sinn Fein asserted its belief that 'the way should now be clear for inclusive peace talks and for the next phase of this process, with everyone at the table and everything on the table'. We regret that such talks have not yet begun and we

see no valid excuse for their being delayed. The refusal of the British government to accord parity of esteem and equality of treatment for Sinn Fein voters provides further evidence of their unwillingness to enter fully into the peace process. This Forum cannot accept a situation which accords anything less than parity of esteem and equality of treatment for all. Without a change in the British government's policy on this crucial issue, there can be no meaningful process and no resolution of the conflict, that afflicts our peoples .

7.1

Regardless of the promise to equality of treatment contained within the Framework document, the British continue to demonstrate bad faith and to procrastinate at every step, inventing new pre-conditions for our participation in talks and undermining the peace process by conceding only minimal and reversible changes. In contrast to the positive response of the Irish government, the European Union and the United States, Britain's response has been begrudging at best, and has at times been downright destructive of the entire process. Instead of engaging positively, we have the spectacle of British ministers, including prime minister

John Major, offering constant reassurances of the British government's commitment to maintaining the Union. It is difficult, in the light of such assurances, to see how anyone can treat seriously their claims to neutrality in the debate between unionism and nationalism!

8.1

The nationalist nightmare continues. We await its end. We await the British government's positive engagement in the peace process. We await the 'imaginative and generous response' which we were promised would follow a cessation of armed conflict. We await meaningful indications of Britain's good faith. There are a whole range of civil and human rights issues which can and must be addressed immediately and which do not require either bi-lateral or all-party talks. Our cultural rights and our human rights generally cannot be used as bargaining counters in a diplomatic game. Nor should they be regarded as concessions. We await improvements in the conditions endured by prisoners and their families, pending the release of all political hostages.

9.1

Regardless of what is contained in the Framework document, and it has elements to recommend it, republicans will judge British intentions by their actions rather than their words. To date we are not encouraged. Sinn Fein wants to see an end to British rule in Ireland. We accept that others might have a different view. But the majority of Irish people know that there is a need for change. This should include:

- fundamental political and constitutional change;**
- a democratisation of the situation;**
- a demilitarisation of the situation.**

9.2

On this, the fourteenth anniversary of the death on hunger strike of Bobby Sands and the 79th anniversary of the execution of James Connolly, our resolve to achieve a just and lasting settlement remains undiminished. We remain confident that our commitment to the peace process allied to the clear goodwill of Irish public opinion and international pressure, will persuade Britain to concede that which it refuses to grant willingly: justice for the

nationalist people of the Six Counties and an unequivocal endorsement of a process of dialogue which will have the potential to provide agreement on a democratic future for all the people of Ireland.