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BRIDGING THE GAP

Mitchel McLaughlin, Sinn Fein six county Party Chairperson, speaking at a press conference in London this morning said:

Yesterday, Sinn Fein held an important conference in Ireland. The debate was comprehensive and constructive and is evidence of the strength of commitment and political maturity of our membership.

THE DOWNING STREET DECLARATION

The Declaration was the response by the two governments to the developing Irish Peace Initiative.

From their perspective the Declaration was an important development.

From our perspective it marked a stage in the evolving peace process. In its positive elements it suggests a potentially significant change in the approach of the governments to resolving the conflict in Ireland and we welcome this.

But it does not deal adequately with some of the core issues and this is crucial.

The success of other peace accords shows that the necessary dynamic to move out of conflict must be found in the framework, the time-scale, the processes and the objectives of a peace process, and all of these essential elements must be based upon principles which are founded firmly in democracy and justice.

Sinn Féin has recommitted itself to constructing this foundation, by building on the positive elements of the Downing Street Declaration and by seeking to overcome the difficulties; in short by bridging the gaps between what has so far been developed and what is necessary to secure a just and lasting peace in our country.

BRITISH GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSIBILITY

Both now and in the future, just as in the past, the attitude of the British government is crucial. British government policy has failed in Ireland. It has failed to defeat the desire for freedom. It has

failed to satisfy the unionists. It has failed even to meet Britain's own requirements. More importantly it has failed to bring peace.

British interference has never been a benign influence in Irish affairs. It has brought misery and division. It has fomented conflict and suffering. This must change.

We need to put all of it behind us. The London government must accept its responsibility to pro-actively create the conditions which will make this possible. It has the authority and it has the real power to change this situation. To make the nightmare a dream. To make the dream a reality.

A NEW FUTURE

At this important juncture in the evolving peace process I call upon the British government and the British people to seize this opportunity for peace and not to squander it.

I call upon the British government to adopt a democratic approach which tilts the balance away from the negative power of veto towards the positive power of consent.

I call upon the British government to join with us in making a new future, to forge a new relationship between the peoples of these islands based on mutual respect for each other. With the United Irishmen we assert:

"As to any union between the two islands, believe us when we assert that our union rests upon mutual independence. We shall love each other if we are left to ourselves. It is the union of mind which ought to bind these nations together".

I want to also appeal to the Unionists. The unionist leadership must develop the ability to look to the future, to stand on its own feet, to lead its people forward, independent of the veto which can be, at any time, taken from them by the British government.

On behalf of those represented by Sinn Fein, and also, I believe, the wider nationalist family, I acknowledge the need to reach out to our political opponents in the ranks of unionism. Despite the wrongs that have been inflicted by Unionists upon us or indeed that we have

inflicted upon the unionists, there is a need to heal the wounds. This can only be done by a new beginning; with everyone as equals freed from the patronage of a government whose intentions you distrust, even more than we do.

ENDORSEMENT

Our conference reaffirmed Sinn Féin's commitment to our peace strategy and unanimously endorsed the measures taken by this leadership to advance it.

We are totally committed to winning peace and I can assure you that we will endeavour to achieve the political objectives which we have set ourselves. Our struggle is united, confident and strong.

A STEP IN THE PROCESS

The Downing Street Declaration is a step in the peace process. We must look forward to the next steps. These must deal in a fundamental way with the core constitutional issue as well as the secondary issues.

That is why all republicans and nationalists need now to consider how best to advance the basic national demands in the new conditions and possibilities opening up before us.

DEMILITARISATION

Peace demands change. Fundamental change. An end to conflict will require a process of demilitarisation. This is not solely the responsibility of republicans. Indeed the British government, representing the political wing of the largest armed faction in our country has the central responsibility.

I have pointed out many times Sinn Féin's willingness to play a constructive role in this matter. Our party leader, Gerry Adams, has also pointed out that Sinn Féin should attempt to advance the peace process by *"bringing into play, in a very direct way, what we have to offer. Theoretically, what we have to offer is our electoral mandate, our total commitment to establishing a lasting peace in our country and whatever political influence we have to secure a political package so that the IRA can make judgements in relation to the future conduct of its armed campaign."*

The reality is, however, that the IRA will take its own counsel on this. We are not the IRA but we have helped to formulate proposals which have been enough to move the IRA publicly to say that *"if the political will exists or can be created, it could provide the basis for peace."*

I welcome Thursday's statement by the IRA leadership. The begrudgers and kneejerkers have chosen to dismiss it as rhetoric. However I interpret it as a clear commitment that if the proper conditions can be created, the IRA will be flexible.

That is the challenge facing all of us, and particularly those who have invested time and energy in the search for a peace settlement.

The public interest now will be whether or not the situation can be further developed. The answer is Yes. So where do we go from here? There is only one way for this process to go and that is forward. This is particularly a challenge for the leadership of Sinn Féin. It is one we will not shrink from. That is to create the conditions in which the IRA can act upon its clearly stated commitments and others will act upon their responsibilities so that a negotiated settlement can be agreed, and the people of Ireland can leave conflict behind us and build a lasting peace.

We are determined to build upon the progress that has been made and to bridge the gaps which still clearly exist. We are determined to move the peace process steadily forward towards a democratic, negotiated settlement and towards a just and lasting peace in our country.