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Reference Code: 2021/99/10

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'We must move on' - Adams

Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams speaking at a West Belfast constituency meeting on Friday 28 February has commented on recent remarks by the Taoiseach John Bruton.

The question for all of us who want to see a real process of negotiations is how this can be achieved now. Anyone genuinely interested in rebuilding the peace process will be encouraged by the Taoiseach's declared commitment to securing a process of inclusive, credible and effective negotiations.

However, there is a danger that others, who have blocked movement to negotiations, will take increasing comfort from his recent comments and interpret them as a slacking of the Irish government's resolve to secure a meaningful process which has the potential for real change.

The peace process was already well established when Mr. Bruton took office after the fall of the Reynolds government. Mr. Bruton inherited a strong basis on which a real peace could be developed and even more importantly, an atmosphere of realistic expectation and hope throughout Ireland that a negotiated settlement, addressing the cause of conflict, was not just possible but probable. That hope has since been eroded. During 17 months of an IRA ceasefire the confidence and trust of nationalists that their

rights would be recognised in talks and that the essential bed-rock of equality of treatment would be accorded was steadily undermined. The response of the British to the IRA cessation was minimalist and begrudging; nationalists on the ground saw little or no change on issues of equality and civil rights. And most importantly the British government's refusal to move to talks brought down the peace process.

Their approach since last February has frustrated every attempt to construct a credible peace process. Mr Bruton knows this. He has first hand experience of London's attitude.

Mr Bruton also knows that the Sinn Féin leadership went to the limits of our ability to construct this peace process and, in a political vacuum created by British bad faith, to sustain the IRA cessation for 18 months. Since its collapse we have worked unceasingly to rebuild the peace process. He knows the efforts we have made and the efforts we are continuing to make. He also knows that the British government have, at every turn, frustrated these efforts.

For Mr. Bruton to talk now of common purpose and initiative from the two governments is disingenuous to say the least, as even a cursory examination of the British government's bad faith during the ceasefire and since it ended would show.

Of course there were positive developments as a result of the peace process. Sinn Féin has been the first to acknowledge this. Not least among these was the opening up of a public debate on the conflict. A debate that was silenced for too long. However, much of what Mr. Bruton points to as gains or concessions are matters of civil and human rights which should not require negotiations. It is an indictment of any administration that equality of treatment in areas of employment, culture and access of political representatives should be offered up as concessions or favours.

Mr. Bruton's example of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation as a political gain is of course true. It was a hugely valuable exercise welcomed from the start by Sinn Féin. Our positive contribution to the Forum has been widely recognised. But it has to be said that Mr. Bruton's reaction to the setting up of the Forum was less than enthusiastic. Indeed he was publicly critical of the timing of its establishment while in opposition.

Mr. Bruton's concern at the prospect of empty chairs at talks while those chairs were unionist which they refused to occupy contrasts

with his attitude to empty Sinn Féin chairs which Sinn Féin is excluded from.

While Sinn Féin urged a speedier and more comprehensive approach to the release of Portlaoise prisoners we welcomed the release of prisoners by the Irish government and indeed contrasted the Irish government's positive approach on prisoners to the British government's lack of any movement. Mr. Bruton himself expressed concern at the worsening of conditions for republican prisoners in English jails and members of his own party were moved to speak out on this issue.

Mr. Bruton accuses republicans of having a "nightmare version of unity" and compared it to the "traditional version of unionism" which did not "recognise the possibility of multiple allegiances". Republicans he alleged, had a "territorial concept of unity".

Britain's role in Ireland has always been malign and destructive, as the events of the last three years have graphically illustrated. Of course Irish Republicans wish to see an end to British rule in our country. We wish this to happen as a result of inclusive and democratic negotiations among the Irish people. Republicans seek the unity of the Irish people, respect for the varying allegiances of all sections of our people and an inclusive peace process leading to a negotiated peace settlement. This is an honourable and entirely logical position. It is totally at odds with Mr. Bruton's assertions.

Irish republicanism seeks to unite, to accommodate and encourage the diversity of the Irish people. And to ignore the fact that the territorial division of Ireland institutionalised the division of the Irish people in every sphere of life is to ignore reality.

Sinn Féin has outlined our position on these issues. It would be important for Mr. Bruton to outline his attitude to for example partition, to the role of the British Army and the RUC, to the systematic discrimination, the human rights abuses, the inequality and repression which Irish nationalists suffer in the 6 county state. Does he accept that an internal settlement is not a solution? Does he have a national vision, a view of the people of this island sharing it as one?

Mr. Bruton's latest comments, demanding that Sinn Féin "accept the principle of consent" and linking consent to the question of decommissioning must be challenged. Sinn Féin's position on the issue of consent is clear. We have consistently said that the consent and allegiance of unionists is needed to secure a peace settlement.

But consent cannot be misinterpreted or twisted to provide a veto to Unionists. There can be no veto over negotiations nor over the outcome of negotiations. The positive principle of consent, of seeking consent, of negotiating consent, of agreeing consent cannot be distorted in advance of negotiations, into a Unionist veto over the outcome of these negotiations.

The Irish government's own stated position is that there can be no predetermined outcome. To misuse the ingredient of consent in this way renders meaningless the search for agreement through negotiations. The means of measuring agreement is clearly a logical follow-on from the reaching of agreement. It should therefore, await the necessary political process of democratic negotiations. In its clarification of the Downing Street Declaration in May 1994 the British government accepted that no party had to sign up to positions which would be the subject of negotiations, in advance of those negotiations.

Finally all the political parties in Ireland are facing into elections. In the past the north has featured, rhetorically as an issue in Leinster House elections and at times the main parties there have intervened in elections in the north in a partisan way. That is their right. But all of us have to be mindful that the question of peace should be above party politics, especially at election time. Otherwise there is a danger that the cut and thrust of electoral rhetoric could erode the very precepts upon which the peace process was based and upon which it must be rebuilt.

In other words there should be no return to the failed policies of isolation, of preconditions, of recrimination. Politics must be about taking risks. The search for peace demands and justifies risk taking by the Taoiseach as well as the rest of us. We must all seek to unite in the common purpose of securing an end to conflict and the causes of conflict. In the choice between conflict and the negotiating table, Sinn Féin is unreservedly committed to negotiations, to democratic and inclusive dialogue as the only way of resolving conflict and securing a lasting peace. We will continue to work, despite the difficulties involved, to recreate the opportunity for an agreed peace settlement among all the Irish people

I have no appetite for negative campaigning which reduces politics to a vilifying round of accusation and counter accusation. This only gives succour to those elements who have no wish to unite the Irish people but who are more comfortable with division. We have all made mistakes. We should learn from them. We must move on.