



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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S/S Gallagher; Mr Teahon;  
Mr Dalton; Dr Mansergh;  
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Section: ~~Box~~

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# Opening Remarks at Strand Two

**Sinn Féin President Gerry  
Adams MP**

# "Hope of a New Beginning"

7/10/97

A Chairde,

Bobby Sands writing on the first day of his hunger strike said: "***I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world.***"

We too stand today on a threshold. A new century, a new millenium beckons to us all, holding out the hope of a new beginning for the people of Ireland and of these islands. What we need is the courage and the vision to work together, in partnership within this process, to reach a democratic peace settlement acceptable to all the people of this island.

Tá muidine fosta inniu ar thairseach athraithe móra. Tá céad nua, mílaois nua, ag teacht inár dtreo agus ag teacht leis, an dóchas go bhfuil tús nua i ndán do mhuintir na hÉireann agus do mhuintir na nOileán seo. An rud atá de dhíth orainn anois ná an tuachtacht agus an aisling, le teacht ar shocrú síochanata daonlathach a nglacfaidh gach cuid de mhuintir na hÉireann leis agus a chuireas an sochru cuí in áit an dóchais.

If the participants around this table can meet these challenges, today will mark the commencement of the transition from conflict and division to peace and democracy. This places an onerous responsibility upon us all. We will face difficulties but they must be overcome. The Irish government especially has an historic responsibility to pro-actively promote Irish national interests in an inclusive but assertive way.

Sinn Féin is absolutely committed to democratic and peaceful methods of resolving problems. We are determined to win an equitable and lasting agreement which can accommodate diversity and provide for national reconciliation.

### **Building a new democracy**

The task before us all is a difficult one; to remove the causes of centuries of conflict. Our starting point must be the recognition, particularly by the British government, that British policy in Ireland has manifestly failed. Partition has failed. The decades of unionist rule in the north have failed. Those days are gone forever. There is no going back to the failed policies and structures of the past, to the domination of a one-party unionist state supported by the British government.

Today we collectively close the door on that part of our history. We are opening a new door.

President Nelson Mandela spoke of what this requires when he said: ***"What challenges us, is to ensure that none should enjoy lesser rights; and none tormented because they are born different, hold contrary political views or pray to God in a different manner."***

So, we are tasked with looking to the future and in plotting a course for the future we must bring in change on constitutional and political matters, we must demilitarise the situation, and we must establish democratic rights for all of our people.

### **Sovereignty is the Key Issue**

Sinn Féin enters these negotiations as an Irish republican party seeking to promote the broad nationalist objective of an end to British rule in Ireland.

It is our firm view that this Strand, which deals with north-south relations, is a critical area of negotiation because the resolution of this conflict will only be found in an all-Ireland context.

British policy at present upholds the union. It enforces the partition of Ireland. Democratic opinion in Ireland and in Britain must seek to change this policy to one of ending the union.

The issue of sovereignty, the claim of the British government to sovereignty in a part of Ireland, is a key matter which we will raise in the negotiations. Our objective is to achieve through dialogue among the Irish people an agreed Ireland. The political and historical evidence shows that political independence, a united Ireland, offers the best guarantee of equality and the most durable basis for peace and stability. An internal Six-County arrangement cannot work.

### **Equality**

There are many issues which fuel the conflict. For example there needs to be equality of treatment in terms of employment, economic development and the Irish language and culture, as well as on the difficult issue of cultural symbols, of flags and emblems. In other words there needs to be equality in all sectors of society - in social, economic, cultural, education, justice, democratic and national rights issues.

These issues do not require negotiation. They are issues of basic civil and human rights. The British government should act on these issues immediately by outlining a programmatic approach which delivers real change, which makes equality a reality and which builds confidence in the wider peace process. The immediate responsibility for equality rests with the British government and there should be no artificial distinctions, no arbitrary barriers placed in the way of these rights.

But the Irish government and Irish nationalists also have a responsibility; a responsibility to ensure that the concerns and fears of the unionist population are addressed and resolved through negotiation. A process of national reconciliation must secure the political, religious and democratic rights of the northern unionist population. That is not only the democratic norm but a practical necessity if we are to advance the cause of peace in Ireland.

### **Demilitarisation**

It is self-evident that peace requires the demilitarisation of our society. The political climate in which these talks occur could be significantly improved if the British government acted positively and speedily to demilitarise the situation.

Repressive legislation should end.

The deployment of military and para-military forces by the British government should end.

The ongoing construction programme of new fortifications should end.

The issue of political prisoners must be fully resolved. There must be urgent movement on the release of all political prisoners.

### **Bridging the Gap of Distrust**

I welcome the contribution of Senator Mitchell and his colleagues to the negotiating process. Sinn Féin has long argued for an international dimension to the search for peace in Ireland. The international dimension is one which can play a crucial part in maintaining the momentum and dynamic through the negotiations.

There is a huge gap of distrust between nationalists and unionists. It must be bridged. We need to secure an accommodation, based on equality.

Building peace is a collective responsibility. In setting out the

republican position I also want to stress our willingness to listen to other positions and to see and to uphold the dignity of all sections of our people.

The British government also has a crucial and constructive role to play in persuading unionists to reach a democratic agreement on the issue of Irish national reunification with the rest of the people of this island and to encourage, facilitate and enable such agreement.

### **Transforming Irish Society**

Sinn Féin is committed to a transformation of Irish society. We know that peace is not simply the absence of violence. Our vision sees beyond the present conflict and beyond the present phase of our history.

Our vision embraces democracy. It is economic, as well as political. We are for the redistribution of wealth, for the well-being of the aged, for the advancement of youth, for the liberation of women and for the protection of our children.

Our vision is for a free Ireland and for a free people. It is for an end to war.

It foresees the relationship between Britain and Ireland resting upon our mutual independence. It is this vision which sustains our efforts to reach agreement and a new accommodation between all our people.

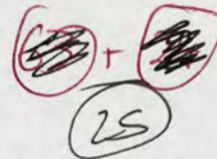
There is nothing complicated, or unreasonable about these goals or their achievement. But they will not be achieved without leadership and it our collective task to provide that leadership.

The objective must be to bring about qualitative change. Substantial change. Effective change. Our task in the time ahead is to manage that change and to ensure that it is peaceful and constructive. It is time we opened our own chapter in the history of Ireland and wrote a chapter of which we can all be proud.

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**A NEW BEGINNING**

**REMARKS BY**

**MARTIN MC GUINNESS MP**

**SINN FÉIN CHIEF NEGOTIATOR**

**TO**

**OPENING SESSION**

**OF**

**STRAND ONE**

**OF**

**SUBSTANTIVE NEGOTIATIONS**

**STORMONT,**

**OCTOBER 7TH. 1997**

**A Chairde,**

**Ba mhaith liom a rá, ar son Sinn Féin, go bhfuil athas orainn bheith anseo. Is lá stáiriúil é seo.**

**Today we enter into negotiations, the agreed outcome of which will inevitably mean far reaching change.**

**A democratic settlement acceptable to all the inhabitants of this island means that we need to approach these negotiations in the knowledge that the status quo has failed to deliver a society where all citizens are treated as equals.**

### **A Democratic Peace Settlement:**

**There is no going back to the failed policies of the past. Partition has failed. The partition of this small island and the division of our people have created a failed political entity in the North of our country. The inequality and the discrimination against nationalists and the militarisation of this part of our country must end.**

**This requires a negotiated and democratic settlement of the conflict. We now, for the first time since partition, have the opportunity to negotiate that settlement.**

**Britain's policy which resulted in the undemocratic partition of our national territory, sustains division among our people, and it follows that our people cannot be united while our country remains divided.**



**We need therefore to direct all our energies towards reaching an agreed form of government to which all the citizens of this island can give their allegiance. It is our firm conviction that this can only be effectively realised in an all-Ireland context. We approach this strand of negotiations on that basis.**

**Our commitment is to an equitable and lasting agreement which will gain the allegiance of all our people by catering for diversity and working towards national reconciliation.**

### **There Must Be Change**

**We enter into these negotiations as Irish Republicans but in a spirit of openness, flexibility and friendship. We are willing to engage in real and meaningful negotiations with those who come to these negotiations with a pro-Union agenda. Our objective is, through dialogue among all the people of this island, to achieve an agreed Ireland.**

**It is our view that Britain's policy is the root cause of the conflict in our country and therefore is the key matter which must be addressed in these negotiations.**

**All political, economic and historical arguments prove that a United Ireland offers the best guarantee of equal citizenship and the basis for stability and an enduring peace. History has shown that an internal Six-County arrangement is not a viable option. An 'arrangement' is not a solution.**

**Furthermore both the British and Irish governments and all of the Nationalist parties on this island are agreed that an internal settlement is not a solution.**

**More and more people now accept the need for fundamental constitutional and political change if we are to bring about a democratic conclusion to this process of negotiation.**

**This will not be easy. The road ahead will be difficult and dangerous and risky for all of us but working together I am convinced that we can succeed. It is my conviction that we will have a peace settlement. If we are resilient, if we dig deep, we can overcome all obstacles.**

### **Overcoming Mistrust**

**We can empathise with the concerns of the unionist population about their position in an Irish national democracy. And in this process they must be addressed and resolved in a real manner. We need to reach an agreement which rejects exclusion for any reason. That is not only the basic concept of democracy but a practical necessity if we are to reach a settlement and an agreed peaceful Ireland.**

**Sinn Féin is aware that there is mistrust between republicans and the unionist section of our people. We realise also that dialogue and negotiation is the best way of dealing with that mistrust. We believe that this dialogue and negotiation can be the bed-rock on which, together, we can build a peaceful settlement to this age old conflict.**

**For too long we have fought with each other and talked past each other. It is time that we started talking and listening *to* each other.**

**Sinn Féin recognises that all sides have suffered and that great patience will be required in any process of reconciliation. We want to reach an accommodation with the unionist people of this island.**

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**We want to overcome the mistrust which exists between us. But building trust and reaching accommodation is a shared responsibility. The unionists must also want to build trust and reach an accommodation.**

### **The Dream Of Peace**

**Now is the time for this generation of political leaders to make real the promise of democracy. We have to rise above the failures of the past by seeking to fulfil the dream of peace for all our people.**

**The British government should exercise its responsibility in a positive way by encouraging unionists to participate in these negotiations in a serious and constructive manner. The British government should resist any obstructionist tactics. Progress must not be held hostage to narrow party political or individual interests. A democratic settlement must not be postponed because of selfish and sectarian goals.**

**The British government should encourage, facilitate and enable agreement to a democratic settlement. The achievement of Irish national self-determination and reconciliation is the most effective long-term solution to the conflict here.**

### **Moving Forward Together**

**The reality is that the destiny of nationalists and unionists, of Protestants and Catholics and dissenters is inextricably intertwined.**

**The reality is that nationalist freedom is bound up with unionist freedom**

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**The reality is that we cannot move forward alone - we can only move forward together. And as we advance together we must pledge that there will be no turning back.**

**Our very presence here today shows that present structures have failed and that change must take place. Our shared objective is for a new political settlement. Our task is to manage that change in a constructive fashion in order to bring about the kind of settlement to which we can all give allegiance and which will offer our children and our children's children a peaceful future in a new agreed Ireland.**

**Go raibth maith agaibh a chairde.**