REPUBLICANISM AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AGREEMENT

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The current difficulties in the peace process need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Although the two governments claim that the IRA is the only obstacle to a lasting settlement, the reality is otherwise. In December 2004 the DUP walked away from a comprehensive agreement because of their opposition to power sharing and the Good Friday agreement. The answer does not lie in attempts to project republicans as criminals, a failed tactic that has often been attempted in the past. Instead, the causes of political conflict must be tackled, by returning to the core principles of the Good Friday agreement: inclusivity, equality and mutual respect.

The politicisation of the republican movement was associated with a shift in emphasis from ideological rectitude to the electoral imperative. The movement’s growing political power facilitated it in signing up to the Good Friday agreement in 1998, and this, in turn, allowed Sinn Féin to develop its electoral strength further, to reach a plateau by the end of 2004. Post-agreement republican emphasis on equality and human rights created a new political space, but another stumbling block appeared: the absence of transparency regarding the decommissioning of weapons, followed by allegations of IRA involvement in criminality. These issues, and the perceived link between the IRA and Sinn Féin, have the capacity to destroy the republican political project.

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This evening I am addressing the very relevant and immediate subject, “Republicanism and the implementation of the agreement”. At present, there are, deep difficulties in the peace process. These must be urgently addressed and overcome.

Last night’s IRA statement is obviously a direct consequence of the confrontational and damaging approach recently adopted by the two governments. It is evidence of a deepening crisis and I regret this. Sinn Féin is not involved in this process because we are a conduit between the governments and the IRA. We are in this process because we are the largest pro-Agreement party in the north and the third largest party on this island. In all, 342,000 people from every corner of Ireland vote for us—that’s nearly 300,000 more people than voted for the Progressive Democrats in the last general election—the Progressive Democrats who are now driving the Irish government’s policy on the peace process.

Bertie Ahern is Taoiseach. He has a huge responsibility in all of this, not least because he is leader of Fianna Fáil. But the tragedy is that for the first time we have an Irish government publicly acquiescing to a DUP position.

The two governments say that the only obstacle now to a lasting and durable settlement is the IRA. This is patent nonsense. Are they seriously telling us that Ian Paisley has suddenly embraced equality and power sharing? The DUP walked away from a deal in December—a deal of huge significance—because they oppose power sharing and oppose the Good Friday Agreement. There is no evidence that this has changed.

So the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has been paralysed, not as some claim, by a bank robbery before Christmas. This is simply the latest excuse. The real reason is unionist opposition to a process of change which can deliver for the first time equality and inclusivity within the northern state. In December the DUP walked away from a comprehensive agreement which would have seen the power-sharing institutions restored. The political institutions did not collapse because of the robbery at the Northern Bank. They were already in deep suspension and they remained suspended even when in December the IRA offered to deal conclusively with the issues of its arms and its activities.
Our task as politicians, as political leaders, is to find a resolution to all of these outstanding matters through a process of discussion, negotiations and ultimately accommodation. This is a collective task for the political parties and the two governments, particularly the British government. The Irish government also has an enormous responsibility to promote and defend Irish national interests and the rights and entitlements of Irish citizens across the island, north and south.

III

The lessons of the last 30 years are that exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation do not work. They are the remains of a failed and unacceptable past. Over recent weeks we have seen, particularly here in the south, a new political offensive against Sinn Féin. A Progressive Democrat-led campaign is attempting to label the struggle for Irish freedom as a criminal conspiracy. This is patent nonsense.

Of course, this particular tactic is not new. It has been employed before by British and Irish government propaganda campaigns calling into question the motivation of the republican struggle. It was most notably and tragically employed by the Thatcher government in the late 1970s, culminating in the deaths of ten young Irishmen on hunger strike in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh.

The logic of this went far beyond the grim prison cells of the H-Blocks. It was a British attempt to brand Ireland’s struggle for freedom as 800 years of criminality. Bobby Sands and his comrades died long and agonising deaths to defy Thatcher’s attempts to brand them as criminals. Michael McDowell, who has led this latest attempt to criminalise the republican struggle, tells us that Bobby Sands was a criminal because he was convicted and sentenced in court. In fact, Bobby Sands was the victim of a political non-jury court set up to imprison republicans.

But setting this historic reality aside, according to Minister McDowell’s logic this state was founded by criminals, including a number of Minister McDowell’s antecedents. The United Irishmen were criminals. The Young Irelanders and the Fenians were criminals. Tom Clarke, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly were criminals. The reality, however, is that without them we would not have the freedom from Britain that the south of Ireland now enjoys. International criminals, as defined by Minister McDowell, include the former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi.

Such campaigns of vilification failed in the past. They are entirely counter-productive and ignore the political nature of the problems we are facing. They attempt to demean and undermine the electoral choice of a large number of Irish people, north and south, who vote for Sinn Féin.

In the past these campaigns were led by British Governments attempting to legitimise their own involvement in Ireland. But today the offensive is led by Irish politicians and parties, all of whom, and this is no coincidence, face a growing challenge from Sinn Féin. Some of the leading voices in the attacks on Sinn Féin have
themselves played no constructive part in the peace process. They belong to parties which abandoned northern nationalists to decades of injustice and discrimination. I believe that many ordinary people see through the hypocrisy and the double-think of those who turn a blind eye to corruption and white-collar crime and who take a decidedly non-confrontational approach to a British government which refuses to co-operate with the inquiry into the Dublin/Monaghan bombings and which continues to conceal the role of its agents in the killing of Irish citizens.

IV

The fundamental lesson of the last ten years is that dialogue and accommodation are the only way to make progress. Sinn Féin is committed to that dialogue and to playing a responsible and constructive role in resolving outstanding issues. But others must also affirm their commitment to dialogue. Ian Paisley and other unionist leaders have to face up to the challenge of engaging with their political opponents and reaching an accommodation with the rest of the people on this island.

Only a very short time ago we were locked into a vicious cycle of injustice, inequality and conflict. All of this was the legacy of the undemocratic partition of Ireland and the establishment of two entirely artificial states on this small island, based on a crude sectarian headcount. Many within the small Protestant minority in the south of Ireland felt isolated and alienated by the overwhelmingly Catholic composition and, increasingly, ethos of the new state. That situation should never have arisen and is one of the largely unacknowledged consequences of partition.

In the north, the much larger Catholic minority faced similar alienation and isolation from the new state but, in the north, this was accompanied by widespread state and quasi-state violence. The largely nationalist Catholic community was regarded as an enemy within and a threat to the existence of the state and, because of this, an atmosphere of intimidation and discrimination was the experience of northern Catholics for almost five decades.

The sectarianism that Mary McAleese controversially referred to last week can, of course, be found in both sections of the community in the north of Ireland. But like racism and anti-semitism, structural anti-Catholic sectarianism is the creation of the established power structures, it was consciously generated to create divisions, it was encouraged by the leaders of unionism over decades and it was institutionalised within the structures of the six-county state.

Anti-Catholic sectarianism, including periodic anti-Catholic pogroms, was promoted and continues to this day. We saw this at the Harryville picket of a Catholic church; at the Holy Cross protest aimed at primary schoolchildren; and in almost daily attacks on isolated Catholic families and communities across the north. Loyalist violence has been unapologetically sectarian in nature and direction. The truth is that the nationalist community was totally abandoned by the Dublin political establishment throughout those decades. The scale of the injustice lead, in the late 1960s, to the civil rights movement. The state’s violent response to this led, in 1969, to out-
right rebellion. That conflict continued unbroken for the next 25 years. The British state adopted a military approach to what was, in reality, a political problem. As a result, we seemed trapped in a conflict that many believed to be intractable.

But since the early 1990s, as a result of the peace process, the situation has been transformed and we have, for the first time, the potential to put the injustices and failures of the past behind us. The challenge for all of us now is to ensure that the progress we have made is not undermined.

V

We need to get back to the Good Friday Agreement and to its core principles of inclusivity, equality and mutual respect. There is no alternative. We have come so far that it would be tragedy to give up now or allow narrow party political concerns to distract us. The peace process is much too important for that. Sinn Féin wants to find a lasting peace between republicanism and unionism on this island and between Britain and Ireland.

The Sinn Féin leadership stands over and is proud of the contribution we have made in the peace process and in transforming the political situation, not just in the north, but throughout the island of Ireland. But there is much more work to be done.

Unfortunately, at this time, the governments have opted to attack the commitment, integrity and motivation of Sinn Féin. This is fair enough in the cut and thrust of party politics but has no place in a peace process. This negative approach has scuttled the unprecedented IRA initiatives which were publicly outlined in December.

The challenge now for all of us in positions of political leadership is to rescue the situation. That is the focus of the Sinn Féin leadership. But we cannot do this on our own. The two governments have a critically important contribution to make. They can either rise to the difficult challenges of peace making or they can go on making a bad situation worse.
I

More than three years ago IBIS organised a seminar on the topic “Redefining republicanism”. Mitchell McLaughlin, the National Chairman of Sinn Féin, was in an expansive and generous mood on that occasion. He sought a broader definition of Irish republicanism; of a Republic that “meant more than a form of political administration”; one that had no desire to drive unionists out nor to deprive anyone of the right to designate themselves as British. What was needed was “an alliance for a new Ireland—one which was free of corruption, and characterised by civic virtue and social justice”. In short there was a need for a civic Irishness, by which “I mean commitment as a citizen to an Irish society that is one of responsibility and not narrow individualism, of ethical standards rather than greed and venality, of a self-governing community through structures of empowerment, of reward by worth and not birth” (McLaughlin, 2002).

Now that was, and is, a noble vision. What I intend to do is to examine that visionary statement against events and mood shifts over the past three years—indeed, over a longer period—as political republicanism began to find its bearings. What I do not intend to do is to produce a check-list or a moral ledger. A Marxist analysis of that approach a quarter of a century ago reminds us that “the consequent characterisations have been highly abstract, moralistic and often uninformative ... and lack any attempt to locate its precise political significance” (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 1979: 75, 209). Besides, it pays too little attention to the context in which change is taking place. Furthermore it does not allow for serendipity, the doctrine of unintended consequences—and no one can doubt the force of serendipity in recent times.

II

One might argue that Sinn Féin’s exploration of the political was largely accidental. Danny Morrison, for example, reflected that “the subsequent reorientation of the republican movement around politics probably would have been impossible had it not been for the fortuitous death of Frank Maguire and the election of Bobby Sands, because the movement was totally suspicious of politics, because politics equals compromise” (English, 2003: 205). Tom Hartley concurred that the hunger strike was a watershed, that the policy of criminalization, Ulsterisation and normalization threw up a new republican leadership that had “a view of putting in place an ideological framework to the struggle, that is: we need to build up the party, we need a voice, we need a voice that is articulate on the demands, and we also need to be very clear about what [are] the demands and what are the aims and objectives of the movement” (English, 2003: 187-8). Accidental or not, it can be said that republicans embraced the political dimension with the same discipline that they brought to
the armed struggle. The results were spectacular.

Politicisation shifted the emphasis from ideological rectitude to the electoral imperative. Even though the IRA rejected the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 as copper-fastening partition, the reaction of Gerry Adams was more subtle. In an interview with An Phoblacht/Republican News a month after its signing Gerry Adams recognised the dual nature of the Agreement: yes, it underwrote partition but it contains a promise of concessions to improve the quality of life for nationalists in the six counties. Sinn Féin correctly sees these concessions—if they come and they have any real substance—as being the result of the steadfastness of a section of the nationalist people, allied to their support for Sinn Féin … Dublin and London freely admit that their Agreement is partly aimed at isolating Sinn Féin by introducing concessions and creating a political climate. The equation is therefore a simple one: support for Sinn Féin equals concessions from the British (English, 2003: 242).

Republicans accepted these concessions. Indeed they were able to invert what was potentially a fatal obstacle—the security implications of the Agreement—into an opportunity for political advancement.

The 1985 Agreement illustrated another important facet of political change—unionists no longer had a veto over North-South cooperation nor, indeed, over internal reform. Following the failure of their anti-Agreement campaign some unionists realised that the political climate was changing. They may have taken some encouragement from the 1994 ceasefires and were in a more willing mood to compromise. They recognised that demographic and electoral change undermined the case for majority rule and strengthened that for power sharing. In the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, for example, unionists won 52.8% of the vote, nationalists 40.7% with 6.5% for others. A leading Ulster Unionist MP, John Taylor, accepted that to have rejected the 1998 Agreement “would have left the party almost completely isolated within British politics” (The Economist, 18 April 1998). It was (as we shall see) a lesson not lost on republicans as they began to probe the contemporary meaning of democracy.

III

This was the context and the climate in which Sinn Féin signed up to the 1998 Agreement. One commentator has noted that because republicans were concerned with selling the deal to their own constituency “Sinn Féin negotiated much harder on issues such as prisoner releases and equality than on the all-island agenda, which ought to have been the party’s domain” (Tonge, 2004: 53). It did, however, keep the border issue alive by calling for a fixed date for simultaneous north-south polls on Irish unity. Tonge has analysed the fundamental shift in republican thought by comparing their attitude to the border poll of 1973 with their position in 1998: “The party’s insistence on full restoration of the Good Friday Agreement, with places for Sinn Féin ministers in a Northern Ireland Administration illustrates that contrary to its earlier insistence that there was no Stormont way Sinn Féin now insisted that there was only a Stormont way" (Tonge, 2004). It was the Stormont way that had delivered them electoral riches which had enabled them to overtake the SDLP and to gain political respectability north and south. It could be argued that by
2004, following a successful European Parliament campaign, Sinn Féin as an all-island party had reached the plateau for sustained political development.

In many respects, when we analyse republican implementation of the 1998 Agreement this is the dominant element in explaining republican strategy—the need to maintain and increase its own constituency by selling previously abhorrent policies. Nothing illustrates this more than the IRA’s move on decommissioning in October 2001 when General de Chastelain’s International Decommissioning Commission announced that the IRA had finally begun the process of putting its weapons beyond use. It followed a highly symbolic meeting the previous day in Conway Mill in the heart of republican Belfast, an area devastated by loyalist incursions in the summer of 1969. The President of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, presented his constituency as one that had “overcome” and one that was positive: “Our aim has been to save the Good Friday Agreement ... Sinn Féin’s commitment to the process is absolute”. He spoke, too, in global terms: “From South Africa to North America there are commitments and promises to support our efforts”. And he married the local to the global: “We are in a time when world events are dominated by imagery and stories of conflict and violence and terror. At this time these stories are replicated locally in provocative and deadly sectarian actions, both in the intimidation of little schoolgirls and in bomb and gun attacks on nationalist families (Irish Times, 23 Oct. 2001)—hence the need for vigilance and magnanimity.

If that was one reason for republican strategy another was more conceptual in outlook and concerned the meaning of democracy itself. The concept is explored in Richard Bourke’s Peace in Ireland. He argues that it “would be more accurate to view the Good Friday accord as merely pointing to the possibility of a democratic settlement which could evolve in the course of operating the provisions of the Agreement” (Bourke, 2003: 1-2). Some would assert that that is precisely what Sinn Féin has been doing in the intervening years with so much emphasis placed on implementing the equity and human rights agenda. It was part of a wider understanding that during the direct rule years Northern Ireland “remained an integrated part of the United Kingdom, yet not an integral part of its politics” (Bourke, 2003: 235). Their historic task, then, was to fashion a democracy as “a regime founded on equality, and not a political organisation belonging to a majority (Bourke, 2003: 270).

While that was a wholly admirable endeavour that created a new political space it represented less than the sum total of the Agreement. Their opponents accused republicans of procrastination and prevarication on issues such as decommissioning and policing reform. It was part of a wider malaise in the implementation stage: “as we explore the need for truth and justice in Northern Ireland, it becomes clear that what has eaten away at the credibility of the agreement is the issue of responsibility” (Democratic Dialogue, 2001: 90). Responsibility was particularly problematic for the republican movement since, in the perception of the wider public, the distance between Sinn Féin and the IRA was not self-evident. Much of that mistrust manifested itself in the breakdown of negotiations in December 2004.

IV

The stumbling block appeared to centre on transparency in the decommissioning of
weapons. But a more insidious one lurked in the undergrowth—the assertion that the IRA was involved in criminality. The charge was led by the Progressive Democrats, the junior partner in the Dublin government: “Party calls for commitment to stop all criminal activity” (Irish Times, 10 Dec. 2004). The problem for Sinn Féin was that such activity belonged to the realms of the “unthinkable”; “The unthinkable is that which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternatives, that which perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased” (Trouillot, 1995: 106). It sits uneasily alongside their claims of venality and corruption in the Irish political establishment. It would challenge, too, Mitchel McLaughlin’s concept of “civic Irishness”.

It was the raid on the Northern Bank in Belfast in the run-up to Christmas 2004 that served as the catalyst. It was the considered opinion of the security services on both sides of the border that the IRA was responsible for the massive robbery. That did not sit easily with the Sinn Féin leadership. Martin McGuinness told a press conference on 12 January 2005 that the “IRA are not criminals, never were criminals and in my opinion never will be criminals”. This mindset was explored in an editorial in the Sunday Tribune on 9 January 2005 that claimed that Gerry Adams had stated a little over a month before that the IRA never engaged in crime: “the clear implication was that nothing the IRA did, whether it involved murder, violence or robbery, could be classified as criminal because in the warped value system of republicans it was by definition part of the national struggle”. It was a defining moment in the peace process. Until this question was tackled adequately Sinn Féin’s exercise in coalition-building would be put on hold.

These claims and counter-claims have had a profound impact. In the short term the robbery “has demonstrated that we are more than a photograph away from a restored Executive now” (according to an Irish Times editorial on 8 January 2005). At a more general level Stephen Collins’s assertion in the Sunday Tribune (9 January 2005) that the “acceptance by governments that the IRA army council should be the arbiter of what is politically acceptable has warped the development of democratic politics” was a watershed. He continued that the “price that is being paid for the appeasement of Sinn Féin has been the corruption of democratic standards in both parts of the island”.

That is a large claim and is indicative of the seriousness of the moment. The doctrine of unintended consequences has struck with a vengeance. Mitchell McLaughlin’s vision of four years ago is severely dented. Sinn Féin’s onward electoral progress in both parts of Ireland is no longer guaranteed. Its standing in the international community is being put under scrutiny. Its famous self-confidence has been called into question for the first time. More significantly the perceived link between Sinn Féin and the IRA has the capacity to destroy the political project. Any audit on the implementation of the Agreement that ignores these profound conceptual and practical issues would be merely superficial.

REFERENCES


