

OSCE Chairmanship Conference – “Shared Future: building and sustaining peace”

The Northern Ireland case study

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Speech by Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness

Tanaiste, President Ahtisaari, Secretary of State, Secretary General, Senator Mitchell, Ministers, Ambassadors, and distinguished guests.

It is a pleasure to address you this morning on the theme of the Irish peace process.

We are privileged that we are at the helm of one of the most successful Peace Processes in the world today.

The Irish Peace process is rightly seen as a model for successful conflict resolution.

The Peace process in Ireland has been a long and, at times, difficult journey. It has taken courage and strong leadership from all sides to make progress and to secure the political institutions.

In 1988 Sinn Féin first published proposals for a peace process. At that time we were still in the midst of a bloody and deep conflict. Many people were sceptical of our intentions.

The Sinn Féin documents, Scenario for Peace and Towards a Lasting Peace, in 1992, had as their central tenant, a belief that the conflict could be ended and that it could only happen through a process of inclusive dialogue and negotiation.

These public contributions were an expression of Sinn Féin's willingness to encourage the commencement of a peace process.

However, behind the scenes, discussions were under way.

Michael Oatley, a representative of the British government, who we understood to be representing British Intelligence, known in the media as the Mountain Climber, had begun talks with myself through a back channel which had not been used for some years. These talks took place with the full knowledge and support of both the Sinn Féin and IRA leaderships. As was later evidenced these talks were taking place with the full knowledge of the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

John Hume had begun a series of engagements with Gerry Adams. This Hume/Adams dialogue, was another vital component of the early days of the peace process.

And at governmental level the government, led by John Major was engaged with Albert Reynolds in a process which would eventually lead to the publication of the Downing Street declaration and an important statement from the British government Secretary of State Peter Brooke that they had no 'selfish or strategic interest' in remaining in Ireland.

Republicans were clearly watching all of this very closely. I sensed that a real potential for a significant advance was taking shape. It was clear that a military solution was not possible, and the British government and Republicans recognised that the solution had to be built around political dialogue. We had to get to a point where all sides wanted a peace process, if we were to succeed.

A newer more articulate and politically focused loyalist leadership also seemed poised to play a role.

I was of a firm view that we could all find a basic premise for moving forward into fully blown political negotiations.

I was also not naive enough to believe that such negotiations either could take place, or more importantly succeed against a backdrop of ongoing violence.

There was also the difficulty that political unionism at that time had set itself entirely against the political process as it was shaping up.

So it was against this backdrop that we in the Sinn Féin leadership went to the IRA and set out our belief that there was the real possibility of a negotiated solution to the causes of the conflict.

The IRA responded with the August 1994 cessation. This remains in my view the single most important event in the entire process, which unlocked the potential for peace. At that time I was hopeful that we would see a proper response from the British and Irish governments, from loyalism and from political unionism.

Loyalism responded. The Irish government likewise. However the response from the then leader of unionism Jim Molyneux was, incredibly, that the IRA cessation was the most destabilising event since partition. A weak John Major government, dependant on unionist votes in Westminster, retreated from the basis upon which we had argued for the peace process and failed to grasp the opportunity for peace. It is quite interesting that one of the main opponents within the Major government of a direct British Government/ Sinn Féin negotiation is now a key minister of the Cameron/Clegg coalition government .

There was a brief collapse in the IRA cessation, but I never gave up the belief that a negotiated way forward existed.

The impact of the Labour landslide in the 1997 General election cannot be under estimated in the efforts to rebuild the process.

Tony Blair's government now had a massive parliamentary majority, and was indicating very clearly that inclusive, time framed, all party negotiations involving Sinn Féin would commence shortly after a new cessation.

Gone was the stalling of the previous years about permanence, about elections to talks, about decommissioning – it seemed to me that the offer was fairly clear – the preconditions had been swept away and a new opportunity was staring us in the face.

It was an opportunity that this republican leadership was determined not to squander.

Gerry Adams and I led the Sinn Féin delegation into Castle Buildings in late 1997. And within a few short months, under Senator Mitchell's chairmanship we achieved the Good Friday Agreement.

One of the most significant conversations to take place in the week leading into the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement was between Tony Blair, Jonathan Powell, Gerry Adams and myself. In that conversation Tony Blair conceded that successive British governments were as responsible for the conflict in the north as anyone else. I felt that this was highly significant and indeed the first ever such admission by a British Prime Minister.

In terms of the overall peace process, the Castle Building negotiation was only a few short months, but the impact of those few short months are still being felt today.

And there is a lesson in that for other processes. The Easter deadline was in my opinion a crucial factor in the achievement of agreement. So it has to be said was the contribution of others including the then US President Bill Clinton, the then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Secretary of State, the late Mo Mowlam.

But ultimately the Good Friday Agreement was an agreement made in Belfast and overwhelmingly endorsed by Irish people throughout the island.

It was a triumph of political skill and negotiation – but it was also a triumph of the underlining principles that the peace process teased out, away from the media, years before – inclusion, dialogue, commitment to peace and respect for political mandates.

And it should also be remembered that while the DUP sat outside the negotiation process at that time, they had never detached themselves from the political process as it developed. In fact in 1997 both myself and Peter Robinson led respective party delegations to South Africa at the request of the then President Nelson Mandela.

I always knew in the aftermath of the Agreement we would enter a new phase in the process. Achieving agreement was one thing, implementing agreement is an entirely different thing.

I never got the feeling that David Trimble and the UUP were entirely on board for the process. Indeed he failed in my opinion to embrace, fight for or implement the Good Friday Agreement. He managed to squander much of the goodwill generated and the mandate he achieved for implementation in the 1998 Assembly elections and referendum. Historians will debate and judge the reasons for this, however, from our perspective a unionist partner willing to move forward collectively was vital.

A peace process is much like a bicycle – it needs always to be moving forward, if it is allowed to stall as under John Major's tenure, then it can quickly collapse on its side. I was determined that having achieved agreement that this would not be allowed to happen.

It was vital that momentum was breathed into the process.

In 2003 after the DUP became the biggest party within unionism myself and Gerry Adams met with Tony Blair. At that time Tony Blair told me that his strategy was to try and revitalise the UUP. He said that Ian Paisley would never share power with Sinn Féin. I challenged him directly on that. I told him that his plan to revitalise the UUP was going nowhere. I told him that I believed that we could reach an agreement with the DUP and that was what the British government needed to focus on. I also told him I thought agreement with the DUP would be possible – difficult yes – impossible no.

And so the process led to what I believed was an inevitable place – an engagement with Sinn Féin and the DUP – an engagement which energised the peace process, liberated the political process and resulted in stable power sharing institutions.

And next week we will see the 5th Anniversary of those institutions, led by Sinn Féin and the DUP. And I wish to pay tribute to the role played by Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson in bringing that historic situation about. Indeed in my first meeting with Ian Paisley he said to me – 'Martin we can rule ourselves, we do not need these direct rule ministers coming over here telling us what to do'. And I agreed with him – there was common ground upon which to move forward.

We have recently completed our first term of inclusive government, in the history of the North.

Peter and I, are ministers, not only in the Assembly, but also the North South Ministerial Council, alongside the Taoiseach and his ministers, and also the British Irish Council with the British Prime Minister and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales.

It was a long and sometimes frustrating road to peace. It is a road that took all of us involved, on a journey that we continue today. It is not a journey that has seen some change, but a journey that has seen dramatic change.

Our peace process has demonstrated that with belief in ourselves, imagination, leadership and dialogue and a commitment to achieve peace it is possible to overcome what many thought was the impossible.

Making peace can be hugely challenging and enormously difficult. It demands that we seek to understand what motivates, what inspires, and what drives our opponent. Ultimately, as Nelson Mandela said, we have to make friends with our enemy. He also made the important point that in any peace process the most important constituency you negotiate with, is your own.

The International community helped us along the way. People like Marti Ahtisaari, Cyril Ramphosa, Roelf Mayer, General De Chastelain the late Harri Holkeri and others all played key roles.

Nelson Mandela and the ANC were very helpful to us.

We travelled to South Africa and they travelled to Ireland, along with many international representatives who have been enormously helpful to our process, not least from the United States.

We have taken our experience and in recent times have tried to be helpful in peace processes in the Basque country, the Philipines and elsewhere. Indeed plans are well advanced for a Peace Building and Conflict Resolution centre to be built on the former Maze/Long Kesh prison site. A centre which I hope will be used by countries emerging from conflict around the world.

I had been involved in efforts to make progress in the conflict in Sri Lanka. And I want to take this opportunity to express my disappointment that the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tigers, both of whom i have met, were unable to build a genuine peace process, a fact which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Tamils and the continuing displacement of tens of thousands more in government run holding camps.

Myself and other participants in the Irish Peace Process have also met in Finland with different groups from Iraq and have visited Bagdad.

Our journey is one that I wish to share with others.

In all of this it is important to remember that I am still an Irish republican and that Peter Robinson is still a unionist.

But we each, unionists and republicans, now have a peaceful, democratic process in which we can pursue our political goals, while at the same time allowing all of us to tackle the important issues.

I will conclude with a word or two about reconciliation and its role within our process.

Proper reconciliation is key to the future.

Reconciliation is essential between our communities, Republicans and Unionists, and also between my community and the British state. It will not be easy but must happen.

Republicans realise that dealing with the past will not be an easy process for us – Republicans inflicted much hurt during the conflict, and hurt was inflicted upon Republicans - but if we are to build a new future it is necessary and it is a road that I am not afraid to go down.

And in my experience of recent years many within the unionist community are up for that journey of reconciliation and dialogue.

For Republicans, increased dialogue and engagement with the wider unionist and protestant community is essential. That means being prepared to set aside our own assumptions about the nature of that dialogue, in order to better understand the fears and apprehensions of protestants and unionists. I believe we have to listen unconditionally to what they have to say.

Republicanism needs to become more intuitive about unionist apprehensions and objections, and sensitised in our response. We need to be open to using new language and consider making new compromises.

Our conflict is over and the imperative of creating a better society, at ease with itself is a new challenge for us all. Republicans will approach that laborious work with compassion and imagination.

We will ensure our engagement is based upon listening carefully to unionists and others, and we must develop the capacity to explore what more can be done to help meaningfully heal our society's divisions.

Dialogue, using new language and making new compromises to create trust, are the seeds of a new future for us all.

Sometimes in politics, compromise is a negative word.

We should not be ashamed of the compromises that we have made here. I am proud of the compromises that I and my party have made to bring about a stable peace. We should all be proud of where we have taken our people.

So our political message is a fundamentally hopeful and positive one, focused on our young people, our future, and a better quality of life for everyone.

The war is over. The conflict is over. There will be no going back.

Go raibh maith agaibh