

ADDRESS TO LONDON SINN FEIN CONFERENCE

20 February 2010

What I have to say is really quite simple. I believe that in the present circumstances of continued deep communal division in Northern Ireland and deep economic crisis in the Republic of Ireland, Irish unity is not on the political agenda; nor does it make sense to put it on the agenda any time soon. I have not heard advocates of rapid moves towards Irish unity put forward any convincing arguments about how political unity would help solve either of these massive problems and the social problems of sectarianism, inequality, poverty and the dangerous marginalisation of young people that accompany them.

I believe that in the foreseeable future most of the intelligence and energy on the island should go into finding solutions to these twin problems (as well as wider international issues like climate change). I believe the way forward lies in doing as much as possible of that difficult work together on the small island (or parts of it) that we all – unionists, nationalists and others – call home. That is why I – along with the Irish and British governments, the European Union and the US government – place so much emphasis on cross-community cooperation in the North and cross-border cooperation on the island. These for me are the elements in the Good Friday and St Andrews Agreements which, if worked properly, can become the building blocks for eventual reconciliation – whatever political form that takes – on the island of Ireland. When we manage to cooperate to build a shared *society within the North* and cooperate to build a successful shared *economy on the island* that will benefit people of all allegiances, only then, when the benefits of unifying *people* around common aims and interests become clear, does it make sense to talk about Irish unity in political terms.

But those key elements of the Good Friday and St Andrews Agreements haven't been worked properly yet. Cross-community cooperation often works well at grass roots level, particularly when it is properly funded. But the valiant efforts of the community and voluntary sector to bridge the sectarian divide have not been backed up by any coherent policy by the main two parties in government in the North, Sinn Fein and the DUP, to reduce sectarianism by building a

shared society: through shared housing, shared schools, shared public spaces, shared leisure facilities and so on.

Cross-border cooperation has been one of the quiet success stories of the post-Good Friday Agreement period. Inter-governmental relations – both between the British and Irish governments, and between the latter and the Northern Ireland Executive – are closer than at any time since partition. Peter Robinson has said on numerous occasions that the North-South relationship has never been better. The work of bodies like InterTradeIreland has seen North-South trade rise every year on average by 9 percent for the past decade. In areas as varied as infrastructure, energy, higher education and research, health, agriculture and spatial planning the levels of cooperation are unprecedented. 23,000 cross-community and cross-border projects, most of them community-based, have been funded by the EU (my Centre for Cross Border Studies is currently engaged in five EU- funded research, training and information projects on reviving the border region economy, and cross-border spatial planning, hospital services, impact assessment and citizens information – the so-called INICCO projects). Around 200,000 children have crossed the border on school and youth exchanges in the past 12 years. This explosion of cross-border activity must give real hope that in the future much of the fear and suspicion that have poisoned relationships on our island for centuries will be dispelled, and that our children and grandchildren will be able to forge harmonious new relationships undreamt of in the past.

But here again the potential has often been stymied by lack of a vision at governmental level. Surprisingly the Irish government has no strategy for North-South cooperation. It has been willing to spend lots of money on big North-South infrastructural projects like the Dublin-Derry road and the all-Ireland electricity market. But it has left much of the civil society and people-to-people cooperation which experience elsewhere tells us is vital for building trust across a contested frontier up to a myriad of small educational, voluntary and community groups almost totally reliant on rapidly decreasing EU funding.

It seems to me that there are three elements that are vital in the next 5-10 years for moving towards a just, peaceful, prosperous and reconciled society in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and none of them involve any moves towards Irish unity. The first is the hard task of beginning to build a fairer, more equal and more trusting society *within* Northern Ireland. We have to work to make sure that working class people in Belfast can lose their fears enough to allow the so-called

'peace walls' to come down between them and their neighbours; we have to make sure that there is equal access to education and training for everyone, particularly those in the most disadvantaged areas (who suffer particularly badly at the hands of the North's class-divided, grammar school-driven education system); and we have to make sure that people can move around our cities, towns and region to work and socialize without fear in order to provide the mobility of labour without which major job-creating investment will not come to Northern Ireland. If Northern Ireland continues to be a place known for fear, intolerance and instability, neither new investment nor the talent that comes with new investment will locate there,

The second element is a subset of the first. There is a real danger from the growing unemployment and poverty which will certainly be caused by the serious financial cutbacks that are inevitable when a new British government of whatever colour comes in later this year (and Northern Ireland is particularly vulnerable to those cutbacks because of its huge dependence on the public sector). Already there are many young people in poor working class estates in Belfast, Derry, Craigavon and other places who have little hope of a job or any kind of real future, and who will find the arguments of dissident republican groups and their loyalist counterparts for a return to violence increasingly attractive. Something has to be done urgently to make sure those young people – many of them with talents which could turn them into local community leaders – are provided with attractive possibilities for further education, training and employment..

The third element is more North-South cooperation, and particularly cooperation to move the island of Ireland to the next stage of economic development : a stage of seamless all-island infrastructure and transport , closely linked knowledge-based industries (including green industries) and integrated social insurance, tax and higher education systems (and of course, both jurisdictions using the Euro). Economic cooperation since 1998 has been a classic example of how practical cooperation for mutual benefit can persuade even the most politically unyielding unionist of the virtues of doing business on an all-island basis. As that visionary former senior civil servant and business leader, Sir George Quigley (himself from a strong unionist background) put it recently: "North and South, in their relationship, have left the segregation model further behind than Northern Ireland itself has. People are now engaging and interacting freely, doing things together, getting to know each other to a degree which would have been unthinkable 30 years ago. I believe this steady process of détente has been feeding into a lowering of group boundaries *within* Northern Ireland. The negative attitudes to the South,

which have historically reinforced internal differences, have steadily weakened...The development of surprisingly widespread acceptance of the North-South economic project demonstrates that the straitjacket within which people mistakenly seek to preserve their identity can be exchanged for more comfortable clothing in situations where positive relationships, which are able to replace negative stereotypes, can develop.”

Last month I did an interview with the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, on North-South cooperation for my Centre for Cross Border Studies’ annual journal (which will be published next month). He talked about the ultimate destination of the Irish unity political project being “a matter of time working itself out”. That destination would probably be for other people to decide in another time, he said. He went on: “We have to make the here and now a better place. We have to do it on the basis that we have devised a political culture that is less suspicious and fearful than ever before, that is more open to recognize the common interests that we have together whilst respecting that we are in separate jurisdictions. We should be concerned about what it is we can do *together*. I think the people on the ground see the common sense of that approach.”

I agree with Brian Cowen, and with his Minister, Martin Mansergh (one of the main architects of the Good Friday Agreement) who says that the Republic’s main challenge now is to maintain its economic viability and sovereignty, rather than to press claims to the North, which in the present dire economic climate are a lot less compelling than during the heady days of the Celtic Tiger. Even Martin McGuinness sometimes appears to me to put less stress on moving rapidly towards Irish unity and more on ending the age-old hatreds and divisions in the North (for example, in his interview in this week’s *New Statesman*). An aspiration for eventual Irish unity is entirely legitimate and I accept that Sinn Fein will continue to work for it peacefully with all their might and main. But I believe it should remain that: a long-term aspiration. For the present and the foreseeable future let us work together – Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist and republican, North and South – to make the island of Ireland in all its contradictions and complexities a more just and prosperous society (or societies), to make the here and now a better place.