

Platform

*The Northern Chair of
Sinn Fein on the
ceasefire*

150 "days
of peace"
in Northern
Ireland



IRA military activity ceased 150 days ago. Progress, however has been slow

By Mitchell McLaughlin

IT IS nearly 150 days since the IRA ceased all military activity. Generally speaking, within the community that Sinn Fein represents there is a sense of disappointment that more has not been achieved in that period. The significance of the IRA decision, while it is appreciated within the nationalist community, is not being acknowledged by the British Government. There is a clear nationalist view about where responsibility for the lack of progress lies, a view held by supporters of the SDLP, and by many within the Dublin political establishment as well as by Sinn Fein. It lies with Britain. Pressure must be put on the British Government to move the situation along at a greater pace.

Mr Major's dependence on Unionist MPs at Westminster is a factor in this, but not the only one. Another is the fact that John Major evidently intends to make the Labour Party's devolution policy (Scotland, Wales) a big issue in the next General Election campaign. And, of course, within the Conservative and Unionist Party there are many who share the views of hard-line Unionism about the Republican movement and the Nationalist community. The peace process will be in danger unless it develops its own dynamic and is able to survive the imponderables of the next British general election. The Reynolds government in Dublin, which was so pivotal in bringing about the ceasefire, has collapsed; the Clinton administration, which also played a role, has suffered badly in the mid-term elections; Major's government could collapse any day! There is a need in these circumstances to bed down the peace process so firmly that it will survive any changes in government or external political events.

All the issues that have to be dealt with in an evolving peace process are interdependent. It is difficult to identify a particular issue that is the make or break issue because so many of them could be. British refusal to move beyond exploratory dialogue — through civil servants — to formal recognition of Sinn Fein's electoral mandate is a dagger at the throat of the peace process. For the British to be insisting that they don't have any political prisoners is ridiculous. That question will have to be addressed. At this stage Sinn Fein is confident that it will be. We see the posturing and rhetoric of the British ministers, but we are confident at this stage that the issue of prisoners will be addressed. We welcome the decision of the Dublin Government to begin to release Irish Republican prisoners. In turn this will put pressure on the British Government.

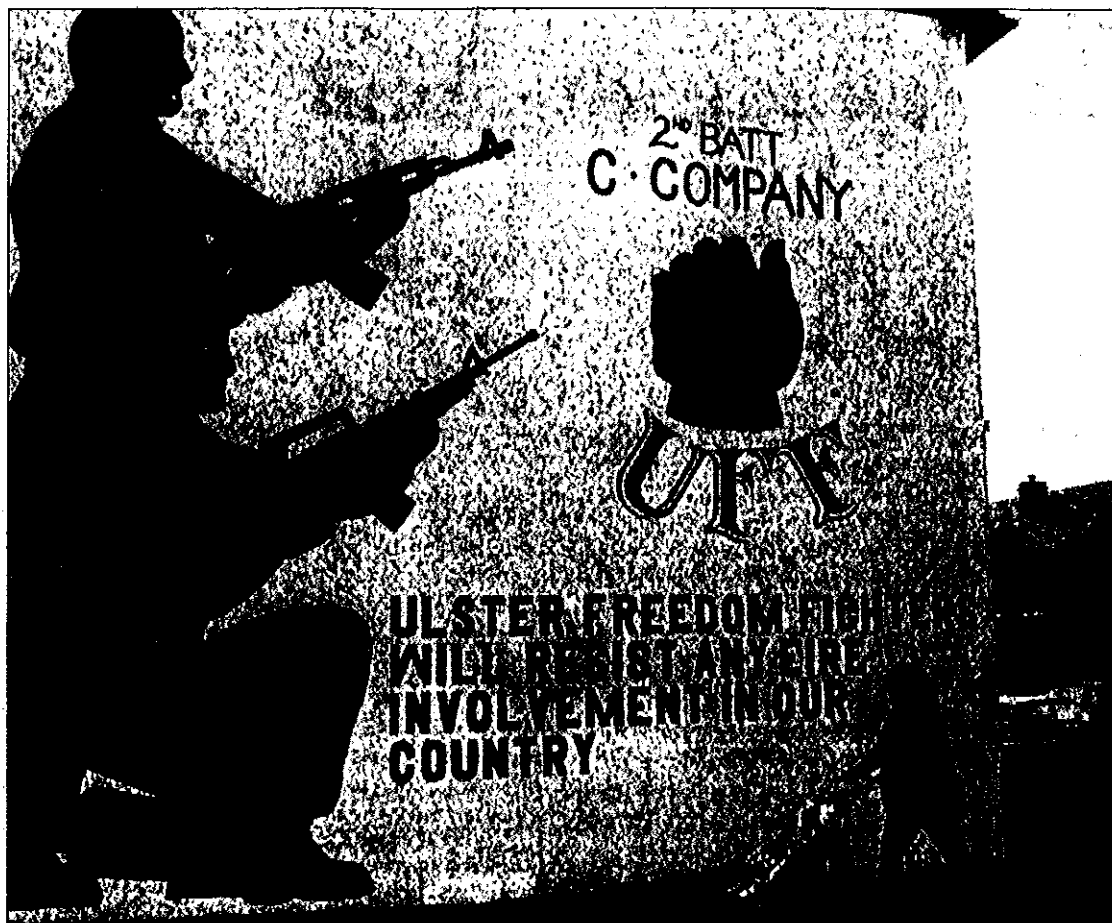
The most critical issue now is bilateral discussion between all parties with an electoral mandate in Ireland. Both governments should facilitate that. We have the Dublin government so engaged, but not the British government. That is a short-term objective and one that republicans are pursuing with considerable energy.

Another major issue is the demilitarisation of society here. In town after town, we still have British militarisation — British Army camps, look-out towers, fortified check points. All of that has to be removed.

We are very encouraged by the emergence of what we see as new thinking within Unionism, but the combined electoral support of the "new thinking" UDP and PUP is less than one per cent of the Unionist community. These are fringe organisations: they don't reflect the attitudes of mainstream Unionism at this stage. But the courage and conviction of these people is opening up new ground. Other democratic options are being examined. They are providing a political alternative within the Unionist community that will eventually have its effect.

Sinn Fein's position on "consent" is that the consent of all shades of political opinion is necessary for the emergence of new political structures. The negotiations and discussions that would lead to the emergence of new political structures is a matter for the Irish parties alone. It is not something that can be imposed from outside. We say that the history of Northern Ireland since partition is irrefutable evidence that partition has failed us all, and that there is no Six-County solution. All attempts to reform or democratise partition have failed. We have to look to the wider context of the whole island of Ireland.

Sinn Fein's ideal solution is a United Ireland. We recognise that this ideal is not shared by everybody. We are prepared to present our analysis, and we are prepared to listen carefully to the analysis of others. We are prepared to enter into negotiations both on transition arrangements, and on an ultimate conclusion. These



There is some new thinking among Unionists but mainstream Unionism is still mistrustful of the peace process

would have to be submitted to the Irish people as a whole for ratification. That, we believe, would be the practical exercise of self determination by all the Irish people, whether they are from the Loyalist, unionist tradition or the republican, nationalist tradition.

Our demand that the British government should "join the ranks of the persuaders" of the Unionists does not mean we are asking the British Government to put their hands up and say: "We think Sinn Fein were right all along. We are now going to adopt their policies." It would be wonderful, but we don't expect that to happen! We want the British Government to adopt a pro-active policy — to be persuaders for agreement on political structures in Ireland. We want them to insist that all options be available, that there be no exclusion and no preconditions put on the attendance of anyone with an electoral mandate.

We know there will be difficulties getting the Unionist parties into dialogue with Sinn Fein. It won't be a pleasant experience for either side at first. But it has to happen, and Government can only make it happen when they say from the outset that parties can exercise their own judgement as to when they come through the door for inclusive dialogue. No one should be confronted by a door that is locked in their face because the Unionists said, "if you talk to Sinn Fein we won't talk to you", or because some parties view the electoral mandate of a section of the Irish people as less valid than that of other sections.

Sinn Fein have made it clear that we will consider all options, and that any party with an electoral mandate from the people has the right to put forward an analysis, whatever that analysis might be. If someone who achieves such a mandate comes to the negotiating table with a Federalist policy we are obliged to look at that and study it very carefully, and we will. Nothing is precluded. All we ask is the right to make our analysis, and for us all to make a comparison.

Sinn Fein have been involved since 1988 in negotiations leading to the present strategy. The points of agreement between the SDLP and ourselves in the talks of 1988 formed the basic agenda for the discussions between Gerry Adams and John Hulme. We have

been talking to the British Government for five years now. It is two years since the Irish peace initiative emerged publicly. Sinn Fein as a party organisation has been consulted and has been involved. In my view political historians will examine the pre-ceasefire process that Sinn Fein went through and testify to its impeccable democratic credentials. Every single member of Sinn Fein has had the opportunity to be informed, briefed, and to express a view. There is no danger in my view of any fragmentation within Sinn Fein. Each phase of this process will be reviewed, assessed and decided on by the membership.

Prospects for socialism? Historically there have been divisions within the working class in Ireland, always around the "constitutional question." The resolution of the constitutional question

will create enormous momentum. There will be first of all a realignment of political forces, and we will see emerging the kind of left versus right debate that has been absent from Ireland. Ireland is a very conservative, socially retarded country and working-class strength here has been dissipated by division, even within the trade union movement, North and South, over the constitutional issue. If that is resolved then I see a renaissance of socialist debate. Out of that debate will come a new vibrant tendency. ■

Note: Mitchell McLaughlin is the Chair of Sinn Fein in the Six Counties. He was talking to Alan Johnson.

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