

## *The creation of a framework for negotiations*

# A leap into uncharted waters

## Seàn Mag Uidhir

Seàn Mag Uidhir was a republican prisoner from 1976 to 1984 and then an activist until 1997, including a period as Sinn Féin cultural officer, three years working on the republican newspaper *An Phoblacht/Republican News* and two years in the Sinn Féin Publicity Department.

**T**he decision by the IRA leadership to call a complete cessation of military operations in August 1994 was a leap into uncharted waters. For the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness – who had taken over the reins of power after the failure of the 1974–76 ceasefire to advance the republican position – this was a particularly hazardous course of action to take.

After the 1974–76 ceasefire, the IRA had come closer to defeat than at any other time during the conflict. It was reorganized and geared towards a long war of attrition and Gerry Adams took on the task of developing a strong political party, moving Sinn Féin beyond simply being a support group for the IRA. ‘Ceasefire’ had become a dirty word in the Republican vocabulary, and therefore the steps to the 1994 cessation had to be slow and patient, ensuring that the movement’s unity and cohesion were maintained above all else. It took a great leap of faith to convince the republican base that a cessation could actually advance its position. The chief fear of republicans was that any protracted cessation would be used by the British government to sap the will and ability of the IRA to wage war – as had been their experience of 1975. Others worried that Sinn Féin would be sucked into a process and become indistinguishable from parties such as Fianna Fáil and the SDLP, who had failed to achieve an end to partition.

### Preparing the ground

There was however, broad acceptance of the leadership’s assertion that the movement alone was not strong enough to bring about the conditions necessary to end partition and that allies were needed. The advantages of republican involvement in negotiations were clear in terms of increasing Sinn Féin’s profile and just being there would stiffen the backbone of the SDLP who were likely to accept less than republicans.

The experience gained in breaking down the policy of treating prisoners as criminals following the 1981 Hunger Strike had instilled confidence in the movement's middle leadership. Another source of confidence was that the IRA was leaving the field intact on its own terms: unbroken and unbowed. This was of immense psychological importance to an organization that had suffered military defeat in previous campaigns. The Sinn Féin leadership drew heavily on experiences gained in Palestine and South Africa where conflicts were also drawing to a close with the aid of international involvement.

Nothing was left to chance, however, and the base was prepared for the ceasefire announcement in a series of detailed briefings over a three-week period in the run-up to 31 August. A set of strategic objectives was laid down which made progress measurable and a return to armed struggle was never ruled out. Activists were told clearly that John Major's British government and the unionists were not willing participants in the peace process. They would accept change only where there was no other credible way out. The dynamic in the peace process would be the axis of Adams, Hume and Reynolds. While there was still some nervousness in republican ranks, the movement was united in its determination to try to make the peace strategy work.

Nationalists all over the island welcomed the cessation as a great opportunity to test the British government's assertion about having no 'selfish or strategic interest' in Ireland. The British government and the unionists were clearly wrong-footed by the announcement of the cessation, but Major set the tone for the next eighteen months of stalling, prevarication and obstruction by saying he wanted to hear that the cessation was permanent.

## **Coming in from the cold**

Republicans remained upbeat as the Irish government under Albert Reynolds moved quickly to live up to its promises. Reynolds steadfastly refused to be drawn into the debate on permanency. He met with Gerry Adams and John Hume within days at Leinster House (the Irish seat of government) and the public handshakes signalled the coming in from the cold of Sinn Féin. He began a prisoner release programme, set up the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation and ended censorship of the party in the media.

Compared to the IRA's complete cessation of military operations, the British response was derisive and begrudging, and they still seemed more intent on defeating the IRA than building a peace settlement. Throughout the cessation there was no serious engagement by the Major government. They announced a 'decontamination' period before their officials – rather than ministers – would meet with Sinn Féin. Military patrolling of nationalist areas remained high, they restored remission for prisoners to pre-1989 levels rather than beginning a prisoner release scheme and only lifted the broadcasting ban on Sinn Féin when it became too embarrassing to continue.

However, if there was one event which killed off the potential of the 1994 cessation to culminate in a peace settlement it was the resignation of Albert Reynolds in November 1995 over an unrelated political scandal. The writing was on the wall from that point. Reynolds was a key figure and had taken political gambles in the run-up to the cessation to bring republicans on board. That is not to say that the breakdown was unavoidable with a bit of imagination or willingness from the Major government to participate actively in the process.

The new Taoiseach, John Bruton, could be described at that time as republicans' worst nightmare. The Fine Gael leader had been a consistent critic of Reynolds' support for the Hume-Adams initiative until the cessation was actually announced. He was considered overly sympathetic to unionists. With Labour leader Dick Spring, Bruton did at least make some ground in the British and Irish governments' Framework Documents of 1995. The documents fell short of republican aspirations but they did formalise the centrality of all-island institutions in any solution to the conflict. Republicans felt that this could provide building blocks towards Irish unity.

While Bruton did make an honest effort to advance the peace process, he failed to comprehend fully that he needed to be proactive in persuading the British and the unionists of the need for change. As a result he allowed the British government, in particular, to choke the life out of the potential of the 1994 cessation.

Meanwhile, British insistence on no movement without decommissioning (which now replaced a demand for an assurance that the ceasefire was permanent as the sticking point) began to exasperate not just the republican leadership and the IRA, but the nationalist people as a whole.



Source: Pacemaker Press

## Back to arms

The talks between Martin McGuinness and British officials had become both insulting and damaging, as the British government refused to get involved some seven months after the cessation. This strategy was sending out the wrong signals to the republican base. A listening device was discovered in rooms being used by republicans in Stormont during the meetings, and the talks charade was allowed to die a natural death without Sinn Féin being unduly criticised for walking out. Eventually the British Secretary of State did meet Gerry Adams in Washington in March 1995.

The next nail in the cessation's coffin was the British government's reversal of previous decisions to ban Orange parades along the Ormeau Road in Belfast and Garvaghy Road in Portadown. Nationalists all over the North saw the triumphalism of Ian Paisley and David Trimble in Portadown as a humiliation. It rekindled a feeling that despite twenty-five years of conflict

nationalists still didn't count in the eyes of a British government faced with loyalist violence and Orange pressure. The Major government was by then totally dependent on Unionist votes at Westminster to stay in power and would not have been able to move forward even if it had been willing.

Republicans were rapidly coming to the conclusion that the political process at that time offered no potential to end the conflict – with a weak Tory government in London and Bruton at the helm in Dublin. The British stalling tactics and what was seen as duplicity were beginning to erode the unity of the republican movement and this factor too weighed heavily on the decision to resume the armed campaign. There was an air of inevitability within Republican ranks that there would be yet another round of warfare.

The end of the ceasefire might have come sooner than February 1996 but for the feel-good factor generated by

the visit of US President Bill Clinton to the North in November 1995. The visit captured the mood of huge public support for the peace process, and the world's most powerful leader demonstrated a strong commitment to the achievement of peace in Ireland. The Sinn Féin leadership had worked hard to secure US involvement in the process, and the IRA was not about to commit political suicide by resuming its armed campaign before the Clinton visit.

## Alarm bells

Gerry Adams issued a series of warnings that the process was in trouble but it seemed that no one was listening. Many had confused the IRA cessation with the achievement of peace, but for republicans conflict resolution meant dealing with the whole range of issues that had sparked off and then sustained the conflict. Some commentators accused Adams of sabre-rattling. Adams however had his finger on the pulse of the republican community and understood perhaps better than anyone that the cessation could not hold without movement by the British government at least on the core issues of equality, justice and human rights.

The last straw was Major's rejection of the Report of the International Body on Decommissioning which had been established by the British and Irish governments and which offered a way out of the deadlock on decommissioning. Although it later emerged that the IRA had been preparing for the Canary Wharf bombing for months beforehand, Major's rejection of the report made it inevitable.

However in spite of the breakdown, the isolation of the republican movement had been broken. Even though the governments moved immediately to break contact with Sinn Féin following Canary Wharf, dialogue continued with officials. Personal relationships established between the Sinn Féin leaders and all the major players on the Irish side survived the resumption.

## New directions

New doors had also opened between Sinn Féin and Protestant clergymen and in particular with the unionist business community who saw the potential for economic growth unleashed by the prospect of peace and stability. European money for Peace and Reconciliation had revitalised the community sector and inter-community contact had been strengthened

The situation that existed up to the 1994 ceasefire was set in stone. The IRA cessation broke that mould and made the political situation fluid. The republican movement like every other part of the body politic has been affected by the winds of change unleashed by the 1994 cessation.

The Sinn Féin leadership had handled the period with great skill and had emerged from the shadow of the IRA. They were now seen as competent leaders who were sincere and prepared to do business. The strategic objectives set out in 'Towards a Lasting Peace' in 1991, though refined, continue to govern the direction of the republican strategy of conflict resolution. The political advances made by republicans were borne out in the next elections held North and South in 1997. Unionism on the other hand had been weakened with new divisions opening up daily.

For the IRA too everything had changed. There could be no return to the long war of attrition and it was recognized that dialogue would be a necessary element in bringing the war to an end. Given the right conditions there would be another cessation. It was no surprise therefore that the elections of Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern within a month of each other in 1997 brought about a second cessation as soon as they announced the beginning of inclusive all-party negotiations for that Autumn.