

MARTIN MCGUINNESS

DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER OF NORTHERN IRELAND

A long-time Irish Republican activist. He is currently a Member of the Northern Irish Assembly and holds the position of Deputy First Minister, following the St Andrews Agreement and the 2007 elections. For the past four decades he has been one of the leading voices in his party, Sinn Féin.

Bearing in mind what was concluded in the Good Friday Agreement, what assessment can be made of the self-determination process in the six counties?

My evaluation is clearly positive. The progress we have made would not have been realistic some years ago. However, we still face a long way ahead and now that a lasting peace seems more possible than ever we shouldn't forget where we are coming from. Still, the necessary steps are to be made and as Irish Republicans we want a full sovereign, reunited Ireland. Our great challenge implies persuading the Protestant community that a united Ireland won't harm them either. It will be a win-win situation for everyone.

Beyond all the political agreements, is there a road map that Sinn Féin supports?

The most important thing to say is that Sinn Féin isn't going back to anything. We are a party on the move. Sinn Féin is willing to play our part in facing this exciting challenge that is a fair, prosperous and a reunited Ireland. No conflict, anywhere in the world, would be resolved without leadership from people who are at the heart of the conflict. And to find ourselves in the position we are in at this moment requires leadership. Courageous leadership.

Putting aside the huge political challenge of national reconstruction, what are the main pillars of



Sinn Féin's government policies in the fields of welfare, economics, health, etc?

Sinn Féin seeks the establishment of a new Ireland based on sustainable social and economic development. Our challenge is to build a country and an economy that creates wealth and shares wealth

that is based on enterprising excellence and social solidarity. Despite the crisis we are committed to improving our welfare system through fair redistribution.

Many analysts indicate that education has brought change in your society.



As a former education Minister in Northern Ireland I believe education should play a leading role in the reconciliation of both communities. In my opinion, what changed the situation eventually - and, of course, it took a lot of time to change it, things like that don't change in a week or a fortnight - was the new educational system.

Your party has already been in government for several years with the Unionists. Have they accepted the irreversibility of the process?

Along with that ongoing process Sinn Féin took a decision to establish a peace commission, which had the responsibility of travelling around the country to receive submissions from the general public, and also our opponents. Most of them do not see it this way and are still very reluctant to accept a united Ireland. Having said this, I want to acknowledge that some people within the Protestant community are slowly changing their views and they're starting to change their mind about the reunification of the whole island.

How do you evaluate the role of the Republic of Ireland in the peace process and what strategy should they follow to ultimately achieve reunification?

Some politicians in the Republic of Ireland traditionally have not appeared to be overly keen on the issue of Irish unity. As peace and reconciliation in the north is gaining ground the opinion is being modified and more people in the political spectrum openly advocate Irish unity. It is nonsense, and very costly, to have two separate administrations in our small island. However, we feel the

support of the people of the Republic. This is our greatest asset.

Will the recent breakthrough have the historic significance of the Good Friday Agreement?

It will have an important impact of great consequence. For the first time in Northern Ireland the powers of policing and justice will be exerted from a democratically elected chamber on a cross-community basis.

The Good Friday Agreement was an incredible breakthrough, something that has laid the foundation stone for all that has followed. But we have seen the ongoing success of the peace process; we've been through the St Andrews Agreement, which obviously propelled us forward a bit more. But it's my view that the Hillsborough Agreement could see politics in the north come of age, and see us all move forward on the basis of equality and partnership. When it seemed impossible, ways were explored to clear the main obstacles to the peace process.

To what extent has your own thinking changed over the decades?

I have always been an Irish Republican; I truly believe in a united Ireland and I'm working to achieve that. But over the course of 15 years or more, people like others and myself have been working to end the vicious cycle of conflict.

Has the British establishment accepted Irish reunification?

Officially not, but I believe they privately admit the inevitability of the process.

Does the prospect of a new Tory administration jeopardise this goal?

Let me put things in perspective. I think that Tony Blair showed himself to be the first British prime minister in the history of Britain's relationship with Northern Ireland to seriously make the effort to understand what was wrong here and what was required to put it right. The Conservatives will do a grave disservice to this process if they don't make a similar effort.

What's your view on the role the EU has played to secure the peace process and make it successful?

The EU has played a positive role in the search for peace, reconciliation and prosperity in Northern Ireland. The EU plays a part in assisting all of Ireland's social and economic development into the future. The financial contribution has helped people from the six counties and border regions to exit social exclusion and have a real chance to improve their own lives and the lives of their children. It's not a modest contribution.

In your opinion, can one say a new Europe of the peoples and (small) nations is being defined? Will countries like a reunited Ireland, the Basque country, Catalonia, Scotland or Flanders have a say in it?

I believe in the Europe of its peoples. Countries like those you have mentioned will certainly play a role in a new Europe that is emerging. The EU cannot turn its back on nations like ours that have been around for centuries.

How do you regard the political evolution of Catalonia?

I feel close to the Catalans in their struggle for liberty. Just like any other nation it is up to them to decide their future and what to do with their country. I hope in the future we will be able to strengthen our cooperation since there are many common interests and challenges to face.



Do people usually make comparisons between the Irish and the Basque situation? In recent years we have seen how a number of Batasuna's militants have been jailed. These leaders were apparently trying to create new political proposals to reach a peaceful compromise between the different parties. From what you know, how do you feel about it?

We have had, and we still have, strong links with our friends from the Basque Country. Sinn Féin has always argued for the need to revive the Basque peace process. The banning of Batasuna, alongside the continued jailing of political representatives will in no way aid this task.

I BELIEVE IN THE EUROPE OF ITS PEOPLES. THE EU CANNOT TURN ITS BACK ON NATIONS LIKE OURS THAT HAVE BEEN AROUND FOR CENTURIES

Will there be a united Ireland in your lifetime?

Well, I'm working to achieve that. I believe that the agreements we have made allow us to go forward to bring an end to the old hatreds and divisions that have been so much to our detriment. I believe a united Ireland is inevitable. Absolutely. But I believe it can only happen by peaceful and democratic means.