



SINN FÉIN

Response
to the
submission
of

**The Church and Government Committee of
the Presbyterian Church of Ireland**

to the

Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

This submission is a particularly welcome contribution to the deliberations of this Forum. Taken together with the documents upon which it is based, it indicates a readiness amongst Presbyterians to re-examine old certainties and to explore new possibilities in the interests of reaching an accommodation between the divided people of our land. In particular, Sinn Fein acknowledges the challenge posed by the submission's suggestion "that events have demonstrated a bankruptcy of our traditional politics, both pro-British unionism and pro-Irish nationalism, in that neither have significantly breached the communal division, while cross-community political movements have gained only limited support".

Initially, the submission provides some explanation of the historical basis of that division, noting that northern Presbyterians are, by and large, the descendants of Scottish settlers and suggesting that the traditional focus of Presbyterians have been more west-east than north-south. While the historical links between Ulster and Scotland are indisputable, the significance of that link as a defining 'national' characteristic is, we feel, overstated. After all, there are few families in Ulster, either Catholic or Presbyterian, who can not trace a direct Scottish connection and it is worth restating that Dalriada was a Gaelic kingdom.

Given the contemporary political allegiance of most Presbyterians, the eighteenth century eighteenth of their Church has proved difficult to come to terms with. It is to their credit, therefore, that the authors of this submission record the experience of their forebears as victims - like their Catholic fellow citizens - of a repressive Anglican regime, and their acknowledgement of the role played by Presbyterians in the development of Irish Republicanism during that period.

Nonetheless, the brevity of the acknowledgement of the radical contribution of this

'dissenting voice', and the pointed implication in the word 'some', that only a minority of Presbyterians were involved in the revolutionary and republican politics of the late eighteenth century, betrays a continued reluctance amongst some Presbyterians to examine their present 'tradition' of pro-unionism in the light of the earlier tradition of democratic and radical separatism.

It is certainly true, as the document states, that the nineteenth century saw a tragic retreat into narrow sectarian definitions of national identity, and that in the latter part of the century, in particular Irish constitutional nationalism became entangled in the influence of the Catholic clergy, while unionist 'ascendancy' politics became the creed of the majority of Protestants of all denominations. But, against that, it should be remembered that the republican tradition of the late eighteenth century survived and that Presbyterians such as the Fenian leader, the reverend Bell, continued to espouse the non-sectarian and separatist philosophy which had characterized the city of Belfast and the majority of Presbyterians, including many of their ministers, in the eighteenth century.

If Catholics need to re-examine the divisive legacy of nineteenth century nationalism, and to re-discover the pluralist definition of Irishness espoused by the United Irishmen, then Presbyterians must give serious consideration to the essentially democratic and radical tradition in their faith, that rejected and opposed the supremacist philosophy of a Protestant Ascendancy, and led them to form a 'union of love and affection' embracing Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. The tradition of Dickson, Hope, Jackson, Neilson, McCracken and countless others is surely entitled to more than simply an embarrassing footnote in Presbyterian histories.

And in the light of a re-examination of its radical tradition, Presbyterians might ask,

what caused the breach? Was it, as the document suggests, the essential 'difference' in background between Presbyterians and their Catholic neighbours? Clearly it was not, for that 'difference' was surely even more pronounced in the eighteenth century, at a time when they made common cause with their Catholic neighbours. Undoubtedly there were other forces at work, amongst which the pro-active role of the British government in ensuring that never again would Presbyterians and Catholics unite, was paramount.

The submission makes the valuable point in relation to the two partitioned states on this island that while one used the watchword "A Protestant parliament for a Protestant people" as a governing ideology, the other relied increasingly on Roman Catholic social teaching as a badge of identity. We look forward to the day when these limitations on political pluralism encouraged by the Partition settlement are transcended by new political arrangements. As Republicans we have always seen discrimination based on the misuse of religious precepts as an attack on the democratic rights of all the Irish people.

The submission does not appear to consider deliberate colonial strategy as the basis for the divisions which afflict us. We feel this weakens the historical understanding and contemporary analysis of the submission. Yes, there were many other reasons. Some, such as the increasing identification between Catholic and Irish have already been referred to, and no doubt the fear of being dominated by Rome in an all-Ireland administration was as real a century ago as it is today. We believe that we speak for all the 'nationalist' parties to this forum when we declare our preparedness to address those fears as a priority. Contrary to the assertion that 'the major problem facing the island of Ireland' is 'how to accommodate this British presence in its midst', we regard this issue as far from insurmountable.

The major problem as we see it now, having persuaded Britain that it must reverse its past divisive role and become pro-active as a persuader for agreement between all the people of Ireland, we can then persuade Irish Presbyterians that their true interests lie, not in the insecure and politically dependent relationship they currently have with Britain, but rather in a secure and democratic relationship with the rest of the people of Ireland. We realise that the hurts of the past make that task difficult and we acknowledge our responsibility for some of that hurt. Furthermore we accept that the positive potential of persuasion and of winning free consent and support from the broad Protestant/unionist family has not been seriously addressed by Irish nationalists.

We aim to redress that situation and to become persuaders for agreement on a democratic settlement. Our guiding principle will be the rejoinder of the founders of Irish republicanism that we break down divisions by uniting on what we hold in common and putting past dissensions behind us. It is this pluralist philosophy with its welcome for and accommodation for diversity that holds the key to resolving the conflict on this island and we cannot be satisfied with the limitations of mere co-operation or mutual respect, as these would only confirm and strengthen the reality of division.

Again, we welcome this submission and see it, in conjunction with the documents upon which it was formulated, as part of a much-needed dialogue between unionism and nationalism. We trust that that dialogue will continue in the months and years ahead.