

Sinn Fein's demand for an Irish Language Act may have more support if they demonstrated respect for the Good Friday Agreement

Belfast Telegraph - 19th December 2019

Prior to the December 12 general election, Sinn Fein, while stating the key focus was Brexit, was clear also regarding the importance of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA).

For example: "We need to give people the hope and vision that was there back in 1998... we are fighting for the GFA... we must now ensure that he (Boris Johnson) is not allowed to trash an internationally binding peace treaty in the form of the GFA... it cannot be cherry picked."

Pages one and two of the GFA make clear: it offers a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning; confirms a commitment to mutual respect as the basis of relationships; and it recognises the legitimacy of Northern Ireland's present status as part of the United Kingdom.

The last mentioned reflects a fundamental principle of international law, respect for the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of states.

For many years after the creation of Northern Ireland, the Irish Parliament opposed its existence, such as support for anti-partition candidates in Northern Ireland elections.

More formally, the Irish Constitution initially contained a legal claim to the territory of Northern Ireland, mirrored by Sinn Fein's non-recognition of the Westminster Parliament. This claim was an underlying problem preventing development of normal politics within Northern Ireland and between the two parts of Ireland.

Consequently, to improve all-Ireland relationships, the Irish Government - as part of the GFA and if approved by two referenda in Ireland (North and South) - would remove the territorial claim from its constitution, replacing it with a referendum process regarding any constitutional change.

On May 22, 1998, these referenda overwhelmingly approved the GFA.

Thus, the legitimacy of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom was supported by legislation passed in the Irish Parliament opening the opportunity for a new beginning in relationships.

The Irish Times (December 4, 1999) reported: "The removal of the 62-year-old territorial claim to Northern Ireland and its replacement by a commitment to the consent principle gave effect to the most dramatic change in the definition of Irish nationalism since the foundation of the State."

In sharp contrast, and regrettably, Sinn Fein's position remains unchanged. It was summarised by Gerry Adams (the then Sinn Fein president) on the BBC's The Andrew Marr Show, March 12, 2017: "I consider the position of this island to be totally and absolutely illegitimate and amoral."

But Northern Ireland's position is not illegitimate; it is the opposite, endorsed overwhelmingly by the peoples of Ireland.

This quotation illustrates how far Sinn Fein acts outside international law by showing no respect for the state called 'United Kingdom'.

For example, Sinn Fein MPs refuse to participate in the Westminster Parliament as they believe it has no right to legislate for Northern Ireland.

This is the politics of the dinosaur. Denis Bradley (BBC Newsline, December 16, 2019) described Sinn Fein's abstentionist policy as being "very much past its sell-by date".

The refusal to respect the legitimacy of Northern Ireland, with associated words and actions, is a major stumbling block in attempting to find a sustainable political way forward.

Where to now? The British and Irish Governments are co-guarantors regarding implementation of the GFA.

Both governments, by consistently ignoring the above fundamental aspect of the GFA, have contributed significantly to the lack of political progress.

It is imperative that the Secretary of State and the Tánaiste both publicly make crystal clear what obligations Sinn Fein has under the GFA.

To date, the two Governments have abdicated, not fulfilled, their responsibilities.

Sinn Fein cannot be permitted to hold our political process to ransom.

There are others who could also make a better contribution. For example: William Crawley (December 3, 2019), when questioning Michelle O'Neill said: "I can understand and I'm not going to debate your political perspective with you."

This referred to Sinn Fein's Westminster abstentionist policy. In the run-up to the election, this surely displays lack of investigative responsibility. Even Stephen Nolan (December 10, 2019) didn't fully challenge Sinn Fein.

Overall, Sinn Fein gives the impression of being modern and moderate.

Yet, at the very core of its policy is a form of aggressive nationalism that has long been rejected by modern democracies. Sinn Fein does not uphold the basic tenets of international law, though it claims otherwise.

I have always sought to build mutual respect across both communities, including support for an Irish Language Act. But, to be blunt: to be constantly lectured by Sinn Fein, on an inaccurate basis, about implementing the terms of the GFA exhausts all tolerance.

It demands full respect without offering reciprocal respect. Sinn Fein's demand for an Irish Language Act may have more support if, by words and action, it demonstrated respect for the GFA.

Yes, the right to have the Irish language recognised in the form of a separate Act has been advocated by the Council of Europe, a leading international body on human rights. Therefore, Sinn Fein could argue its demand for an Irish Language Act is in accord with international law. But that's only half the argument.

The Council of Europe said in its latest commentary on the subject (2017) that, "the UK Government should engage in a dialogue to create the political consensus needed for adopting legislation".

It is therefore reasonable to ask that Sinn Fein complement its Irish language approach by respecting the national constitution and acting without prejudice to the territorial integrity of the UK.

This is in accordance with the Council of Europe, International law and the GFA.

For example the SNP, under the leadership of Nicola Sturgeon, is as forceful a separatist party as is Sinn Fein.

All other separatist politicians (Plaid Cymru in Wales as well as the SNP and the SDLP) respect the present legitimacy of the United Kingdom, as was also agreed overwhelmingly by the peoples of Ireland in 1998.

This respect should involve full participation in the national parliament.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve better.

Those that wear the mantle of democracy have failed to hold Sinn Fein to account but rather dance to their tune.

Would the two governments and Sinn Fein step up to the plate, take the initiative and create the environment for progress?

No more waffle, do your job and start restoring the Assembly right now.

Dermot Nesbitt