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Convincing the grassroots. How Sinn Féin and the IRA gave up armed resistance

Annemarie Adam

1Nine years after the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed, which ended thirty years conflict in Northern Ireland, the IRA has decommissioned its weapons and given up the armed struggle completely. Sinn Féin has accepted the Northern Ireland Police Service and taken her seats in a joint government of Northern Ireland with the extremely anti-catholic, anti-nationalist and anti-republican Democratic Unionist Party of reverend Ian Paisley. All of this could not have happened without the recognition by the republican movement in the late eighties of a military and political stalemate, and the peace process initiated in the early nineties which culminated in the settlement of 1998.

Considering these momentous changes in the position of the republican movement, the question arises how the leadership of Sinn Féin and the IRA managed to unite the movement as a whole behind the peace process. How did the leadership convince their grassroots to accept and support the cease-fires of 1994 and 1997, the GFA in 1998 and ultimately decommissioning? How were members of a self-appointed liberation movement persuaded to support a process that set in motion a series of developments which led to the IRA giving up the armed struggle, and to the archenemies Gerry Adams and Ian Paisley (with a big smile) taking place at one table and declaring in front of the whole world that they would form a joint government in Northern Ireland?

Although the intricate diplomatic moves leading up to this event and the motives of the leadership have been fairly well documented, little is known of the workings of the internal processes in the republican movement which enabled these changes. To analyse these processes this article makes use of official Sinn Féin statements and reports, including summaries of the Ard Fheis (Sinn Féin party congresses), the republican newspaper *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, various statements from members of the movement and several interviews conducted by the author with Sinn Féin and IRA leaders, members and supporters.

Start of the peace process

In the second half of the eighties the republican leadership recognised that they had ended up in a military and political stalemate with the British government. Although both parties had the means and the materials to keep up the war for a long, long time, neither party seemed able to defeat the other. In the political field the leadership realised that they could prevent an internal settlement in Northern Ireland, but they also knew that due to the armed struggle Sinn Féin would never be invited to participate in political negotiations. The use of force also prevented further growth in the electoral support for Sinn Féin in the North of Ireland while in the Republic of Ireland it remained dramatically low. Despite the fact that the republican movement had abolished their policy to abstain from what they saw as the British inspired parliament of the Republic of Ireland in 1986, it received only 1,9 % of the votes in the elections of 1987.¹ In the North Sinn Féin had built a steady following of about 10 to 12 % of the electorate since the hunger strikes of the early 1980s, which was about one third of the nationalist vote, but apart from an occasional issue related peak this percentage did not show any sign of growing further. The nationalist electorate had had sympathy for the dying hunger strikers, but most did not support the IRA bomb attacks in which many innocent people died.

As a consequence of the stalemate, a debate started within Sinn Féin about the benefits of the armed struggle. This reassessment was also inspired by the Anglo-Irish Agreement signed at Hillsborough in 1985. This treaty was an attempt to isolate Sinn Féin, stop her electoral growth, and, for the British, to beat the IRA. As Thatcher put it afterwards: "The real question now was whether the agreement would result in better security (...) We hoped for a more cooperative attitude from the Irish government, security forces and courts. If we got this the agreement would be successful."² Furthermore, the agreement promised the creation of a local government existing of all the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland. Not without reason Sinn Féin feared the Hillsborough agreement would hurt them militarily and lead to the institution of a separate government in Northern Ireland without their involvement and consequently to the reinforcement of the partition of Ireland.

¹ Brendan O'Brien, *The Long War. The IRA and Sinn Féin* (Syracuse 1999) 132.

² Gerard Murray, *John Hume and the SDLP. Impact and Survival in Northern Ireland* (Dublin 1998) 143, 148.

As part of the debate on armed struggle Sinn Féin published a new policy document in 1987 called *A Scenario for Peace*. Although the document was still full of the old republican rhetoric, it also for the first time provided an opening to a peaceful settlement: 'Sinn Féin seeks to create conditions which will lead to a permanent cessation of hostilities, an end to our long war.'³ The document was meant to open up an avenue for discussions. With this purpose Sinn Féin, through father Alex Reid, approached the Irish prime minister or Taoiseach, Charles Haughey. Although Haughey still found it politically too risky to start discussions with Sinn Féin, he did advise John Hume of the constitutional nationalist SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) to enter into dialogue with them. The Hume/Adams talks subsequently started in 1988 between representatives of the SDLP and Sinn Féin. Although this dialogue did not immediately lead to a joint initiative, it made clear both parties opposed an internal settlement. Consequently, the dialogue continued.

Debate about the use of armed struggle

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was successful in stemming the electoral growth of Sinn Féin. Its poor election results in the north and south in the late eighties reignited the debate about the use of armed struggle within the republican movement. This time it was informed by the attempt of John Hume and Gerry Adams to formulate a joint declaration for the British and Irish government on the way forward. Hume discussed draft versions of this declaration with the Taoiseach Haughey and his adviser Dr. Martin Mansergh, who played an advisory role.

The debate within the movement was also influenced by a rhetorical dance between the British government and the republican movement. A dance in which they explored each others opinions by means of public declarations and, as it later turned out, by secret meetings. The British declarations were clearly influenced by the products of the Hume/Adams dialogue of which the minister for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, was kept informed by John Hume. The declaration by Brooke in an interview published on 3 November 1989 that the IRA could not be beaten militarily, and that if the violence ceased negotiations with Sinn Féin were not ruled

³ Sinn Féin, *A Scenario for Peace. A Discussion Paper* (Dublin 1987) 3, 5-7.

out, had a great impact on republicans.⁴ Another important element in building support for the use of peaceful means was a speech held by him on 3 November 1989 in which he declared:

the heart and core of the British presence is not the British army or British ministers but the reality of a nearly a million people living in a part of the island of Ireland who are, and who certainly regard themselves as, British (...) we acknowledge that there is another view, strongly held by the nationalist minority within Northern Ireland. That is the aspiration to a United Ireland (...) It is possible to take either view with integrity. It is acceptable to uphold the one or advocate the other by all legitimate peaceful and democratic means (...) the British Government has no selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland: our role is to help, enable and encourage.⁵

Following the Ard Fheis of 1992, Sinn Féin published a new policy document entitled: *Towards a lasting peace in Ireland*. This document directly addressed Brooke's declarations:

The British Government cannot have it both ways. It cannot on the one hand claim a preference for maintaining the union while on the other hand claiming no strategic or economic interests in being in Ireland (...) If the nationalists parties wish to believe that Britain has "no selfish interest" in remaining in Ireland they should demand that Britain actually carries out that statement to it's logical conclusion, and formally accept the right of the Irish people to self-determination.⁶

If the British had no interests in Northern Ireland the republicans thought they could maybe be convinced by means of political pressure, exercised by a broad nationalist front, to withdraw from Northern Ireland. 'Sinn Féin recognises that only the combined forces of Irish nationalism can defeat imperialism in all its forms. Sinn Féin therefore reiterates its support to building a broad front to be the main vehicle for national liberation.'⁷ To

⁴ Murray, *John Hume*, 189.

⁵ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 22 Nov. 1990, 8-9.

⁶ Sinn Féin, *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland* (Dublin 1992) 11, 14.

⁷ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 27 Feb. 1992, 7.

enable cooperation with constitutional nationalists a serious revaluation of the role of armed struggle was necessary. In *Towards a lasting peace in Ireland* republican policy was therefore reformulated, slowly moving away from armed struggle and onto the political path. The armed struggle was not given up yet, but from now on it was only to be used in case political means did not deliver: 'armed struggle is recognised by republicans to be an option of last resort when all other avenues to pursue freedom have been attempted and suppressed.'⁸

Building a broad front was precisely what Sinn Féin had been doing the years prior to the publication of *Towards a Lasting Peace*, and would continue to do in the ongoing discussions with the SDLP and, through the SDLP, with the Irish government. The opposition by unionists to the British Government over the Anglo-Irish Agreement had also shown that a United Ireland could no longer be reached, as in the old republican view, by a simple withdrawal of British forces after which the unionists would automatically come to their senses and realise that they would be better off in a United Ireland. It was now accepted that peace could only follow a process of national reconciliation with unionists:

The ending of partition (...) Democracy and practicality demand that this be done in consultation with the representatives of the Irish minority, the Northern unionists (...) We recognise that peace in Ireland requires a settlement of the long-standing conflict between Irish nationalism and Irish unionism. We would like to see that conflict, often bloody, replaced by a process of national reconciliation, a constructive dialogue and debate (...) Irish republicans realise that to achieve national reconciliation the deep fears held by people must be addressed.⁹

At the time of publication of the 1992 document Jim Gibney of Sinn Féin said: 'We know and accept that the British government's departure must be preceded by a sustained period of peace and will arise out of negotiations involving the different shades of Irish nationalism and unionism.'¹⁰

These changes in Sinn Féin policy were not possible without the consent of the IRA. *Towards a Lasting Peace* had been approved by the IRA

⁸ Ibidem, 11.

⁹ Sinn Féin, *Towards*, 10, 14-15.

¹⁰ Brian Feeney, *Sinn Féin. A Hundred Turbulent Years* (Dublin 2002) 379.

army council before the 1992 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis. According to Brendan O'Brien the army council had been divided over the new policy. At the vote chief Sinn Féin negotiator Martin McGuinness had stayed on the side of the hardliners, and the motion was accepted with only a small majority. If O'Briens' assertion is true, it must have been a tactical vote by McGuinness, in order to show the membership that he was deeply committed to the armed struggle. In an interview with him in 2002 McGuinness claimed to always have been behind the peace strategy, and he was indeed involved in it from the start. For the IRA it was a risk to put the use of force up for discussion. The grassroots could have seen it as a sign of weakness and it could have caused a split in the organisation and the establishment of a republican splinter group, as had frequently happened in the past.

It is unclear whether the ordinary members had been involved in the discussions over the change of policy. After a question to this effect McGuinness answered: 'Not in the early stages but as things progressed from the early nineties on, determined attempt was made to bring leadership, middle leadership people into the debate so that there would be an even approach all over the island.'¹¹ On the question if the middle leadership informed members about discussions and changes in strategy he replied:

Well they would at times, but they would only be able to inform them of the general sense, they wouldn't be able to inform them of the detail, because from a negotiating point of view it would clearly undermine our strategy in negotiations if we were putting into the public domain effectively what our approach would be. So we had to be very cautious, but at the same time we had to be very careful to ensure that information was being given to membership on the ground.¹²

Members of the IRA confirm this picture:

You are informed, you know what is happening (...) in everything that happens we know about it weeks in advance. You can't tell everybody what you're going to do. For example in negotiating with the Brits you can't tell (...) you downgrade your negotiating position.

¹¹ Interview with Martin McGuinness, 22 Apr. 2002, I.

¹² Ibidem, II.

You have to trust the leadership in this (...) but we knew things were going on behind the scenes.¹³

Another IRA activist confirmed this. 'There was communication (...) Decisions were taken by the leadership of course, but there was discussion(...) there was no dialogue between different regions, only among ourselves in for example Derry and Kerry. Any discussion was with leadership people.'¹⁴

Discussion did take place of the two policy papers: *A Scenario for Peace* and *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland*. According to McGuinness 'they were widely read and there was much commentary and discussion and debate within Sinn Féin.'¹⁵ On the question if the grassroots were involved in the reformulation of policy in *Towards a Lasting Peace*, McGuinness answered:

The party was involved in the discussions and the party was aware of what we were doing, and I mean people knew that we were adopting strategic negotiating positions. We knew, when having changed our strategy or our approach visibly, our desire to have an end to British government rule in our country, they knew that we were still Irish Republicans. The question then became what is the quickest way to set in chain a set of circumstances which would eventually bring that about, and I think in the very beginning republicans were prepared to go down this (...) I suppose from our point of view it was a very risky strategy, but it wasn't that risky, because we had great faith in the intelligence of our membership.¹⁶

From the above can be concluded that the grassroots were informed only up to a certain point. They were not directly involved in the discussions leading to the change of strategy in 1992. The launch of *Towards a Lasting Peace* in 1992 did engender discussion though. Apparently the republican rank and file thought the movement was adopting strategic negotiating positions, and in spite of the changed rhetoric they accepted that the leadership continued to strive for an end to British rule and a reunification of Ireland. The policy had been reformulated in such a way that it would not cause significant numbers to leave the movement. Furthermore, at the

¹³ Anonymous interview, 20 Apr. 2002.

¹⁴ Anonymous interview, 20 Apr. 2002.

¹⁵ Interview with Martin McGuinness, 22 Apr. 2002, I.

¹⁶ Ibidem, V-VI.

vote on *Towards a Lasting Peace* at the Ard Fheis Adams and McGuinness set an example for the whole movement by jointly stepping up the podium and voting in favour off the change.

The 1992 document was of great importance to the peace process because it slowly prepared the republican grassroots for and convinced them off the need to move from a combined military and political strategy to a purely political approach. By slightly changing the rhetoric in a carefully orchestrated step-by-step process everybody within the republican movement was kept onboard.

Towards a Cease-Fire

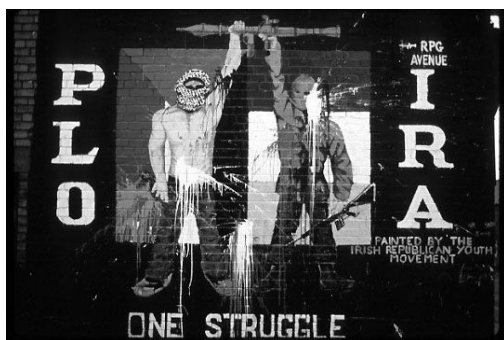
Subsequent to the Hillsborough Agreement Peter Brooke had started talks with the constitutional parties of Northern Ireland to try and find a new form of devolved government. The talks took place intermittently throughout 1991 and 1992 but were postponed each time without result. Sinn Féin had not been invited to the talks, and in response the IRA had launched a bomb campaign to show the British such an attempt was irrelevant without them. However, as a cease-fire was a precondition to allowing Sinn Féin into the talks this did not have any immediate effect. A cease-fire was, however, not that easy to institute as many in the IRA were suspicious of politics and not fond of cease-fires, particularly in light of the disastrous truce of 1975.¹⁷ In the republican perspective the British had used this cease-fire to get a rest from bomb attacks while safely gathering intelligence on the IRA. The consequences were put by an IRA activist:

You see (...) the people in the leadership of the movement, be it Sinn Féin or be it the IRA, in the 1975 cease-fire what was decided then was that there would never be another open ended cease-fire. The IRA would not do that. That was inculcated into the minds of activists.¹⁸

¹⁷ After the 1975 truce the British had almost beaten the IRA. As a consequence the IRA had changed her strategy from an urban to a rural campaign, and had reorganized the army into a cell structure, thus making it more difficult for the British to infiltrate or gather intelligence.

¹⁸ Interview with Hugh Feeney, 23 Apr. 2002, XIX.

To assure the grassroots and show that politics did not get preference over the armed struggle, changes in favour of political means therefore always paradoxically coincided with an increase in the armed struggle.



Afb. 1 IRA-
muurschildering

This time Sinn Féin was kept informed by the British government about the progress in the talks, to make sure the internal debate within the republican movement was not undermined. The government was aware of this discussion through the Hume/Adams talks and the secret contacts with the republican movement, which had been initiated in 1990. In it a former priest, Denis Bradley, and two other Derry Catholics functioned as mediators between McGuinness and two MI5 agents. A third MI5 agent with the codename Fred delivered the messages to the British government through the secretary of the NIO, John Chilcott. This complicated arrangement and the active role taken by the mediators meant that the content of the messages was sometimes altered to bring the two sides closer to each other. Sinn Féin later claimed that in one of those secret contacts, on 14 December 1992, the British Government had requested whether a cease-fire was possible:

He inquired about the possibility of a unilateral cease-fire by the IRA. He was advised that this was highly improbable. He inquired about the possibilities of the IRA easing off in the context of a talks situation and was informed that advice on this would be sought.¹⁹

In the beginning of 1993 the British government claims to have received a message from McGuinness, which he denies to have written, and which

¹⁹ Sinn Féin, *Setting the Record Straight. A Record of Communications between Sinn Féin and the British Government October 1990-November 1993* (1993) 22.

stated: 'the conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close.'²⁰

In this exchange the republican leaders had gotten the impression from the mediators that the British and Irish governments were searching for a way to involve Sinn Féin in the talks, and they realised a cease-fire would be a precondition. At the Ard Fheis in February 1993, McGuinness mentioned the possibility of being included in the talks process and said it was necessary to have an open and flexible approach and to be ready for radical initiatives.²¹ While not saying it out loud McGuinness meant a truce. It was only a slight change of rhetoric, but a clear sign that the republican movement slowly started to prepare her grassroots. In 1992 the IRA had also started to replace quartermasters in charge of weapon depots to make sure militant members would not have direct access to the weapon stores.

In March 1993 the British reacted to McGuinness' alleged message, by requesting an armistice of two weeks to show that the IRA leadership had control over the army, and sincerely wanted to end the conflict. Unfortunately an IRA bomb exploded on 22 March in Warrington, killing a ten year old boy. A secret meeting had been scheduled for the day after, but the British government representative decided not to go. The meeting nevertheless took place with McGuinness and Gerry Kelly as Sinn Féin mediators for the IRA, and Fred and Denis Bradley for MI5. Fred tried to convince McGuinness and Kelly that any cease-fire would lead to the immediate entrance of Sinn Féin into the talks. A month later the IRA did secretly offer a nominal truce to the British government. There would be no official declaration, but there would be a cessation of armed hostilities for two weeks. Another IRA bomb in the financial heart of London causing 350 million pounds of damage hardened the government's attitude. They extended their demand from two weeks to three months but were slow to communicate this to the IRA. In the absence of a government response to their offer, the Opera House in London was bombed by the IRA on 20 May and the British government put her proposal on ice.

At the same time the Hume/Adams talks led the Irish Government to initiate a joint Irish/British initiative for Northern Ireland. While their negotiations started, the Irish journalist Eamonn McCann found out about the secret meetings between Hume and Adams. The ensuing media furore

²⁰ Eamon Mallie and David McKittrick, BBC documentary *The Endgame* (1999) episode 2.

²¹ O'Brien, *The Long*, 267

forced Hume and Adams to explain their position. They admitted they were having a dialogue, that in their view an internal Northern Irish solution for the conflict was not an option, and that the people of Ireland as a whole had a right to self-determination. On basis of the results of the Hume/Adams talks the Irish government suggested a joint declaration to the British government. The British Prime Minister rejected the proposal in public and informed Taoiseach Albert Reynolds that he just could not publicly wear it, as the unionists would never accept a joint declaration that in their perspective would smell of republican terrorists. The republican movement had initially approved the proposal but had become afraid that British acceptance and a lack of preparation of their grassroots would get them into trouble. John Major's rejection gave them more time to generate support for a peace initiative in the movement. On 20 June, McGuinness made clear political means was the way forward: 'Our voters are freedom voters (...) who voted for the Sinn Féin peace strategy which is now a central part of our function as a political party (...) We are all going to have to make the first move. There will be no turning back.'²²

The 1994 cease-fire

In September 1993 the republican movement had still not received an answer from the British government on their cease-fire offer. The intermediaries wanted to move things forward and revealed the exchanges to John Hume. He then discussed it with Adams and they decided to publicly disclose the results of their dialogue, to try to pressurise the British government into involving Sinn Féin in negotiations. On the 26th they gave a press conference stating that the results of their dialogue, which could form the basis for peace negotiations, would be presented to the Irish government. In secret a report was also sent to the British government. The preconditions that were put forward in the report were formulated in such a way that it would help the republican movement to maintain her members' support for the peace process.

The most important precondition was a recognition by the British government of the Irish right to self-determination. They also wanted a clear time-span in which legislation would be passed to allow for the execution of this right. If the British would declare this publicly, it would be

²² *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 24 June 1993, 8-10.

clear in what time-span the republican goal of a United Ireland could be obtained. Together with the argument that a broad nationalist front with the SDLP and the Irish government would be much more likely to bring about a United Ireland than a continuation of the war, the republican leadership figured that they could convince their grassroots of the merits of a truce.

The situation was complicated in late November by the leaking to the press by a source in the NIO (Northern Ireland Office) of the secret contacts between the republican movement and the British Government. To take away the impression that a secret deal had been done with the British government Sinn Féin published a document called *Setting the record straight. A record of communications between Sinn Féin and the British government October 1990 – November 1993*. As a result everybody could see that the British had not responded to the initial IRA offer of a cease-fire.

The revelations by Sinn Féin were followed on 15 December by the presentation of the Downing Street Declaration by Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Reynolds. There had been tough last minute negotiations between the Irish government and the British government, and the declaration therefore differed considerably from the initial Hume/Adams proposal. The declaration did include the precondition of self-determination, but it was heavily qualified:

The British government (...) will uphold the democratic wish of a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland on the issue of whether they prefer to support the Union or a sovereign united Ireland (...) Their primary interest is to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement among all the people who inhabit the island (...) The role of the British Government will be to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of such agreement over a period through a process of dialogue and cooperation based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland. The British Government agree that it is for the people of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish. They reaffirm as a binding obligation that they will, for their part, introduce the necessary legislation to give effect to this²³.

²³ O'Brien, *The Long*, 299.

In the republican perspective the clause on self-determination meant a confirmation of the unionist veto, but although they thought Reynolds should have stood firm in the negotiations with the British, they did not say it publicly. It was important to uphold the image of a broad nationalist consensus and they had known beforehand that the British would play it tough. As McGuinness said:

But all sorts of agreements were made with the Irish government, as indeed the Downing Street Declaration. But they were made knowing that ultimately the Irish government would have to go to John Major, the British prime minister and effectively go into a whole new negotiation with him about the content of any such declaration. And we knew that there would be an attempt made by the British government to claw back the agreements that were made between ourselves and the SDLP and the Irish government.²⁴

An important clause in the declaration stated that paramilitary organisations would be allowed to enter the negotiations after a cease-fire. Reynolds had assured Sinn Féin and the IRA that there was no time limit connected to the cease-fire, to make it more attractive for them.

The British and Irish Governments reiterate that the achievement of peace must involve a permanent end to use of, or support for, paramilitary violence. They confirm that, in these circumstances, democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the Governments and the political parties on the way ahead.²⁵

The clause could be explained in different ways: on the one hand the republican movement could read in it that if they would announce a cease-fire, it would mean that they would abide by the democratic process, and consequently they would be invited to the talks. The British could make of it though that the IRA would have to show over a period of time that they abided by the democratic process and then, in due course, would be invited to the negotiations.

²⁴ Interview with Martin McGuinness, 22 Apr. 2002, V.

²⁵ O'Brien, *The Long*, 422.

In response to the declaration the republican movement made every effort to convince the grassroots to accept the declaration and support a cease-fire. In January 1994 Sinn Féin set up a Peace Commission to evaluate the Downing Street Declaration, and to measure support for a cease-fire. Meetings with IRA activists were held in all parts of the country:

Throughout the spring of 1994 there were meetings of republican activists at several venues across the North. Prisoners with maximum “street cred”, like Bik McFarlane, were released on parole by the NIO to tell activists that the prisoners supported “the Irish Peace Initiative”.²⁶

The IRA prisoners had a very important role to play in convincing the grassroots to support the peace process. The prisoners were veterans that had been in and out of prison or in hiding their whole life, and had a great standing within the movement. A former IRA activist conveyed in an interview:

In Belfast certainly there was a large meeting of activists in the Conway Mill (...) We were told as much as we could be told at that time and the people who chaired the meeting, Jim Gibney and, if I remember correctly, Tom Hartley, and they took questions and answers from the floor and explained as much as they were able to explain at that time (...) Unlike that period in 1975, when the IRA leadership and Sinn Féin said that they were talking to the British, who had told them they were going to withdraw from Ireland. The leadership of the republican movement then in 1994, had never at no stage said: look we’ve done a deal with the Brits they’re going. They said: we’ve been involved in talks, there has been no deal done, these talks are open ended, we see what comes out of them. But our objective remains as it has always been, to cause the British to withdraw from Ireland (...) People knew that they were told the truth. Which was a very important thing to do, because that kept people on board. And it didn’t build up any false hopes.²⁷

The process of convincing the grassroots was absolutely necessary, as the IRA brigades had initially opposed the Downing Street Declaration: ‘Overall

²⁶ Feeney, *Sinn Féin*, 402.

²⁷ Interview with Hugh Feeney, 23 Apr. 2002, XIV.

the IRA brigades came out about ninety to ten against the Declaration as it stood.²⁸

The leaders did not support the declaration either, but emphasised that participation in the peace negotiations could lead to a United Ireland. Adams argued that the British had for the first time recognised, if heavily qualified, that the Irish people as a whole had the right to self-determination, and: 'It is logical that if the British recognise this right that they then cannot presume to dictate how this right is exercised.'²⁹ On the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis of 26-7 February McGuinness was critical of the British, but also made clear that the republican movement should be prepared to announce a cease-fire:

To the British demand that for Sinn Féin to be involved in talks, the guns must not be at the table, he said: "fair enough, but I think we should go just a little further. Let everyone leave all the guns, British and Irish, outside the door (...) If the British are prepared to say that the unionists will not have a veto over British government policy and that guns, vetos and injustices will all be left outside the door, then there is no good reason why talks cannot take place."³⁰

By taking a hard stance towards the British, McGuinness showed he was still a hardliner, while at the same time condoning a cease-fire.

To aid the leadership in their attempts the Irish Government tried to show the republican movement the benefits of a cease-fire. The lifting of the Broadcast Ban against Sinn Féin on 11 January had a major impact:

The result was cataclysmic, not just among the general public, but most importantly within the republican heartlands of the North which had felt demonised and abandoned by the South for most of the conflict. Reynolds was building up trust, showing he would deliver on his word.³¹

Reynolds also successfully lobbied President Bill Clinton to arrange a visa for Adams. Against the advice of the U.S. Justice and State Departments,

²⁸ O'Brien, *The Long*, 303.

²⁹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 06 Jan. 1994, 5.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 3 Mar. 1994, 6.

³¹ O'Brien, *The Long*, 308.

Clinton agreed. Adams attended a peace conference organised by Irish-Americans to prepare Irish-Americans for a cease-fire:

Adams and his entourage (...) were mollifying republican supporters in the USA, many of whom were actually more militant than the IRA in Ireland. Their message to them was that there was no sell-out of republican principles. Adams was as anxious to avoid a split among republicans in the USA as he was to avoid a split in Ireland. The last thing he needed was sympathisers in the USA prepared to finance dissidents in Ireland, which, as Adams knew only too well, was exactly what had happened in 1970.³²

During his stay in the U.S. Adams was invited to several television interviews, like the Larry King Show, and became something of a celebrity. The visa proved to be a big propaganda coup for the republicans, adding American support to their campaign. The need for such international support was clear to many within the movement: 'Irish republicans by themselves simply do not possess the political strength to bring about the aims outlined above.'³³ Not only did the republicans have the Irish government and the SDLP in Ireland behind them; they now had international support in the form of the President of the United States as well.

On 24 July 1994 Sinn Féin held a special conference in Letterkenny, to formulate an official reaction to the joint declaration:

The Downing Street Declaration is not, nor do its authors claim it to be, a peace settlement(...) it does mark a further stage in the peace process(...) Sinn Féin is convinced that, despite the inadequacies of the declaration, the potential to build upon a real process still exists(...) Sinn Féin therefore commits itself to advancing the peace process and to creating the foundation for a lasting peace by building on the positive elements contained in the Downing Street Declaration, by attempting to overcome the difficulties which still exist – in short, by bridging the gaps between what is contained in the Irish Peace Initiative and the Downing Street Declaration.³⁴

³² Feeney, *Sinn Féin*, 405.

³³ Anonymous Source.

³⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 28 July 1994, 8-9.

The most important argument in support of the declaration was to consider it simply as a step in the peace process. A basis for further negotiations that could lead to the republican goal of a United Ireland. The final element in selling a cease-fire to the members was the visa Reynolds arranged for Joe Cahill, a convicted IRA 'terrorist' who had been deported twice from the United States for collecting money. In lieu of the circumstances Clinton had demanded and obtained guarantees from the IRA. For the republican leaders it was important to show that the visa for Adams had not been a once off event. A day after Cahill arrived in the USA on 31 August 1994, the IRA announced a cease-fire:

Recognising the potential of the current situation and in order to enhance the democratic peace process and underline our definitive commitment to its success the leadership of Oglaiigh na hEireann have decided that as of midnight, Wednesday, 31 August, there will be a complete cessation of military operations. All of our units have been instructed accordingly.³⁵

Besides the argument that in the current constellation peaceful means were more productive than the armed struggle in bringing the republicans closer to their goal, there were some additional arguments that helped convince the grassroots. According to several activists the IRA leadership had stated the cease-fire was only temporary. A permanent cease-fire was considered unacceptable to the rank and file.³⁶ One activist said that *the* argument to sell the cease-fire – an argument never mentioned publicly – had been that the unionists would never want to work together with republicans, and would cause the peace process to collapse. Sinn Féin would then look good as the peacemaker, while the unionists would get the blame for causing the process to collapse.³⁷ From one of McGuinness' answers it can be deduced that this was indeed the republican leaderships reasoning:

The British government were outmanoeuvred, the unionists were outmanoeuvred. And at the same time republicans were propelled into a strategy which would see them having to continue to make the pace, and even continue to take initiatives, which would ensure that

³⁵ Ibidem, 1 Sep. 1994, 1.

³⁶ Anonymous Interview, 17 Apr. 2002 and Interview with Hugh Feeney, 23 Apr. 2002.

³⁷ Anonymous Interview, 17 Apr. 2002.

they effectively held the moral high ground as the people who had brought the peace about.³⁸

IRA activists also had their own reasons to support the cease-fire. One activist said that he realised peace was inevitable. What was the alternative? Another 30 years of war? It was better to get a voice in politics. If the war was not won after 30 years, it would not be won in the future either.³⁹ A former IRA activist clarified how they reasoned:

And as a personal opinion, I think after Loughall, when many IRA volunteers died, the impact that had on their community was such that to have gone out and fought the war with the British, if that's what it would have meant, communities couldn't have sustained that. And certainly the ranks of the IRA weren't being filled overnight to put new volunteers in those positions (...) So when the cease-fire came, people recognized that (...) the tempo of the war had been reduced to such an extent that it really wasn't achieving its goals, so politics had to be the way forward.⁴⁰

The shoot-to-kill policy of the British in general made a lot of activists think: "There were a lot of personal losses, the people that died were often good friends, and if you were on the run you could not go to the funeral."⁴¹ Another activist argued that especially the older activists, who had been in prison or on the run for most of their lives and had lost many comrades, thought the cease-fire was a good decision. A republican supporter claimed that the war had disadvantaged the nationalist people, who often died or were jobless, whilst the unionists profited from the war because a lot of their jobs were connected to the security forces in Northern Ireland.⁴²

Underlying all these arguments was the absolute trust most of the rank and file had in the leadership, which allowed them to take the movement where it would otherwise not have ventured:

so when the cease-fire did come about, there was enough confidence in the movement, a confidence which had been brought about

³⁸ Interview with Martin McGuinness, 22 Apr. 2002, VIII.

³⁹ Anonymous Interview, 17 Apr. 2002.

⁴⁰ Interview with Hugh Feeney, 23 Apr. 2002, XVIII-XIX.

⁴¹ Anonymous Interview, 20 Apr. 2002.

⁴² Anonymous Interview, 10 Apr. 2002.

because of their stewardship of the movement over a long period of time, for people to put their confidence in them and believe what they were being told.⁴³

A small minority did not accept the arguments in favour of the peace strategy and left the movement to form the Continuity Army Council.

The cease-fires and the Good Friday Agreement



Afb. 2 Unionistische kijk op Adams

The cease-fire was however not followed by an invitation for Sinn Féin to all party talks. In response to unionist objections the British government put a number of obstacles in Sinn Féin's way to the negotiating table. The first barrier was the demand for a permanent truce, closely followed by the second barrier: the demand that the IRA would decommission her weapons before Sinn Féin would be allowed to join in the talks. The unionists did not want to talk to Sinn Féin, and since John Major depended on the unionists for a majority in the House of Commons, he was unable to force them. Reynolds tried to convince the British otherwise and

Clinton tried to facilitate the process by stimulating economic aid and investment conferences for Northern Ireland, by appointing Senator George Mitchell as head of a decommissioning commission and by visiting the North himself. To no avail though, the remainder of 1994 and the whole of 1995 were lost to quibbling over the conditions under which Sinn Féin would be allowed into talks.

The IRA also lost one of the advocates of their cause when Taoiseach Reynolds was replaced by John Bruton in December 1994.

⁴³ Interview with Hugh Feeney, 23 Apr. 2002, XIX.

Bruton tried to force the issue by insisting that the IRA should decommission and refusing to talk to Hume and Adams directly. This seemed like the end of the nationalist front and at this point Adams lost the support of the IRA army council for the cease-fire. At the same time Major ignored the advice of George Mitchell that decommissioning should take place parallel to the negotiations, but supported the unionist proposal for elections to a Belfast forum. All this caused the IRA to lose faith in the process and on 9 February 1996 a large IRA bomb exploded at Canary Wharf in London causing £85 million of damage and two deaths. The cease-fire was officially broken.

Undeterred the British and Irish governments started all-party talks without Sinn Féin on 10 June 1996. In their absence these had no clear results. The peace process was only reignited when the Conservative party lost the elections by a landslide to the Labour party of Tony Blair in May 1997. Blair was not depended on the unionists for a majority and he decided to make peace in Northern Ireland one of his principal objectives. A change of government also took place in the Republic of Ireland, where Bruton was replaced by Bertie Ahern. Like Blair he considered peace in the North the highest priority on his agenda. Soon after his election, Blair announced that there would be explorative talks with Sinn Féin. The new Northern Ireland minister, Mo Mowlam, made clear that six weeks after a new cease-fire Sinn Féin would be included in all-party talks. All the elements were in place again: the nationalist front had been repaired and a responsive British government was elected. Consequently the IRA renewed her cease-fire on 20 July 1997.

Sinn Féin then entered the negotiations on 10 September 1997, causing Paisley's DUP to leave the talks. At the start of October the IRA held an Army Convention. A dispute developed over Sinn Féin's acceptance of decommissioning. Adams and McGuinness tried to keep the dissidents on board by stating that only Sinn Féin had agreed to this and not the IRA. At the same time dissidents – like the Quartermaster General – were replaced by supporters of Adams and McGuinness. The militants saw the pledge to decommission as a betrayal of republican principles, and split off from the IRA to form the Real IRA.

The all-party negotiations lasted until 10 April 1998 when the GFA was signed. The DUP, representing approximately 30% of the unionist electorate, did not sign the agreement. The main reason David Trimble got his Ulster Unionist Party to support the agreement, was the guarantee from Blair that the IRA would have to start decommissioning right away. This

was not part of the GFA, which stated decommissioning had to take place over a period of two years. This discrepancy would later lead to many explosive debates and problems in implementing the GFA.

Sinn Féin and the IRA started a campaign to sell the GFA to the grassroots. To help promote the agreement, the NIO released some IRA prisoners on parole. The stipulation of the GFA that prisoners would be released over a period of two years was one of Sinn Féin's most important arguments that political means delivered direct dividends. In interviews several IRA activists mentioned the same argument for supporting the peace process and the GFA: they did not want the next generation to suffer the same fate as they had, being imprisoned or on the run for most of their lives. They wanted children, including protestant children, to have a future without war.⁴⁴

At the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis of 10 May 1998 Adams called upon those present to support the GFA as a step on the way to a United Ireland: 'It is important that we all realise that the peace process is not concluded. The Good Friday Document is another staging post on the road to a peace settlement (...) But British rule has not ended. Neither has partition. That is why our struggle continues.'⁴⁵ The Northern Ireland Assembly, which would govern Northern Ireland, was presented not as an internal but as an interim solution. The Assembly would give Sinn Féin influence on the rule of Northern Ireland. This may seem trivial, but it defined a big leap in republican thinking, in which a Northern-Irish government had always been unacceptable because it confirmed the partition of Ireland.

Another big concession in the GFA, the changing of the territorial claim on Northern Ireland in the Irish Constitution, was also defended by Adams:

While Sinn Féin has made it clear that we are not opposed to changes in the Irish constitution we do accept that there is a real and justified concern at the changes in articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution (...) We should also note that what is proposed in the

⁴⁴ Anonymous interviews, 17 Apr. 2002 and 20 Apr. 2002 and interview with Hugh Feeney, 23 Apr. 2002.

⁴⁵ *Report of the Ard Fheis on May 10th 1998*, Presidential Address by Gerry Adams, 2, 4-5.

change to article 2 will confirm a constitutional right to Irish citizenship for the people in the six counties.⁴⁶

Although the Republic of Ireland gave up her territorial claim, thereby accepting British ownership of the land, she also gave everyone born on the island of Ireland, including the North, automatic citizenship.

More positive was the establishment of North-South Institutions monitored by an All Ireland Ministerial Council, which would create cooperation on an all-Ireland basis, and give the Irish government influence on Northern Irish affairs. Republicans view the institutions as a step on the way to a United Ireland. By cooperation with the Republic of Ireland in the social, economical and political fields, both parts of Ireland would slowly come together. At that time most Republicans believed that in twenty to twenty-five years unionists would thus recognise that a reunification of Ireland would be in their advantage.⁴⁷

Because even before the institutions were set up it was quite clear that many business people and economists, even within the unionist community, recognised that the division of Ireland in terms of economics was a nonsense (...) And it is that I think will grow, that there will be a percentage of people within unionism who will agree that a United Ireland is inevitable. And who can be convinced in referendums that will take place further up the road, to vote for an end to British rule and for the establishment of a 32 county Republic.⁴⁸

Other improvements for republicans were the dismantling of British army posts; the reduction of British troops and the abolition of emergency legislation in the North symbolising a commencement of a British

⁴⁶ Ibidem, Presidential Address by Gerry Adams, 3-4 and *Ard Chomhairle* Emergency Resolution Number 2, 4.

⁴⁷ In Article 1, point iv of the Agreement between the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the government of Ireland, it is stated that: The two governments affirm that, if in the future, the people of the island of Ireland exercise their right of self-determination on the basis set out in sections (i) and (ii) above to bring about a United Ireland, it will be a binding obligation on both Governments to introduce and support in their respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish.

⁴⁸ Interview with Martin McGuinness, 22 Apr. 2002, IX-X.

withdrawal from Northern Ireland; a commission for reforming the predominantly protestant, and in Republican eyes extremely sectarian, Northern Irish police force; the assurance of an independent system of justice, and the incorporation of a Bill of Rights in Northern Irish legislation to protect human rights.

Despite all these changes the support of most members for the peace process and the GFA came down again to the immense trust in and loyalty to the republican leadership. In all interviews activists said they trusted the leadership, some even blindly: 'there was enough confidence in the movement, a confidence which had been brought about because of their stewardship of the movement over a longer period of time, for people to put their confidence in them and believed what they were being told.'⁴⁹ The leadership had earned that trust over a long period of time, through their participation in the struggle and their willingness to support the members in the face of public opinion. The presence of Adams and McGuinness at every Sinn Féin or IRA funeral had generated a lot of goodwill towards them:



Afb. 3 McGuinness en Adams dragen de kist van een IRA Volunteer

It was Good Friday, and Saturday I got back to Derry and met a woman who had been in prison and suffered all sorts of hardships. And I said to her: 'well what do you think?' And she says, 'no she says, what do you think?' And I says, 'I think it's okay'. And she said, 'well if it's okay with you, it's okay with me.' People (...) were also very much (...) trusting of the leadership. 'They actually believed that this was a leadership with a real strategy, (...) which could bring us to, in an evolutionary way, the reunification of our country.'⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Interview with Hugh Feeney, 23 Apr. 2002, XIX. See also, Anonymous interviews, 20 Apr. 2002 and 10 Apr. 2002.

⁵⁰ Interview with Martin McGuinness, 22 Apr. 2002, VIII-IX.

Conclusion

In the May 1998 referenda on the GFA, 71.12% of people in the North and 94.4% in the Republic voted in favour of the agreement. The turn-out in the North was 81%, while in the South only 56% voted. The republican leadership had managed to take the movement along with her during the peace process, and had united almost the entire republican grassroots behind the GFA. The two groups that split off, the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA, remained very small. This constituted an enormous and almost unique achievement, considering the big splits that had occurred in their past. This republican leadership had been very careful, and already started preparing her grassroots for the peace process from the early nineties onwards. By slowly changing the republican rhetoric, and by keeping the grassroots informed and involved as far as possible throughout the process, the leadership made sure they did not lose trust.

And trust was ultimately one of the most important reasons for the support of the grassroots in all the changes, the peace process and the GFA. The acceptance by republican activists that they had entered an irreversible military stalemate and their determination not to have another generation grow up with a war, meant the only way forward was peace, politics and reconciliation. And so the peace process continues; unionists, nationalists and republicans now govern Northern Ireland together. There is cooperation between the North and the Republic on social, economical and political issues. Republicans hope that the two parts of Ireland will thus grow together, and unionists will ultimately realise that they are better off in a United Ireland. And why not? Nobody ever thought the IRA would disarm or that Paisley would take his seat in one government with Sinn Féin, but it happened.



Afb. 4 Paisley en McGuinness
starten de nieuwe regering