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An Phoblacht/Republican News

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"Rise to the challenge" - IRA urges parties in talks

Exclusive IRA interview in An Phoblacht

In the first interview since the IRA cessation of 20 July, a spokesperson for the IRA leadership has outlined to *An Phoblacht* the reasons they renewed the cessation and has urged all political parties to play their part and "rise to the challenge this renewed opportunity presents them".

The IRA said movement by the new Labour government in London and the Fianna Fail-led government in Dublin was vital in the scenario which brought about the renewed cessation.

On Sinn Fein's affirmation on Tuesday 9 September of the Mitchell Principles the IRA said:

"All Republicans should understand and support [Sinn Fein] as they do what they believe is right and necessary to bring about a lasting peace. Sinn Féin's stated commitment is to secure a peace settlement which both removes the causes of conflict and takes all the guns, British, Republican, Unionist, Nationalist and Loyalist, out of Irish politics."

For itself the IRA said it "would have problems with sections of the Mitchell principles. But then the IRA is not a participant in these talks".

Full text of interview follows.

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'Rise to the challenge' IRA tells parties

IRA interview

In the first interview since the IRA cessation of 20 July, a spokesperson for the IRA leadership gives an assessment of the political climate in advance of all-party talks

An Phoblacht: The announcement of a renewal of the IRA cessation on 20 July came as a major surprise to most political commentators. What were the key factors or changes in the political climate which influenced the decision to restore the ceasefire?

IRA: Our announcement of a restoration of the cessation of August 1994 certainly did appear to catch most political commentators on the hop. But then many of these commentators regularly call it wrong, particularly with regard to our position.

In any case, the key elements which influenced our decision were that the new British Labour government moved with some speed after taking office to deal with the need for all inclusive negotiations and the new Fianna Fail-led government in the south moved to help put a peace process back on the rails from an Irish point of view.

The previous British government, under John Major, had imposed a number of blocking mechanisms or obstacles to prevent inclusive and meaningful peace talks taking place. The British government had known for sometime that before the IRA would again consider a cessation of military activity they would have to address four key issues:

- 1) The removal of the precondition of decommissioning;
- 2) Setting a time frame for any talks;
- 3) Immediate entry into talks for Sinn Féin on the basis of its democratic mandate;
- 4) Confidence-building measures by the British government.

The new British government moved publicly and speedily to address these issues. They removed the precondition of decommissioning, they set a timeframe for substantive talks of between now and May next year, they made it clear that such talks would be substantive and inclusive when they were convened on 15 September and that bi-lateral meetings would start almost immediately after any announcement of an IRA cessation. They also gave public commitments to move on a series of confidence-building measures, including POWs, the Irish language and issues of equality of treatment.

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Both London and Dublin governments have also committed themselves to the start of negotiations on substantive issues from 15 September.

An Phoblacht: Do you believe there will be all-party negotiations on 15 September?

IRA: Well, I believe that all-party negotiations are absolutely necessary for the resolution of the conflict between the British government and the Irish people. I therefore believe them to be inevitable. Those elected representatives who would refuse to participate in all-party negotiations are wreckers trying to hold back the tide of history. For our part, we took an initiative in August '94 to enhance the potential for a meaningful peace process. That historic opportunity was run into the sand. We now have a second opportunity. We have played our part in restoring the total cessation of August '94. It is for others to play their part and rise to the challenge this renewed opportunity presents them.

An Phoblacht: Sinn Féin have affirmed the Mitchell principles. Do you have a view on that and what of your own view on the Mitchell principles themselves?

IRA: Sinn Féin is a political party with a very substantial democratic mandate. What they do is a matter for them. But I think all Republicans should understand and support them as they do what they believe is right and necessary to bring about a lasting peace. Sinn Féin's stated commitment is to secure a peace settlement which both removes the causes of conflict and takes all the guns, British, Republican, Unionist, Nationalist and Loyalist, out of Irish politics. The Sinn Féin position actually goes beyond the Mitchell principles. Their affirmation of these principles is therefore quite compatible with their position.

As to the IRA's attitude to the Mitchell Principles per se, well, the IRA would have problems with sections of the Mitchell principles. But then the IRA is not a participant in these talks.

An Phoblacht: Let me go to the issue of "consent". Is there confusion out there as to the republican version of consent?

IRA: There shouldn't be but there is no doubt that the British and Unionists have quite deliberately muddled what should be a clear concept by interpreting consent to mean a political veto. In doing so they have tried to introduce a new precondition into the equation in the same way as they previously tried to make decommissioning a precondition.

For Republicans any political consent requirement must have a straightforward 32 County context. It must recognise the properly defined parameters of nationhood and self-determination as

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understood in international law. Any consent requirement must be defined within the context of British withdrawal and encompass all the people of Ireland. It cannot therefore be shaped with regard to outside impediment or interference. The idea that a minority grouping in Ireland, situated within the Six Counties, should have a veto over political progress in the island as a whole is anathema to Republicans. Unionists, after all, are in the majority in only three of the 32 counties of Ireland. I have no doubt both the Unionists and the British would be among the first to object if someone was to pick any other three counties and suggest they be afforded a similar veto.

An Phoblacht: In the past the IRA have said there will be no decommissioning. Has your position changed in any way with regard to this?

IRA: No, our position on decommissioning has not changed in any way at all. I don't think anyone has ever realistically expected us to agree to decommissioning this side of a political settlement. There is no historical precedent in Ireland for such a demand. Those who raised the issue in the first instance and who continue to hype it are interested only in creating an excuse for their own refusal to engage in meaningful negotiations. The seriousness with which they take the issue can be fairly well measured by their lack of focus on any need to decommission the guns of the RUC, the British army or the 100,000 and more other 'legally' held guns in the Six Counties.

Decommissioning on our part would be tantamount to surrender. It was irresponsible of the last British government to try to use the opportunity provided by our initiative in August 1994 to secure an IRA surrender. It would therefore be doubly irresponsible if the present British government went on that same fruitless pursuit again. Decommissioning should not be allowed to become a distraction from the need for meaningful negotiations. Those with a genuine interest in developing a peace process which has the potential for producing a just and lasting peace will have no interest in decommissioning beyond the point where all guns are silent.

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