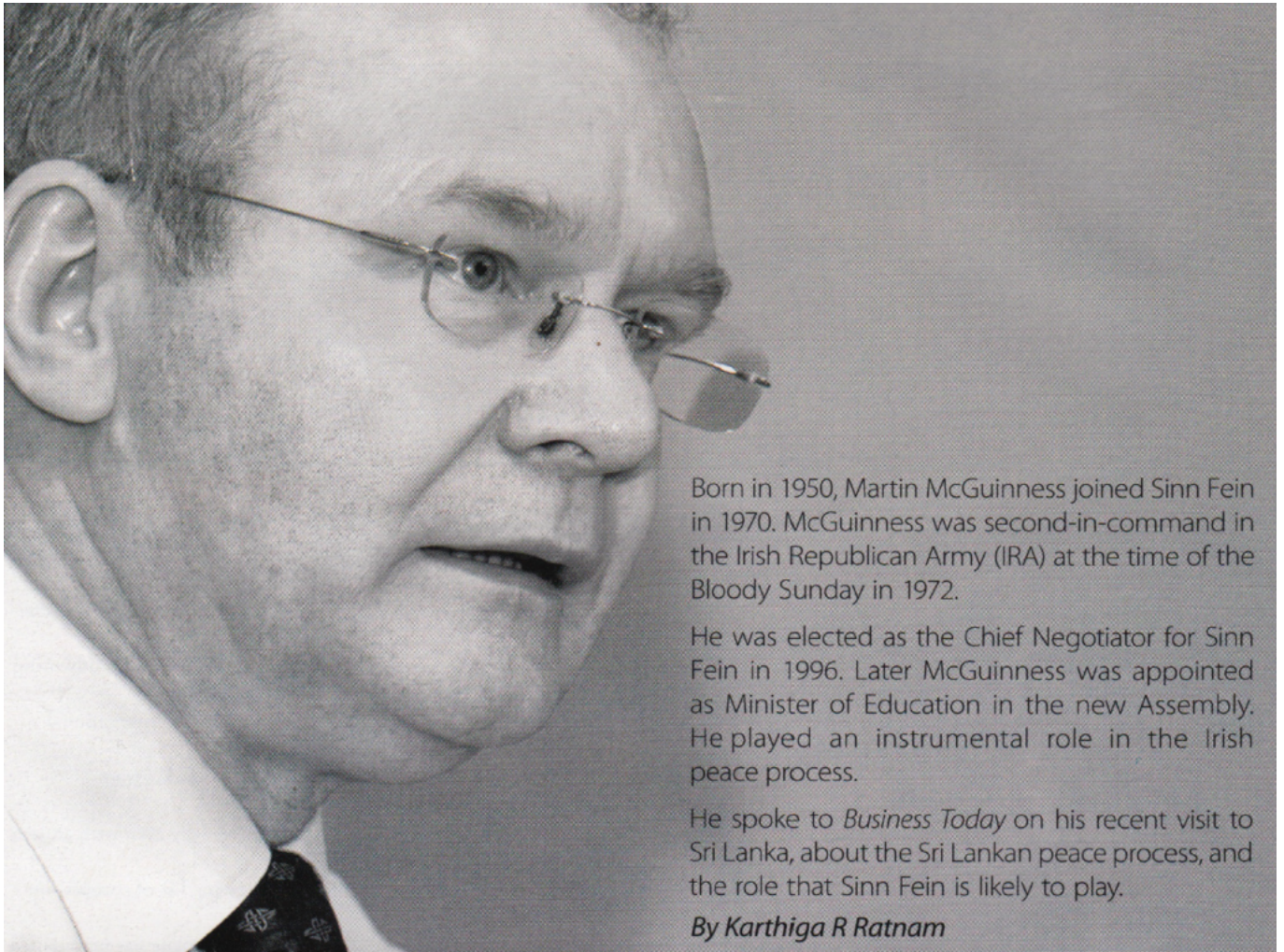


Taking risks for peace

Posted on



Born in 1950, Martin McGuinness joined Sinn Fein in 1970. McGuinness was second-in-command in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) at the time of the Bloody Sunday in 1972.

He was elected as the Chief Negotiator for Sinn Fein in 1996. Later McGuinness was appointed as Minister of Education in the new Assembly. He played an instrumental role in the Irish peace process.

He spoke to *Business Today* on his recent visit to Sri Lanka, about the Sri Lankan peace process, and the role that Sinn Fein is likely to play.

By Karthiga R Ratnam

You have stated: “The peace process is about more than how we remove the guns from politics.” The Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE has been in existence for four years. What more can the government do to engage in peace?

It is crucially important that everyone recognizes that guns, bombings and conflicts are all symptoms of a greater conflict that already exists. In our cities in Northern Ireland, conflict grew out of the fact that the people that I represent were treated as second-class citizens by British Governments, therefore conflict was almost

inevitable.

We had 25 years of war. I do not claim that the situation in Sri Lanka and the situation in Ireland are the same. But I hear people in Tamil areas complain that they have not been treated fairly in the past and they say that the conflict has risen as a result of the injustice that has been imposed upon them.

The conflict really is about the perceived belief that people have not been treated properly in a changing society. So what is absolutely vital in my view is the recognition by everyone that we have a big problem and it needs to be resolved.

In Ireland we had a situation where the Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought against the British Army for approximately 25 years and many British Generals who wrote books and different theses about this declaring that the British Army will never militarily defeat the IRA. Of course many people within the Irish Republic also believed that the IRA could never force every last British soldier out of Belfast or the rest of Northern Ireland. So the tryst was – do we allow the conflict to go on forever or do we try to bring the conflict to an end.

In Ireland, the initiative to bring the conflict to an end came from us, from those who were fighting against the state. The British were almost dumbfounded that the IRA was prepared to move first and call a complete cessation of military operations in the summer of 1994.

Pro British Union leaders did not know how to handle that. Within hours of the IRA calling for a cessation in 1994, the leader of the largest political party on the pro-British side described the IRA decision as the most destabilizing event since Ireland was partitioned. I regard that as the quote of the last 11 years because it gave me a tremendous insight into the thinking of pro-British Unionist leaders at that time.

In Sri Lanka, there is a deterioration situation although there has been a ceasefire in place for the last four years. There appears to be an escalating situation with people losing their lives on all sides. I think that there is a massive responsibility on the political leaders, the political representatives, the military representatives of the Tamil Tigers, and the leaders of the government to move immediately to prevent a slip-age back into war. They also need to commence a new road that will seriously address all of the issues that lie at the heart of this conflict.

The fact that Mr Solheim is visiting from Norway and Mr Balasingham from London,

gives some hope that maybe we will see some developments over the course of the coming period.

We have urged the Sri Lankan Government to move hell and high water to get a political initiative up and running to ensure meaningful negotiations. I also urge Mr Prabhakaran to move hell and high water to contribute to the essential negotiations that will be required to resolve all of these matters.

In the many meetings I have been involved in I have explained that in Ireland there was a ceasefire in 1972 that lasted a few short weeks. There was another one in 1975 that lasted almost a year. From this point it took almost 20 years before the IRA called an all out ceasefire. It would be an absolute tragedy if Sri Lanka were to wait for a decade or two before we see an all out ceasefire here.

Everybody who has a brain in their heads must know that ultimately this will have to be resolved by political negotiation. Therefore it is much better to resolve it now than wait and hear tales of thousands of people losing their lives. It would be unforgivable for political or military leaders to allow this situation to happen.

You mentioned that a political solution and disarmament plays a big role in this scenario. The LTTE have refused a disarmament clause in the CFA. How is the Sri Lankan Government supposed to handle this situation?

I have always regarded the existence of weaponry as a symptom of a conflict. So what we see is decommissioning of mindsets – if we take them as mindsets and get into a real negotiation to resolve the conflict, then all these matters in relation to weaponry will be resolved. But people should not use the issue of weapons as a pre-condition to stall talks or to build obstacles to political level situations. I observed people trying that in Ireland and that is a mistake. We have just resolved the issue of arms in Ireland over the last 12 months. The IRA have put all of their weapons beyond use, and called a complete end to the military campaign. We in Sinn Féin have accomplished a pathway to the unity and freedom of our country through political and democratic means. Sri Lanka is obviously a different situation. It is up to the people who live in Sri Lanka to decide what is the best way to deal with that issue. We dealt with the issue of arms in a way that best suited our situation and we have been successful. So this is something that needs to be solved by the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil Tigers as we move forward. Weapons should not be used as an obstacle by anyone.

The IRA accepted federalism. The LTTE is against both federalism and a unitary state. So there is an obvious impasse with the Sri Lankan Government. In your opinion, what is the solution?

In our case as a result of the Good Friday Agreement we brought about a power sharing arrangement where the leaders of the two British Unionist parties must sit in government with ourselves. Sinn Féin has proven to be a large political party in Ireland and the north of Ireland. We could become the largest party in the north of Ireland over the next couple of elections and will take the position of First Minister. We are content to move along with the power-sharing arrangement. As a result of the Good Friday negotiations we have formed an all-Ireland Ministerial Council where ministers from the north and south meet to deal with different issues of accordance to the people – the commerce system, education system, health, environment, and agriculture. We believe that we have created a roadmap for Irish unity through peaceful and democratic means. It is not my responsibility to outline what is the best solution for Sri Lanka. That is a matter solely for the people of Sri Lanka and not a matter for the representatives of all of the political and military groupings that hopefully will engage in an inclusive way in the essential negotiations that are required to take this forward.

What alternative solution do you think the Government of Sri Lanka now has?

It is a matter for the government and all parties of the conflict to resolve amongst themselves. It would be very wrong of me coming from 5,000 miles away to put out my formula as to how Sri Lanka should be governed in the future. That is something that I have no business in. This is strictly a matter for all of the people who live on this island and must be the subject of negotiation between them in the period ahead.

“The message is simple – there can be no military solution, there can be no military victory in this. What is required is dialogue and negotiation, a compromise.”

What kind of role do you see yourself playing in the peace process?

We do not have any delusions of grandeur and we do not pretend that we are

hugely important in the Sri Lankan peace process. At the moment the key players in the process are – the Norwegians as facilitators, the President of Sri Lanka, the representatives of the Tamil Tigers, and all political groupings. All we can do is come to Sri Lanka and relay our experiences on how we resolved the conflict in Ireland. How people choose to use that is a matter for themselves. We are more than willing to do whatever we possibly can to assist. We have some ideas, and others have some ideas about how we can help in the future’. We will not interfere and WL’ are not going to do anything that will make life more difficult for the key negotiators in this situation.

Could you elaborate on those ideas?

We would very much like a first hand opportunity to speak to the actual leadership of the LTTE. I think that would be hugely beneficial for us and also beneficial for them. We hope to take the opportunity and speak to Mr Balasingham if he is willing to engage with us. We will gladly travel from Ireland to meet him in London and we hope that this message can be conveyed to him in the course of our visit here. We expect that it will.

From your experience, what measures can the two parties in this conflict engage in to build confidence?

In our situation we had a bad experience over the course of many centuries with every British Prime Minister. It was only after Tony Blair was elected in 1997 that we made an assessment that we were dealing with a British Prime Minister who was genuinely willing to bring about a change in Britain’s relationship with the island of Ireland. I feel what people have to do is impress one another. You have to take risks for peace. We have to show one another what we are prepared to do and then build confidence. An important factor is key personalities meeting with one another and engaging in real dialogue and building some sort of a relationship as we built a relationship with the British Prime Minister. A big flaw in the Sri Lankan peace process at the moment is that there has never been a meeting between the Head of Government of Sri Lanka and the leader of the LTTE. If such a meeting were to take place it would be a positive contribution to the work that lies ahead.

How do you go about changing the radical mindsets of individuals involved in a warring faction?

The responsibility of the political leaders within any political organization or within

any military force has to be to recognize that they have a duty towards the people who support them, to bring an end to injustice and discrimination in conflict. As a politician I am accurately aware of my responsibilities to the people I represent. The people that I represent passionately want peace. It is my job as a politician to deliver for them. I believe that all of the people of Sri Lanka passionately want peace too. It is the responsibility of Mr Prabhakaran in the north and the President of the country and all political leaders to help bring peace to Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) is an integral part of the CFA. But they have now withdrawn from Trincomalee and previously from Jaffna. What can the Government of Sri Lanka do in this situation?

It will probably be a dangerous situation given that there has been renewed conflict and people are losing their lives. Anything that suggests that we are heading towards a complete breakdown in the CFA has to be viewed as dangerous indeed. This needs to be avoided at all costs and the responsibility to take initiatives lies on all sides. Everybody- the leadership of the LTTE and the Norwegian and Sri Lankan Governments, have to consider the position and hopefully after a period of reflection someone within the process will give confidence by taking an initiative, which will be responded to by all sides. From our perspective, we understand the urgency and seriousness of the situation. Therefore, the best advice that we can give people is to fall back from the brink, recognize the great dangers that lie ahead, and have the courage and strength to have an initiative which will lead to a new round of negotiations. They also need to resolve all the issues that lie at the heart of this conflict.

How is the SLMM's pullout going to affect the confidence in Norway as a facilitator to the peace process?

I think that it is a knock to the confidence. But obviously the role played by Mr Solheim on behalf of the Norwegian Government appears to be an important one where he has gained the respect of all sides. In our peace process we had the participation of Senator George Mitchell from the USA. He was supported by representatives of the Government of Finland and General John de Chastelain on behalf of the Canadian Government. It is essential to continue to encourage the role of the facilitators because at the end of the day some sort of facilitation is required in order to put the negotiation process back in place.

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Do you think that the CFA needs to be reiterated by the Sri Lankan Government?

There needs to be a big effort made to return to the original ceasefire which was called four years ago; the responsibility to put the conditions back in place rests with all sides. Someone needs take an initiative and we are not specifying whom that should be but I attribute equal responsibility to both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government. One side not taking the initiative is not a reason for the other side not to do so. Something desperately needs to be done. Something needs to happen over the course of the visit of Mr Solheim to give new hope and expectation to people all over the island. The citizens need to see the new round of negotiations that are required to get the peace process back on track.

At what cost should there be peace in Sri Lanka?

I cannot make that decision for the people of Sri Lanka. The only people who can decide what should or should not be offered are the people who are the main stakeholders in the conflict that exists here. It is their responsibility during the course of negotiations to put out their own positions and to negotiate. It would be a gross interference on my part to in any way engage in that debate vis-a-vis peace should be at what cost. This is something that can only be decided by the representatives of the Sri Lankan people.

You have met the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE during your visit. What are your thoughts and do you think that there is a chance for peace?

Yes I do think that there is a chance. I understand that many people feel despairingly about the situation. But my message is clear – if the CFA breaks down and Sri Lanka slips back to war, then conceivably they could be in that situation for the next 10 to 20 years. I do not think that this is of any benefit to the Sri Lankan government, the LTTE, the Tamil people, the Muslims or the Sinhalese. It is of no benefit whatsoever to any of these people. It will also be hugely damaging to the country, the economic prosperity of the people and detrimental to the economy. When you consider how much money has actually been spent on fighting a war,

that money can be used to build roads, hospitals, schools, and to provide proper housing and employment for the people. The message is simple – there can be no military solution, there can be no military victory in this. What is required is dialogue and negotiation, a compromise.

Some of the southern parties do not have the confidence in Norway. How can Sinn Fein play an intermediary role?

We would prefer, now that we have been here, to adjust ourselves and to have conversations with people. We would like to go away and think about what we have learned here and develop some of the ideas that we spoke about. But ultimately it is a matter for the people of Sri Lanka to invite us to help. We are more than willing to do that and we are very anxious to help in whatever way we can, but really we need to be asked rather than attempt to impose ourselves on a situation.

What lessons can we learn from the Israel – Palestine situation?

The big lesson that everybody has to learn from an unresolved conflict is that at some stage in the future that conflict is going to be resolved. My word of advice to both Israeli representatives and Palestinian authorities that I met a few years ago was that if you accept this fact, then it is better to do it now. If you have some sense of what the outcome of a negotiation is going to be, in the case of Palestine it's clear – it's a Palestinian State and Palestinians accepting the right of Israel to exist. So if people have a vision of what the outcome is going to be, I do not understand why people will wait five, 10, 15, or 20 years to again embark on negotiations. In the meantime thousands of people lose their lives needlessly and the country effectively descends into a state of war. So this is the lesson that must be learned. There is an urgent need for a new round of negotiations and now is the time to do it – not in five, 10 or 20 years time.

Al Qaeda is threatening the Western world. What can the western countries and governments do to counter the threat of Al Qaeda?

There is no doubt that Al Qaeda is a huge threat to world peace. But there is a huge responsibility on Western leaders to recognize that the opening up of the gulf between East and West is a damaging development and something that needs to be repaired as quickly as possible. Western leaders and everybody in the East need to recognize that it is not in the interest of this planet to see the next century dominated by this type of strife and conflict between the East and West. This is

debilitating and dangerous for the planet, and it's something that needs to be avoided at all costs. Everybody needs to be very careful about every step that they take. This is why we have clearly stated that we are opposed to the war in Iraq. We believe that it has been a damaging development on the world stage. The major danger is that nobody knows where all this is going to lead; we have just got a sense that if it continues, we are going to see further outbreaks of conflict in different areas around the world. Something needs to be done to resolve this and that is why the role of the United Nations (UN) is critical. But the UN has been sidelined by the USA in the decision to go to war in Iraq. All the political leaders in the West need to reflect very deeply on where we find ourselves at the moment and put in place programs and strategies which will see the West stretch out the hands of friendship to our fellow human beings in the East. We are part of a very small planet, so everything we do is interconnected. Therefore, there is a huge responsibility to recognize that the imminent dangers that lie ahead are almost akin to a possible breakout of a third world war.

Bill Clinton recently stated that Tony Blair would make a good Secretary General to the UN. What are your views?

Firstly, we need a strengthened UN. We need a more powerful UN organization that can prevent governments moving off on their own and doing their own thing without any consideration of the repercussions for the wider world. This is actually the most important aspect. I was not aware that Bill Clinton had stated that Tony Blair would make a good Secretary General. Tony Blair has certainly been very good for the peace process in Ireland and he was the first British Prime Minister to do things differently, given our colonial past. Whether or not he will be interested in being the Secretary General of the UN - I cannot speak for him - but this is certainly something that he can answer for himself. But the reality of his involvement in the invasion of Iraq alongside the USA does raise questions about his judgement in the international arena. Gerry Adams and I discussed these matters with Tony Blair long before they took the decision to go into Iraq. We made clear that, obviously we are a very small political party compared to his role as the head of government, but we thought that we had a duty and a responsibility to tell him very clearly where we stood - that we were opposed to the war in Iraq. We also delivered the same message to President George Bush before the decision was made to go into Iraq.

From being the front-man in the IRA to a political leader in Sinn Féin, how did this transformation take place? Do you have any regrets?

I absolutely have no regrets whatsoever. I joined the IRA at a time when the community that I came from was being treated as second-class citizens. We had no other way of opposing the draconian measures that the British were using in order to suppress the demand for civil and political rights, proper housing, and decent jobs. Thus I have absolutely no regrets about my time in the IRA. That said, I have always been very political. I have not always had a sole military mindset and Over the years I have evoked into a senior political figure in Irish Republicanism. My job as a republican politician is to give leadership, even when it is extremely dangerous to do so, and to take risks for peace. Gerry Adams and I came to the conclusion many years ago that we had to develop a peace process in Ireland, a conflict resolution situation, a meaningful process of negotiations, and that we had to collaborate and work together to bring about a situation where others would join in. I think we have successfully done that. Our journey is not yet complete because our primary objective is to establish a 32-county sovereign Republic in Ireland. We want to make peace with our Unionist brothers and sisters. We want to stretch out the hand of friendship. They are fearful and concerned because they obviously see the Good Friday Agreement as a mechanism, which will ultimately bring about a united Ireland. We need to have a genuine dialogue about these matters because when all is said and done we are not their enemy. Many of the divisions that have occurred in Ireland have been the responsibility of successive British Governments down the generations. The colonial mentality of the British has been detrimental for Ireland, as well as other countries around the world, including Sri Lanka in the past. We are now at a position where the work that we have engaged in has fundamentally changed the political and military dynamics on the island of Ireland. We will continue to set about our work with a firm focus on the need to achieve our primary objective.

Could you tell us the qualities that make and define a good political leader?

The leader of my party is Gerry Adams. Politically he and I think very much the same. I believe we have the vision of the future. We have a vision of an Ireland that will be free and independent. We also have an understanding of Ireland's responsibilities in the interim period before we get to that point. As political leaders, we understand our political responsibilities to the people we represent. We see ourselves as politicians who have to make things right. We have to take tough decisions and we have to take risks for peace. We have to be decisive and strong; and go out there and fight the good fight to bring about an improvement in the lives

of all of the people that we represent and also those that we do not represent. We do not just engage in politics to achieve everything for the community that we come from, but we understand that there are other communities and that all of our fortunes and futures are interlinked. So we have a responsibility to all of these people. So it is really about having the vision. It is about having the courage, being decisive and about moving in a determined manner to bring to fruition the objectives that you seek. The other important aspect is to be able to see the other person's point of view. Essentially that is what I think a good leader is about.

