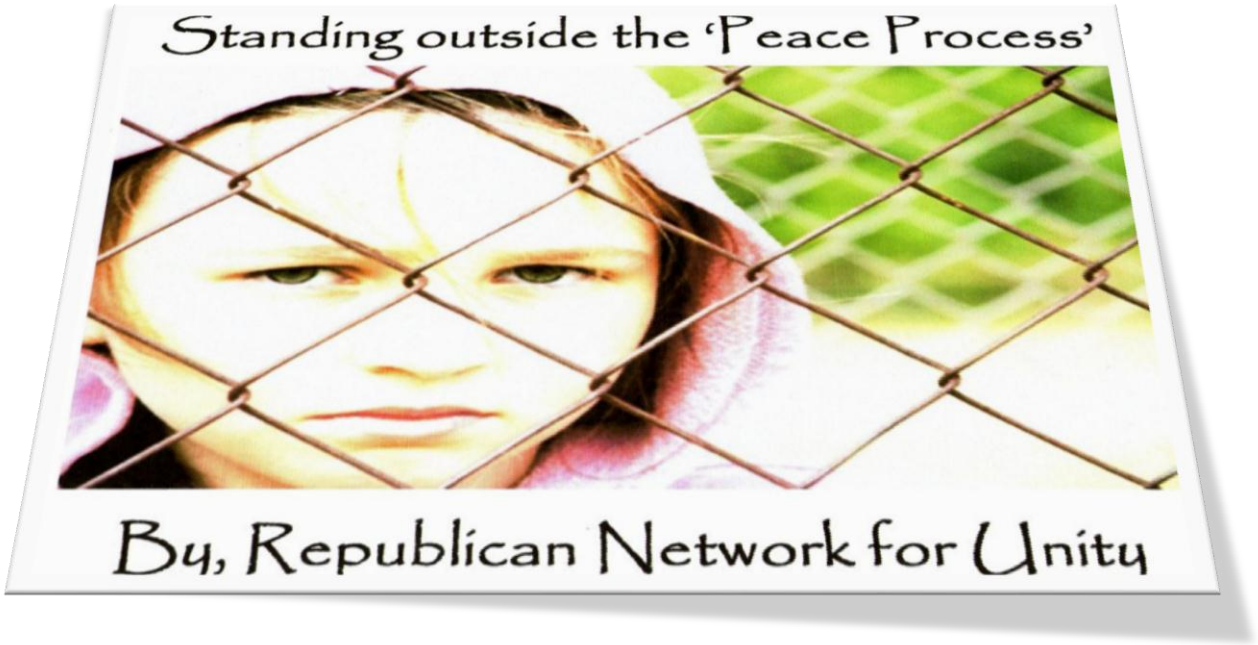


A Revolutionary Republican analysis of the Irish Pacification Process by the Republican Network for Unity.

Introduction

The Ard Comhairle of Republican Network for Unity wishes to thank you for taking the time to read this, our position paper on what is commonly referred to as the 'Irish Peace Process'. This piece is intended as a precursor to a much more substantial and substantive set of policy documents that will be collectively entitled 'Revolutionary Republicanism', due to be released in early 2013.

'Standing outside the peace process' is a basic outline of where we believe Republicanism stands within today's Irish political system, how we think it arrived at this position and why as Irish Republican Socialists, we do not conform to the modern political set up In Ireland.

The main aim of this position paper is to lay the groundwork for the release of 'Revolutionary Republicanism' as well as to provoke and encourage debate and critical engagement on a wide range of issues which that work intends to address.

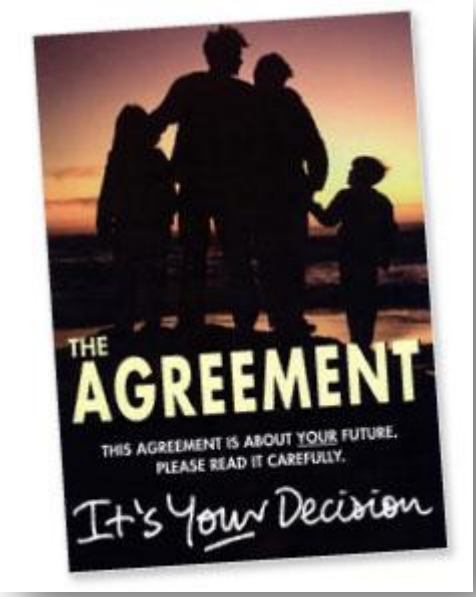
Issues addressed within 'Revolutionary Republicanism' will range from our position on Armed Struggle to suggestions for possible socialist economic frameworks for a New Ireland.

RNU would urge all republicans and socialists to engage with our future policy documents as well as to bring their own visions of the revolutionary alternative, which Irish society requires now more than ever.

Where hope met history?

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was marketed to the Irish people as the Panacea between war and peace. Designed in the hangover of a long, vicious and bitter conflict between Republicanism and the British state, its advocates claimed it was the only alternative to a horrible war which had touched almost every family in the six counties and many beyond that.

The real and bitter suffering endured by so many as a result of that conflict - from actual loss of life and liberty, to the long list of other negative legacies which arise from a long war - made selling the GFA to the people much easier and in particular to the republican and nationalist community, in which there was little or no debate as to the long term political merits of the Agreement itself.



State directed Loyalist death squads such as the LVF and UFF still hovered menacingly over the Catholic community in the years during which the GFA was designed. This spectre of random sectarian murder reminded the Catholic community that a heavy price could be extracted from them, should republicans continue to pursue revolutionary goals in their name.

In practice, the threat from these state sponsored killer gangs along with the continued presence of the British army and RUC provided a deadly coercive influence which made acceptance of the GFA vitally important to the average Catholic/Nationalist voter in 1998.

When packaged as a 'vote for peace' there was little doubt that the nationalist population would tick the box marked 'Yes', and following strong lobbying from both Sinn Fein and the SDLP, this is precisely what happened.

This same dynamic existed at the time of the Anglo Irish treaty in 1922, when Britain evoked the threat of 'immediate and terrible war' in a bid to coerce the people into voting in a way they saw fit.

There was no option for Irish unity on the ballot papers, and if there had been it would hardly have mattered as the outcome of the northern vote [pre-Determined as it was by partition itself] held supreme, regardless of what the rest of the Island wished for.

In this way, the Good Friday Referenda were in reality a continuation of the old partitionist dynamics of the early 1920s, made possible by the same gerrymandered voting arrangements and the same threat of British/Loyalist violence, as had been practiced many decades earlier. Irish history had merely came full circle and found itself back at square one, bar a series of reformist and cosmetic gestures designed to smooth the transition of the IRA into a constitutional movement, entirely absorbed into Sinn Fein structures.

Given that the [once revolutionary] Provisional leadership had by this stage, committed itself to constitutional politics alone, there was little to be gained by them from criticising the internal workings of the Agreement itself.

Furthermore, the failure of Republican negotiators to provide basic safeguards for former combatants and prisoners in the GFA raises questions as to just how far they were willing to turn their backs on activists amongst their own ranks, (not to mention future political prisoners) in the pursuit of political ambition.

Good Friday even provided for the imprisonment of its own supporters, as was later seen in the case of Sinn Fein representative Gerry McGeough, who upon voicing disapproval at his former party's support for the PSNI found himself arrested and imprisoned for actions he undertook decades earlier in a time of war.

Many other former republican prisoners have had their release licences revoked in response to voicing or acting in a fashion critical of the Good Friday Agreement, and in effect hundreds of former POWs are today being held as hostages of their own conscience as a result, fearful of being returned to Gaol should they resume revolutionary politics.

And if Sinn Fein could get things so wrong on the welfare of Republican prisoners, then the question must be asked, did they get it wrong on the constitutional issue also?

The virtual interment of its political opponents today along with the coercion of the wider Nationalist population in 1998 shows just how counter revolutionary a settlement the GFA actually was.

However, it is its many other aspects and dynamics which also dispel utterly, claims that the Good Friday Agreement could be used as a vehicle to deliver credible republican aspirations, and which explain why true revolutionaries, Irish republican socialists can have no truck with it.

Inherently Sectarian, Inherently Partitionist, Inherently Capitalist

Despite being marketed as the key to 'ending Sectarian conflict in Ireland', the GFA is in fact a sectarian settlement, with sectarian values at its heart and a guaranteed sectarian outcome if it remains the only vision for political progress in Ireland.

From its internal clauses regarding 'Parity of esteem' to the constitutional out workings and daily running of its Stormont executive, the entire world view of the GFA presumes and supports a view of Irish society in which Sectarian divisions are inevitable and even natural.

RNU, as revolutionary republican socialists, as followers of Tone and McCracken, reject this 'two communities' vision, which the GFA enshrines as the cultural and social model around which we should base our future.

We reject the notion that historical discrimination practiced upon the Catholics of the north, can or should be crudely addressed by simply pointing to the lot of the protestant working class and demanding the same for 'our side', as is proposed by supporters of the GFA.

This eschewed view of equality creates only mistrust and deliberately lowers working class aspirations; it is exploited by the rich who take comfort in working class division and postpones the day when protestant & catholic workers unite in a true common struggle.
That is in the national and class struggle to secure for the working class of Ireland the ownership of Ireland and all its resources to be used for the common good.

In this sense we are truly anti-sectarian, we don't seek equality 'between two communities', we seek to destroy sectarian distinctions altogether in the course of struggle to achieve a New Ireland. This places us apart from the pro-GFA parties, whose values accept sectarian division and see them as inevitable, regardless of what they claim to profess.

We seek to create a united Irish working class, united not within a national or communal identity but in common purpose for progressive human gain. Stormont and British politicians, as well as the Capitalist business elite here, recognise the benefits of maintaining sectarian divisions within our communities.

They see that divisions within our ranks serve their financial and political interests, and they therefore place little importance on ending them.

We need only point to the example of the 1932 cross community 'outdoor relief riots' to emphasise the revolutionary potential of protestant and catholic working class communities rising above the identity brackets assigned to them by church and state here.

And when we consider the potent results of this real example of class unity, then we can fully understand why the 'powers that be' have little interest in allowing true unity happen today; why they allow sectarianism to continue, in the form of the Good Friday Agreement.

Politicians understand that it is much easier to implement Anti-Working class cuts, such as the 'Welfare Reform Bill' or merely to deny workers basic rights and conditions, if the working class base sees itself as divided into two hostile factions incapable of uniting in common cause.

This dividing factor was used by the Orange boss class and the Catholic Church for hundreds of years here, and its negative influence continues today via the workings of the GFA.

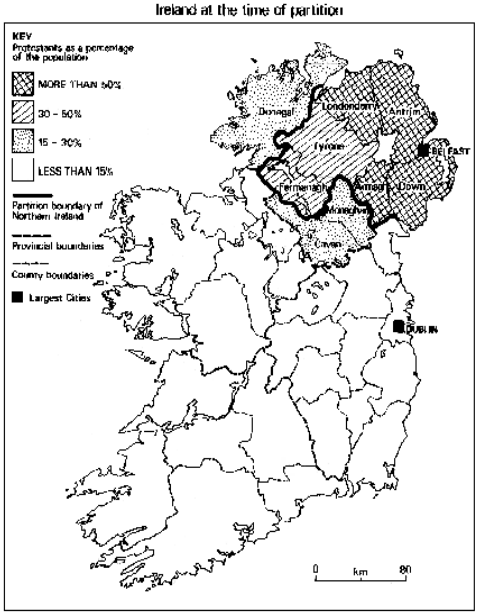
A Vehicle for Irish Unity?

The Good Friday Agreement allowed for nationalists to express aspirational preferences towards nationalist goals in a way that Britain had virtually criminalised in previous decades. However it was in effect a series of stage managed concession and of zero use to revolutionary republican intentions.

Stereotyped cosmetic gestures, tolerable to Britain (once the IRA campaign was over) were given government approval. Official recognition of the Irish language and the reduced usage of unionist trappings within government bodies, Policing and the courts were presented to the nationalist people as compensation for relinquishing their demands for full self-determination from Britain.

Clauses celebrated by Nationalist politicians as mechanisms to be used in the pursuit of unity were outlined in the 'Strand 3' section of the Good Friday Agreement. However even a cursory look at 'Strand 3' reveals a continuation of the old Unionist Veto (aka, the Principle of consent), whereby the wishes of the guaranteed Unionist majority within the gerrymandered 6 counties remains supreme.

Map 1
Ireland at the time of partition



NOTE: for clarity this map omits the names of non-Ulster counties (all of which were less than fifteen per cent Protestant at time of partition)

(Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 25)

At best, Strand 3 mechanisms amounted to an allowance for the northern population to campaign for the 'triggering' of a border poll, which itself could only be authorised by a British secretary of state if he believed there was a reasonable chance of a majority 'yes' vote within the six county area.

This mechanism could, we were told, be worked towards while also attempting to maximise the influence of cross border governmental bodies (i.e. the North/South ministerial council) and cross border trading and economic initiatives, in a 'great experiment' to effectively make the border disappear.

Again, the value of such a political dynamic is alien to revolutionary republicans.

Not only because it accepts that Britain has a right to set the conditions for Irish independence, but because it presumes that eventual moves towards independence can only arise from a 'greening of the north', (that is the promotion of nationalist electoral identity within the six county area) whilst immersing the same national movement in capitalist economics, albeit on an all-Ireland level.

We believe, that not only are strategies to secure such constitutional solutions in the north unrealistic (all polls refute their likelihood in this generation), their widespread promotion would, if taken seriously, spark off sectarian resentment and communal withdrawal, which would place revolutionary politics in jeopardy to the point where apparent nationalist tactics would actually prove a hindrance to republican goals.

Capitalist exploitation of the GFA

Multi -national corporations and worldwide business investors took great interest in the Irish "peace process". Post GFA Ireland to them was marketed as a place where people would work for very little and where tax breaks would be available to Billionaire business owners, in return for setting up shop here. Indeed both the global and Irish financial elites promoted the GFA in order to generate future profits.

The deeply pro- business action group 'The Portland Trust' proudly cite how…

"Leading business organisations and businessmen formed the Group of Seven (Irish G7) in 1996 to argue the economic merits of peace. Without ever explicitly calling for a 'Yes' vote in the referendum that ratified the Agreement, the G7 ensured, through conspicuous public advocacy, that voters understood the Agreement would be good for business."
http://www.portlandtrust.org/sites/default/files/pubs/epm_northern_ireland.pdf

Ten years on from the GFA, direct investment from the US increased and came to account for 10% of the jobs in the 6 counties. However the investor's motives were far from pure.

Again the Portland Trust confirm…

"To take one example, in January 2005 Citigroup chose to locate one its IT centres in Belfast, promising an investment of $100 million over five years and 375 new jobs. Citigroup was drawn to Northern Ireland by a workforce that, while possessing world-class technical skills, earns wages some 30% lower that its counterparts in England or the Republic of Ireland. Invest Northern Ireland (formerly the Industrial Development Board or IDB), the governmental agency that promotes inward Investment, provided $12.6 million to support the project."
http://www.portlandtrust.org/sites/default/files/pubs/epm_northern_ireland.pdf

Many multi-national firms took advantage of these incentives, and throughout the years of the ill-fated 'Celtic tiger', the arrival of a plethora of factories, industrial estates, jobs and the subsequent appearance of wealth was held up as evidence of the success of the Good Friday Agreement.

In reality, the firms involved in setting up here post GFA, were here only to make a quick profit and please their shareholders, not to help ease the suffering of the people of Ireland.

Indeed when the inevitable world-wide recession hit, these companies (many having maxed out their tax breaks), packed up and left as quickly as they had arrived, leaving the Irish worker with nothing but a hangover from an 'economic miracle' which was in fact no more than a temporary illusion.

Post-recession colossal job losses in the north including a massive four day 2% wipe out of the manufacturing sector, have in a very brutal fashion demonstrated to the population how for more than a decade they had been duped into believing that the post Good Friday era would be one of endless financial opportunity and prosperity.

The roots of the illusion

Of course what we were seeing was politically motivated investment; business development grants, tax relief and subsidies, these were the elements which really provided for the changing city skylines.

The apartments, office blocks, call centres, and an army of cranes had little to do with a naturally growing, healthy indigenous economy, it was the result of a political settlement which saw the population of the six county state being groomed into a pool of cheap labour, and in an environment free from Republican resistance.

This was the ultimate goal of the Good Friday Agreement.

Who are the 'dissidents'?

In this false environment, many recognised the flaws, and chose instead to hold on to revolutionary ideologies; the ways of Tone, Connolly and Bobby Sands.

Contrary to state and constitutional nationalist propaganda, most of those who dissented from the GFA were principled republicans and socialists. Yet they were relegated to the position of the lunatic or be grudger, as the lifestyles of one time rebellious figures were changed beyond recognition.

Now constitutional republicans became landlords, speculators and property developers and in turn were lauded by

once radical newspapers at business award dinners attended by PSNI chief constables and DUP stalwarts.

Together and with the backing of the international business elite, these elements tried and almost succeeded in creating a new universal ethic here.

In republican districts a conservative world- view was promoted by politicians across the spectrum, as well as by non-elected community leaders and partisan journalists, themselves with a stake in the new economy and who were bound by the demands of Unionist pre-conditions and vetoes.

Community solidarity, of the type which had seen working class districts stand by each other in the face of cutbacks, poverty, anti-social behaviour and state aggression was discredited by party workers and community leaders who floated initiatives such as business centred health care, a gradual acceptance of water charges and reliance on the PSNI/RUC.

Community cohesion was further corroded by an encouraged culture of 'home ownership' a condition which by accident or design has tamed once radical communities, tying many key individuals to a slavish combination of low wages and ever demanding high mortgages.

This social taming measure had been a central plank of Margaret Thatcher's socio-economic vision for Britain during her time in government and explained the mass selloff of council housing during her time.

Even at an early stage, some journalists with conviction and sensing that the economic 'boom' here was not altogether natural and spontaneous, rightly dubbed what was happening as 'the feel good factor', an essential and designed element in the process of securing the 'peace process'.

By the 1990s and with the undeniable jettisoning of all socialist rhetoric by Sinn Fein, 'number 10's' carrot and stick approach to ending Irish Resistance was allowed a clear run.

Nationalisms' reward for co-operation with the British state came in the form of incentives to investment along with the strategic funding of an array of paid community posts pre-allocated to local republicans of influence, tying them into the taming and controlling influence of the mortgage culture, a culture which it was now in their personal interests to maintain.

Following the Signing of the GFA financial incentive programmes went into hyper mode, inviting a scramble by international business' to get here and avail of now famous tax relief packages, grants and subsidies, and buoyed by promises of the type made quite recently by Deputy minister Martin

McGuiness on US business trips, ie: *'the north is open for business'*, code for we can offer the lowest paid work force in the "United Kingdom".

Few would have criticised the northern working class for embracing the sparse benefits of this new system, for many young families it provided (albeit for a short period) the impression that they could prosper and be rewarded for their efforts, in a secure job and a peaceful environment.

Indeed it was difficult to even question the apparent economic successes here without sounding like a 'mad rebel clutching at straws' that was at least until recent times, when it seems that the artificial 'feel good factor' has passed its sell by date.

It is beyond doubt, that those who refused to concede or conform to the GFA (referred to as 'dissident republicans) were isolated from Irish society, to the point in which they became politically powerless - and some - politically inactive. And in this vacuum it is possible that some mistakes were made, mistakes which perhaps did little to help our overall world view or cause.

However it is understandable that with the pressure of world opinion, finance and power bearing down on us, dissenting Republicans effectively retreated into the political wilderness. This was not the first time in recent history that Republicanism was pushed to the margins of society, and in such a fashion.

This state of cold storage however is thankfully coming to an end, as the contradictions within the GFA become more glaring day by day and Revolutionary Republicans grow in confidence, learning more about these

contradictions and exercising their ability to articulate criticism, as well as organise alternatives.

The illusion fades

Almost simultaneously to the announcement of PIRA decommissioning, came news of the Stormont assembly's intention to introduce water charges to the public. They said it was an economic necessity coming just as Gerry Adams' criticised Westminster's failure to make available a 'peace deficit' here.

Lobbying for a 'peace deficit' effectively asked that Britain's former security budget for the north to be ploughed instead into Stormont's budget, it didn't happen.

Days later arrived a shocking news story of mass job losses at the Seagate factory in County Derry, breaking symptoms of what was soon to be rolled out as the now infamous 'credit crunch' or economic global downturn.

As more and more job losses were inflicted upon the six county workforces it became evident to critics of Good Friday that the mass subsidies, incentives and rescue packages (characteristic of pre - 2005 British economic policy) would no longer be forthcoming.

It appeared that Britain having secured PIRA decommissioning saw how the potential threat posed by mass disaffection here was nullified. There was no further need to tame the risen Irish Northern working class, it was safe to withdraw subsidies and 'let whatever happens happen', and so they did, it is that simple.

The only significant British government investment here since has come in the form of MOD contracts to Thales air defence, hardly demonstrating the lack of strategic interest in Ireland that Peter Brooke spoke of in 1990.

And today, whole districts in the north, Protestant and Catholic alike are blighted by serious social problems, problems indirectly related to the conflict here and made worse by both the recent false economy and its resulting anti-social ethic.

There exists now, chronic levels of negative equity; heart-breaking cases of working families who had placed their faith in a false economy and had signed up to mortgages which could not be backed up by their employers in the long term.

Thousands now face the real threat of losing their homes as firms are either driven out by the global downturn or (as in the case of Visteon/Ford) simply decide to move onto to a cheaper workforce in the sudden absence of British subsidies, using the recession as a smokescreen.

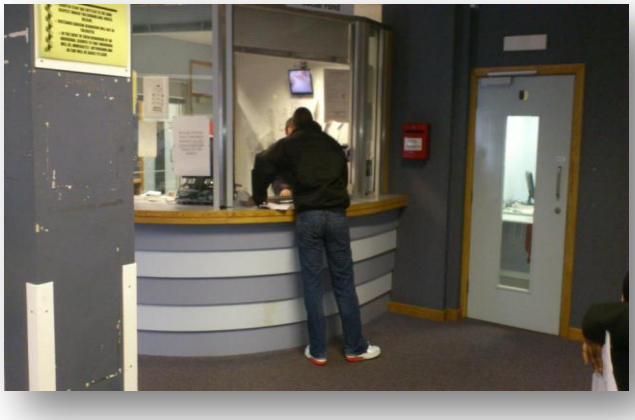
Meanwhile the social fabric of once solid working class republican areas has been severely compromised by individualism; a form of thinking largely brought around by the 'own your own home' culture, a culture which not only questions the universal right of every family to own a home unconditionally but arguably contributes to anti-community behaviour, as the 'look after your own patch' mind-set takes over what had been a 'look out for your neighbour' mind-set in the past.

The complete futility of modern republicanisms' embracement of the 'Northern Ireland' state and its capitalist economy can be seen in Sinn Fein's inability to protect the recently unemployed in even the sparsest form.

Gerry Adams' (albeit well-meaning) lobbying for decent redundancy packages on behalf of recently shafted Visteon/Ford workers, will if successful hardly be a victory for the workers, it will be no more than a Band-Aid over a shrapnel wound, and with each day comes more news of impending job losses.

Attacks on the benefit system

And as for the growing dole queues! DHSS Staff cannot keep up with the influx of claimants. Amazingly, following the St. Andrews agreement, politicians here were offered the opportunity to devolve social welfare powers, but they declined.



Had they devolved, they would have been able to offset the effect of Westminster's recent anti-working class welfare measures, such as the welfare reform bill and the lowering of the age of a child at which point a single mother must return to work, or the replacement of incapacity benefit with the American style ESA system.

As it stands the recently unemployed will at the point of claiming benefits take on the role of the 'undeserving poor', scrutinised by a department who will hold them responsible for their situation.

And always the opportunists, the British army, Navy and Air force are all making the best of people's desperation with an all-out recruitment drive taking place across the board in the North's job markets as even a brief visit will demonstrate.

Just where the revolutionary vision of Connolly and Larkin, Pearse and Plunket fits into this scenario is a question which Sinn Fein supporters can now only counter by screaming empty accusations of criminality at 'dissident' republicans.

Why stand outside the 'Peace Process'?

We should all at this point ask ourselves the serious question, are we really committed to the Revolutionary Republican Socialist path?

Although they are well meaning, some principled Republicans still campaign solely on the issue of 'Brits Out' while being neutral on the economic question; others are unashamed advocates of Capitalism. This position is a non-starter as it is at best doomed to perpetuate failures of the past and at worst, take us to oblivion.

If some are not committed to the revolutionary path - and merely wish to return (solely) to the war politics of the past - then there is no reason to expect that the lure of the economic incentives mentioned above (which did compromise republican leaderships) could not take their toll on them too in future decades.

If that was to be the case, then they would be as well backing the Sinn Fein electoral strategy now instead of later, indeed that is point Sinn Fein spokes-people are making, when they mislead the public by asking RNU to 'debate' with them.

Those of us who do stand 'Outside the Peace Process' do so with good reason, yet we should be aware of those reasons, so as not be lured into similar processes in the future.

The Revolutionary Alternative?

Revolutionary Republicans stand by the belief that the struggle for National Liberation and Socialism should be practiced hand in hand, that the liberators of Ireland will be the

working class and that it will be within a duel struggle for control of the 'National territory' and the 'Means of production' that a worthy freedom will eventually be achieved.

Such a process would take place on our terms (not Britains) but would require the challenging of both communal sectarian identities (green and orange) as well as of capitalist economic priorities in Ireland, cross border though they may be.

In conclusion therefore; RNU view the so called 'Peace Process' as in fact inherently sectarian, inherently partitionist and inherently capitalist, promoting ultimately communal division, a continuation of British rule and the dominance of a greedy capitalist class who care little for the economic wellbeing or welfare of the Irish people north or south.

We on the other hand, intend to propose a programme of Revolutionary Republicanism, the encouragement of the Irish working class to peruse a Free Socialist Republic, via all available means of struggle. Not for nationalist or emotional reasons, but for practical and humane reasons and as part of the progressive struggle for control of Irish resources, to be worked for the welfare and future integrity of all our people.

We believe such a path to be the true republican & non-sectarian path, the route towards healing our Nation, and freeing it from Imperial and colonial evils; from corruption, poverty and privilege, instead taking us towards true Irish freedom.

Revolutionary Republicanism

Republican Network for Unity

www.republicannetwork.ie