

# No future without dialogue

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For the last ten years Irish republicans have been at the centre of a peace process, working with other political parties and the Irish and British government to resolve a conflict that affected this part of Europe for over 30 years.

The first IRA cease-fire was called in 1994, but then-PM John Major let the opportunity slip through his fingers. However, after Tony Blair's 1997 landslide victory, a second IRA cease-fire was promptly called, followed by all-party talks. The negotiations that began in September 1997 produced the Good Friday Agreement. For the last 7 years, the different parties have been working to implement the agreement, and despite the fact that some are still trying to subvert the peace process, one thing is clear: the Good Friday Agreement is the best framework for moving our society from conflict to peace. The simple fact is that dialogue works.

What lessons can be drawn from the Irish experience and applied to the conflict between the Basque Country and Spain? While there are many differences between the situations, there are also similarities. 1998/9 saw a nationalist consensus in the Basque Country, an Eta ceasefire and the Spanish government's refusal to embrace the opportunity for peace. That ceasefire ended after 18 months. Violence, whether by



Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Féin, was a key player in the Good Friday peace talks / EFE

Eta or the Spanish state has continued and the politics of exclusion and criminalisation have defined the political climate. 2004 saw the election of a new Spanish government, who during their short time in office have made significant foreign and social policy changes.

Observers of the Basque-Spanish conflict hoped that a change would also occur there, and many of us wondered

if Jose Luis Zapatero would follow Blair's example and start a process of inclusive dialogue with all Basque political representatives. Unfortunately there are little signs that Zapatero will follow Blair's lead: political prisoners continue to be tortured and dispersed across Spain, the banning of social and political organisations and imprisonment of individuals for political activity

continues. Even Juan José Ibarretxe's modest proposals for more autonomy have been rejected.

Admittedly, Zapatero has limited room for manoeuvre. The Popular Party was effective at mobilising Spanish public opinion in opposition to dialogue or compromise with any shade of Basque nationalism. He has also been left with the legacy of legal procedures (the list is endless) initiated under the previous government, and which are about to hit the courts. Batasuna's Anoeta proposals of last year represent a serious opportunity to build a conflict resolution process. The upcoming Basque Autonomous elections provide for an important litmus test. Will Zapatero move to ban Sozialista Abertzaleak, or will he allow Basque voters in the autonomous community to choose their own representatives? The first course will simply compound the conflict, making resolution all the more difficult. The second course will at least send a signal that Zapatero's government is different to Aznar's.

But after the elections, will Zapatero respect the choice of the voters and talk to all parties with an electoral mandate? This is the key lesson to be learned from Ireland; without dialogue nothing is possible.

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