



THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

CITY HALL
NEW YORK, NY 10007
(212) 788-7116

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**SPEAKER QUINN, COUNCIL MEMBERS FOSTER, DICKENS, GIOIA &
MCMAHON VISIT IRELAND**

Council Delegation meets with Irish and British leaders, Sinn Fein and DUP

Tuesday, March 20th, Belfast – With the March 26th deadline for the transfer for power in Northern Ireland just a week away, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Irish American attorney Brian O'Dwyer led a delegation of New York elected officials, labor and community leaders to Ireland and Northern Ireland. The group met with Irish and British officials and the two major parties in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein (known as republicans) and the loyalist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

During the trip, the delegation also saw Irish leaders, including Teoiseach Bertie Ahern and the head of the Irish Dail, Ceann Comhairle Rory O'Hanlon; discussed the economy with unions from both Northern Ireland and the Republic; toured Ballymun, an Irish housing project currently undergoing renovation; were briefed on immigration issues by the Irish Abroad unit of the Irish Department for Foreign Affairs; and marched in Dublin's St. Patrick's Day Parade.

The delegation was sponsored by the Committee on American Irish Relations (CAIR) and was comprised of Council Members Inez E. Dickens of Northern Manhattan, Helen Diane Foster of the Bronx, Eric Gioia of Queens, Michael McMahon of Staten Island; business leaders, including prominent Irish American attorney Brian O'Dwyer; and representatives from the unions of the carpenters, operating engineers, construction laborers and Local 74 USWU.

On Saturday, Council Members marched down O'Connell Street in Dublin as part of the City's annual St. Patrick's Day Parade. The delegation carried City Council signs and wore stickers that were banned by organizers of New York's parade. They were warmly welcomed by 650,000 spectators cheering on the marchers in this inclusive parade.

On Monday, the group traveled to Belfast to support the peace process. The day began with a briefing from the highest-ranking Irish official in the North, the outgoing director of the Anglo Irish division of the Irish office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Niall Burgess. Mr. Burgess has just been appointed Consul General of Ireland, and will be moving to New York for the post.

“The Irish government asked us to meet with both sides, in hopes that our delegation could further communication among the parties. At this critical juncture in the peace process, New

(over)

Yorkers and Americans must be vocal about our support of the peace efforts, and today we have conveyed that directly to those involved in the negotiations," said Speaker Quinn. "It was an honor to be part of this historic process, and hopefully to play a role in bringing a real and lasting peace in Northern Ireland," said Queens Council Member Eric Gioia.

Pursuant to the elections held on March 2nd, the DUP received just over 30% of the vote, and Sinn Fein won a strong 26%. The Good Friday agreement, and the timeline subsequently agreed to by all parties, establishes March 26th as the deadline for finalizing any open issues, seating the government, and handing over power by the British.

The New Yorkers were greeted by Sinn Fein ministers Mitchell McLaughlin, who is the main electoral strategist for the party, and newly elected MLA from Derry, Martina Anderson, who was jailed by the British for her active support of a united Ireland. After a meal together with Sinn Fein in a local community center, the group joined in a discussion about the history of the situation, and the current key issues. Said Quinn, "Martina Anderson was imprisoned for 13 years in England for her beliefs, yet now she and Sinn Fein are prepared to cooperatively form a government and resolve differences through the political process, instead of through violence."

Council Member Helen Foster added, "Sinn Fein has a strong connection with the civil rights movement back in the U.S. Catholics were similarly denied jobs and housing was segregated. In their effort to win freedom and justice, Irish freedom fighters called on the history and lessons of our civil rights struggle. We literally passed by murals to Irish freedom fighters, like hunger striker Bobby Sands, which were right next to a mural of Fredrick Douglass. Even today, our communities face similar issues, such as policing."

"I have been looking forward to this visit for some time now," added Council Member Inez E. Dickens. "Seeing firsthand the civil rights struggle here in Belfast, and hearing from both sides about the current issues before them, was historic. We heard from Sinn Fein leaders of the clear connection to the experience black Americans in the U.S. and our civil rights movement. I am proud to have been a part of a process that can bring peace to Northern Ireland."

The New York delegation also sat with DUP leader Rev. Dr. Ian Paisley and MP's Jeffrey Donaldson and Peter Robinson at Stormont, the seat of Northern Ireland's government. Dr. Ian Paisley has personified the Loyalist movement for 40 years. "To my knowledge, this is the first time Dr. Paisley has met with a group of Irish American community leaders," said O'Dwyer, who has organized similar educational visits for President Bill Clinton, then-Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, among others.

"Given the history of the troubles, I had mixed feelings about meeting with Dr. Paisley," said Council Member McMahon, "but I believe we gave the peace process a helping hand and that obviously transcends all else."

The delegation traveled outside Belfast to Hillsborough Castle for an audience with the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Haine, MP, and briefed him on their discussions with Sinn Fein and the DUP. Secretary Haine reiterated the need for both sides to have heard U.S. support for reaching an agreement.

“When I was last in Belfast in October 2002, it was the very day the peace process faltered, the government closed down, and Stormont was shuttered. To be here today, a week before the deadline for power sharing to take place, and to be welcomed by Irish and British government officials, Republicans and Loyalists, is quite a sea change,” said Speaker Quinn. “I hope our delegation was able to communicate American support for the effort to reach a lasting peace to both sides of the conflict, and that we will have helped them reach an agreement next week.”

“From our meetings in Northern Ireland, to marching in Dublin’s great St. Patrick’s Day parade, to visiting affordable housing development, this was a visit that was educational and inspiring. It was a time none of us will soon forget,” she added.

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