



[Martin McGuinness' Jubilee handshake](#)

A Meaningless Gesture?

by [Denis Joe](#)

Well now we're respected in society

We don't worry about the things that we used to be
[Rolling Stones – *Respectable*]

It won't have escaped anybody's attention but 2012 is the Diamond Jubilee of the Queen. In that time she will shake the hands of tens of thousands of people, but no handshake will create as much interest as the 3 second connection with ex-IRA chief Martin McGuinness.

There is something rather apt that the handshake took place in a room in the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, a room normally used for creative learning, as this was a heavily scripted meeting, helped in no small part by the charity **Co-operation Ireland** which the Queen is the main benefactor for.

Everyone was in agreement that this was the right thing to do. Tory minister, Owen Paterson, said that it was a "most significant event", Unionist First Minister, Peter Robinson agreed that it was the right thing to do and one time 'Troops Out Movement' supporter, Peter Hain said: "what this really puts the seal on is that the past is the past."

But it could be said that the "past" had already passed 14 years ago with the Good Friday Agreement that was accepted by all the parties involved, as well as 71.2% of people in Northern Ireland and 94.39% in the Republic of Ireland in a referendum. Sinn Fein's acceptance of the agreement and the subsequent decommissioning of IRA weapons pushed the one time radical nationalists onto the international stage and helped to make Sinn Fein to become one of the major forces in Northern Irish politics. The creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly saw Sinn Fein's share of the votes to the Assembly rise, whilst that of the one-time dominant 'nationalist' party in Northern Ireland, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) fell, and by 2001 Sinn Fein became the dominate nationalist party in the province.

The break-up of the Eastern Bloc and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 threw world politics into disarray. The end of Stalinism created its own problems for western democracies that had

defined themselves in opposition to communist Europe. On the international stage many of the national liberation struggles in the Middle East and throughout the developing world, had relied on the Soviet Union and its allies for political and material support. Though this was not the case with the national struggle in Northern Ireland, the end of communism was one of the major factors that forced the parties to reach a solution to the war in the Six Counties of Ireland. The military campaign had reached a deadlock: The republicans would not move from a position of a united Ireland, whilst the British establishment could not concede territory that is considered a region of the United Kingdom.

As a party Sinn Fein were the political wing of the Republican struggle but the lack of enthusiasm in the 26 Counties for a united Ireland and the boycotting of Westminster by Sinn Fein MPs restricted the party to a regional outlook that campaigned for support of the IRA and around the excesses of British occupation. With the abandonment of the armed struggle, Sinn Fein was thrown into the international arena. Bill Clinton's visit in 1995, for example, highlighted the importance of Sinn Fein's involvement in the peace process. The British establishment responded by making concessions to Sinn Fein even setting up inquiries into the abuses of the RUC.

Today Sinn Fein are a major voice in Irish politics. Though the party remains formally committed to a united Ireland there is little grassroots support for that aim to be achieved through a military campaign and even less prospect of it being achieved through political channels. The rehabilitation of Sinn Fein into an established party (one, however, that maintains the pretensions of 'outsiders' by not taking their seats in Westminster) should not come as a surprise. It is true that the party of today is in no way the same party of twenty years ago, but then neither is the British establishment, particularly the monarchy.

Though it would be wrong to underestimate the enormous political power that the monarchy have in Britain, it would be true to say the Royals have undergone a PR remodelling. The death

of Diana Spencer in a car crash in Paris on 31 August 1997, saw highly popular feeling of mourning for the Princess. It also became a period when the monarchy came under intense public criticism over their reaction to the death and their lack of emotional display. A [poll by ICM](#), at the time, found that only 48 per cent thought the country would be worse off without a monarchy. Today that figure is 62% though the popularity of the monarchy appears to be more to do with their celebrity image than any real commitment to the institution.

What is interesting about the meeting between McGuinness and the Queen is the raising of the subject of the assassination of Louis Mountbatten, who was the uncle of the Duke of Edinburgh. It is suspected that McGuinness was a senior IRA commander at the time and this seem to add a poignancy to the meeting. Most of the media seem to avoid attempting to paint McGuinness as a villain (with the notable exception of the [Daily Telegraph](#)) and seemed to highlight the forbearance of the Queen.

Martin McGuinness would later say [in a speech](#) that his meeting with the Queen was “highly political, highly significant and highly symbolic”, also stating his regret for every death during ‘The Troubles’. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity but his description of a meeting that was a few minutes long seems somewhat hyperbolic.

Some commentators are suggesting that the meeting may pave the way for Sinn Fein MPs to take up their seats in the House of Commons. It may well do but what difference would that make? It would be as empty a gesture as the Queen shaking hands with an MP. As head of State it is incumbent on the Queen to meet with and acknowledge many people. It does not signal an acceptance of their views, neither does it tell us anything about the Queen’s feelings towards those she meets.

If we can take any lesson away from this incident it is not its historical importance (it has none. It changes nothing fundamentally) it is the importance that the media and the establishment wish to impose on it. It also shows that the duty of a head of state counts for little compared to her emotional behaviour.

Whilst I have no sympathy or support for the monarchy, I find this view of the Queen, as a human being susceptible to her emotions, a little troubling. If we accept the idea that a head of state can allow their personal feelings to cloud their role as leaders, what hope is there for any kind of leadership in the future?