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SDLP Comments on Sinn Fein "Proposals"

Introduction

The SDLP has no objection and indeed would be willing to work with Sinn Fein or any other party to develop a strategy towards the achievement of agreed common objectives. We would make it clear however that we would be working together on exactly the same terms - using democratic and peaceful methods and without any links or associations with any paramilitary organisations or with support or approval for such activity.

The "Proposals"

1. The SDLP view is that the Irish people do have the right to self-determination. The problem is that the Irish people are divided as to how that right should be exercised. The real search for peace, justice and stability in Ireland is the search for such agreement. In the SDLP view this has always been the case and has never been faced up to in any serious way by nationalists or republicans in Ireland. This is the real challenge facing all of us. It cannot be pursued by "armed struggle".

2. This question underlines a consistent weakness in the nationalist/republican approach. The tendency to get hung up on abstract principles such as whether or not the British have a legitimate right to be in Ireland. The Irish will always argue that

they haven't, the British will always argue that they have, and both arguments will be based on different historical perspectives. The endless argument simply leads to a reinforcing of each position and no progress on the real problem. It is much better to deal with the factual reality than to have endless debate about ideological rectitude.

The real question is how do we end the British presence in Ireland in a manner which leaves behind a stable and peaceful Ireland ?

Answer Unite the people of Ireland first. What in fact we should all be discussing is how we achieve that objective and how we can persuade Britain to assist us in achieving that objective.

3. The SDLP view is that while the IRA may be politically motivated, no legitimacy can be conferred on its actions. To do so would concede the right of the majority of the Irish people to determine the means by which agreement in Ireland can be pursued to an unrepresentative and non-elected, non-accountable paramilitary organisation.

4. The SDLP view is that violence only produces further violence. The most effective response to violence in N. Ireland is non-violence, despite the temptation to do otherwise.

Condemning the violence perpetrated by British forces cannot excuse paramilitary violence as a legitimate response. Both are counter-productive and create barriers to achieving political progress.

The speediest way to end the military and armed police presence on the streets, together with all the consequences of that presence which weigh so heavy on the already disadvantaged people represented by SDLP and Sinn Fein is the political way. If the British Government states that the reason for that presence on the streets and consequent activity is the IRA campaign, then remove the stated justification by ending the campaign. In the event of that campaign ending the SDLP will cooperate to the full with Sinn Fein in ensuring that the people in all areas are relieved of the pressure of the military and armed police presence. We have little doubt that in such circumstances that object could be achieved very quickly. As to the political presence our own view on that is contained in our original document and in our answer to 3 and is indeed central to our whole political strategy and analysis.

Does anyone doubt that the people who are suffering most from what Sinn Fein calls the "war" in Northern Ireland are the people of Nationalist areas. Is there not grounds for ending that war by using the exact same reasons as Padraig Mac Piarais and his comrades in the GPO in 1916 when they laid down their arms lest they bring more suffering on their people ?

5. The SDLP has never argued for a purely internal settlement. The only people who do so are those who advocate an independent Northern Ireland. The SDLP has repeatedly made clear that relationships between Ireland and Britain as well as relationships within Ireland need to be resolved satisfactorily if there is to be lasting peace and stability.

6. This proposal is answered in the first paragraph.

7. The SDLP is prepared to enter into meaningful discussions with any political party which receives a popular mandate and which use democratic and peaceful methods, with a view to working for agreement in Ireland. To this end the SDLP would also join with such parties to seek such international support as would be appropriate.