Reference Code:	2018/68/61
Creation Dates:	11 July 1988
Extent and medium:	10 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Accession Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

SDLP Response to questions raised in discussion and in previous Sinn Fein papers.

11 July 1988

In its response to our questions in our document of 17 March Sinn Fein lists a number of academic quotations on the question of self-determination but appears to avoid the reality that when all such questions are boiled down to their essentials it is people who have rights, not pieces of territory, and it is the Irish people who have the right to self-determination. Unfortunately the Irish people are divided as to how that right should be exercised. We are accepting the Sinn Fein statement that it is the Irish people as a whole who have the right and the Irish people should be defined as those people domiciled on the island of Ireland.

It is clear that there has been a profound disagreement between different sections of the Irish people, a disagreement that has been strengthened and made more difficult to resolve by the geographical concentration of the substantial minority who disagree in one corner of our island. We can have as many academic discussions or statements as we wish but the hard realities and the hard facts of the situation are that the Irish people are divided as to the exercise of the right to self-determination and as to how we live together. The other harsh fact is that if that disagreement is to be eradicated it must mean agreement between both the Unionist and Nationalist traditions. Others can help us to resolve the differences and to reach agreement but the main responsibility lies with the people of both traditions who are domiciled on the island of Ireland.

It is purely academic to argue that the Unionist people have no right to a veto on Irish Unity or on the exercise of self-determination or that British policy confers such a right on them. The harsh reality is that

whether or not they have the academic right to a veto on Irish Unity, they have it as a matter of fact based on numbers, geography and history and they have it in the exact same way as Greek or Turkish Cypriots have a factual veto on the exercise of self-determination on the island of Cyprus.

It is against the background of these views that the SDLP asked whether Sinn Fein would attend a conference attended only by elected representatives of the people of Ireland and convened by an Irish Government. This conference table is proposed in order to create the machinery whereby agreement on the exercise of the right to self-determination and as to how the people of Ireland could live together in peace, justice and agreement might be achieved.

In advance of such a conference we suggested that the British Government should make it clear that it would endorse any agreement reached at it. This declaration would mean in practice that the British Government were accepting the right of the Irish people as a whole to exercise self-determination. They have already made clear that if such agreement took the form of Irish Unity that they would endorse it. It is surely logical that if the agreement took the form of something less than Irish Unity that they would also endorse it.

Would not such a declaration relating to such a conference by a British Government remove the stated justification of the IRA for their campaign, which is that the British are preventing the exercise of the right to self-determination by the Irish people and are in Ireland defending Britain's own interests by force?

Hence our second precondition for such a conference that the IRA would have ceased its campaign. What possible role would an IRA campaign have in persuading fellow-Irishmen?

In the event of representatives of the Unionist people initially refusing to participate in such a conference we asked whether Sinn Fein would join with an Irish Government and other parties in preparing a peaceful and comprehensive approach to achieving self-determination in Ireland. The same two "preconditions" obviously apply here because the only obstacle in the way of achieving the exercise of self-determination would be the attitude of people who by Sinn Fein's own definition are fellow Irish people. That is an obstacle that cannot be removed by force. It can only be strengthened.

In addition it seems to us to reveal a deep misunderstanding of the Ulster Protestant tradition to suggest that it is largely the British influence and not their own choice and their own reasons that make them wish to live apart from the rest of the people of Ireland. Do we not accept whether we like it or not that they have deep seated and deeply felt reasons of their own based on many historical factors for their differences; differences which go back beyond partition, beyond even the Plantation, differences which were visible as far back as the 6th Century? To understimate the task of really accommodating the diversity of the Irish people is to really intensify our central problem and to continue to push difference to the point of division.

The SDLP accept that the British Government, could play an influential role in assisting us to persuade the Ulster Protestant tradition that their best interest lies in coming together with the rest of us to build a new Ireland and to accommodate our diversity in the way that other nations have done and would be willing to join with others in persuading them. Hence our development of the proposal contained in question 5, in our response to you (pp 2-3) on 13 June.

We believe that agreement to such a proposal would be overwhelmingly received by the Irish people and would release enormous constructive energies within Ireland as well as massive international good will and support. We also believe that it would have a powerful response within Britain itself and within considerable sections of the Unionist people. We do not underestimate the difficulties in achieving our objectives but believe that for the first time we would be concentrating all our energies on the real Irish problem and would make consistent and steady progress.

From our study of your documents together with reflection on our discussions we believe that there are two basic differences between us that prevent us reaching agreement on a peaceful and political way forward both of which are interlinked. The first difference is as to whether the Unionists have a <u>right</u> to a veto on Irish self-determination. The second relates to our stated belief that Britain has no interest of her own in remaining in Ireland, that she has no strategic, military or economic interests and that if Irish people reached agreement among themselves on, for example, Irish Unity that Britain would facilitate it, legislate for it and leave the Irish to govern themselves.

The SDLP welcome the willingness of Sinn Fein, as expressed in their paper of 13 June, to "explore" our stated belief as to British interests. In the SDLP view, this belief is given expression in Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In this Article the British Government formally state for the first time in an international agreement that, given the existence of the required consent to change they would be prepared to facilitate and support legislation to give effect "to the establishment of a united Ireland". It is axiomatic therefore that it is exclusively a matter for the Irish people of the two traditions, without interference from Britain, and without British interests standing in the way, to agree on the terms on which they can unitedly share this island.

It also appears to the SDLP, and here we come to the core of our difference with Sinn Fein, that if our belief is correct, then the IRA's stated justification for their campaign is removed and it should cease and we should all concentrate on the task of achieving agreement among the Irish people. The question is, if our belief is correct, do Sinn Fein accept that the consequences for the IRA campaign are as we state and would they ask the IRA to cease its campaign. If so, then it would be our responsibility in the SDLP to demonstrate to Sinn Fein that our belief was correct and we would believe that this should be a major topic of discussion between us as to how we could best do so.

The other and interlinked issue of disagreement between us is whether or not the Unionists have a right to a veto on Irish Unity, a subject that has already been dealt with above. The SDLP can fully understand why Sinn Fein say that "the Unionists have no right to maintain partition and the union in opposition to a national majority". As we have already said

however the argument as to whether or not they have a right is purely acedemic and we are a party of realistic politicians, not a team of theologians. We must deal with factual reality. The art of politics must be to respond to and try to reach beyond, the many complex relationships which history - however warped its impact - has bequeathed us and which are a part of the political reality of this island.

Whether or not the Unionists may or may not have a right to a veto on Irish unity, they in reality posses such a veto and have done so for a very long time. Solutions to the problem of division in Ireland have been postponed by Nationalist/Republican concentration on the language of ideological rectitude rather than trying to face the political reality. The challenge is to change this reality by political dialogue and not to estrange it further by the continued futile and counter-productive use of force against fellow Irish people.

The SDLP welcome the acceptance by Sinn Fein in previous papers that the search for agreement as to the future shape of Ireland must of course involve Northern Protestants and that every effort must be made to get their agreement and involvement in the process. We also welcome the sensitivity expressed towards "the fears about their civil and religious liberties held by Northern Protestants" and about the need for those liberties to be "guaranteed and protected" in your paper of 13 June. It is however an unfortunate reality that the Unionist people believe that their most fundamental liberty - the right to life - has been for some considerable time under severe threat. That such should be the case is surely repugnant to Republicanism with its vision of an Ireland embracing

all Irish men and women, irrespective of their history, traditions and beliefs.

The SDLP sincerely ask Sinn Fein to consider whether the achievement of this Republican vision is being advanced and whether the Tone goal "to abolish the memory of past dissensions" is being furthered in any way by an IRA campaign which is directed largely against indigenous people seen by the Protestant people as the defenders and protectors of their heritage? This campaign is in conflict, we would argue, with the logic, thrust and, in many cases, the classic Republican vision and generosity of the language of the Sinn Fein paper.

The SDLP believe that, politically the positions of Sinn Fein and ourselves are not unduly removed from one another and are bridgeable. In particular each of us have stated our commitment to protecting and preserving the ethos of Ireland's two great traditions. Our most significant difference, as stated above, and as reflected in our central arguments, is the degree to which we believe that British policy towards Ireland is now neutral and agnostic. The SDLP believe and assert that this is beyond doubt. We further assert that this removes all justification for the IRA campaign if placed against their own reasons for justification.

We accept that to date Sinn Fein remain unconvinced of our belief but ask them if our belief is correct that they agree that the IRA campaign should cease and will they formally ask the IRA to end their campaign and use their considerable influence to persuade them to do so. If so it is for the SDLP to convince Sinn Fein that our belief and assertion

are correct and let us discuss now how best we can do so. This issue is the crucial and central test of our joint willingness to present a clear political alternative to what has been called "armed sturggle" in order to achieve peace and justice in Ireland.