

10th

ADDRESS

OF

SDLP LEADER

JOHN HUME M.E.P.

TO THE

1981 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

OF THE

**SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND
LABOUR PARTY**

1981 has been one of the most difficult years in our history. Since we were here last, the SDLP has been tested more severely by events, criticised more savagely by our opponents (and some we thought were not our opponents), and pronounced moribund, irrelevant or paralysed, more often than any other political party in my experience. But as Mark Twain, reading his obituary in a London paper telegraphed to New York in 1897, 'The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.' We have emerged, more serious about our cauldron, more confident than ever that we are on the right road, more serious about our role as a professional political party, and more resilient than any other political force in the North, or even, dare I say, anywhere in these islands today. That in itself is no mean achievement. Why? Because while other events were dominating the headlines, the basic work of the SDLP was continuing, and not without advance.

The SDLP's message, argued consistently to British parties, that the North is constitutionally not politically viable, has been adopted by two of these major British parties, the Labour Party and the SDP. The centre of gravity in Britain in relation to Ireland has shifted substantially. The Anglo-Irish political initiative, originally an SDLP concept, as the Taoiseach said in the Dail on Thursday, has been formally launched by the Irish and British Governments. In a major development Mrs Thatcher agreed with Garret Fitzgerald in London to commit her Government to "efforts to heal the divisions within Northern Ireland and to reconcile the two major traditions in the two parts of Ireland." Our long-standing policy on the way to promote agreement in Ireland has at last been adopted by a British Government. These are all important political advances in which you and I, as members of this Party, can take considerable satisfaction. They are the first rewards - not the last - of years of patient, courageous, unflinching efforts on the part of everyone here, in arguing the rationale of the politics of a divided Ireland.

In spite of its apparent bleakness, the year was productive. On the economic front, there were two positive and major developments, both resulting from SDLP initiatives. The decision of the European Parliament to ask the Commission to allocate special assistance to Northern Ireland has resulted in an initial response comprising approximately £16 millions for housing in Belfast. This is but a first instalment, and will be built on. The E.E.C. Small Farm Plan worth £80 million, another SDLP policy initiative won by a determined campaign, offers some hope in what has been a devastating year for our small farmers.

As for our own political fortunes, leaving aside the success of our efforts to influence policies, the turnout at this conference testifies to the fact that we are indeed a mature, tested political entity, "grown from the soil of the people's hard necessities". Despite the storm of criticism, despite massive intimidation of our supporters and against the background of greater public turbulence than we have had to contend with for years, and in the worst possible electoral circumstances, we increased our representation in the recent Local Government elections. This time last year we had 101 Councillors; this year we have 104 and we have, for the first time, overall control of Derry and Newry and Mourne Councils. Our delegate and membership strength have, since last year increased by 16%. The reports of our demise are indeed somewhat exaggerated.

Let me say a few words about our critics. We are first of all a professional political party committed to non-violence and to the democratic process. We wish to win power like any serious political organisation. Until then we wish to influence power in the interest of a good which surpasses in importance the whims or the obsessions of dilettantes or zealots. That good is the patient promotion of what is right for the people of Northern Ireland within the real limits of what is currently possible. The real limits of what was possible in the difficult periods during this last year were narrow in the extreme and, at times temporarily reduced almost to zero. We had a choice: to choose what is really

possible, or to ignore reality in order to gratify personal preference. We chose, painfully but rigorously, what was for a professional political party trying to keep the democratic process alive in Northern Ireland, the long-term good. We were right to do so and time will prove us so. The numbers here today, our assurance and our resilience, our political successes in this past year, prove it. In ten years time great political progress will, I believe, have been made through our efforts. If by some tragic failure of nerve on the part of Governments, that should not be the case, the SDLP will still be here, still undismayed by adversity, still recognising the limits of possibility, still steadily and clearly pressing forward, still absolutely convinced that "We shall overcome."

An appalling year for politics. Yet a year in which there were solid political achievements by this Party to record. But there can be no period of relaxation. All the strength that we have preserved, and more, will be needed to face the crises that are still with us - one economic, the other political.

Our economic situation can be responsibly described as alarming. The vicious downward spiral of the economy continues unabated. Unemployment has increased, over the past two years, more than in any other period in our history. All forecasts indicate that it will be well over 20% by Christmas and will continue to rise in 1982. The black spots of unemployment spread across the map. The once prosperous Carrickfergus's and Antrim's are joining the Strabanes and the Newrys. Youth unemployment - perhaps the single worst aspect of the crisis in the long-term - has increased by more than 50% in one year. Every sector of the economy is in crisis - farm incomes have dropped by 70% in two years, the construction industry is starved of public expenditure, and every month sees the closure of more textile plants.

Even the statistics understate the misery. 70,000 of those registered as working are on short time. Larger numbers, particularly women, have not registered as unemployed. Thousands are employed in security jobs. I said here last year that on any scale of misery from one to ten we score ten in every category. On any scale of prosperity from one to ten we score one in most categories of measurement and zero in several.

As a Party we have been at the forefront in the fight for economic survival; we must stay there. In the only areas of achievement of progress in our community we were in the front line. We have led the successful fight for the introduction of the Agricultural Programme for the Less Favoured Areas, a programme heavily financed from Brussels. In the European Parliament we have secured unanimous support - no mean task - for the recognition of the special needs of Northern Ireland, and already in response to that resolution the European Commission is bringing forward special programmes. One direct and immediate consequence will be a substantially increased housing programme in Belfast. That is but a first step. Other programmes are under study by a top level group set up by President Thorn to investigate how the E.E.C. can best help Northern Ireland and how it can help co-operation in both parts of Ireland. Substantial funds have been set aside for studies into the special problems of Northern Ireland. Some of these funds I have already asked to be devoted to a feasibility study of the creation of specialised industrial development zones in our areas of highest unemployment.

Perhaps most importantly in the long-term, the European Commission has obtained, as we in the Parliament asked them, an agreement from the British Government that the extra E.E.C. expenditure that will flow from our initiative in Parliament will go directly to Northern Ireland and will be additional to ordinary Government expenditure. An important and significant victory! In short, in those areas where we, as a Party, have responsibility and influence, we have exercised them on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Our successes to date are not enough. Northern Ireland desperately needs a new economic strategy. We need, as the European Parliament in our support has called for, an economic development programme for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's present industrial development strategy has, to put it mildly, outlived its usefulness. We need a heavier concentration on the promotion of small and medium sized industry, a strategy which has proved so successful in job creation elsewhere. We need to harness the new technology to the needs and assistance of our small industries. We need new programmes for our inner cities.

We need a rural development programme within extended boundaries of the Less Favoured Areas, a programme committed to job creation in agriculture, to the development of small rural and market towns, to a new approach to afforestation, to new action programmes for our small farmers.

Any serious analysis of our economy and its prospects must come to terms with the fact that our history has reduced us to a state of dependence. Our much vaunted self sufficiency and commercial hard-headedness are myths of the past. Compared with the South, which has built its own enterprise with its own hard won capital, ours has become a dying economy owned by outsiders, tied into a distant kidney machine, whose batteries are now exhausted. Our economic history has been one of ever increasing aid from Britain, aid which the British Government no longer has the economic capacity or the political will to continue at an adequate level.

Clearly our immediate and medium term strategy must be to create the conditions for self-sufficiency, to regenerate our industrial and agricultural base in keeping with the real world in which we live. But for the foreseeable future we will need financial aid and this basic fact of life must be taken into account when facing our political crisis and reviewing our political options. It rules out any settlement which does not have the good will and support of the British and Irish Governments. Such good will and support would be an essential pre-condition for any financial aid coming from international bodies or from friendly nations. This is a point which is not sufficiently stressed or driven home to those who think that solutions can be based on victory or on demagoguery.

This 13th year of the current cycle of political crisis has seen a heightening once again of havoc and hatred. For many ordinary people here, the experience of human life last year became an extended nightmare, coloured by despair for the future and by private and communal fear. We who lived through the year here know this to be no exaggeration. Thank God the worst horror that loomed over our lives has now retreated. The damage, the scars, the toll on hope are still glaringly visible. Those brave people deserve our thanks, who tried and tried and finally succeeded in turning the tide of misery which had been deliberately unleashed on us at the orders of men of chilling malevolence and which might earlier have been stemmed by a more vigorous and sensitive Government.

I said repeatedly during those terrible months that the hunger-strike was only a symptom, not a cause. The cause has not changed. It continues to be a fundamental structural fault, not just within Northern Ireland but in the relationship between North and South and between Ireland and Britain. The Anglo-Irish approach to the crisis - an SDLP concepts in its genesis and spelt out at our Conference last year - has now been launched, and the two Governments have already made significant progress in terms of several SDLP policy objectives, notably in the adoption by the British Government for the first time, of our policy of reconciling the two major traditions in Ireland. Our hopes now depend on the determination with which the two Governments progress on their joint course. There must be no faltering, no diversion, no failure of nerve. We should expect

progress to continue on a step-by-step, relatively unspectacular rhythm. Much as I understand the hopes which our Party has invested in this approach, I would suggest that neither the process nor our aspiration would be helped by either unrealistic expectations or over-enthusiastic criticism of the speed of progress. Remember that Herodotus warned us a long time ago that haste in every business brings failures and remember that Mrs Thatcher, who is at the other end of the process, has not yet joined the SDP, not to speak of the SDLP!

I am frankly, once again depressed at the reaction of Unionist politicians to this initiative. I have a particular reason for being so. The fact is, that the Anglo-Irish strategy in its original SDLP conception was designed, primarily, not to further SDLP priorities, but to accommodate, to an extent which some would view as a gratuitous excess, the fears and anxieties expressed by those very Unionist politicians of whom I despair. The purpose of the concept was to meet - comprehensively and transparently - all the Unionist objections to any dialogue with their neighbours in Ireland. The hysterical leap-frogging of Paisley and Molyneux, as so often, prompts one to despair. In this case I hesitate, hoping that the reality - the reality that this policy was basically designed to help them even more than us - will somehow penetrate some of that granite resistance to reality behind which they collectively cower. I continue to hope (although God knows I am now bordering on presumption), that one or more of them might discover the wit and the courage to actually say so. Were it not so desperately serious, the prospect of this Gadarene herd racing each other headlong once again over the edge of the real world, at the very moment they are handed all the reassurances they had bayed so long for, would be a fine piece of Loyalist vaudeville. Alas, what we are witnessing on the Northern Ireland stage is another act in a long and repetitive tragedy. It is expressed in slogans of no surrender, not an inch. We have heard it all before.

Some Unionist and Loyalists politicians are beginning to recognise, dimly and fearfully it must be said, the growing reality about Britain's intentions, for which we have tried to prepare them for years past. As Shaw once said: "There are no secrets better kept than the secrets everybody guesses." The British will to territory, to power and to solidarity in Northern Ireland is simply no longer real. It doesn't exist any more. There is no positive commitment, merely a bothersome obligation. Of course the guarantee in the '73 Act, so dear to Mrs. Thatcher's heart, still exists. But what the British Government has said is tantamount to a man saying to his wife "I will stay with you as long as you like, because I am obliged to do so under the "guarantee" clause of the '73 Marriage Act; but the very instant you agree to a divorce you shall have it; and what is more, I wish you to know that I have my lawyer on permanent retainer, so that there will be no delay in arranging the separation." That is what the London communique says, like it or not. Where is the pride of the Unionist partner in this unhappy union? There is, as I have said, very considerable evidence of a growing realisation of this new reality, even on the part of the most obdurate of Unionism politicians.

I remain depressed about these politicians, and particularly depressed about the welfare of the people they so unworthily have failed to lead. It is a fact that all of us, Unionist or Nationalist, know well, that the quality of political leadership of the Unionist tradition in Northern Ireland has with very few exceptions been a poor advertisement for the rich and varied talents of that community. The reasons for this are understandable and have much to do with the failure that was Stormont. It has also much to do with the failure to realise that Unionist right to an acceptable political settlement is not an absolute right. It is heavily qualified by the right of the minority to their political aspirations and to the recognition of their identity. It is further qualified by the right of the British and Irish Governments as representatives of their peoples to limit their price for the continued failure in Northern Ireland to accept reasonable norms of political behaviour.

The human community these so called politicians "lead" is as gifted as any in Europe, I would say this to the Protestants of Northern Ireland. Many among you can have little satisfaction in seeing the steady rise in the tyrannical dominance over you of a man whose name in every country in the world has become a by-word for bigotry, demagoguery and obscurantism. Is Paisleyism, in any sense, consistent with those great protestant values of individual freedom, free speech, civil and religious liberty of which you are so rightly proud? Is not what is being said and done in your name in Northern Ireland a gross and unworthy abuse of everything you stand for.

The essence of the appeal of Unionism is that it is the only protection of Protestantism in Ireland. Is it? Has it not instead seriously weakened your integrity and become a profound source, politically and intellectually, of real danger to the deepest values of the Protestant tradition in Ireland? Is it not time to consider that there are other ways, not only to protect the integrity of your tradition but to develop it and become a positive leaven in Irish society, challenging uniformity? Is it not time to recognise that other ways do not involve conflict with your neighbours on this island, but a fruitful partnership which recognises the richness of difference and diversity? Surely not to consider other ways is to consign your own future, your children's future, our future, to despair, and surely you have no more right than we to adopt such a nihilistic course. Must you - and now absurdly - permit your leaders to demand all power, exclusively and forever? For ourselves we abjure any "solution" in which there would be winners and losers, conquerors and vanquished, victory and defeat. So should you! Face reality with us, and let us together be grateful that we have an opportunity to do so, before catastrophe overwhelms us all. All we demand is that you and your leaders sit down and negotiate our future with us and the British and Irish Governments. For our part we would insist that the results of such talks would have to be ratified in two separate referenda, one in the North, and the other in the South. That is a more secure guarantee of your rights than the cold and increasingly inconvenient device of the '73 Act. The principle of consent will be truly respected. We have to live together in the future. I know that many of you do not fully grasp my words. I know that you do not realise that when we say that we are proposing an "Agreed Ireland", we mean those words absolutely literally. We mean an "Agreed Ireland" which you would decisively help to shape. I ask you to reflect on our words because they do offer us the prospect of a future together within the limits of what is really possible.

We are not wedded to any one form of Ireland or any rigid set of institutions. We are concerned to see that all traditions are respected and have a role to play. One version, a form of Irish partnership, a sharing of power on the island that we would find acceptable, would be the creation of an autonomous North within a Federal Ireland and with new links with Britain. Such an arrangement would give adequate power and protection to all sections. But it is only one possible arrangement. Negotiation and dialogue within the Anglo-Irish framework, on the basis that democratic consent shall be sought for all agreements can hurt no-one. In a deeply depressing situation it is the only way forward.

Finally may I urge those in the Protestant community who have never accepted loyalist demagoguery, who have always distinguished between Unionism and Protestantism, but who have long remained silent, that they have a major contribution to make at this time. They should seize the opportunity of the shift that is afoot inexorably, though almost unconsciously, in the relations between these islands, by setting forth forms and shapes of a New Ireland that is acceptable to Protestantism as distinct from Unionism. Try at this time to find the courage of your convictions and give a lead to your own community away from sterility and hopelessness towards a creative and full role in the life of this island.

Let me turn now to the South. The North has now become the absolute priority issue on both sides of political life in Dublin. That in itself is very welcome. There is a growing and evident awareness that in a new relationship in Ireland there would have to be changes in some aspects of life in the Republic. I would again, as I have earlier done, urge all of the parties in Dublin to issue, in the form of a joint declaration, a solemn undertaking that they will not flinch from the necessity to accommodate all the anxieties of the North. The will to implement such a declaration must be overt and tangible. To the British Government the SDLP says: "It is essential that you put Northern Ireland at the top of your agenda and keep it there, otherwise our problems will never be solved. I mean never. We are encouraged by some of your actions. We feel, however, that you owe it to the people of Northern Ireland, for their sake as well as your own, to tell them what your real intentions in Northern Ireland are, clearly and positively. You should realise that in withdrawing your consent to the "guarantee" you would not be destroying the right of consent of the majority in Northern Ireland to decide their future. That would still operate. You would be merely ending the coercion of the other community in Northern Ireland, the victims of generations of sectarian oppression which flowed, not only from the active malevolence of a local majority, but from the introverted defensiveness created by your guarantee to them of enduring dominance. There are growing signs and signals of your eventual preferences and intentions. You must now be more forthright and more explicit in indicating them.

The continuing campaign of violence of the Provisional IRA is legitimately a matter of overwhelming concern to both sections of the community. Protestants in Northern Ireland, many of whom see the RUC and the UDR as their protectors, see in the campaign of murder against serving and retired members of these forces and their families a campaign of sectarian genocide against themselves.

The nationalists of the North see in the Provisionals activity the destruction of the integrity of their own political values, a direct attack on the real meaning of Irish unity. We also see in those parts of the community where the Provisional IRA are more active, the spread of a foul social cancer. The cohesion of society, at the best of times, is both deep-rooted and fragile. Its roots, the shared principles of respect for life, liberty and order can go deep, but they must be tended and watered assiduously and incessantly. There are now communities in Northern Ireland where these roots have not alone been neglected, but have been hacked away and poisoned by the Provisional IRA's campaign against the fundamental human right to live until God calls us. What has followed is a gross distortion of moral values in society, the promotion of the pornography of death and nihilism on our gable walls, and the deep corruption of the young. The SDLP will always recognise this evil for what it is, and call it by its only name: Murder. We say to the Provisionals "You are not Irish Republicans; you are extremists who have dishonoured and are dishonouring the deepest ideals of the Irish people. Can we remind you, yet again, that those whose inheritance you so falsely claim, laid down their arms in 1916 lest they cause any undue suffering to the Irish people."

We as a Party remain committed to a noble art - politics. Politics has been described as many things. Its essence is the reconciliation of differences - the greatest challenge facing the people of this community today. "No man is good enough to govern another", said Lincoln, "without that other man's consent". The challenge of building a consensus in Ireland is the greatest challenge to this new generation, a challenge that is all the more exciting because of the failure of previous generations to meet it. It is a challenge that will only be met by patient political negotiation. Patient political negotiation is unspectacular, it has no dramatic appeal. The alternative - the use of violence disguised as military patriotism - has misled many young idealists. Its monuments are mangled

and broken bodies, prison walls and cemeteries. Patient political effort will not fill jails with young people. Violence will. Patient political effort will not prevent job creation in a community starved of employment, particularly for young people. Violence will. Patient political effort and non-violence have won the only achievements and benefits that we can claim over the past decade. Violence has made the underlying problem - division - more difficult to solve.

Many young people have joined us in the task of politics, the difficult task of building mutual respect and understanding which forms the basis of true peace and freedom. We need many more. In the 1980s the true patriot is the builder, not the destroyer. 1981 has been a year of many lessons for many people. The SDLP has come through 1981. We hope that we shall never see its like again. Yet we have emerged with renewed strength. We can only go forward.