

SDLP

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY

Headquarters:

38 UNIVERSITY STREET
BELFAST BT7 1FZ

Telephone: 23428

Telex: 747848.

Press Release

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THE SDLP ARE SHOUTING STOP

By John Hume

This election is not to a Parliament or Assembly with any power. It is an election to a body that might become one - on certain conditions. Those conditions the SDLP find unworkable. We said so before Mr. Prior published his White Paper. We said so before he published his legislation. We tried to stop him. We say so now. To enter this Assembly is to accept those conditions, to raise false hopes and to treat our weary public to a scenario of political wrangling to which they have become all too accustomed over the past ten years.

The essential precondition is that power will be devolved to the new Assembly if there is seventy per cent agreement among its members on a cross-community basis. Both main Unionist parties have already made clear that there are no circumstances in which they will even attempt to get agreement with the SDLP. So the question that faces us is - should we try to appear reasonable by going through the motions of pretending that we can achieve the impossible?

We tried under Mr. Whitelaw and you know what happened. We tried under Merlyn Rees, and you know what happened. We tried under Humphrey Atkins and you know what happened. Should we try again under Jim Prior when we know what will happen? When his successor comes along, should we try again? Meanwhile Northern Ireland continues to descend into the political and

economic wilderness.

No. The SDLP are shouting stop. We are saying to the British Government it is time you faced the real problem if we are ever to get a real solution. It is time to bring matters to a head and it is particularly urgent because of the present political and economic breakdown.

Northern Ireland was created for the Unionists. They are the only people who could make it work. There are only two ways for them to do so. Majority rule, which they have discredited, and partnership, which they reject. All British Government solutions have been based on an attempt to make Unionism work. They have failed. We are saying that it is now time to look at the alternative - the SDLP are seeking the mandate in this election to take steps to see to it that the alternative is placed clearly on the table and real dialogue begins.

However, there is another precondition which is not only unacceptable it is positively dangerous. It is that once the 70% agreement on devolution of power is reached all other subsequent decisions in the Assembly will be by simple majority. Even if such an agreement were reached how could any minority party protect its interests subsequently? There are no guarantees whatsoever about future situations, about what happens after a future election. Would there be more negotiations about 70% agreement and would Britain withdraw power pending such negotiations? Or, power, once having been devolved would Britain ever take it back and would we remain forever subject to majority decisions?

The SDLP would be totally irresponsible to accept such conditions. Entry into the Assembly would mean such acceptance and the SDLP have no intention of doing so. Old-style abstentionism or realistic negotiation and proper

representation of our interests?.

Mr. Paisley, of course, who originally thundered against Mr. Prior's plan because of his opposition to any "Cross-community" involvement has also spotted the propaganda value for himself of the 70% - simple majority mixture. He has indicated that his objective is to achieve a 70% vote for all Unionist parties (with his own party as the largest of course) and on that propaganda base demand a return of Stormont. The only people who can prevent that are, of course, the voters and the only party with candidates in all constituencies and which can maximise the opposition to Mr. Prior's plan is the SDLP.

Some have argued that the way to stop Mr. Prior's Assembly was through a boycott of the elections. The problem with an electoral boycott is that it is virtually impossible, particularly in Northern Ireland, to have an effective one. With SDLP absent from the polls and polling stations unmanned, there would be nothing to prevent massive personation in favour of unrepresentative parties or parties hostile to our point of view, thereby distorting completely the size of turnout and allowing the British Government to claim that the people had rejected the boycott and to proceed with their plans. Besides, a democratic party has a duty even when it is rejecting proposals to demonstrate that it does so with the support of its electorate. Without a mandate a democratic party does not exist. Those who stay away from the polls only make it easier for Unionists to obtain their 70%.

The most impressive way to demonstrate the strength of our position is by inviting thousands of people all over the North to join us at the ballot box.

In that way the message will be clear. There will be no distortion. In addition we will have secured a mandate to continue to speak for people and to negotiate a real solution at a meaningful conference table.

The SDLP rejection of violence is also being challenged in this election by the Provisionals under their election slogan "A Principled Stand". Unfortunately their principles do not contain the most fundamental principle of all - the right to life. They are clearly seeking justification in retrospect for their campaign which has brought so much suffering to so many. Say clearly in this election where you stand on this issue and let the world know of the commitment of the mass of the Irish people to non-violence.

The SDLP have argued consistently and continue to do so that the problem of the North can only be resolved if all the conflicting relationships involved are on the table for discussion. The Northern problem is about relations within the North but it is also about relations within Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. The Anglo-Irish framework is the proper forum for such discussion. The SDLP strengthened by its renewed mandate will be available to put its views to both governments. But it is no longer enough to await moves from the British alone. On the Irish side of the argument we have been extremely effective in presenting the Anti-Unionist case. Given the behaviour and attitudes of Unionists this has not been too difficult. The presentation of the positive case for an Irish solution has not been quite so effective.

The SDLP have asked on several occasions that parties in the South who believe in a New Ireland should spell out in some detail what is meant by that. Continued failure to do so allows Unionists - and others - to dismiss such objectives as conquest of the North by the South, or as the destruction

of Protestant distinctiveness within Ireland. A real debate on alternatives have never taken place.

In addition, the bi-partisan approach in the Dail to the North has clearly broken down and the North and Anglo-Irish relations are becoming increasingly party political issues in the South. This can be to no-one's advantage except both the British and the Unionists. If the Irish cannot agree among themselves as to what they are seeking or offering as a solution, there is little chance of anyone taking talk of either unity or a New Ireland seriously.

That is why on this occasion the SDLP are proposing that the Government in Dublin together with the other parties in the Dail who believe in unity should set up a Council for a New Ireland consisting of members of the Dail and members of the Assembly, a body representative of all Irish democrats who believe in a New Ireland. It should have specific terms of reference and a definite lifespan. Its function should be to examine in depth the obstacles - political, economic and constitutional - to the creation of a New Ireland. It should then present a blueprint for a New Ireland, a document agreed by all the constitutional parties. A real debate on real alternatives can then begin for the first time, not only in Ireland, North and South, but in Britain and internationally as well for, assuming as I do, that the blueprint would outline not only our concept of a new and pluralist Ireland but would also indicate in clear and precise terms both the protections, the role and the power of the Irish Protestant tradition in a New Ireland, then for the first time those who object to this concept would have to spell out their reasons against, not a vague concept of unity, but a real plan. Their reasons would have to be based on more than prejudice and would have to outweigh the terrible costs of division that we are all paying to have any validity. Only when our alternative is on the table, only when we have

grasped all the nettles that have needed grasping for so long, can we begin the process of convincing the Northern Protestant that his true role lies within Ireland and so does lasting peace.

The clear rejection of the British approach by the electorate and the placing of a new agreed Irish plan on the table for the first time will transform the debate on British-Irish relations and will at last bring the matter to a head. Make sure that we are there with maximum strength.