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SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY

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P**

Headquarters: 38 UNIVERSITY STREET
BELFAST BT7 1FZ

Telephone: 23428

Telex: 747848

MR. SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE ON ELECTORAL LAW

SUBMISSION BY THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY (SDLP)

1. The Government of Ireland Act 1920 laid down that there should be 12 Northern Ireland seats at Westminster. It is clear that this decision by which Northern Ireland did not have the same level of representation as England, Scotland and Wales was a deliberate decision which recognised the separate and different circumstances that obtained in Northern Ireland.

Several distributions have taken place since and in spite of the fact that Northern Ireland would have had exactly the same case for an increase in seats on those occasions as it has today, no change has taken place in the Northern Ireland representation at Westminster. In fact, a 1944 Speaker's Conference accepted that Northern Ireland was in a different position from the rest of the United Kingdom and recommended that Northern Ireland should retain 12 seats. It has therefore, for good and fundamental reasons, become an established practice that Northern Ireland's representation in the United Kingdom Parliament should be viewed differently from that of the rest of the United Kingdom. Any decision to change that situation represents a major departure from established practice and therefore represents a major

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political decision about the future of Northern Ireland.

If such political decisions are to be taken then all the factors relevant to the political and constitutional problems of Northern Ireland must be taken into account. We would submit that a Speaker's Conference is not the appropriate body to consider such matters. The nature and extent of Northern Ireland's relationship with Great Britain runs to the heart of the serious constitutional problem of Northern Ireland and is inevitably interlinked with decisions as to the future form of Government there. They cannot and should not be separated.

2. The original allocation of 12 seats to Northern Ireland in the Westminster Parliament was part of an overall settlement to the Irish problem in 1920, which involved the setting up of two parliaments in Ireland with the ultimate objective of one. This basic approach has been repeated ever since by successive Westminster Parliaments. It would be both foolish and wrong therefore to consider Westminster representation in isolation from other aspects of the Northern Ireland problem. This is particularly true when all aspects of a settlement are at present under consideration.

In terms of SDLP policy for future constitutional structures which emphasises the nature of both the British and Irish dimensions and which coincides with the stated policy of the British Government, as endorsed by all Parties at Westminster, any increase in representation at Westminster would undeniably tip the scales in one direction and seriously, if not totally, undermine the possibility of an acceptable

solution. We are therefore implacably opposed to any increase in Westminster representation.

Accordingly, we would recommend that the Speaker's Conference should not depart from established practice and should therefore recommend no increase in Northern Ireland's representation at Westminster.

3. The peculiar circumstances of Northern Ireland are well known to members of the Conference and need no elaboration. We would submit that the Conference would be better employed examining the method of election for the present representation at Westminster.

Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society which has been ill-served by the straight-vote system. This has been clearly and overwhelmingly endorsed by the British Parliament on several occasions in recent times - in legislation introducing Proportional Representation in both Local Government and Stormont elections. The Government is likewise recommending PR for European elections as the system which can, most adequately, represent both sides of a divided community.

It would seem logical that if PR is the voting system that can most adequately represent opinion in Northern Ireland that it should be introduced for all elections.

On no occasion was this point more forcibly underlined, than in the distortion of Northern Ireland opinion, represented by the result of the February 1974 General Election, which came at a crucial time in the history of Northern Ireland. Although 51% of the electorate voted for candidates opposed to the Sunningdale Agreement, they obtained 11 out of the 12 seats, thereby giving the impression of a landslide opinion in Northern Ireland against the new arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland. This clearly gave enormous encouragement to the illegal activity which subsequently brought down the powersharing Executive in Northern Ireland against the wishes, not only of a substantial section of the Northern Ireland population, but against the overwhelmingly declared wishes of the people of the United Kingdom as represented in Parliament.

There is, in our view, an overwhelming case for Proportional Representation as the voting system in all elections in Northern Ireland and we ask that the Speaker's Conference recommend it for election to the existing seats at Westminster.

4. We would welcome the opportunity to expand these views orally before the Speaker's Conference.

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