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TOWARDS A NEW IRELAND

- A POLICY REVIEW

Policy document for submission to SDLP  
Ninth Annual Conference, November 27-4, 1979.

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In its policy document - FACING REALITY - which was adopted by the Party Conference in 1977, the SDLP reiterated its commitment to the path of partnership as a means of solving the political problems within Ireland. The Party emphasised then, as it does again, its commitment to this path in the sure knowledge that the prejudices, the bitterness, the hatred and the fears which exist in Ireland can only be eradicated by both traditions working together and demonstrating their joint concern for all of their fellow countrymen.

This path found favour among those sections of national and international opinion which recognised the need to lead the people of Northern Ireland away from the politics of conflict and confrontation towards a new politics of consensus and co-operation. It was seen by the British Government and Opposition; the Irish Government and Opposition; the European Parliament; informed and influential political opinion in the USA; the political representatives of the Non-Unionist community and a sizeable section of Unionist opinion within Northern Ireland, as being the only sane and just approach towards solving the deep divisions and distrust among the people of Ireland.

This approach necessarily means partnership between the differing traditions in the North and partnership between both parts of Ireland. Both are essential cornerstones

of any solution. To seek to promote one to the exclusion of the other is half-heartedly to attempt to solve half of the problem. In seeking to have these fundamentals of policy implemented, the SDLP has always approached inter-party discussions and negotiations in an eminently reasonable manner, constantly making every effort to make agreement possible. To try to meet those with whom we have been in negotiations prior to Sunningdale, during the Convention and to the present day, we have, in a true spirit of understanding, emphasised that "we are not irrevocably committed to any one system of power-sharing in Government", and that North-South partnership would be on the basis of that which was "freely agreed between North and South". (SDLP Report to Parliament 1975).

The response of the Unionist parties, however, has been one of absolute intransigence which is best exemplified by the recent refusal of the new leader of the Official Unionist Party even to consider entering into political discussions with the other parties. British Government reaction has been equally negative, allowing the disastrous vacuum of the past four years to develop without any serious effort to take the initiative in seeking agreement, while purporting to leave the people of Northern Ireland to agree among themselves. Instead, they have consistently insisted on and upheld as a basis of policy an unconditional guarantee of the basic political position of those same Unionists. Yet what has this guarantee achieved?

Has it received from Unionists even the slightest willingness to examine conditions for the Government of Northern Ireland laid down by the overwhelming vote of the British Parliament and approved of as reasonable and fair by opinion throughout the world? It is, in fact, a major contributory factor to the intransigence of Unionist opinion. As a result of the ensuing vacuum, violence has flourished, extreme political groupings have prospered and the capacity to find agreement through the normal process of negotiation between the Northern Irish political parties has been substantially diminished.

Consequently, the SDLP now considers that in these circumstances it is impossible to pursue successfully agreement in this way, and that the primary responsibility must rest with the two Sovereign Governments involved. It is now clear that the problems of Northern Ireland can only be solved by joint Anglo/Irish action taken as part of a clearly agreed programme between both Governments. This clear recognition of the central role which each Government must play has been contained in every policy proposal made by our Party in the past; the primacy of their roles has been brought into stark focus at the present time by events and factors which are common to both. Indeed what we ask them to recognise is that the Northern Ireland problem is their common problem. For both it is creating common security problems which can not be tackled successfully except through a joint, agreed approach. But if the Irish Government has - as has been recognised even by

the Unionist parties - a central role to play in creating peace in the North, they must surely have also a joint political role to play with the British Government in creating the institutions of lasting peace and in creating a political settlement. For both Governments the financial drain of their respective security measures is far and beyond that which any country should have to sustain indefinitely. Their common interest must be in bringing to an end the conditions which cause this common drain.

Both Governments have experienced considerable international embarrassment because of the political insecurity in Northern Ireland. Is it not reasonable to suggest that they jointly take steps to eradicate the causes of this embarrassment? Irish and British lives are being lost daily. The respective Governments must take joint political action to ensure the safety of all of their subjects. Neither Government can afford to act or deliberate about the Northern Irish problem in isolation from the other; both owe it to those whom they govern to create jointly political stability, which will in turn promote real and lasting peace, economic development and social stability. The time has come for positive and decisive initiatives. They must be taken by both Governments acting together. Anglo/Irish concord in relation to a common problem is essential.

As a first step they should make it clear that there are no longer any unconditional guarantees for any sections of the Northern community, but rather a commitment to achieve a situation in which there are guarantees for all.

The British Government must acknowledge that the basis of its policy is unworkable, a tragic mistake which must be put right. The basis of that policy is, in fact, an unconditional guarantee of support to one section of the community - the Unionists - at the expense of the other. This has ensured both the alienation of the minority and the unwillingness - indeed inability - of the Unionist parties to enter into any meaningful dialogue about the problem. Such a guarantee is an open invitation to intransigence. It can never produce either peace or stability. It must be re-examined.

The Irish Government in turn, must acknowledge that its claim to unity, while it remains undefined in that they are reluctant to spell out its economic, social and political implications, is interpreted by many Unionists as a real threat. They must clearly demonstrate that they are prepared to accept the sacrifices involved in real unity, including the social changes which will demonstrate that Irish life is not dominated by any one

section or tradition. Unity must come, and be seen to come, by agreement. The Irish dimension to our problem must be seen as a positive, creative element in the solution of our problem, not as a threat which is stultifying and introverted.

Secondly, both Governments should agree that, in fact, a solution can only be arrived at through a clearly-defined process which will enable progress to be made in all areas directly and indirectly affecting Northern Ireland and its relations with the rest of the island, with Britain and with the EEC. They should declare themselves committed to such a process, a process of integration of the differing traditions on this island, a process designed to lead to an agreed Ireland with positive roles for all.

One of the initial steps in this process might be the creation of a viable administration in the North, based on partnership and participation at every level, which would command the active support of all sections of the Northern community. The two Sovereign Governments should agree to, and be seen publicly to agree to, the structures, responsibilities and modus operandi of this administration, and to commit themselves to sustaining it while it adheres to the principles and methods of operation upon which it is created. Simultaneous with the creation of a partnership administration in the North, the Governments should set up

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a Standing Commission to examine in detail the development of Governmental structures in Northern Ireland and the special position of Northern Ireland within Ireland, within the United Kingdom and within the EEC, in an effort to develop an ongoing settlement. This Commission should consist of elected representatives of the Northern political parties and representatives of both Sovereign Governments. It would operate within an open-ended time-scale and report periodically to the Governments in the areas where the process of integration might best be assisted.

However, progress in the social and economic fields can not be ignored. The changing world scene, the European dimension and developments within these islands make it imperative that the similarity and complementarity of social and economic interests in Ireland, North and South, and the special relationship of both with Britain, be examined. The two Governments should jointly create bodies, which would include representatives of each Government and the Northern parties, to identify and promote projects which would be of benefit and which would develop the obvious areas of common ground that exist between both parts of this island.

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In making these proposals, the SDLP is aware that some parties in the North will initially refuse to participate in this process of creating a solution as they blindly refute the constructive and conciliatory Irish Dimension which it obviously contains. However, short-sighted intransigence must not be allowed to postpone further the political, economic and social stability which the people of Ireland, North and South, so desperately want and deserve. No longer can the veto of one small section of the Irish people be allowed to condemn the vast majority on the island, who wish to live in peace and agreement, to further decades of suffering and strife. The process must start and the dialogue continue without them while leaving the door open for their eventual participation. The intransigence of a two per cent minority can no longer be allowed to frustrate the settlement of a problem which is poisoning relations between the people of Ireland and between the people of the two islands.

In proposing this course of action, the SDLP asks the Irish and British Governments to face up decisively to their responsibilities, and, by their joint actions, create the process through which the experience of working together will lead to long-term reconciliation and real unity of purpose within Ireland. SDLP asks the representatives of the Unionist people to allow the distinctiveness of their own tradition to become a dynamic and

and constructive element in reaching the type of lasting solution so desired by all: a prosperous future free of the conflict, instability and violence of the past and, regretfully, of this generation. The Party demands of itself that no stone is left unturned in the search for a just political settlement and that this search be continued in a true spirit of understanding and reconciliation.