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Social Democratic & Labour Party

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17/3/88

Dear Gerry

Following our recent discussion I promised to put to you in writing a summary of the views that I put to you on that occasion with a view to their consideration by your organisation and with a view to developing more in depth discussions at future meetings. You promised to do likewise.

The views which I put on that occasion were broadly in two parts, firstly my comments on the analysis and methods of the Provisional Republican Movement and secondly arguments and proposals for a peaceful political alternative. I now repeat those points in writing. Of necessity they are brief but I would hope that they could be developed in much greater depth and detail in any forthcoming discussions.

The basic method used by the Provisional Republican Movement is of course the IRA campaign.

The price^{of} that campaign is already clear to everyone, not least to the members of that organisation themselves and to their families. Lives have been lost, people have been maimed, young lives have been wasted in prisons, untold damage has been done to the economy of this island as a whole destroying hopes for the future of many of our young people and forcing them to leave and therefore to diminish Ireland. The statistics are well known and do not need repetition.

The people who have suffered most and the areas who have suffered most are the very people and areas that are represented by either SDLP or Sinn Fein. The other constant irritation to people are the numerous complaints about harassment of security forces, house searches, heavy military presence on streets, providing constant strain and tensions in the daily lives of people who have enough problems, given the economic circumstances in which most of them are living. The justification given by the authorities in Northern Ireland is that all these activities by the security forces are a reaction to the IRA campaign and are consequences of that campaign. A great deal of relief could therefore be brought to ordinary people by ending the campaign and removing the stated justification for security force activity.

It is not an answer to suggest that the British presence is the primary source of our problems, and therefore the cause of all the violence.

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It is not enough to suggest as Provisional spokesmen frequently do, that the cause of all the violence is the British presence in Ireland. All of us take our own decisions and use our own methods for dealing with that presence. We must also take responsibility for those methods and for their consequences particularly when such consequences can be foreseen. The IRA must take responsibility for their methods, as they do, but also for the foreseeable consequences of those methods which have brought so much suffering to Irish people.

It is also clear to us that there is little chance of those methods succeeding in the foreseeable future in achieving the stated political objectives of the IRA. Does anyone in Ireland even among supporters of the IRA believe that the present British Government will accede to the demands of the IRA made by force? Does that not mean that the whole country and the members and families of the IRA face at least another decade of what we have just been through with all the suffering and without any guarantees of achieving their objectives at the end of it?

Is it not time for the IRA and the members of the Provisional Republican Movement to seriously reconsider the methods that they have chosen to achieve their objectives or are they in danger of moving to a situation or are they already in it where the methods have become more sacred than the cause?

Even if, of course, the stated objectives of the IRA were to be achieved in the manner which they have set out, we in the SDLP would argue that that would not bring peace to Ireland but would lead to much greater chaos and to permanent division and conflict among our people. That is a serious charge but it is a view that is shared by the vast majority of the Irish people who do not endorse the use of force to solve political problems in Ireland or to achieve national objectives. It therefore deserves serious attention and consideration by members of the Provisional Republican Movement if they are open to genuine dialogue as to the way forward. It is a view that is also shared by a wide spectrum of British political opinion who wish to see permanent peace in Ireland and who are sympathetic to the Irish cause.

The objectives of the Provisional Republican Movement are a British withdrawal from Ireland or a declaration of intent to do so within a given period. In our view there is no difference in practice between those objectives because once a declaration of intent is made then the effect is no different from an actual departure. The political vacuum is immediately created and as all experience of such situations show the vacuum will be filled immediately by force as each section of the community moves to secure its position. This route is the route of maximum risk and is a risk which we believe no one has the right to take unless they do so with full authority of the Irish people.

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What is the risk? In such a vacuum the likelihood is that the British army would become inactive. In the knowledge that their government has decided to withdraw all responsibility does anyone think that soldiers would be prepared to risk their lives? Each section of the community would seize its own territory and we would have a Cyprus/Lebanon style formula for permanent division and bloodshed. What would the 12,000 armed members of the RUC do? What would the 8,000 armed members of the UDR do? Is it not likely and natural in the emotionally charged atmosphere that would obtain and in the absence of any acknowledged authority that they would simply identify with the community from which most of them come and become its military defenders? And what would happen to the Catholic community in such circumstances particularly in those areas where they are most vulnerable?

Is the risk involved in such a military policy not an awesome one and likely to ensure that the peace and unity of Ireland will never come. And would the contemplation of such risks and such consequences not justify ~~and~~ complete re-appraisal of their methods and their strategy by the Provisional Republican Movement? Or have they reached the stage where their certitude about both their methods and strategy amounts to the fact that their methods and their strategy have actually become more sacred than their cause, (the cause being a united independent and peaceful Ireland) and to discuss them or to contemplate changing them is unthinkable. Such an approach is a purely military approach, and as has already been admitted on all sides, there can be no military solution.

There is a political alternative and in our view the political road is the only one that will ensure that there is lasting peace in Ireland. For the SDLP, Ireland is first and foremost its people, the territory is secondary since without people the territory isn't much different from any other piece of earth. The tragedy is that the people of Ireland are deeply divided and have been deeply divided for centuries on some very fundamental matters. But it is the Irish people who have the right to self-determination. It is the Irish people who have the unalienable right to sovereignty. Unfortunately the Irish people are divided on how to exercise the right to self determination. The Irish people are divided on how to exercise the right to sovereignty. It is the search for agreement among the Irish people on how to exercise these rights that is the real search for peace and stability in Ireland. It is a search that has never been seriously undertaken by the nationalist/republican tradition in Ireland and it is the real challenge facing us today if we have any belief in the future of the Irish people as a whole. Does the Provisional Republican Movement accept that the search for agreement among the people who live on the island of Ireland (which means in practice agreement between what has become known as the people of the Unionist and Nationalist traditions) on how to exercise self determination is a search that cannot be conducted by force. And does anyone believe that if such agreement were reached that any British Government could refuse to endorse it?

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Indeed the present British Government has made clear in an internationally binding agreement that if such agreement on the exercise of self determination took the form of Irish unity that they would in fact endorse it. Is that not the clearest possible challenge to the nationalist/republican tradition in Ireland to begin the task of building a new Ireland with our Unionist fellow citizens, an immensely difficult task given our past but one on which substantial and steady progress can be made in the absence of military and violent activity.

Is that not the challenge that has also been put two centuries ago by Wolfe Tone and never really taken up in his oft quoted but misinterpreted diary statement of his objectives and his methods.

"To subvert the tyranny of our execrable Government, to break the connection with England the never failing source of our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country - these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of our past dissensions and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denomination of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter - these were my means".

It is surely clear from that that Tone was stating with great clarity that his means or method of breaking the link with England was to unite the people of Ireland first.

And does that challenge not also remove all justification for the use of violence because does not the British declaration on endorsing and accepting agreement among the people of Ireland on Irish unity not make clear that Britain is now saying that she has no interest of her own in being here and that her only interest is to see agreement among the people who share the island of Ireland.

We in the SDLP would therefore like to pose some questions to the Provisional Republican Movement with a view to creating the conditions in which all military and violent activity will come to an end.

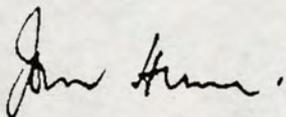
- 1 Do you accept the right of the Irish people to self-determination?
- 2 Do you accept that the Irish people are at present deeply divided on the question of how to exercise self-determination?
- 3 Do you accept that in practice agreement on exercising that right means agreement of both the unionist and nationalist traditions in Ireland?

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- 4 If you accept 1, 2 and 3 would you then agree that the best way forward would be to attempt to create a conference table, convened by an Irish Government, at which all parties in the North with an electoral mandate would attend. The purpose of such a conference would be to try to reach agreement on the exercise of self-determination in Ireland and on how the people of our diverse traditions can live together in peace, harmony and agreement. It would be understood that if this conference were to happen that the IRA would have ceased its campaign. It would also be understood in advance that if such a conference were to reach agreement, it would be endorsed by the British Government.
- 5 In the event of the representatives of the Unionist people refusing to participate in such a conference would you join with the Irish Government and other nationalist participants in preparing a peaceful and comprehensive approach to achieving agreement on self-determination in Ireland? Would we in fact and in practice take up the challenge laid down by Tone.

I think that you might agree that if we were to proceed successfully down such a road that the atmosphere throughout Ireland would be transformed and that the international good will would be overwhelming to such an extent that many things which seem either difficult or even impossible now would become attainable. Naturally the points that I am making in this letter are of necessity brief and I am looking forward together with my colleagues and yours to going into them in more depth in a spirit of genuine dialogue. May I also add that in spite of all the pessimism that is around and indeed my own realistic sense of the obstacles that lie in the way, I sincerely hope that we will be successful in attaining an objective of bringing an end to all military and violent activity in the northern part of Ireland.

Yours sincerely



John Hume