Address of

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of the

Social Democratic and Labour Party

of Northern Ireland

to the Conference

of the

Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community

on

"VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY".

ROME, 16th May, 1982

I live in a section of the city of Derry in Northern Ireland,
the Bogside, which was until fourteen years ago a neglected
community of workers and their families which few people
outside of Derry, not to mention Ireland, had ever heard of
and which no-one cared much about, except us Bogsiders for
whom it was and is the warmest and finest community on earth
and the centre of our universe. Today the Bogside is known
across the world as a bye-word for terror and counter-terror,
for destruction and for violent revolt. When I and my neighbours
come out of our houses we are immediately surrounded by all the
lurid evidence and symbols of destruction : the bombed buildings
and public property, the soldiers and police patrolling in,
heavily armoured vehicles, the graffiti laden with messages
of hatred and death.   None of our children and few of our
young adults can remember anything else. Indeed, many of their
elders find it difficult   to recall the earlier times,
times which were difficult enough for most families but which,
against today's misery, have acquired something of the aura of a forgotten
Eden.

I and my party have, since the beginning of this cycle of violence,
insistently and consistently denounced and striven against the use of force.
We have confronted it directly on our streets and we have challenged
it in the political arena.

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There are, as I shall attempt to explain, different types
of violence. The violence practiced in the name of the
minority in Northern Ireland who have been the victim of
generations of repression and discrimination is different from
that of middle class youth in Germany and Italy. If all else
has failed - years of political endeavour and non-violent
agitation, the mobilisation of opinion in Britain and
internationally - why is violence not the only way to force
through political change ? Why do I and my party oppose its
use so absolutely ?   There are basically two reasons for this.
Firstly, it is destructive to ourselves.
Secondly, not only does it not work : it makes our problems worse.

Violence is destructive of ourselves. We who live in Northern
Ireland can bear witness to the truth of this proposition more
than any other community in Europe.   Political murder is an
event which sends waves of horror and fear through every normal
community in Europe.   It is felt - correctly - to be an
attack on the entire community. In Northern Ireland, although
it is equally to be condemned, it has become a rather routine
phenomenon.   Thus is the community desensitised and dehumanised.
Violence of whatever variety is more than an exercise in the arbitrary use of f
it is a cult in itself. It exhalts death above every human value,
directly inverting the natural hierarchy of human values which

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ultimately rests on the fundamental right of human beings to live.
Violence denies that right and thus every other human right.

What I am saying is no mere theoretical analysis. It is
the real daily experience of the people of Northern Ireland.
We are the living witnesses to the spread of a cancer of
nihilism   to the very roots of our community, a cancer which
loosens and undermines the network of cohesion which holds human beings
together in society.

It is our duty as human beings believing in the fundamental value
of human life to oppose it resolutely and at whatever cost.
It is moreover our duty as democrats and as social democrats to
oppose it. Violence   is after all the denial of the rights of
the ordinary man and woman to decide their political destiny :
it says to you and to me and to those we represent :   "You are too
stupid and too weak to determine your future; we, the men of force
the elite, the only repositories of wisdom and resolution, will
decide and arrange it for you."   Social democracy is the supreme
political expression of the rights of the common man and woman.
Violence   is its direct and absolute denial. We are therefore its
ennemies.

Violence is increasingly international in character and our opposition
to it must correspondingly acknowledge no bounds. It will not have

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escaped your notice that the **men** of **violence** imitate and learn from each

others methods. Northern Ireland has produced two particularely

horrifying methods which are now in international use: the car

bomb and knee capping. Every incident, whereever it takes place,

diminishes all of us and challenges all of us.

However, it is a mistake to regard politically-motivated violence merely
as a form of criminality.
Commitment to a cause, however spurious or unrealistic, is more
sustaining than the self-interest of the criminal underworld.
The causes which attract extremists breed a fanaticism which is
more daring and more prepared for altruistic self-sacrifice than
is common among the criminal fraternities. Such causes are often
served with a ruthlessness, borne of commitment to an ideal and
strengthened by a belief in the inevitability of ultimate triumph
which has no parallels in ordinary crime. To attempt to deal with
this phenomenon,as though it were just another type of criminality
is doomed to failure.

The reaction of our society to this frightening phenomenon has
been varied. Responses have tended to follow two broad patterns.
The traditional response of the European Right has been simple,
unthinking reactionism - the increase of police powers, the re-
duction of civil liberties, the use of force to suppress force.
By and large that reaction has failed. It has failed because it
has, to a degree, adopted the tactics of violent men to deal with
violence. It has reduced the respect shown to the individual by
the state, in order to deal with organisations who show no
respect to the individual. It has helped to fulfill their
prophecy - to substantiate the criticisms of the **democratic process**
made by those who wish to destroy it.

There is no better example of the failure of this reactionary
approach than the case of Northern Ireland. To a greater or lesser
degree over the past 14 years the British Government has attempted

a solution to the problem of violence, based on the use of force. The police force has been strengthened in numbers, fifteen thousand troops are deployed on the streets, with ten thousand part-time paramilitary soldiers to support them, and civil liberties have been suspended in a great many areas. The police and the military now have wideranging powers of arrest and interrogation. They can hold a suspect incommunicado for up to seven days. They can enter, search or commandeer any property almost at will. So severe has the use of these powers been that the British Government has been found guilty of inhuman and degrading treatment of suspects by the European Court of Human Rights, and has been severely criticised by Amnesty International for mistreatment of suspects under interrogation. Yet the violence continues, because the main thrust of British policy has been directed at suppressing violence, rather than dealing with the causes of it, suppressing the symptoms rather than curing the disease.

Not only has this approach to the problem of violence within our society failed – it has contributed to the problem. It is the forces of the Right who generate the political and economic ethos wherein it is assumed that "might is right". Being more concerned with land and property than with people, they pursue a territorial and economic hegemonism which breeds conflict.

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Again, there is no better example of the way in which this approach contributes to, and even evokes, a violent response, than Northern Ireland. We have in Northern Ireland a deeply divided society, the majority of the population being of British origin and clinging to their British identity and Protestant beliefs and values, the minority being Irish-oriented and clinging with equal tenacity to their Irish identity and culture and Catholic beliefs. This is the legacy of our colonial past. When the struggle for self-determination in Ireland reached its climax in 1921, the country was divided, the greater part of Ireland becoming an autonomous state, seperate from the U.K., the North-Eastern part becoming a semi-autonomous state within the U.K.

For fifty years the British-oriented section of Northern Ireland's population (Unionists) held power continuously in its own hands. The minority, Irish-oriented section of the population (which is now over 40 % of the total population) were permanently excluded from any exercise of power, or participation in Government. Because the Northern Ireland state was created on the basis of a sectarian headcount, being the largest area within which those of British origin (Unionists) could sustain a majority, the inevitable result was the pursuit of sectarian policies by those who inherited power. The history of the Northern Ireland state is one of continuous repression of, and discrimination against the Irish-oriented minority. Discrimination in employment, housing, development and all areas of

public policy, during those fifty years of Unionist hegemony, is
now thoroughly documented.

Northern Ireland, therefore, provide the classic example of the
failure of existing political models to accommodate minorities.
To a greater or lesser extent all of our societies are divided.
All over Europe there are minorities - ethnic or linguistic minorities,
religious minorities, cultural minorities, political minorities,
minorities of class, age group and economic interests. The great
challenge to democracy in the later twentieth century is the
adaptation of our democratic political systems so as to give fair
access to the decision making processes to all sections of our
societies.

This is, or should be, the basis upon which parties of the
European Left respond to the problem of disorder and violence in our
societies. We are, all of us, from parties which have their origin
in protest against the injustice and inequalities of our society.
Whereas parties of the Right have represented the dominent strata
of our societies, it has been the historic role of our parties to
represent the mass of the people, the underprivileged, the poor and
the oppressed. That is why we are in a better position to understand
the discontents and the grievances which give rise to disorder and
violence, and why we must play the key role in solving the problem.

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We cannot protect what is valuable in the societies we live in,
if _^ allow the men of violence to dictate the terms of the conflict

   governments

they wage against us. If we respond to violence only by the use

of force, the suspension of civil liberties, or indiscriminate

reaction against dissent, then _^ discredit and ultimately

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destroy all the things we seek to protect. That is not to say

that responsible political authorities should not seek energetically

to maintain order. However, we cannot maintain the values we believe in

if we disregard those values — the sanctity of human life, the rights

of the individual, freedom of speech and conscience — when dealing

with the _^ of violence. That reduces us to the level of the men of violence

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and accomplishes their first objective.

We must ask ourselves what "policing" means when we consider the

problem of keeping order in society. Policing is the process by which

the law is enforced and the institutions of the state protected. If there

are clear sections of society who feel that they have no influence over

the making of the law, no place in the institutions of the state, no

part in the decions making process, then you will have a policing pro-

blem because a section of society will be outside the consensus upon

which democratic institutions must rest.

It is obvious that this is a serious problem in Northern Ireland.

Yet I wonder if this aspect of the problem is not underestimated in

the rest of Europe. It is arguable that in the second half of the

twentieth century, in the major democracies of Western Europe as a

whole, respect for the political process and for politicians is

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declining. In many of our countries the mass of the population
nave little real feeling of control over the political process.
This is indicated by declining voting figures in elections,
by a popular perception of politics as an esoteric process controlled
by an elite, and a perception of politicians as being motivated
by self-interest. This is a dangerous trend which may weaken the
democratic institutions we wish to preserve.

It is arguable that our democracies are too large, and that power
is too remote from the people. It is no longer possible to return
to the direct democracy of ancient Athens, but ought we not to be
thinking in terms of increased decentralisation - of increased
devolution of power to local bodies. That process has begun under
the new   government in France, and hopefully, will be emulated
elsewhere.

We must also look at the economic structure of our society, and
ask ourselves to what extent we have achieved a fair distribution
of wealth and resources. In many of the countries of the Community

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our parties have held office. We have great and important
achievements to our credit. However, there are still vast areas
of deprivation, and real poverty, in our inner cities and in our
depressed rural regions. We must redouble our efforts to tackle
this problem, to end the scourge of unemployment and to give
a decent standard of living to every section of society. While
the poor and the deprived are neglected they will be prime targets
for those who seek to persuade them that society must be destroyed
by force. They will certainly have no strong commitment to
maintaining a structure of society which gives them no comfort
and no hope.

Order in our societies can only be achieved by consensus. The great
challenge to our democracies is to build that consensus so that it
embraces every section of our communities. If there are sections of
our society which are not part of that consensus, who feel cut off
from the political process with no influence over the making of law or
the taking of decisions, then those sections of society will have no
interest in the maintenance of the law, and will be alienated from the
political, social and economic framework of our society. That is
exactly the climate in which violence can flourish.
It will be the historic task of our parties to examine our political,
social and economic structures, and to reshape them where necessary so that
they better serve the interests of all the people. We must build that

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consensus on the recognition and acceptance of diversity rather
than the enforcement of uniformity; on the achievement of social
justice, rather than the achievement of material progress, on the
achievement of harmony between peoples rather than national
aggrandissement.