

Address by  
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SDLP PARTY LEADER



**To the  
14th Annual Conference**

Saturday, 26th January, 1985  
in Forum Hotel, Belfast

As we meet again in Conference, I would first like to give credit to the critics of the SDLP: credit for consistency if for nothing else. It seems that, every year around this time, there are those who do us the favour of writing us off. We too are consistent. Every year we give to critics an ever more resounding answer than we did a year previously. That answer is all around us this afternoon in the strength of this gathering.

1985 is International Year of the Youth. For many people that will mean little more than a banal slogan. For the SDLP it will mean that we will begin 1985 with the youngest Executive of any significant political party in these islands. That is clear from the list of candidates contending for our Party Executive.

The vehicle for progress in change in this diseased society will not be one, or two or five personalities; it can only be a strong, organised political party. The more youthful and vigorous the Party the better. In 1985 the SDLP is more vigorous and more youthful than we have been for many years. We have many to thank for this: our General Secretary and Headquarters staff, our fundraisers, the men and women who sit behind me on this platform who have been virtually full-time public representatives for the past decade with no personal reward or gain. It has been their "principled leadership" in their local areas that has won respect for this Party. And our supporters, surely the most severely tested democrats in these lands.

For years in their thousands they have gritted their teeth and said with the SDLP: "Repression: No! Violence: No! Democracy: Yes!" Today, despite the sickness that has eaten so deeply into our community, those thousands are being joined as never before by many young men and women whose commitment to peaceful change is, if anything, fiercer than ours ever was because they have had actual living experience of the alternative.

A year ago as we were looking ahead I quoted the perverse slogan of Orwell's novel "Nineteen eighty four": "War is Peace" Orwell was right about 1984. 1984 saw the nuclear arms race entering space. Even Orwell could hardly have written the script as globally the superpowers insisted that the road to peace lay in accumulating more and more nuclear arms and locally the Brighton bomb was extolled as a "bomb for democracy". Famine racked much of Africa, stirring to unequalled generosity our own collective famine memory and instincts. The mounting Cruise Missiles and Soviet SS-20s coincided with rocketing youth unemployment, with Northern Ireland, as usual, beating all sides and all record.

The beginning of wisdom is to see that all of these problems are interlinked. I think that we in the Party know and feel this more strongly than almost anyone

else. We may not all have the expertise, but we KNOW what is wrong in Africa, what is wrong in Cyprus, what is wrong in the Middle East and, yes, what is wrong as the United States and the Soviet Union face each other across their Himalayas of nuclear gunpowder. We KNOW that the will to peace and the will to justice are not strong and not urgent enough. That will, if we were strong enough, could transform the global economy by transferring the resources wasted on nuclear weapons to the developing world, thereby creating the growth in world markets that would enable the Western economies to tackle their unemployment problems in the rising tide. If that will had been strong enough in London, Northern Ireland would not be dangerously divided today.

This community of ours may be in crisis, but that should not - and it does not - deter us from concerning ourselves with the larger problems of the world. These larger issues are being debated in depth elsewhere on our agenda and I congratulate all of those who have brought forward documents setting out our detailed policy positions which distill the uniquely perceptive feelings of our people for situations of oppression, poverty and conflict in our world today. It is for me to concentrate on the immediate political problems that confront us.

1984 saw two major advances for our Party. The first was the successful conclusion of the New Ireland Forum, to which I shall return. The second was the Party's - the Party's-smashing victory in the European elections which pundits had forecast as a difficult race for the SDLP. Well, they - and we - maintained our consistent record.

We face this year as an invigorated, rejuvenated and confident Party. And we face the challenge of 1985 with renewed realism. For we are realistic. Youth unemployment continues to rise. People continue to be murdered. Political attitudes seem to be as frozen as ever. The prospects of achieving political stability seem difficult. In whole areas of our community there is no accepted system of order. The social fabric and the basic traditional values are in real danger of disintegration because of that. This social calamity in turn reflects a deep disorder in the structure of our politics, a kind of primordial Original Sin in that structure, for which redemption today can only come about by the achievement of political consensus. The SDLP has always seen political consensus as the basis of order. The question is: are the British or the Unionists ready for such consensus?

1984 ended with requests for talks from Unionist leaders. We in this Party take those requests very seriously indeed and we have made our position clear. We are committed to the democratic political process

and so we are committed to dialogue. We will enter dialogue with any democratic party and our approach will be based squarely on the problem as we see it and on proposals which we see as adequate in this and necessary, in other words, on the Forum Report in all its aspects. No party in Northern Ireland has set out its position, its analysis or its proposals more clearly or in more detail than the SDLP.

In the interest of peace and stability we are obliged to ask whether the talks now offered are based on a real change of heart or merely for short-term advantage. In SAYING that we take requests for talks very seriously we are obliged to have in mind that talks which fail would damage the political process. The experience of the SDLP with our opponents over the past 10 years - experience which, were it not for the death and destruction of Northern Ireland in those years, could only be described as bad political farce - entitles and obliges us to insist on that question.

Much of that experience is recent. We witnessed the sectarian triumphalism after Chequers. Even in recent days we have seen the mask drop again in various ways. We have heard the ugly sectarianism of Mr. Taylor, one of the more senior figures in the Official Unionist Party. One after another over the years, Unionist dominated councils have been found wanting: Lisburn, Craigavon, Armagh, Cookstown . . . Because some unionist couldn't stomach the fact that Derry, my own native city, is no longer exclusively their gerrymandered fief, their political leaders at Westminster this past week have sought to establish two councils rather than one: this was the culmination of a declared campaign to smash power-sharing in Derry which Unionists know has always been and remains on offer from the SDLP.

Are these the attitudes of people who want a new beginning? We are told, however, that these are people who want to make a new beginning. If so, they will not find the SDLP wanting. The SDLP will engage in dialogue on the basis that I have stated. Accordingly, I will be making informal approaches to the other party leaders to clarify the questions I am raising with a view to creating reasonable ground for fruitful dialogue and to emphasis yet again that we seek accommodation of our differences not conquest. Those who fail to recognise and accept the diversity of their country or their community will never unite it.

I now address those who claim to speak and to wage war for me and for you and for the rest of the Irish people, the Provisional Republican Movement. I would like in particular to address myself to their supporters and to ask one simple question: Can any human being - you or I - evade responsibility for the consequences of the methods that we use to solve our political problems? Surely the answer must always be No. What responsibility does the Provisional Movement accept

for the consequences of the methods they use? A Sikh shot Mrs. Gandhi. Who suffered? Within twenty-four hours there were one thousand dead Sikhs. Does Mrs. Gandhi's killer bear any responsibility for those deaths which were the direct consequence of his action? Who are the dead in the North? The majority of civilians killed are from the Catholic community. So are the majority of young people in jail. The same is, proportionately speaking, overwhelmingly the case on the dole queues. It is the Derrys, the Strabanes, the Newrys that have been blasted as "economic targets"; it is principally the jobs of their people that have been bombed to extinction as though those communities didn't have enough unemployment inflicted on them from other sources already.

We all heard a leading spokesman from that movement tell the world after the Brighton bombing that the hope of the Provisionals had been to kill half the British Cabinet. They then expected as a direct consequence widespread repression against the nationalist community, including internment. There is a lesson for nationalists in that statement, particularly our young, and there is a stark message for the British. It is now clear beyond any doubt that the Provisionals see in the repression and the sufferings of the nationalist population advantage for their own design to "seize power in Ireland North and South". The people and their problems are simply tools in a bid for political power.

The question will, of course, be asked: "What about the British and what they're doing?" We should never take OUR standards from the actions of the British in Northern Ireland and we, by our actions and our self-imposed standards, should withhold from the actions of the British our own approval. The Provisional IRA can do just that - AND they can end a very great source of misery and suffering - merely by stopping their campaign of violence and removing the justification for the repressive legislation that afflicts our people. On a factory gate in Coalisland, there used to be a piece of IRA graffiti. Originally it read "Freedom 73" "73" was painted out and "74" painted over it. "4" was painted out and "5" painted on top of that. "1975" was then painted out and the word "now" painted over it.

Unfortunately, many of the young people who believed that slogan and followed its leadership have paid a very heavy price with either their lives or their own freedom. Now we have Mr. Morrison telling us in one of his revealing moments that their objective may now take fifty years to achieve. How many lives do they think their objective is worth? Is human life to be totally subjected to ideological and territorial imperatives? Are we not human beings BEFORE we are Irish, English, French? Is Ireland without its people worth more than any other piece of earth?



The Provisionals' notion of "victory", even if it could be achieved, would be a calamity for everyone in Ireland as it would bring neither peace nor unity in its wake. For the SDLP "victory" is "out". "Peace", "stability", "agreement", "consensus" and "partnership" are all "in".

The question is: what is "in" for Mrs. Thatcher? Britain, as indeed Mrs. Thatcher seems at one level to acknowledge, retains ultimate responsibility for this problem. That does not mean that Britain retains the prerogatives of the sovereign government: it means that Britain retains the ultimate responsibility for the fact that our problems are so appalling. I would say in passing that I am glad that the Alliance Party have finally echoed our view that the British cannot present themselves as the referees of our tragic conflict; they are the principal participants in it. British policy, so far as we can discern it, is based on three points:

FIRST, it rests fundamentally on the unionist guarantee. We have consistently pointed to the political paralysis that flows inevitably from that policy. Part of this element is the assumption that the problem is confined within Northern Ireland and that the only issue therefore is to win over an artificially created unionist majority. This is wilfully to overlook the fact that our crisis is a problem of the relations between our islands as well as the fact that real and lasting consent should be sought through the broadest possible consensus of the people of both islands.

SECOND, the British say that their political objective is to bring the two sides of the community in Northern Ireland closer together through a system of government that has widespread acceptance throughout the community. We take that to mean power-sharing. But that is not a policy; it is no more than an aspiration. If it were British POLICY, the British would not, as they have done for 10 years, allowed the Unionists alone, time after time, to veto it, they would have implemented it.

THIRD, their so-called policy is finally grounded on one real objective only: security at all costs. This is implemented through a vast gamut of emergency laws, procedures and personnel. Its effects are the inverse of the second objective of bringing the community together; more than anything else the security policy in practice divides the people of Northern Ireland, drives them further apart and erodes respect for order. Let me be specific: around 60,000 people have been arrested under the Emergency Provisions Act; only 12% of those were brought to trial; 70% of them were never questioned about their own actions, only about the actions of others. In other words the Act is an instrument of intelligence-gathering, not an instrument of justice. The overwhelming majority of the people involved are under 25 and from specific areas of Northern Ireland; is it any

wonder that many of the young are more and more alienated?

This British approach, based on these three premises, is sterile and self-contradictory. From Britain's own selfish point of view it is disastrous. I saw the British Prime Minister for a serious discussion last week. For my part I set out our Party's position in all its important dimensions. My approach to Mrs. Thatcher was, of course, based centrally on the Report of the New Ireland Forum. The Forum remains the clear and best hope for peace in this island. The Forum has created a solid, generous, workable, comprehensive and open-ended policy for democratic nationalism in Ireland for the first time ever. The Forum first sought to describe the problem; then to discern the underlying irreducible realities that cannot be ignored by any solution and finally to set out a framework which would accommodate those realities. We outlined three possible specific ways in which those realities might be accommodated but also said that we were open to consider other possible ways of achieving this. Nothing could be more absurd than to suggest, like the wishful thinking of some unionists, that the "Forum Report is a dead letter". Let me read to you a few brief excerpts from the serious international press reaction to the Report which will give some idea of its unprecedented impact on world opinion. In Britain "Deserves an unqualified welcome from all those who want a peaceful solution to the Irish question . . . it is essential that the response should be positive" - Financial Times; "A breakthrough in Irish politics" - Economist; "Mrs. Thatcher cannot afford to turn her back on the Forum . . . neglect has been the curse of British policy for far too long" - Observer; "A powerful critique . . . a challenging series of ideas . . . an offer to start again which should be gratefully accepted". - Guardian; "Serious and intelligent" - the Daily Mirror.

From the United States "The document is a remarkable political gesture and a positive development" - The Baltimore Sun; "It constitutes an act of courageous realism, an extraordinary accomplishment in the context of Ireland's mortal passions . . . it promises to hold the potential for an historic agreement of sanity and democratic principle" - Philadelphia Inquirer "The document is an opening statement in what its writers hope will be a continuing debate" - Washington Post.

From France "The first serious attempt to redefine Irish nationalism in the light of current realities" - Le Monde; "The tone of the Forum's conclusions are moderate, constructive and in no way constraining" - Figaro. From the Netherlands "A serious attempt has been made to put an end to the bloodshed in Ulster" - De Telegraaf.



From West Germany "It would be dangerous for the United Kingdom to heed Unionists shrieks and put the Report aside" - Frankfurter Rundschau.

And from Sweden "The British must now tackle the problem of Northern Ireland. - Passivity can only lead to a much more serious situation" - Dagens Nyheter.

Is someone going to tell me, as some gleeful voices have done, that the Forum process has ended just because a British Prime Minister says no? Where would any political movement be if they took no for an answer from government? Indeed where would we be today if we had accepted the refusal of successive British governments and Parliaments to even discuss Northern Ireland and its deep grievances from 1920 till 1969? We shall not take "no" for an answer, particularly when we are so aware of the support for our position.

More important than the press reaction has been the political reaction. Aside from the support of President Reagan, does anyone think that the European Parliament would have produced a report centred on the issued of the conflict of identities in Northern Ireland if it were not for the Forum? The Forum has in fact spawned a whole new industry of reports from sources who have never previously brought themselves to considering a possible solution to the Northern Ireland problem seriously. Does anyone think that Unionists would now be offering talks to the SDLP had it not been for the Forum? Mrs. Thatcher told me that Northern Ireland is one of the priorities of her government. Does anyone think that it would be so were it not for the Forum? Does anyone think she or her government would be talk to Dublin about the need to accommodate the two identities in new political structures had the Forum not been put at the centre of the stage of British politics which is where the SDLP promised that it would be?

If we were to distill the essence of the approach of the Forum Report in one single paragraph of the Report it would be paragraph 4.15 of the Report, I quote:  
"the solution to both the historic problem and the current crisis of Northern Ireland and the continuing problem of relations between Ireland and Britain necessarily requires new structures that will accommodate together two sets of legitimate rights:  
- the rights of nationalists to effective political symbolic and administrative expression of their identity; and  
- the right of unionists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life.

So long as the legitimate rights of both unionists and nationalists are not accommodated together in new

political structures acceptable to both, that situation will continue to give rise to conflict and instability. The starting point of genuine reconciliation and dialogue is mutual recognition and acceptance of the legitimate rights of both. The Forum is convinced that dialogue which fully respects both traditions can overcome the fears and divisions of the past and create an atmosphere in which peace and stability can be achieved".

Does Mrs. Thatcher disagree with that? If she does not, what are her proposals for implementing it?

We in the Forum for our part have gone further. We have laid down the framework within which those principles can be accommodated and, again, that framework is summarised succinctly in the following paragraph of the Report. I quote paragraph 4.16:

"A settlement which recognises the legitimate rights of nationalists and unionists must transcend the context of Northern Ireland. Both London and Dublin have a responsibility to respond to the continuing suffering of the people of Northern Ireland. This requires priority attention and urgent action to halt and reverse the constant drift into more violence, anarchy and chaos. It requires a common will to alleviate the plight of the people, both nationalists and unionists. It requires a political framework within which urgent efforts can be undertaken to resolve the underlying causes of the problem. It requires a common determination to provide conditions for peace, stability and justice so as to overcome the inevitable and destructive reactions of extremists on both sides. Both governments, in co-operation with representatives of democratic nationalist and unionist opinion in Northern Ireland, must recognise and discharge their responsibilities."

Now let me come to the attitude of the British Prime Minister. The Forum lays down and accepts no preconditions for accommodating the realities we identified. In rejecting the three possible options described in the Report, Mrs. Thatcher put forward a monumental precondition of her own: sovereignty.

Let me be very clear. We for our part are not hung up one way or another about preconditions. All we want is a solution. For us sovereignty derives from people and not from outdated territorial concepts. Mrs. Thatcher has told me, she has told the Taoiseach and she has told President Reagan that she wants a solution. Yet she starts with preconditions. She should start with the problem itself if she really wants to solve it.

I have to say that I am not impressed by her particular precondition. Is sovereignty an immutable principle nowadays when it comes to the solution of Britain's problems? Is there such a thing as total sovereignty in any State in the world in 1985? Britain pools her sovereignty as does the Irish State in the European

Community and that does not make Mrs. Thatcher feel any less British or our friends in Dublin any less Irish. That is the most obvious example. The basic element of sovereignty has been understood for centuries as being the control by the sovereign state of the instruments of defence. What greater derogation from sovereignty could there be than to allow the leader of another country to deploy and control his nuclear weapons which could destroy the earth on your own sovereign territory?

Let the Irish and British governments get together without preconditions on either side and create that framework that we all need. It can be done.

For the SDLP a major objective in 1985 will be, with the help of our young members, to reach out to the young men and women who have lost hope in politics and who are tempted by the nihilism of violence. We rededicate our Party and our community to the non-violence on which we were founded. Let us do this with vibrant confidence. In the sixties, when we brought this great problem to the attention of the whole world as a people, our resources were non-existent, our organisation was limited, our motive was near desperation. Today we are a very different people in a very different world. All we need is our own talents and our own self-confidence. Never again will our problems be swept under any carpet. All we need is time, commitment, endurance and intelligence and to recognise that all the positive changes of the past 15 years have been won by non-violence. In the early seventies when asked that Free Derry Corner why I opposed the "young fellas" throwing stones, I said "Because when you throw the first stone, you do not know whether the result will be a broken window, one dead or a thousand dead and when you cannot control your weapon you should never use it." Violence is a uncontrollable weapon.

We must go out and face down the notion that throwing a stone or a petrol bomb or firing an armalite is manly or courageous. It is not MANLY. It is an abandonment of belief in humanity to kill those from whom you differ rather than from trying to convince them of your point of view.

Let me at the beginning of this International Year of Youth end with some words of Martin Luther King's:

"Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind. It is impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and

makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers".

Is there anyone who has lived through the last fifteen years who would disagree with a word of that statement? If we stand firm for those principles we shall overcome.