

20th
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CONFERENCE



Shaping the Future

Address by
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Party Leader

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It is once again a pleasure and an honour for me to address you as Party Leader. It is a particular honour for me to do so on a weekend in which twenty-two years ago this very day, 25,000 people stood on Derry bridge in one of the most moving and outstanding examples of non-violence that this island has ever seen.

Our message was simple - give us justice. We pointed out that any society built on injustice could not survive that question. Within three weeks, without a stone being thrown, Derry Corporation, the symbol of the worst injustices, which had survived fifty years including an IRA campaign in every decade, had fallen and the transformation of this city had

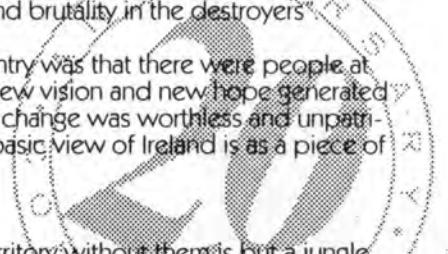
begun. Three years later the reverberations created by that movement brought an end to the Stormont regime itself. It did not survive the question. The basic and unanswerable demand of the civil rights movement was equality of treatment for all citizens in the North and once that was achieved we had every confidence that all other problems, particularly the deep divisions among our people could be solved by normal democratic and political means.

This party was born out of the Civil Rights Movement and was fundamentally based on the same philosophy, a philosophy that we have steadfastly pursued ever since. It is best summed up in the words of one of the great men of the 20th Century that I have quoted often, - Martin Luther King - words that are quite prophetic when applied to the violence on our streets today:

"Violence as a way of achieving 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 everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than 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."

The tragedy for this society and for this country was that there were people at that time who, in spite of the new energy, new vision and new hope generated by the Civil Rights Movement, believed that change was worthless and unpatriotic unless it was steeped in blood. Their basic view of Ireland is as a piece of territory. Its people are expendable.

For us Ireland is its people. The piece of territory without them is but a jungle and in any case it is already united; it is the people who are divided and they will never be united by force or coercion. It is also an accident of birth where and what we are born. Those who are members of the IRA might well have been born in Ballymena or East Belfast. Had they been born there many of





them would no doubt today be members of the UDR or the RUC in the sincere belief that they were defending their own traditions and their own identity. All of this underlines the futility of trying to respond to difference by pushing it to the point of division or by wiping it out. Victories are not solutions.

In most parts of the world today where there are serious and apparently insoluble problems, it is because of refusal to accept difference; refusal to recognise that the essence of stability and unity in any society is the acceptance of diversity. Where difference exists, the real task is to accommodate it - not to wipe it out.

Indeed, in most places too, where conflict is at its most vicious, the name of God or Allah, is often called down in support of one side or another. Has it ever occurred to them, if they really believe in God, that God created everyone of us and that in the entire human race there are not two people who are the same. Difference therefore is of the essence of creation and should never be a source of hatred or conflict. The richness of difference and diversity should always be the source of respect, preservation and development.

We all know the part which symbols of difference play in the life of the North. We are constantly reminded of battles fought long ago, of famous victories and ignominious defeats. On both sides, we have our legends of courage, treachery and deceit. Each tradition, in its collective memories, seems to seek to define itself through opposition, what we are against. The history of Northern Ireland becomes an ever playing re-run of some sordid drama of blinkered resentment and fruitless despair - what abutery - we seem trapped in a never ending zero sum game where, by definition, my gain is your loss and vice versa.

In many cases, the development of the nation states of Europe has also seemed to rely on an approach which sees conflict as somehow fundamental. Indeed, the unseemly rush for colonial possessions by the major European powers in the 19th Century and before was based in large part on the need to define themselves through competition with others. Britain could not be Britain nor France France, nor Germany Germany unless each country dominated either one another or some unfortunate "third party" to their struggles elsewhere on the globe. Often the imperial psyche could be satisfied only if the victim country, already dominated or colonialised, had in turn been grabbed by one predator power from the jaws of a major rival.

We in both parts of Ireland once knew only too well the reality of this power system. In different ways, both traditions on this island have suffered much, sometimes in support of, sometimes in opposition to the old European concept of an order based on division between peoples and states. However, in the countries of Western Europe especially, whatever rationale ever existed

for this order perished with the millions of dead of the two world wars of this century.

The European experience, it is now clear to all, demonstrates the catastrophic consequences inherent in a system of relations which feeds on and defines itself primarily in terms of rivalry and refusal to accept difference.

Of course the most important and most inclusive symbol of this new order of relations in Europe is the European Community.

In this regard, it is surely significant that Franco-German reconciliation needed to find a wider forum to bring about the most lasting changes in their respective approaches. The sheer intensity and massiveness of the historical pressures towards division were transformed in the broader context of the original community.

It is also significant that the Community came into being in limited areas which went to the heart of the relationships between the founding countries. They began with the common ground. They began with coal and steel, the critical products for waging war in Europe and sovereignty was pooled in these areas.

The reason I am concentrating so much on the European experience is obvious. If countries and peoples that slaughtered one another in millions, twice in this century alone, can lay aside their past, can build institutions which respect their differences, which allow them to work their common ground together, to spill their sweat and not their blood and to grow together at their own speed towards a unity that respects their diversity and evolves through patient agreements, can we on this small island not do likewise?

Indeed given that both parts of this island have already voted for that European process and have agreed to the pooling of sovereignty and new relations with Greeks, French, Germans, Spanish, Dutch, Danes etc, is it not long past time when we should build new and agreed relationships with one another?

The achievement of European Union is nothing short of remarkable. All we have to do is to cast our minds back to 50 years ago this very day and the slaughter and devastation that was under way. To have constructed a new order in Europe, removing war and conflict as a means of settling difference is a priceless achievement in terms of human life alone. It is nothing less than a joke to suggest as Mrs Thatcher does that the type of coin - pound or ecu - with which we buy a pint is a matter of fundamental principle which can prevent this continuing evolution. It is more than a joke, it is an expression of the nineteenth century nationalism which led to world wars and which was the driving force of imperialism. That nationalism is thankfully now gone. The world has changed and advanced and it is clear that even Mrs Thatcher's own people recognised that.



Unhappily, the proxy bomb strategists of the IRA cannot perceive that the world has advanced. The IRA analysis of the Northern Ireland problem is as irrelevant to current realities as Ceausescu's demented ideas were to the welfare of the Romanian people. The IRA are the true heirs of the old imperialism. Their tools are death and destruction, their aim is conquest through fear and terror, their mind set in sectarian divisiveness. The "mistakes" which they admit are the murder of the innocent. Their doctrine is an eye for an eye and they are blind. By their own standards let them be judged.

They proclaim the proclamation of 1916 as their bible and basic guide. Have they even read it? Let me quote it: "We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, whose blessing we invoke upon our arms and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity or rapine". Was the blessing of the Most High God on the bomb that made a human time bomb out of Patsy Gillespie? Was there no cowardice in making people carriers of death to others? Was there no inhumanity in the killing of Louis Robinson or any of their other recent victims?

Leaders of the Provo Republican Movement have said that they are seeking dialogue and will respond to genuine dialogue. I hope that they are serious.

Let me directly address them. Let me ask them some questions. Perhaps they might answer. If they are serious they will.

Leaving aside the morality of your campaign, militarily how do you justify a military campaign in which you have killed six times more people than the British Army, the RUC and the UDR put together?

How do you justify a campaign in which more than half the people killed are innocent civilians killed through your "mistakes" and the eye for an eye response of the loyalists? How do you justify a campaign in which even among your own members who have lost their lives, more than half of them were killed by yourselves?

Now let us move to your own stated political reasons to justify what you call armed struggle. You state that you are fighting for the right of the Irish people to self-determination.

Do you accept that the Irish people are divided as to how that right is to be exercised? Do you accept that agreement cannot be achieved by killing members of the Protestant community? Do you accept that the Irish people have the right to self-determine the methods that are used in their name?

To continue to the other reasons that you have given. You say that force is justified by you because the British are here defending their own interests by force, interests which you define as economic and strategic. Have you not noticed that events in the outside world, and in Europe in particular have changed the nature of the British-Irish quarrel?

Ireland has had links with Europe going back for centuries evidence of which can still be found in many parts of Europe today. It was precisely those links that brought England into Ireland in the first place because she regarded Ireland as the back door for her European enemies. The Plantation of Ulster was England's response to O'Neill and O'Donnell's links with Spain. The Act of Union was England's response to the French invasion of Ireland.

Now that has all changed. Britain is now pooling sovereignty not just with France and Spain but with Ireland and eight other European countries as well. That has fundamentally changed British-Irish relations. The two Governments together participate in the on-going process to achieve progress across the ever expanding range of Community issues. Common membership of a new Europe moving towards unity has provided a new and positive context to situate the discussion of sovereignty in these islands.

It is no longer sovereignty and independence that is the issue. It is shared sovereignty and interdependence and the Irish have it open to them to rebuild, as they are doing, their links and common interests with the rest of Europe and become part of the European majority.

There does remain a legacy of the past however, one of which we are all too deeply aware. We are a deeply divided people and that division cannot be healed by force. 'Oh,' you may reply, that is only your interpretation of events but the reality is different.

My response to that is to ask you if you have studied Mr Peter Brooke's speech last week. He gave the clearest statement yet of British policy in Ireland in a speech which was very far reaching and positive and which fundamentally addresses and challenges the reasons which you, the Provisional Republican Movement, give for the use of force. Let me simply quote him:

(1) "The British Government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland. Our role is to help, enable and encourage. Britain's purpose as I have sought to describe it is not to occupy, oppress or exploit, but to ensure democratic debate and free democratic choice. That is our way".



(2) "In Northern Ireland it is not the aspiration to a sovereign united Ireland against which we set our face but its violent expression".

(3) "The obstacle to the development of a new and more inclusive Irish identity if people want this for themselves is not to be sought in Great Britain. Those who live here would not bar the way if at some future time that were to be the wish of the people of Northern Ireland themselves; indeed the Government has made clear on several occasions, notably in signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement that if in future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland it would introduce and support in Parliament legislation to give effect to that wish".

(4) "Partition is an acknowledgement of reality not an assertion of national self interest".

(5) "Just imagine what developments of positive benefit to all sections of the community and both parts of the island of Ireland would be bound to follow a permanent end to violence".

(6) "... the transfer from the Common Exchequer every year of very large sums of money to enable programmes well beyond the capacity of locally raised taxation to be carried out. This support is not given in support of some strategic interest or in expectation of some corresponding gain to the people of Great Britain. It seeks no return other than the satisfaction of improving the conditions of life in Northern Ireland".

(7) "There is a need for reconciliation at three levels - between the communities in Northern Ireland; within Ireland; and between the peoples on both these islands".

(8) "An Irish republicanism seen to have finally renounced violence would be able, like other parties, to seek a role in the peaceful political life of the community".

In addition Mr Brooke makes clear that an end to violence will mean an end to troops in our streets and to the considerable arsenal of police weaponry. Mr Brooke, in the name of the British Government, is throwing down a clear challenge to the Provisional IRA. He is telling them with clarity that whatever about the past the reasons that they give for the use of force today no longer exist and that if they want the unity of Ireland they can have it if they persuade those Irish people who do not want it.

All that happening in a context where borders are going down all over Europe, where borders including the Irish one will be no more than county

boundaries and where the common economic ground between both parts of Ireland is increasing daily and will be virtually identical in the Single Europe of which we will be the offshore island. Wouldn't it be one of the great ironies if the only sign of a border anywhere in the European Community were the military checkpoints on the Irish border maintained by an IRA campaign?

Before they rush to tell us that the challenge laid down by Mr Brooke gives a right to a veto to the Unionist population on the future of Ireland let us point out that it is not a matter of right but a matter of fact. There is no way, because of the population structure and geography of this island we can have a final settlement without the clear agreement of the people of the North.

Did not Wolfe Tone say that his object was to unite the people of Ireland Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. If he wanted to unite them they must have been divided and that was 125 years before Partition institutionalised the divide.

In 1891 Charles Stewart Parnell, in one of his last speeches before he died, delivered in Belfast said: "It has been undoubtedly true that every Irish patriot has always recognised from the time of Wolfe Tone until now that until the religious prejudices of the minority" - the Protestant population - "whether reasonable or unreasonable, are conciliated, Ireland can never enjoy perfect freedom, Ireland can never be united".

In short Ireland could not have either unity or independence until the differences between our own people on this island are confronted and accommodated. Isn't that exactly what Peter Brooke is saying today. Except for one important and fundamental difference.

If either Tone or Parnell had achieved unity there is no guarantee that it would have been endorsed by the British Government of the day; because there is no doubt that in those days Britain did have a vested interest both economic and strategic in Ireland. Today Peter Brooke, on behalf of his Government, is making clear that if agreement is reached then not only will the British Government stand in the way they will support it and legislate for it.

The challenge is clear. Have the Provos sufficient confidence in themselves and their beliefs to come to an agreement with their fellow Irishmen without guns or bombs. Anyone who needs a gun to persuade or convince someone else of his or her beliefs does not have much confidence in those beliefs.

The challenge is not of course confined to the Provos, it is to the rest of Ireland as well because such agreement will not be easy and will be only



achieved if we are all committed to a planned process designed to achieve lasting agreement among the people of this island. There is also a major challenge to the Unionists. Remember 1690 is no longer enough. Indeed if they do remember 1690 they will recall that it was a very European occasion. All the present peoples of the European Community were there on one side or the other, except the Greeks and all have since not only settled the 1690 quarrel but many more since.

They will also recall that it was about civil and religious liberty. Leaving aside the fact that in practice they themselves have long since forgotten what civil and religious liberty is all about, if we examine their abuse of power not only when they had real power but even in today's local councils, would they not agree that civil and religious liberty appears to be well protected in today's Europe of which we are all a part and that any agreement that would be reached on this island must similarly reassure them, otherwise they wouldn't agree to it.

The real question is, how do we get there. Let me repeat the proposal that we made two years ago. We have offered, and offer again, to the Unionists that we sit down without preconditions to discuss the problem that we face. We defined the problems as conflicting sets of relationships which had never been resolved to everyone's satisfaction - relations within the North, between North and South and between Britain and Ireland. We went further and said that we felt that the central relationship, the one that went to the heart of the problem, was the Unionist relationships with, or rather their distrust of, the rest of the island.

That was the reason why they rejected Home Rule with all the consequences of that rejection. That is why they excluded the Nationalist population from any say whatsoever at any level under Stormont. That in the end brought Stormont down and was the beginning of the present phase of the crisis. That was why they opposed power-sharing and the Sunningdale Agreement and that is why they are opposed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

It therefore seems logical to us that until that relationship is settled, to the Unionist satisfaction as well as everyone else's then nothing is going to work and it would be foolish to go down any other road.

Now that analysis is either right or wrong. We would welcome the view of any other party, particularly the Unionists. If they disagree with us then let them put their view on the table for discussion as well. What is more, in order to assure Unionists beyond doubt that we mean what we say when we talk of agreement we have suggested that any agreement reached should be

endorsed in a referendum by a majority in each part of the island and if either says no, the agreement fails.

To us that reassures the Unionist people that their agreement is necessary, and for the rest of Ireland for the first time the people of Ireland as a whole would have spoken, they would have expressed their self-determination, in agreement. No genuine Irish person could or would stand against such an agreement so approved and anyone who did would be facing the combined strength of the people of the island as a whole.

We are in no doubt that such an agreement would be very difficult to reach but with real good will it could be. The SDLP would suggest and again this suggestion is for the table and subject to the views of all other parties - that a sensible first step might be for both Governments to make a joint declaration, following the post-war example of European states, that they were setting the past aside. It is too easy for all of us to recall the past in order to justify the present and paralyse the future.

Secondly that they would ask the representatives of all parties North and South to agree institutions of Government North and South that would not only respect difference but allow us to work the common ground together.

That common ground - largely economic - is virtually identical North and South in the new Europe. Already there is no difference between our farmers in our largest and most important industry - agriculture. That common ground will only intensify when with the Channel Tunnel we become the offshore island of the new Europe. Indeed think of the impact of a joint approach to the US and Canada to seek the inward investment that they will want in order to get a foothold in the Single Market and we will want to give hope to our young. By working the common ground, the old poison will be extracted from our relationships. The distrust will evaporate as well as the prejudices and fears as we spill our sweat together and not our blood and in a generation or two we will evolve into a completely new Ireland born of agreement, built by our common toil and totally respectful of our diversity.

That proposal for talks which we put on the table two years ago remains on the table and we offer it again. I repeat, other parties are naturally free to put any other topic on the table. The Unionists refused two years ago. I ask them to reconsider.

I have to confess that I find their approach difficult to understand. They said that they could not talk to us while the Anglo-Irish Agreement remained in existence. Jim Molyneaux recently described it as "a miserable narrow minded contradiction". Yet he will only talk to us through the Secretary of



State of the Government that negotiated that agreement and registered it with the United Nations.

In addition it has emerged that they will only talk to the South as part of a delegation led by the same Government! And yet this party will not stand beside the same Secretary of State at a ceremony in Belfast to remember the dead of two world wars. In trying to understand this contradiction my only logical conclusion is that like the Provos, the Unionists do not have the confidence to stand on their own feet and represent their own people without additional assistance!

In reality, it was the repeated failure of Unionist politics to discard outmoded ideas of domination which led the two governments, working in the closest co-operation, to agree a structure designed to guarantee the rights of both traditions on this island. The Agreement was therefore an admittedly circumscribed effort to remove the concrete causes of much of the "sectarian and political confrontation" Mr Molyneaux refers to.

Both Governments accept that the Agreement is not written in stone. It can be built upon and transcended. The current political initiative is designed to see if the willingness exists on all sides to make political progress. Yet, I must once again ask: Where is this willingness on the Unionist part?

Despite all the evasions and subtle doubletalk, the reality regarding the talks process is clear. The Unionist parties laid down three pre-conditions for their participation. Both Governments, after due consideration and clarification, agreed to respond to these as a basis for commencing comprehensive negotiation.

No sooner was this stage reached than the Unionist parties stipulated a new pre-condition: "substantial progress" had to be achieved in one area of the talks before discussion could begin in other areas. It then transpired as I have said that there was a further pre-condition: the Unionist parties lacked the confidence to participate in North-South talks in their own right instead, they wanted to be members of a delegation headed by the Secretary of State.

It seems curious, to say the least, that the Unionists are insisting on being members of a British Government delegation in talks with the Irish Government about transcending the "miserable narrow minded contradiction" which the British Government had signed and registered with the United Nations!

If the talks are to be about a new Agreement, which is what the Unionists want, then it is the two Governments who should decide the timing of the different strands - not any of the parties in the North. If we were to put in similar pre-conditions based on our stated public position the talks would be gone

before they had started.

Let me also make clear that neither the SDLP nor the Irish Government have insisted that all strands of the talks begin together. What we have said is that since the agreed period for talks was 10 weeks that all talks should be under way within weeks.

The SDLP, in order to leave no doubts, put its position in writing. In order to meet the concerns of the Unionist parties about their electoral promises we made it clear that we accepted that they were entering the talks in keeping with their stated public positions and that if any agreement reached represented departure from those positions that it would have to be approved by the people anyway in a referendum. Any politician worth his or her salt with any self confidence should be able to talk to anyone on those conditions.

Nevertheless, let us leave aside the negative and explore the positive. I am encouraged by certain indications of willingness on the Unionists' part to explore the potential which exists for positive progress, I welcome Jim Molyneaux's acknowledgement that the totality of relations between the two islands needs to be addressed.

There is agreement that this totality includes the relationships existing within Northern Ireland, between North and South as well as between Britain and Ireland. There is then an apparent consensus among politicians that the structural, the so-to-speak architectural dimensions to the problem need to be addressed on a comprehensive basis. There is also the view that the outcome of any talks should be approved simultaneously by a majority in both North and South.

I have already argued that the processes in Europe seem to be about finding ever more comprehensive symbols to give form and meaning to the new realities. To repeat myself again, our metaphors and symbols seem instead invariably to focus on what is divisive in the past. Too many in both traditions seem held in thrall by our shared failure to transcend and transform the negative elements in the legacy from the past. Somehow, somehow we need to invent our own creative and transcending Irish equivalent to the coal and steel community which forms the basis of today's democratic order in Europe.

Jim Molyneaux in his Conference speech refers to the North Channel between Ireland and Scotland. He says that the Channel "far from constituting a political divide has down the ages been a means of communication". However, I think we would be better advised to focus attention on another channel, that between Britain and France, in considering where we stand today in 1990. In this regard, it is clear to all that the Channel Tunnel represents more than



a means of communication (although this aspect is also very important). It also provides a contemporary metaphor of overcoming a political divide. It represents in a tangible form the coming together of the island of Britain with the European land mass. It stands for the breaching of the moat, the realisation that the isolated fortress of the nation state will have little meaning in the new democratic European order. I think we all sense that, irrespective of the latest bulletins from London, there is a growing impetus for full British involvement with the contemporary Europe.

The Channel Tunnel has helped to crystallise a common unease on this island, North and South. There is a palpable fear that our solitary island status in the European Community will leave us further behind the mainstream of developments. I heard Jim Nicholson recently suggest, with obvious concern, that Ireland might become "some Brigadoon, some Quiet Man" type film set location, a quaint anachronism for wealthy Europeans to scratch their heads about. There is at last evidence of a new urgency to identify additional areas of common ground on this island, to take common concerted positions on the ever increasing range of economic and other opportunities which the new Europe offers for those able to take them.

Nevertheless, the experience of the Community is that progress - now so rapid and so far-reaching - has proved possible only once the core issues at the heart of the historic problem were acknowledged and their resolution tackled. For Europe, the ideology of the nation state, seeking to define itself in terms of the divisive, the separate and the apart, was a critical paralysing problem. The experiment with the European Coal and Steel Communities represented the willingness of historical antagonists to work in common on precisely those issues at the heart of their experience of past hatred and division. In Ireland, we will not reach this stage by forever piling up new conditions and pre-conditions for building an acceptable future for all on this island. Let us agree to enter talks without any pre-condition save our stated public positions. Let us agree that any agreement reached, which will undoubtedly involve for all of us a change in these positions, must be approved by the people. Such an approach to talks allows any party to enter them honourably.

Our interests in achieving new political arrangements and relationships is inspired by more than our commitment to reconciliation and peace. It is also informed by the fact that we realise that only when decision making arrangements operate in a framework of consensus can our society have optimum democratic control and influence over the economic and social factors which affect the well-being of individuals and communities.

The SDLP's concern to achieve an agreed Ireland, and our work towards

properly democratic European structures, therefore are not a diversion from democratic socialist ideals. Instead they are proof that we are serious about creating circumstances which will allow us to best promote those ideals rather than indulging in leftist self-regard.

In the difficult and frustrating context of our past 20 years we have done well to preserve, develop and promote a principled and practical Social Democratic approach. Equity has been a central pillar in all facets of our policy. Our pursuit of equality, and our defence of the pursuit of equality, is determined by our belief in the indivisibility of human dignity.

That belief underlies our concern to promote economic development to counter the waste of human talent and hurt to the human spirit of unemployment. We pursue measures not just to eliminate discrimination in employment whether on grounds of sex, religion, politics or disability but also to overcome the legacy of past discrimination. Fairness must not stop at job opportunities but must extend to justice in wages, working conditions and respect for the contribution of loyal labour. We have therefore opposed this Government's low wage strategies, its rejection of the European Social Charter and the effects of privatisation in its various guises.

Not only Government or employers can dismiss the dignity of those in work and their or their families' very dependency on their jobs. There are those who have sacrificed jobs by attacking so-called economic targets and now threaten and attack workers as legitimate targets. They show contempt for the rights and for the honest, and often pressing, motives of ordinary working people. These workers threaten no-one. Their attackers threaten us all.

We not only assert the right to life of all, we stand for enhancing the quality of life for all. Throughout the lifetime of this party we have upheld the case for accessible, adequate and equitable health services and education, for social security provisions which overcome need rather than underscore poverty and for housing programmes which aim at decent, affordable homes in an attractive environment.

It was outrage at the housing problems in our community which led many of us to political activity. I can recall my first election manifesto - in 1969 - in which I advocated the establishment of a centralised housing agency for Northern Ireland, properly resourced, which would take housing out of bigoted and incompetent hands in local government then. We persuaded the British Government accordingly. Going around this city who will deny that our housing situation has been radically transformed?

It is crucial to protect and advance that achievement. Curbs on the Housing Executive's budget and other aspects of Government housing policy are a



source of concern. I would however like to welcome the recent moves towards a strategy on rural housing problems including appalling unfitness levels. The record shows that the SDLP initiated this debate and have been advocating such a programme for years. If resources and appropriate legislation will be forthcoming, generosity might allow us to say "better late than never".

It is worth remembering that as we formulated our case on rural housing we were also standing up for hospital services in rural areas and small towns. We heard nothing of choice when these and other facilities were run down. Today as we face the prospect of hospital opt-outs from the NHS we have to ask can communities not opt out from Government NHS policy in this area? Changes threatening the fabric and spirit of the NHS are being pursued with undue haste.

It is a pity that the Government could not show the same urgency about getting patients into operations as they do about getting plans into operation. Twinned with our concern for the health services are our reservations about the quality of community care proposals. We have long supported the principle of community care but it must be planned and resourced so that it does not simply mean abandonment or solely family care with particular burdens on women. We all know of existing gaps in what is supposed to be our integrated health and social services. We cannot accept a situation where such gaps will become black holes of utter neglect into which those most in need of support and care will be allowed to disappear.

We have already seen that syndrome with the corruption of the social security system. After all the smarm about "targeting need" we have been left, as this party predicted, with a system that all too often ignores and rejects need. Rather than providing through social security we are penalising poverty by social insecurity. How come those who tell us that we cannot afford a system of adequate mutual provision for basic welfare are the same people who have told us about the economic miracle and unprecedented prosperity?

Similarly we have already seen the gloss start to peel from the Education Reforms. The failure to confront the socially and educationally unsound division of children at 11, the inequitable, inefficient and inadequate school funding arrangements and over-reliance on testing are all combining to frustrate and confuse parents, overstretch teachers and disillusion children. The school transfer debacle is only a trailer for wider problems which will emerge.

Our role has not been to defend the so-called "dependency culture". It has been to reject the Tory debt-culture with its loans taxing poverty, student loans to tax and prohibit learning, irresponsible credit booms and high mortgage rates to control the damage caused by their economic policies.

We make no apologies for proclaiming a dignity culture where welfare is not neglected, self-respect is not insulted and equality of opportunity is provided. We uphold a decency culture where care and proper support for the sick, the old and children are not thrown to the winds of market forces. Of course we do not want to see people abusing the system, but the answer does not lie in having a system that abuses people. Yes, we do believe in achieving value in the public sector but we also believe in preserving values in the public spirit.

In following such an approach we are firmly in the tradition of European social democratic parties. The establishment of just such a party here was a goal of my first manifesto in February 1969. Twenty one years on, in February of this year, when I joined in Berlin with leaders of social democratic and democratic socialist parties from the EC countries, EFTA countries and the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe, I was proud that we had achieved that goal. In doing so we have kept true to our purpose and have the respect, support and co-operation of our sister parties.

Together with them we are facing the challenge of creating a new Europe. That challenge includes the creation of democratic policy instruments which can competently address the social, economic and environmental tasks which we share. We recognise that new frameworks and programmes of a much broader scope than the nation state are crucial if we are to hope to have real democratic control or influence over the economic and technological factors which touch the lives of ordinary people. Some spurn this as the dilution of sovereignty, we seek it as the dilation of democracy.

While others are fixated about old concepts of national sovereignty, we are motivated to extend the sovereignty of the peoples of Europe by allowing them to share and shape new democratic alignments, economic responsibilities and social solidarity in ways which also recognise and release the regional identities, energies and aspirations which are too often smoothed by centralised nation states.

That is the essence of real republicanism - creating structures which ensure that the needs and will of the people prevail, harnessing our common humanity, striving for equality, working in a spirit of peace and allowing each generation to embrace new challenges. Those who remain tied to outmoded and tired concepts, however appropriate for previous generations, are failing the ideals of democracy and of republicanism. Those of us on the real path of progress, rather than the cul-de-sac of prejudice, recognise that advance brings new horizons and will not allow barriers of the past to stop our march towards them.



We commemorate another milestone for the party this weekend. Twenty years ago marked a new beginning in Northern Ireland politics. Twenty years ago the founding of the SDLP saw the emergence on this part of the island of the organised commitment to vigorous democratic pursuit of political goals. We set out to place ourselves within the great tradition of democratic politics which has taken root in so much of Europe and beyond. In this spirit, we set out above all to channel the hopes, the aspirations and the energies of individual men and women who shared a commitment to a better society for all in Northern Ireland.

From the start, our party has sought to foster consensus and to work for solutions based on mutual tolerance and understanding. We pledged ourselves to respect diversity of background and of view in our political approach. We sought a politics of acceptance and reach-out rather than exclusion and rejection. We wanted to escape the narrow sectarian mindset which choked generosity and openness of spirit - qualities we rightly regard as crucial for political progress on this island.

We have kept faith with these ideals over the past twenty years. Despite murder and mayhem, dismay and disappointment, in face of triumph and setback we have kept faith in the fundamental decency of the individual human being. We have remained committed to the prevailing power of our common humanity over the forces of death and of destruction which morally and physically stained our society in the past two decades. We have offered no panaceas, no easy and instant solutions to intractable problems. We have held out no vision of some promised land, some Shangri La or Hi Brasil based on deluded dreams and demented notions. Instead, twenty years ago as a new generation we embarked on our journey of both hope and necessity to make a contribution to the political and social life of the North and of the island as a whole. We continue our journey today spurred as before by our common commitment to basic human values. We will not abandon these values: they are the compass and lodestar by which we travel. And we shall overcome.