



SPEECH BY  
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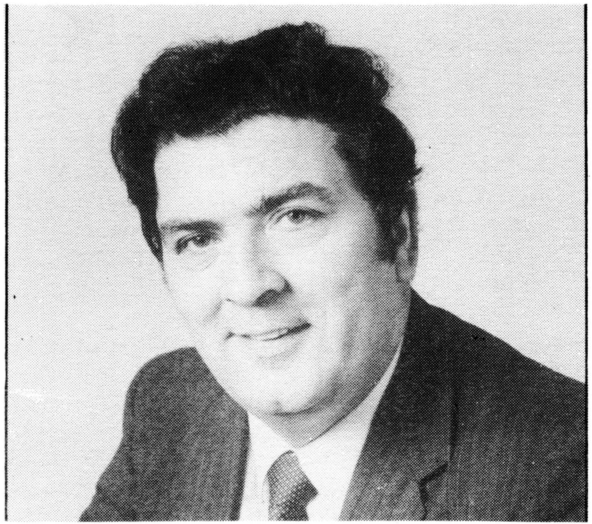
ADDRESS TO  
**22nd ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

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**SLIEVE DONARD HOTEL**

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**6 — 8 NOVEMBER, 1992**



**A**S we meet for our 22nd Annual Conference once again under the shadows of the Mountains of Mourne we can once again use the occasion of our annual gathering to reflect on our role, our work and our leadership and on the continuing growth in support for the steady approach that our party has consistently taken to confronting the deep problems of our society. Most political parties operate in a normal society and their work relates totally to representing people and to shaping the nature and way of life of their society either in government or in opposition. We have a completely different role in that we are neither in government nor in opposition. Our task is to lay the basis for consensus on how our people are governed so that normal democratic politics can take place and so that our people can truly and democratically shape their own society. In the meantime while we work at that difficult and fundamental task we also have to work on a daily basis for our people in confronting the social and economic problems that confront them.

Our task as a political party has not been and is not an easy one. We live and work in the last area of conflict in the European community in a deeply divided society fuelled by the prejudice and distrust that sees difference as a threat and that more often dictates attitudes than the respect for difference which is the basis of stability in any normal society. We live also in the region with one of the highest unemployment figures in the EC.

Yet in spite of all of these difficulties, which render our task much more difficult and complicated than any party in a normal democratic society we are very encouraged yet again this year by the clear evidence of the steady growth in support among the population for the leadership that this party is giving and the work that it continues to do for all our people. Ten years ago we did not have a Westminster seat. In 1983 we won Foyle. In 1986 Seamus Mallon had a great

breakthrough in Newry-Armagh. In 1987 Eddie McGrady surprised everyone by his victory in South Down. And as the whole world is aware in 1992 Dr. Joe Hendron had the outstanding victory of the entire election in West Belfast. In addition our vote has increased steadily in all the constituencies that we represent and in the 1992 Election over the whole of Northern Ireland, our Party received the highest vote ever cast for us in a Westminster Election. All of that is evidence of clear strong support for the steadiness and consistency with which our party has confronted our difficult problems but it is in particular a major tribute to you the members of our party and to your dedicated and consistent work at grass roots level which has won us our steady and growing support.

We meet also at a significant time in our talks process, a time which allows me first of all to express my appreciation to our party members and to our supporters for their patience and their trust in our talks delegation, given that the talks have taken place, for very good reasons, on the basis of confidentiality. We have been unable because of that to keep you regularly informed of the nature of the talks process. However, I think that this weekend has given us a major opportunity to up-date you on the talks process and to have our own internal discussions on that process. It has been a long process, has taken a lot of time and effort and has cut into our regular work in a very substantial way. I would like on your behalf to pay tribute to our delegates and to thank them for the time and energy which they have given, I know that the entire delegation would want me to pay a special tribute to Sean Farren and Denis Haughey for the tremendous amount of detailed effort that they put into the talks process on our behalf and in particular the detailed paper work which was essential to our approach and to our efficiency and to which they devoted so much of their time and effort. They were assisted of course - as usual - by Gerry and Catherine from our headquarter's staff.

**B**EFORE the talks began we were under no illusions about the major difficulties that lay in the way of reaching agreement. We have always recognised that a few years is a very short time in the history of a people, particularly a deeply divided people and if a solid basis of agreement was to be reached that it would probably take considerable time. That has turned out to be the case. However we ought to recognise as well that considerable progress has been made. For the first time ever all aspects of our problem were under discussion. It has been agreed that any agenda for a lasting solution must resolve not only the relationships within the North but between North and South and between Britain and Ireland. In short our problem is not, as it has been wrongly described for so long the Northern Ireland problem. It is in fact a British-Irish problem and indeed it was the failure of Britain and Ireland to sort out their relationships satisfactorily that led to the creation of Northern Ireland. In essence the failure was pushed into a corner and called Northern Ireland and was left to fester for almost fifty years until it finally burst. It is now back at the heart of British-Irish agenda and cannot move back from there. That in its own way is substantial progress. Secondly even ten years ago no one would have forecast that the British and Irish governments, the SDLP and the two Unionist parties would sit

round the same table and in spite of our differences engage in serious and constructive dialogue. That too is substantial progress and in its own way is evidence of the seriousness of the unionists in seeking a solution even though our differences also remain substantial. Where further progress may have been made and time will tell, will be in whether we have developed deeper perceptions of one another's difficulties, problems and necessities.

Our approach to these talks has been clear and unequivocal and we would hope to continue the process, which has begun, of developing a deeper and less prejudiced view of one another by making as many contacts as we can with the Unionist community particularly at community level in order to put to them directly our approach to a settlement.

From the beginning we avoided the traditional approach to talks of putting our detailed proposals on the table on day one. Such an approach, as experience has shown, not only will not produce a settlement, it will not even begin to develop the trust and understanding that are essential pre-requisites to reaching agreement. Instead we insisted that everyone should put their analysis of the problem on the table and begin the process of identifying the common themes and political realities that would have to be faced up to in any solution. That approach has led to a great deal of constructive dialogue and I think to a better understanding of our differences.

Our approach has been based fundamentally throughout on the basis that our task was not to seek victory, not to wipe out difference but to build a society which respected our differences, which created institutions which respect our differences and which allow us to combine our energies in tackling our common problems.

The SDLP have not approached the talks in any traditionalist way. We believe that in its contemporary manifestation the problem that we face is a conflict between two identities or as we put it the failure to devise political structures which accommodate the differences between and allow full and mutual expression to those two identities. We then proceeded to define both identities as we perceived them although we made clear that it was for the Unionist people to define their own identity. I quote from our documentation:-

- "The **Nationalist** community in Northern Ireland sees its identity as essentially Irish and part of the wider Irish family on the island of Ireland. Its vision and aspiration are the creation of a new and tolerant society that unites and accommodates all traditions in a new Ireland, where Nationalists and Unionists can co-exist in harmony and mutual respect. Some Irish Nationalists have not always found it easy to accommodate this central aspect of the problem. The New Ireland Forum commented "for historical reasons, Irish nationalism may have tended to define itself in terms of separation from Britain and opposition to British domination of Ireland". In fact, the experience of other newly independent countries reveals it is common for new states to emphasise their singularity.

- However, the mainstream of Irish nationalism today seeks a more comprehensive understanding of its identity. The Forum Report in this regard noted that “the tragedy of Northern Ireland and the suffering of the people there has stimulated a new consciousness of the urgent need for accommodation . . . the new Ireland must be a society within which, subject only to public order, all cultural, political and religious belief can be freely expressed and practised. Fundamental to such a society are freedom of conscience, social and communal harmony, reconciliation and the cherishing of the diversity of all traditions . . . the implementation of these principles calls for deepening and broadening of the sense of Irish identity”.
- From the inception of Northern Ireland until the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 the Nationalist identity was denied political expression and validity and Nationalists were excluded from effective participation in the institutions of government. The particular significance of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was the acknowledgement – first sign-posted at Sunningdale – by the British Government of the legitimacy and validity of the Irish identity of Northern Nationalists, and that any way forward in Northern Ireland had to incorporate a formal “Irish Dimension”. For the Nationalist community that dimension must be a fundamental element of whatever new arrangements might emerge from the current process.
- The **Unionist** community, on the other hand, perceives itself as British. The majority of Unionists are also Protestant and, as such, are strengthened in their allegiance to the British Crown by the latter’s essential Protestantism. They regard the Nationalist aspiration to a United Ireland as representing a fundamental threat to their own sense of identity; furthermore, they see the Nationalist ethos as pervasively Catholic and incapable of tolerance and respect of the Unionist heritage, tradition, rights and civil liberties. At the same time, it can also be said that many Unionists feel some affinity for aspects of Irish life and culture and would regard themselves also as Irish. To protect their identity, the primary means that they have used or sought to use has been the exclusive exercise of power.
- From a Unionist perspective, therefore, whatever may emerge from the current process will have to be such as to guarantee their sense of identity and to assuage their fears in terms of the perceived threat posed by Irish Nationalism to their ethos and way of life.”

**I**n essence the SDLP summed up the problems that we face as the need to create new arrangements on our island to accommodate two sets of legitimate rights:-

- “The right of Nationalists to effective political symbolic and administrative expression of their identity;

- The right of Unionists to effective political symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life”.

Our task was not to seek victory by one identity over the other, our task was to seek the accommodation of both. That we have made abundantly clear to all talks participants. It follows immediately of course from the definition of both identities that they transcend the confines of Northern Ireland and indeed that was agreed. It was in fact agreed that there are two distinct communal identities within Northern Ireland, both of which need to be given respect and recognition by the other so that they can be appropriately accommodated in the political system, taking account of the wider framework of relationships within these islands. It was also agreed that “each individual community had the absolute right to define their own identity; and that that right and identity should be respected . . . it was reaffirmed that any new political institutions should be such as to give expression to the identity and validity of each main tradition”. In anyone’s language that is substantial area of agreement and indeed an area of agreement that goes right to the heart of our problem and underlines the constructive nature of a lot of our dialogue. The difficulties of course have arisen and they are considerable, in translating those agreed realities into agreed institutions of government.

It is perfectly possible to achieve ways and means by which both identities can be accommodated but it is necessary to recognise that given their nature, that any real expression of them will transcend the confines of Northern Ireland. It means in practice that the Nationalist identity means allegiance to a wider Irish political entity in the same way as the Unionists allegiance to their Britishness is expressed. If Unionists insist as they do that allegiance to the Crown and their identity are inseparable and interdependent then logic argues exactly the same for the Nationalist community. Allegiance and identity are interdependent. Our proposals to the Talks have been aimed specifically at demonstrating the feasibility of this proposition and are firmly based on the acceptance of the legitimate rights of both communities and of giving institutional expression to them. So as well as ensuring that our proposals for Northern institutions ensure fair representation to both sections of our community we also addressed the question of allegiance through our proposals for commissioners appointed from outside Northern Ireland to work alongside those elected within.

**I**n our approach to the Talks also we made clear throughout that the central relationship was the North/South relationship. It was the Unionist fear of their relationship with the rest of the island that led them to oppose Home Rule and to undermine the democratic process. It was the same attitude that led them to exclude all but Unionists from any say at any level in the administration of Northern Ireland. It was the same attitude that led them to oppose Sunningdale and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. As we have often said until that North/South relationship is sorted out to Unionist satisfaction as well as everyone else's then nothing will work. The division that those attitudes represent go right to the heart of our problem. They are divisions which should be regretted by all parties to the Talks because a very high price has been paid by all but especially by the people of the North. It is surely in everyone's interest that those divisions should be healed and all parties to the Talks, particularly the two Governments should declare as their objective the healing of those divisions and commit their resources to creating the atmosphere in which such a healing process will take place. It goes without saying but it needs emphasis that those deep divisions can only be ended by agreement and by respect for difference.

In the meantime in keeping with a healing process the SDLP have proposed the establishment of a North/South Council of Ministers, modelled on the European Council of Ministers, with decisions taken by consensus. Our approach to setting up any structures between North and South is based on our clear view that such structures should be a major element in the healing process. For that reason we have insisted that any North/South structures should have a number of capacities. Such structures should have:-

- A capacity to represent both the Nationalist and Unionist identities in a manner which would attract the support of people in both parts of Ireland;
- A capacity to address all matters of mutual concern and interest to the people of the whole island;
- A capacity to promote and achieve harmonious action between institutions and agencies in both parts of Ireland;
- A capacity to promote co-operation and uniformity in relation to matters affecting the whole of Ireland;
- A capacity to provide for the administration of services on a mutually agreed basis;
- A capacity to break down barriers of distrust which led to past divisions and to lead to a unity, based on agreement, of the people who inhabit the island of Ireland, accepting both diversity within Ireland and the unique relationships between the peoples of Ireland and Britain.

**O**UR proposal is that the overall agreement in both strands should be endorsed in a joint referendum on the same day North and South requiring a yes from each. Thus we bring to its logical conclusion the principle of consent and reassure the Unionists that we seek their agreement. From a Nationalist/Republican viewpoint it is the first time that the people of Ireland as a whole would have spoken since 1918 and their endorsement would give for the first time total allegiance to the institutions of Government North and South. That is the only basis of lasting peace and it is self evident to anyone who does any serious analysis of the overall problem.

In asking the Unionist people to face up to the task of healing the divisions among the people of this island we realise that we are asking them to fundamentally re-appraise their approach to the problem. In asking them to move to an agreed Ireland – a term to which they seem to take exception – we believe that we are only talking common sense. Is it wrong to agree on how we share this island together? Is it wrong for Serbs and Croats to end their divisions by agreeing how they live together? Is it wrong for Turkish and Greek Cypriots to agree to end their divisions by agreeing how they live together? What must be underlined is that agreement to end divisions is not agreement to end difference. It is in effect agreement to accommodate difference. It is to accept – and Nationalists must accept it too – that unity does not mean uniformity. It means the acceptance of difference. Every peaceful and stable society in the world is peaceful and stable only because it accepts diversity. If all sides accept the challenge of our basic approach to the Talks that our basic task is to accommodate our differences, to accommodate two sets of legitimate rights and get down to the task of achieving such accommodation then it is virtually certain that what will emerge will probably be very different from traditional past proposals. What is essential is that they should be agreed. It is also certain that in this day and age, in a world which gets smaller every day, as people of the world get closer and closer, the quarrel that has disfigured this small island is hopelessly out of date.

**T**HE other consistent element in Unionist thinking, which comes across to us as a lack of self confidence, is the persistent need for repetition by the British Government of the constitutional guarantee as the basis of their position. It seems to us that it is surely in the best interests of the Unionist people, and indeed of everyone involved in this problem, that their real strength – and indeed at the end of the day their only strength that matters – is in their numbers and their geography and in standing on their own feet to negotiate an agreement which accommodates their basic interests and their identity. Indeed it is surely also in the interests of the British Government to encourage the Unionists to do just that. And indeed we should all be encouraged by the fact that if that takes place it would be taking place in a completely different atmosphere and situation than the 1920s. It would be taking place in the context of the new Europe which we have all agreed is a major way to pool our resources and to grow closer together and in which Britain and Ireland are already involved together in a major sharing process. In any case we hope that the Unionist people recognise



that it is our clear view that it is in our interest as well as theirs that our agreements are reached in friendship and in respect for our differences.

The one organisation who could make the greatest contribution to creating the atmosphere in which all this could happen is the Provisional Republican Movement. Their attitude, as expressed by their methods, is that difference is a threat and therefore should be destroyed. In the process they not only do not remove difference they intensify it to the point of division. Does it never occur to them that difference is not a matter of choice it is a mere accident of birth and upbringing. Had those who kill human beings in the name of the IRA been born and reared in the Shankill Road or in Birmingham, do they not realise that they might have been the young policeman or the young soldier that they killed. How can you unite with people by killing them. What sort of world would we live in if everyone treated difference as a threat? The normal answer from the Provos to such criticism is "What about . . ." not seeming to realise that even if their what aboutery was correct all it means is that they are taking their standards from those about whom they are complaining. Let me remind them again of what Martin Luther King said, "If you use the methods of the oppressor you will end up worse than the oppressor". The IRA have killed six times more human beings than the British Army, the RUC and the UDR put together.

In recent times political leaders of the Provisional Republican Movement have indicated that they accept that any solution to the problem of Ireland must involve the agreement of the divided people of this country. Let us hope that they will follow that welcome approach to its logical conclusion and use all their influence to persuade the IRA to lay down their arms so that our entire community can get down to the essential task, the healing process of breaking down the barriers of distrust and prejudice that stand in the way of such agreement. As they watch the awful tragedy of the Serbs and the Croats do they not see the painful futility of guns and bombs as a method of uniting divided peoples. The moral courage required to admit that and to lay down their arms would be one of the most patriotic acts in the history of this country.

Parallel to the political talks - and no less important - is the need to make a new start in tackling the economic problems of Northern Ireland, the unemployment, the urban deprivation and rural decline, the lack of growth and the death of hope. At the end of the day politics is about people, the real and only wealth of any country. Unemployment and emigration are therefore destructive of our real country. Politics and economics are inseparable.

**WHAT** I cannot accept from the present Government is the lack of ambition - and with it, the lack of responsibility - in relation to our economic difficulties. We are told, in fact, to expect that things can only get worse following the review of public expenditure. The SDLP stands ready to join with every other political party, and with trade unions, business organisations and voluntary bodies in opposing public expenditure curbs, which will have a disproportionate and devastating impact in Northern Ireland. This should

become our major, immediate priority and we should be ready to put aside political differences and disagreements to support and organise opposition right across the spectrum of opinion.

The next step must be to create consensus for the need for a new economic start, based on policies tailored to the unique situation and needs of Northern Ireland. In the first place we should discuss what the objectives of economic policy should be. We believe the primary objective must be to maximise growth, to generate activity which will create jobs. A minimum target would be growth of at least 5% greater than the projected level of growth in the UK economy. This target, however ambitious it may appear, would need to be maintained year-by-year for a decade in order merely to bring Northern Ireland up to the European average of economic welfare and employment.

It is clear that in the past, Northern Ireland's economic performance was that of an undeveloping, dependent, peripheral region of the United Kingdom. If we are to achieve a minimum growth objective, we need to transform the way we think about our economy. Instead of replicating policies determined in London, we must, at the very least, take action at regional level to **complement** such policies. In fact, we must go much further. We must embark on the "radical and difficult process of some decoupling of the way Northern Ireland arranges its economic affairs from the practices in Great Britain". Not my words, but the recommendation of the Northern Ireland Economic Council, in its recent report on economic strategy in Northern Ireland (Report 88, July 1991, P. 76). (Our Party has drawn a lot on the reports and studies of this Council).

**W**E cannot accept the dogma outlined by the Government in its so-called strategy paper for Northern Ireland. "Competing in the 1990's" which relies on the free-play of the Market. This approach was judged last Tuesday not to be good enough for the United States. If it does not work there, and if the United States needs an active partnership between Government and the Market, how much more essential it is for an active role for Government to have an active role in a weak, peripheral region. The real world, not the world of dogma requires government to have responsibility, to provide assistance and to use resources to exploit opportunities.

Once we see ourselves as something different from a region of the United Kingdom new possibilities emerge. In fact, regional performance has always been – and is now increasingly – influenced by the international economic system. For example, new technology or the reorganisation by companies of their production and supply chains, for reasons which have nothing to do with the national economy may radically change a region's prospects as the people of Magherafelt discovered last year when a multi-national branch closed down. We have to learn to link directly into the international economy. In the context of the world's supply, production and distribution networks, otherwise the world will pass us by.

In particular, we must make a massive effort to train and educate **all** our people. By European standards the British educational system stands out because of the high percentage of young people leaving the education and training system with inadequate or no skills. Here in Northern Ireland we obtain very good "A" Level and University degree results, but are even less successful than the British in providing basic skills and training to the overall population. This neglect, apart from its cost in the waste of human talent, is suicidal in terms of economic development. For we know that two out of three jobs will be affected by the new information technology, and that the new technology is making an impact - not, as predicted by eliminating jobs but rather by creating a huge need for training and retraining.

Together with a large training effort to improve the skills of our people we need measures to improve Northern Ireland's competitive advantage in transport and communications. I am glad to see that organised business on both sides of the border now recognise and are lobbying for, a planned, co-ordinated approach to the provision of such infrastructure on the basis of the needs of the island of Ireland, an approach which is shared and encouraged by the European Commission.

Global progress in transport and communications technology and new methods of production have greatly increased the mobility of the manufacturing and services sector. A recent European Commission study estimates that the proportion of total employment that can now be considered to be potentially "geographically mobile" has increased from around 30 per cent in the 1950s to over 50 per cent in the present decade. Thus the new technology, with its ability to transcend distance, gives us a great opportunity to bring employment not just to Northern Ireland, but within Northern Ireland to revitalise our towns and villages.

We are living through the greatest revolution the world has ever seen, the technological revolution that has made the world a much smaller place, and which has so many implications for our economic future. The Industrial Revolution, the last major economic revolution to change the world led to depopulation of regions like ours, depopulation of rural societies and to urbanisation and centralisation because of the sheer nature of the wealth creating process. The technological revolution is changing all of that. It is no longer necessary for example for government or business to centralise in capital cities. Geography is now meaningless in economic terms. As President Delors said in Derry this week, "Periphery is now a purely geographic term it is not either political or economic". Decentralisation will be and is already a major factor of this technological revolution. Quality of life will be one of the major factors in deciding the location of business. As the offshore island of the new Europe we have quality of life in plenty but we should be facing up to the challenge and turning it to our employment advantage. Our island can provide service industry for the rest of Europe and indeed the rest of the world.

**A**NOTHER fundamental consequence of the technological revolution is that fewer and fewer people are producing the real wealth of the world. This means that the whole traditional meaning of labour, of work, of employment and unemployment is changing. The 21st Century will be a completely new world but a world in which the State will have a much greater responsibility for the total welfare of its citizens than ever before precisely because of the fundamental changes in work and employment being created by the technological revolution. In short our world must move in completely the opposite direction to the Thatcherite survival of the fittest approach of the present Government. The revolution in society and in the State's role in the welfare of countries whose wealth is produced more by technology than people requires deep thought about the future nature of society. Government should be thinking about that now and indeed should appoint a very high level commission to stand back from it all and deeply examine the social, welfare, educational and living implications of the technological revolution. Words like employment and unemployment have to change their meaning and society and individual responsibility will be transformed. But let us prepare for it by standing back and creating in depth debate and discussion instead of going down the road which we are going down at the moment to the law of the jungle, the ultimate destination of the philosophy of Thatcherism.

Finally, as a Party, we will use our influence in Westminster and in Strasbourg to encourage the adoption of overall policies to promote that thinking and to promote growth. We cannot afford to allow the world to slide into recession; In a recession it is the regions like Northern Ireland which will pay the heaviest prices. Part of that strategy to avoid recession at European level must be to increase public expenditure on cohesion, to provide the infrastructure to bring up the weaker regions. Here in Northern Ireland we must make the strongest possible case for increased European community expenditure. Let us get together, with the encouragement of Government, with the other political parties and with the unions, employers and voluntary organisations to draw up a strategic economic plan for jobs and growth in Northern Ireland and let that be the basis of our bid next year for increased structural funds and cohesion expenditure.

Let us give hope to our people. Let us continue to lead. Let us continue to work on behalf of all our people.