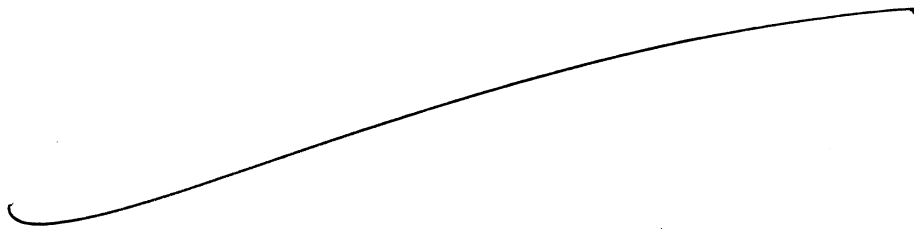


24th Annual Conference.



When we met last year in this very room I outlined to you the background and objectives of my dialogue with Gerry Adams, a dialogue which at that stage was very controversial to judge from the flak of the critics even though they ignored the objectives of our dialogue repeatedly stated by Mr Adams and myself - a total cessation of violence followed by dialogue involving both Governments and all parties whose objective would be agreement among our divided people, agreement which must earn the allegiance and agreement of all our traditions. To move towards that objective, in that speech I made an appeal to the British Government in the following terms, given that both Governments were then in possession of the proposals that had emerged from our dialogue designed to bring violence to an end:

"What is required from the British Government is strong and clear leadership in tackling this problem. They should positively commit themselves to actively promoting with the Irish Government agreement among the divided people of Ireland, an agreement which must earn the allegiance and agreement of all traditions and respect their diversity. Both Governments should make clear that whatever agreement emerges will be endorsed by them and they will take the necessary legal and constitutional steps to implement it. They should also of course take the necessary steps to create the framework in which such agreement can take place".

In my closing remarks I stated:

The key to opening the doors, the key of peace now exists. John Major is in possession of that key. It will require no great effort from him to turn that key and open the door to our new future based on agreement and respect for diversity. It is a key that will threaten no section of our people for it is a key that will open the door to a future that must be agreed by all of them".

Thankfully, a few weeks later he turned that key in the Downing St Declaration with Albert Reynolds, in which he committed his Government to encouraging facilitating and enabling agreement among our divided people and legislating for its outcome. I express my deep appreciation to him for so doing and for his consistent commitment to the peace process. We now await the framework for such an agreement involving dialogue with all parties and let us hope that that dialogue will begin very soon.

In the week that is in it of course it would be remiss of me not to place on record my absolute and total appreciation of the work of Albert Reynolds and his Government in this process. From the day he became Taoiseach when I briefed him on the detail of my dialogue with Gerry Adams he put peace and its achievement right at the top of the agenda of his Government and devoted all his energies to it. I know that this entire Conference will join with me in expressing our deep appreciation and gratitude to him.

In relation to the present situation in Dublin following Albert's resignation as Taoiseach I will be brief. We in this party take it for granted that all major parties in the Dail are totally committed to the peace process and we will work closely with whatever Government emerges to continue that process. It goes

without saying, and it has always been the political attitude of our party that peace and justice in the North transcends party politics in the South and indeed our policy over the years has been to work closely with all Governments over the last twenty five years. We will continue to do so and given the crucial importance of peace to all the people of our island we look forward to working immediately with whatever Government emerges and to the continued development of the peace process.

No people anywhere in these islands are more conscious of the necessity for peace and the realities of our situation than the members of this party and our supporters who have been the front line for peace and civil rights throughout the past twenty five years. Without your commitment we would not be where we are today. As your leader it was natural that the cynics and opponents directed their considerable flak in my direction and attempted to divide us. Now they know that since its foundation this party has been a team, devoted at every level to the basic and human rights of all our people. Indeed what I am saying clearly that as your leader my role in the peace process would not have been possible without your total solidarity, particularly at some very difficult times for members whose homes were attacked, and in particular without the powerful solidarity of my closest colleagues in the parliamentary party and the party executive. Our critics do not seem to have noticed but the central message of the peace process, repeated regularly throughout, was a total cessation of violence followed by agreement among our divided people, agreement that must earn this allegiance and agreement of all our traditions. That has been the central message of this party at all levels since its foundation. Indeed if our critics care to look, we are the first party in this island to have the word consent in our constitution because we have always argued that it is the people of this island who are divided and they can only be brought together by agreement. But let us underline, as Seamus Mallon has done very effectively in major statements in recent times, the principle of consent applies to both sections of our divided people.

Unionists must accept that in a divided society no one party has a veto. It is the people who have vetos and in a divided society any settlement must have the agreement of both sections of the people. The negative approach is to exercise the veto, the positive approach which is the necessary approach is to seek agreement and to keep working till we do so. We in this party will do so at every level.

We now face that major challenge that lies ahead - to achieve lasting stability by achieving lasting agreement. We have now had the longest period of peace in the past twenty five years. Can I express the belief that the decisions taken in recent times by the leadership of the Provisional IRA and the Loyalist paramilitaries will prove to be truly historic decisions in that they will prove to be decisions that have taken the gun and the killing of human beings out of our politics forever on this island and the new century will be the first in our island history without the tragedies of human killing that have

disfigured our past.

In response to those decisions the time has come to leave the past behind us, to draw a line over it and let history judge it. Let us remind those who are continuing to draw up the past that we can all do likewise and there is a lot in our past that we can all be bitter about. But let us not forget that it is past attitudes that have created our tragedies. Past attitudes gave us one of the most unjust societies in Europe. Past attitudes have built the walls of Belfast. If we are to have a just and peaceful future in which the legitimate rights of all our people are to be respected then we all have to re-examine our past attitudes and look to our future with new attitudes, new ideas and a total commitment to bring together Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter in total harmony and in respect for our differences. To do so will require new thinking, generosity and flexibility on all sides. Our basic problem remains to be solved. That is our major challenge. However, if all the energies of both Governments and all parties are committed to solving it, to reaching agreement and to healing our divisions peacefully we will make more progress in our generation than any previous generation in our history.

Let us remember the fundamental principle of what politics should be about - the right to existence, the right to life and to work and housing. There is no point in politics being about any form of emotionalism, flagwaving or territorial ambitions, if our young remain in dole queues or have to earn their living in another land. Our aspirations and our ability to achieve them can only be strengthened by the achievement of that basic right. For that reason, while we are engaged in the difficult and long-term task of breaking down the barriers of distrust and prejudice, the border in the hearts and minds of our people, which is the real border on this island, can we not immediately begin to work together in our common interests, which is to provide decent living standards and employment for all our people. Working together in this front should provide no difficulty and as we do so together we will break down the barriers of distrust that go to the heart of our overall problem. Indeed as we do that we can do it together with descendants of both traditions across the world. We are one of the biggest wandering peoples in the world. People of both our traditions were driven from this land by unemployment, by famine, by intolerance. Yet they have used their talents to build other lands and have reached the highest position in both government and industry in those other lands. Their loyalty to their ancient homeland remains powerful. Let us now as part of the ongoing process towards lasting stability, harness together the enormous good will and influence of our people across the world so that we can at last, as we move into the 21st century, have the first century without emigration and without unemployment. Because of our tradition of wandering over the centuries we have contacts in many lands. Let us now harness them to build our little offshore island, the offshore island of the N S of Europe and the United States of America. The four areas on which we should work with them are self evident - the marketing of the products of our small and medium sized

industries, the seeking of inward investment, the substantial development of tourism and very importantly in today's decentralised technological world the office work service to major industry across the world.

Such a process is not as dream like as it sounds because as you are aware we have already begun it in a small way in my own city, the city where the troubles started and where bitterness was at its deepest. Yet today in that city people from both traditions work together with our contacts abroad particularly in the U S. The results have been significant - up to 45 million dollars of orders for small companies across N I - £120 million inward investment into the city which will create 2,000 jobs. If we do the same on an organised basis right across our island the results will be regular and positive. And of course we will be engaged in real politics - providing the right to existence for our people.

On the political front as well let us realise that although the distrust and prejudices that divide us are deep, the atmosphere for dialogue today is a better atmosphere than at any time in the past. The most obvious reason for that is that the violence has ended and people will not want us to go back to the trenches of the past. The other and most powerful reason is that we are living in a new world today, a world very different from the 1920s.

In the 1920s independence and sovereignty were central issues not just to our quarrel on this island but across the world. The world of the 1990s is a different world. We are living through the greatest evolution in the history of the world - the technological, telecommunications and transport revolution. It has made the world a smaller place. It has brought people and their problems closer to one another. It is a world in which we no longer live in independent countries. We are interdependent, we cannot live apart, particularly if we wish to have a decent right to existence. That has been reflected in political evolution, as in the evolution of European Union and the breaking down of barriers between people who have slaughtered one another for centuries but who today work together through common institutions on fundamental matters of economic concern - the right to existence. Indeed let us not forget that the era of the nation state has not been and is not an eternal era in our history. It is part of the evolutionary process of humanity. Once upon a time on this island and across Europe we had kings, chieftains, clan systems, city states etc. As the world evolved so did the nature of government, not always without controversy, division or war. Indeed one could argue that the era of the nation state will go down as the worst era in world history. It led to imperialism and two world wars. As we develop the new era now, particularly together with the Irish abroad let us begin by tackling the deep legacy that that past has left us - our divided people. Let us use all our energies and resources to heal that division. Let us repeat that it can only be healed by agreement. Let us repeat that victories cannot be solutions and let us all face up to the challenge of reaching agreement.

As we have said before once agreement is reached and our ancient quarrel is over, whatever form that agreement takes, then as we begin working together all the time on all fronts the old prejudices will be eroded and the new Ireland will steadily evolve but it will be built by agreement and respect for the diversity of our people. For that reason we should on all sides go to the table with flexible minds and without fixed ideas, keeping in mind that the essential task is not necessarily who wields power but how do we break down the barrier of distrust that in the past have always led to instability, to injustice and to killing on our streets.

In all of this approach which will require new attitudes on all sides, the British Government has a key role to play as well. As I said here last year, successive British Governments throughout the century have repeatedly told us that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the UK. Yet given the terrible problems that have existed here throughout this century have many British Governments had any sense of direction? Most of them had the Pontius Pilate approach - let them sort it out for themselves. They are now committed and we welcome this commitment to doing all in their power to promote agreement among our divided people and to legislate for whatever agreement emerges. I do not understand their reluctance to be persuaders for I would have thought that everyone in the world who has sympathy with our problem and particularly the Government with responsibility would offer all their power of persuasion to encourage us to reach agreement. After all agreement threatens no one. Its absence threatens everyone. The basis of order in every society is agreement on how we are governed. When that is absent there is no order. There is instability with all its terrible consequences. The major task tht now faces the British Government and all the rest of us as well, is to reach such agreement for the first time in our history so that as we move into the new century it will be the 1st century in which we will have the basis of order - agreement on how we are governed. Let no one be in any doubt that this party is totally committed to that.

As we know over the past twenty five years we have lost not just lives but jobs. The troubles have had a serious economic affect particularly on inward investment and tourism. We can never bring the lives back but with the peace process we can win new jobs and we can rebuild communities that have been broken by violence and unemployment.

We have already begun. The United States has announced a substantial increase in its support for the International Fund and President Clinton will host a major Irish Investment Conference next April. Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission, and our colleague in the European Socialist Group, is finalising a package of measures for next months European Summit. Our party has had a major input into the shaping of both these initiatives.

This party is the one party in Northern Ireland that has always looked out in the realisation that we must live in the real world of the 1990s. We have steadily over 20 years built solid and positive links with the United States because of the enormous interest and good will that is there to be harnessed on our behalf. Central to our contacts has been the question of economic regeneration and the International Fund for Ireland was set up by the late Speaker Tip O'Neill at our request supported by our friends in Senate and Congress and has already led to the creation of 20,000 new jobs throughout our community. Neither have I any doubt of the total commitment of President Clinton, Vice President Gore and the friends of Ireland in Congress. These are powerful friends and their wish is to do all in their power to help all sections of our community. Our community must organise to take full advantage of these opportunities.

Similarly we have built strong links with our sister parties across Europe as is evidenced by their very welcome representation here today. Their solidarity with us gives us enormous strength when matters relating to our part of the world are raised in the European Union. That is evidenced by the speed with which both our socialist colleague President Jacques Delors and the European Parliament responded to the peace process. Here again the challenge to us is to organise these contacts right across Europe for the benefit of our community as a whole and here again as in the U S I am talking about marketing the products of our small companies and seeking inward investment.

This party has always insisted on the importance of Europe, both in the sense that our membership of the European Union provides a framework in which our conflict can be eventually resolved, and in our responsibility to make a positive contribution to the emergence of a Europe united in its diversity.

In recent weeks, we have seen the clear commitment of our European partners to the peace process. The European Parliament gave its virtually unanimous support to the work we have been pursuing, while the Council of Ministers and the Commission have decided to launch a major initiative to underpin the peace process.

At present, at the initiative of Jacques Delors, the Commission has set up a Task Force to draw a plan for EU assistance to Northern Ireland and the border regions. It will be reporting shortly, and it is intended that the forthcoming European Council summit in Essen will adopt a package of measures.

Let us be clear. We cannot expect our European partners to resolve our conflict, nor can they wave a magic wand and remove all our problems of economic development, poverty and deprivation. But we can expect them to do everything they can to allow us, working together, to tackle those problems, and ultimately the causes of our divisions. That is why we have been so keen to make a positive, well-thought and strategic response to the Task Force.

To this end, I have written to the Task Force to put forward a number of proposals. First, a Fund for Peace in Ireland backed by the Commission and the US authorities would provide an essential stimulus to economic development in the areas affected by the conflict. Such a Fund would provide grants and loans, designed to provide leverage for much greater private and public investment than could be provided by the Commission directly. This Fund would also raise money by selling Peace Bonds, particularly in US capital markets. It should be set a target of providing leverage for an extra 1 billion ECU in investment and additional economic activity a year.

Second, we have a specific problem of alienation and social exclusion in this region. The establishment of a Social Inclusion Programme would help to bring those communities and individuals most disadvantaged by the conflict into the mainstream of economic and social development.

I have high hopes that these ideas will be adopted by the Commission, and I look forward to the Essen summit which will hopefully give its assent to the tabling of the necessary European legislation.

Essen will be the last occasion where Jacques Delors will be in attendance at a European Council in his capacity as President of the Commission (although he may well return in another capacity). President Delors has been a good friend to us, and has taken a consistent and genuine interest in our problems. I very much hope that he will still have an influential role in European politics, and I wish him all the best in his future endeavours.

And the British Government? Well, they have promised to treat as additional the funding which will come from Brussels. What they have not undertaken - and it is essential that they do so - is that public expenditure in Northern Ireland remains at least constant and that the considerable savings - up to £500 million per year, opening up in security expenditure - are redirected into giving new life and hope to the marginalized and deprived communities in our midst.

For what is truly shaming, and shocking is the extent of deprivation in many local communities. In this information decade a good measure of the health and potential of a community is its level of educational achievement. A recent survey of West and East Belfast showed school truancy rates of 20%, 11-plus passes at half the regional average, and 80% of YTP trainees suffering from major literacy and numeracy skills. Yet the people from such communities have as much brains as anyone, anywhere else. What they need, and deserve, is proper educational provision, family and child care support, and a climate of hope and employment opportunity. This must be our commitment, to use the peace process to bring hope back to such communities and to break the link between deprivation and violence.

The SDLP wants to see a redirection of spending in order to provide the resources that local community development groups - both urban and rural require. Now is the time for new employment programmes to reach out to the long-term unemployed and to plan for the release into civil society of ex-offenders and of security personnel. Above all, in the process of healing, we must give priority to helping the victims of violence.

There are many opportunities to grasp. Together with the South we can begin to be serious players in the attraction of inward investment and of tourism. We can share energy resources and supplies on the island with common links to the continent. We can build proper transport links; our universities and schools can share and exchange resources; we can create a great dynamism when the cities of Belfast and Dublin, instead of standing apart, begin to properly interact with each other - doing business and trade, exchanging and sharing services, ideas and culture. Indeed, over the past few years - despite the level of violence - there has been a huge growth in North-South co-operation; much of this has been driven by people who were traditional Unionist supporters - another example of how some of the Unionist political leadership has been out of touch with their people and with the new realities.

A new Commission will take office early next year under the direction of Jacques Santer. President Santer will come into office with our best wishes, since we do not underestimate the scale of the problems he and his colleagues will face. I feel confident that he will wish to continue the good work of his predecessor in guaranteeing a positive European contribution to the promotion of peace, justice and prosperity on this island.

The most immediate challenge facing the new Commission will be the integration of the new member states, Austria, Sweden and Finland (and perhaps Norway) into the European Union. The great issue will be to find ways in which an even more diverse Europe will still be able to take decisions, and implement policies capable of addressing our collective problems.

The ability of the EU to address differences sensitively without encouraging political paralysis will be a key test of political will, and will obviously have many implications for peripheral regions like ours.

Enlargement will also have benefits for us. I do not only mean the fact that the new countries will be net contributors to the EU budget. With the countries on the geographical fringes of the EU becoming members, we can reasonably expect the problems of the outlying regions to be taken even more seriously, and that the necessity for strong regional policies will be confirmed. It is also true that enlargement will mean a Commission in which about half the members are drawn from our sister parties throughout Europe.

Furthermore, countries such as Austria can serve as a model for overcoming divisions. The deep divisions of pre-war Austria have given way to a rational and consensual politics, where no one

feels threatened by differences which were once lethal divisions. Similarly, our Nordic friends were among the first to overcome their historic conflicts, and to resolve them in peaceful and co-operative ways.

We will also have to face the challenge of further enlargement as the countries of Eastern and Central Europe continue to prepare for membership. We in Ireland have a particular responsibility in this respect since it is important that we in the relatively affluent West can demonstrate that we are capable of overcoming our differences, of containing and eliminating conflict, and of pursuing an agenda of social and economic change, rather than basking in the futile and sterile conflicts of the past. We are also failing to make a sufficient contribution to the transfer of knowledge which the Eastern and Central European countries so desperately need if the aims of political and social reform are to be met. We should be playing a much more active role in the PHARE and TACIS programmes than we do now.

Finally, we face the major challenge of reconciling a high level of employment, the continued existence of the European welfare state, and the necessary adaptation to global economic and technological change. This is perhaps the key to the pursuance of the EU objective of being a dynamo for peace, democracy and prosperity throughout Europe. Just as in Northern Ireland, it is so essential to work for economic and social progress, the future of the EU depends on its ability to meet the material needs and aspirations of its citizens.

I believe that the combination of the peace process, the international goodwill, and the pent-up creative energies of our own people, gives us, over the next few years, a chance to break with the past - a past of not just from both sections of our community political failure, but economic and social failure as well.

And above all let us hope tht as we move into the next century all our people will walk hand in hand and that we will be spilling our sweat together, not our blood. In the words of Martin Luther King, "Let us learn to live together as brothers and sisters or die together as fools".