

S D L P

25TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

1995

LEADER'S ADDRESS

BY

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SLIEVE DONARD HOTEL  
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EMBARGO 3.30 PM  
CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

We are gathered together today for our 25th Annual Conference. As we have recognised before no party could have been born in more difficult times as we or in more difficult circumstances yet throughout the past 25 years not only has this party been steady and consistent on all fronts but it has grown steadily in electoral support. None of that would have been possible had it not been for the strength, conviction and work of you our grassroots membership who have stood in the front line throughout the past twenty-five years, often in very difficult circumstances, often subject to personal attack. The real strength of this party has been the consistent commitment of its grassroots membership added to a deep consistency of political policy and stability.

Throughout we have been committed social democrats. One of the factors that had been central to our situation in the last twenty-five years has been the natural and understandable fact that the media has been concentrating on the underlying political problem and its symptoms. While that was natural and normal it does not remove the responsibility from political parties to concentrate as well on the issues that are central to politics in a normal political society because at the end of the day all politics in a normal society is about the right to existence - the right to life but also to a decent standard of living - jobs and housing. From our foundation as a party we have worked at every level on these issues as the record shows.

Born out of the Civil Rights Movement from its birth the party has concentrated on the basic issues - voting rights, housing and employment. On the first issue we made major progress in a short time and our electoral system is now totally democratic although we would not object to a reform of the Westminster system to introduce proportional representation.

In our earliest elections on the housing front our candidates sought a mandate to remove housing from the control of local authorities who were abusing their power in this crucial field by widespread discrimination. We suggested the creation of a centralised housing authority and following our proposal to Jim Callaghan by a party delegation the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was created and it has transformed public housing in Northern Ireland since its inception and made an enormous contribution to the living standards of so many of our people.

The one difficult area throughout the past twenty-five years have been the crucial issue of unemployment. We still have one of the highest areas of unemployment in Europe and within Northern Ireland the major unemployment areas are the areas largely represented by our party, another one of the legacies inherited at our foundation. Tackling this problem has been much more difficult for us because of the continuing violence which has been a major in inhibiting inward investment.

In spite of those difficulties our efforts have been considerable and continue. As a party we have recognised that today's world because of the technological, telecommunications and transport

influence on our future economic prospects. US companies give good jobs to almost 100,000 persons in the South and to about 10,000 persons in the North. Over the past 25 years the SDLP has steadily built up support within the American political and business establishments. Today President Clinton is engaged in what he terms 'commercial diplomacy' in support of the Peace Process, encouraging Corporate America to invest in Ireland. Our European and American activities reinforce each other. America sees Ireland as its privileged gate-way into the Single European Market.

As in Europe, the SDLP has always been willing to share its American influence and access with other parties in working the common economic ground together.

The challenge to our party is to generate new visions. In the words of Jacques Delors 'Where there is no vision tension and wariness are rife. In the economic area we have more to fear from deficient levels of cooperation, political will and imagination than from any other form of scarcity'.

We are at a turning point in our island's economic history. In the South there is the prospect of continued strong economic growth and, with reduced demographic pressures, of successfully tackling unemployment and with it, poverty. In the North we are experiencing the impact of peace, the reduction month by month of the unemployment figures, the massive increase in trade and investment missions, the upswing in cross-border trade and in tourism. A highly regarded analysis prepared for the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation put the potential for new jobs over the next five years arising out of a new political settlement at 67,500. This would halve our present level of unemployment.

Our task as a party is to make the vision of a new future for our children - the ones born since 1970 - a sustained reality. We do that through partnership and excellence. Partnership between local communities and business firms. Partnerships and linkages between companies throughout the island of Ireland. The full participation of trade unions in the process of economic and social change. The promotion of cross-border collaboration, trade and cooperation.

Excellence in our educational and training systems. Excellence in our understanding of the changes taking place in the global economy and in our positioning of Ireland to maximum advantage. Excellence in our ability to negotiate solutions to the hazards which face us, whether it be European Union enlargement or different approaches in Dublin and London to European Monetary Union.

I believe it is time for all the political parties in Northern Ireland to come together to explore and discuss these issues. Let us deepen and develop the spirit of the Washington Investment Conference. Let us work out our own vision together of the economic and social future of the people we represent.

One third of those born since 1970 is unemployed. Until each of them has been given decent training and a worthwhile job, our task as a party is not finished.

Our task in the peace process is not yet finished either. This is a party that has never had to apologise for its past because we have always looked to the future. We have always refused to be prisoners of the past. Indeed we have made clear that because of the nature of the past of all our people and the terrible wrongs committed, if we are to have a new future and genuine new horizons, the time has now come for all of us to leave the past behind us and let history judge it. Let us build our new future together, a future that will be based on respect for our diversity and will harness all our energies to build our society together rather than tear it apart.

The central road to that future and the first major step is dialogue. Dialogue, and dialogue alone, has brought us to where we are now, to the absence of violence on our streets. Dialogue is also the road to lasting stability, a stability which can only be based on agreement between our divided people. By definition, agreement can only be created by dialogue. The present impasse can therefore be resolved without any side being asked to take unacceptable risks.

When the peace process began with a dialogue between the president of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams, and myself, the stated objectives were made clear, and publicly so. The first objective was a total cessation of violence. That has been achieved. The second objective was the establishment of all-party talks involving the two governments and all parties with the aim of finding an agreement among our divided people. Such an agreement would require the allegiance of all traditions. Such a process clearly poses no threat to any section of our people.

Both governments committed themselves to that process in the Downing Street Declaration, the document which brought about the cease-fires of 1994. The British government committed itself to "encouraging, enabling and facilitating agreement" among our divided people and to legislate for the outcome of any such agreement.

The declaration also rightly insisted that all parties be totally committed to exclusively democratic and peaceful methods. Since then Sinn Fein has made it clear that it is totally committed to peaceful methods and that, at the negotiating table, there would be no question of threats of any kind.

Having promised to promote an agreement among our divided people, what can the British government do to further that objective? The first obvious step is to set a date for all-party talks. That has not happened.

The British government use as a reason that the unionists will not come to the table unless there is a surrender of arms. The Unionist party must take its own decisions but must like the rest

of us face political reality. At the beginning of the peace process their distrust expressed itself in the belief that secret deals had been made. Now they know that there were no secret deals. Then they suggested that the cessation would last only one month. Then three months. Fifteen months later what is now their view? What is their view of the transformation of attitudes in all sections of our community because of peace on our streets? Do they not see the contradiction in complaining that they were never consulted about the Anglo-Irish Agreement yet refuse to enter talks to achieve an agreement that will be the most important agreement in our history, an agreement based on respect for our two traditions and providing lasting stability.

The unionist people come from a very proud and powerful tradition. They have provided 11 Presidents to the United States and captains of industry across the world. Where is that creativity and self-confidence in unionist ranks today. It seems to the rest of us, and we would like to be proved wrong, that their siege mentality has dried up their creativity as a people, creating a negative mindset that always, because of distrust, sees the negative of every proposal.

We hope that the time has come when that creativity will return and they will have the self-confidence in their geography and their numbers to realise that this problem cannot be solved without them. It needs both their participation and agreement. Is it not better, for the first time in our history, for the unionist people to rely on themselves rather than governments that they do not trust, and make an agreement with the rest of us, an agreement that will protect their heritage and identity forever? That is our challenge to them and it is a reasonable challenge.

There are also major challenges to the nationalist tradition. The SDLP has consistently pointed out that the territorial mentality of traditional nationalism must go. That it is the people of Ireland who are divided and not the territory and they can only be brought together by agreement and by no form of coercion. That is now accepted by the entire nationalist tradition and our major challenge now when at the table will be to have the flexibility of ideas to reach a new agreement with the unionist people. The physical border in Ireland with the removal of checkpoints is now gone as are all borders within the European Union permitting free movement of people, goods and services. The real border remains in the hearts and minds of people and it cannot be removed by one instant package or in a short period of time. It will require a healing process and the creation of agreed institutions which will allow us to work together in our common interests and let the healing process begin.

What does that mean in practice? It means that, whatever form that agreement takes, once our quarrel is over and we start working together, the real healing process will take place and in a generation or two a new Ireland will evolve. Its model will

probably be very different from any of the traditional models of the past and will not be a victory for either side and will be a major force in the new Europe.

We cannot move forward at all without dialogue. That is now the major priority and given that agreement is totally central to lasting stability in any divided society it is not asking too much of the British government to make it their urgent priority.

It would not be sufficient for us to criticise the British government, if we do not offer a constructive way out of the impasse. My colleague, Seamus Mallon, and myself, with the agreement of Sinn Fein, put forward the following proposals to the Prime Minister for consideration by both Governments. These proposals set out a parallel process for talks and arms.

The two governments should agree to launch the preparatory phase for all party talks in the peace process which will, not later than 30 November, lead into substantive political negotiations, in round table format, to reach an agreed political settlement.

The two governments should also agree to ask George Mitchell, the former U S Senator, to head up an international body to ascertain, and advise the two governments on, the commitment to peaceful and democratic methods of all political parties that will be participating in the round table negotiations and consequently of their commitment to the removal of all weapons from Irish politics.

The international body should also be asked to ascertain and advise on how the question of arms, now thankfully silenced, can be finally and satisfactorily settled.

George Mitchell should be assisted by two other figures of international standing likely to inspire widespread confidence.

The international body should have the remit of reporting on whether it has established that a clear commitment exists on the part of the respective political parties to an agreed political settlement, achieved through democratic negotiations, and to the satisfactory resolution of the question of arms.

The International body should report to the two governments, who should undertake to consider carefully any recommendations it makes and to give them due weight.

These proposals seem to me to be ordinary common sense. Once again they threaten no one. We are at an historic moment in the history of Ireland when the gun can be taken out of our politics forever, when lasting stability can be created for the first time in our history, and when an agreement can be reached among our divided people. Such an agreement is the only basis for lasting stability and it should therefore be the top priority of everyone, governments above all.

Bringing about a peaceful resolution will be a major political and historical success. Is it really asking too much to expect

some vision and to ask for a starting date for all party talks?

Speaking recently in Brussels with speakers from Bosnia and Poland, I set out the themes that should govern any situation where there was ethnic conflict. I quote:-

"It is often said that "riches bring their troubles". The world is richer for diversity. But many perceive that distinct regions, different countries and even cities are troubled because of diversity.

The challenge we face is how to positively harness difference not suppress it. How to create political dispensations or arrangements that allow those with different identities and traditions to work together to advance their common interests rather than working apart or against each other to frustrate their rival identities. To always push difference to the point of division is to create more and narrower republics of fear, prejudice or hateful arrogance.

It must be understood, however, that most of those areas now manifesting geo-ethnic nationalism suffered the suppression of ethnicity and regionalism under ideological totalitarian order. The difficulties and tragedies which we have witnessed are therefore symptoms of a failure to treat ethnic difference sensitively and seriously rather than suggestions of the futility of trying to do so.

The late Olof Palme's working premise for addressing global tension can apply equally, perhaps even more, validly to regional and intranational ethnic conflicts - we cannot be secure against each other, we can only be secure with each other. Another principle we must employ is that it is people who have rights not territory. Furthermore people have the need and the right to have their identity respected by and reflected in institutions of governance particularly where there have been historic tensions and where minorities exist. Multi-ethnic societies will be politically dysfunctional within polities made in the image of one identity.

Moving our minds and hearts will always bring more progress and stability than making maps or waving flags. While identity is very important our most fundamental feature is our humanity. We are born human beings before we are anything else. No two human beings are the same even if they have the same name, nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, colour or creed. Difference is the essence of creation. Acceptance and accommodation of difference must also be the essence of creative politics".

The reality about living with difference and affirming identity is that we cannot achieve self-actualisation without mutual accommodation. Martin Luther King got to the heart of it when he said, "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way the world is made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent. We are interdependent".

There are three options in the face of difference: to pretend it does not exist; to combat such differences; or to accommodate them. We have seen the failure of the Stalinist attempt to pretend that difference either does not exist or is an irrelevance. We have all been sickened by the efforts of the warlords in ex-Yugoslavia to eradicate difference by killing and ethnic cleansing. In Ireland, the eradication of difference has been a regrettable part of history. We have also suffered from the activities of those who thought that being Irish or British was a matter of life and death and who were prepared to make sure that it was.

It has always been clear to us that the only rational, human and realistic course of action is to try to seek arrangements which will allow different traditions to live together while preserving their identities. The only sensible way forward is to accept difference as inevitable and see it as a basic and a natural principle of human society. Indeed, with their advances in DNA analysis, we have the scientific proof that difference is universal. We must cherish the diversity of cultures which exist in Ireland, and seek to preserve them and the equilibrium between them. Nationalists cannot be what they ought to be until unionists are what they ought to be and vice versa.

That has been the essence of the politics of the past 25 years of the SDLP. It must remain the essence of our future. Difference is an accident of birth. It must never be the source of hatred or conflict. Respect for diversity will remain the essence of our political approach and dialogue is the only route.