

SPEECH BY
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We are gathered here at this point of time, a crucial moment in the history of our country, a moment of great challenge to all political parties and both Governments. It is a time for reflection and indeed for our Party at this Conference to reflect on our past policies, attitudes and achievements. It is something that we have not been inclined to do. We have never boasted about our success or achievements but perhaps it is both timely and appropriate at this point of time as we seek to lead all sections of our people and to persuade certain other parties to come down a totally non-violent road, a road of total dialogue, a road to lasting peace and stability, to reflect on the basic principles and attitudes that have governed our philosophy and our strategy for peace and stability over the years since our foundation. We can demonstrate the total consistency of our approach and the real persistence of our efforts.

For us Ireland has always been its people. It has never been a piece of earth. We have challenged and rejected the territorial mentality that has shaped the definition of patriotism and nationalism in this country for so long. Without its people Ireland is but a jungle and the piece of earth called Ireland is already united. It is the people of Ireland who are divided and they cannot be brought together by any form of force or coercion but only by agreement. Victories are not solutions in divided societies. Our philosophy has been and will always be a total commitment to non-violent peaceful methods of resolving our difference. Indeed our philosophy of non violence is best summed up in the words of one of my great heroes of the 20th Century, whom I have quoted often, Martin Luther King:-

“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.”

As we agreed at the New Ireland Forum, the problem of our divided people can be summed up as follows. There are two sets of legitimate rights - the rights of the unionist people to their identity and their ethos and the rights of the nationalist people to the same. The challenge of agreement is to accommodate both, a challenge that will require new thinking of all sides, a challenge that cannot be pursued by violence. The logic of promoting such agreement is that all resources and energies should be devoted to that objective. That means in practice, as we in the SDLP put forward in 1979 that the two governments should abandon the megaphone diplomacy that had characterised their relationships since 1920 and work together to promote agreement. Indeed on 15 April, 1981 the SDLP published a document calling for an Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Council backed up by an Anglo-Irish secretariat and a parliamentary tier. Those three proposals became the basis of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, the first major step in the peace process. Indeed to reassure the unionist tradition that agreement reiterated that there could be no change on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority of its people. It also made clear, proposed by the SDLP, that if a majority did give its consent to change that the British Government would legislate for it. That statement led directly to the serious public

debate between SDLP and Sinn Fein which led directly to the direct dialogue between the two parties in 1988. As I pointed out at the time, this declaration by the British Government was a declaration of its neutrality on the question of Irish unity, that it had no selfish interests of its own in remaining in Ireland, that the future of Northern Ireland was a matter for its own people and that that declaration removed the traditional reasons given by Irish republicans for the use of physical force. The dialogue between delegations of the SDLP and Sinn Fein did not succeed in reaching agreement but we agreed to carry on the debate in public and in private. This led to the direct dialogue between Gerry Adams and myself.

The objective of that dialogue as we repeatedly stated was a total end to violence followed by all party talks with both Governments whose objective was agreement among our divided people that would earn the allegiance of all traditions - a process that offered no threat to the rights of any section of our people. In the course of that dialogue I proposed a joint declaration by both Governments that would lead to those objectives. I presented the first draft to Gerry Adams in October, 1991. After many exchanges between us, in consultation with the Irish Governments of Charles Haughey and Albert Reynolds a final draft was agreed in June, 1993 and presented to the British Government by Albert Reynolds. Indeed throughout the dialogue I had kept the British Government fully informed. I would also reiterate that at no stage in the process were we threatening the rights of the unionist people. The objective remained an end to violence followed by all party agreement and indeed in the only joint statement issued by Gerry Adams, Albert Reynolds, and myself it made clear that our problem could not be solved without the participation and agreement of the unionist people. Indeed that is underlined by the principles in the text of the first document which I presented in October, 1991, the principles of which remained throughout the process.

“Aim:- A joint declaration by both British and Irish Prime Ministers.

1. Leaving the past aside and regretting the pain and suffering caused by past failures to settle the relationships of the people of both islands satisfactorily.
2. Recognising that the implementation of the Single Market and the coming into being of the European Union with the effective removal of all borders fundamentally changes the nature of British/Irish relationships. Further recognising that future developments which leave both parts of Ireland as the only part of the new Europe with no land links with the other regions, will intensify the common ground between both parts of Ireland and intensify the need for maximum co-operation to achieve maximum benefit from European Union.
3. Regret, however, that there remains a serious legacy of past relationships - a deeply divided people on the island of Ireland. This is a major concern of both governments and both deeply regret that these are the last remaining such divisions in the new European order.
4. Both governments recognise that these divisions can only end with the agreement of the people North and South in Ireland.

5. Both governments therefore commit themselves to using the maximum resources to create the atmosphere in which such agreement is made easier. Both governments find it unacceptable that these are the last remaining divisions in a Europe that has already ended many more deep and bitter quarrels. They will, therefore, promote intensive co-operation at all levels in order to strengthen the process of agreement.
6. The British Government reiterate yet again that they no longer have any selfish political or strategic interest in remaining in Ireland. Their sole interest is to see peace and agreement among the people who inhabit the island and will devote all their available resources to that end.
7. For its part the Irish Government recognises that the traditional objective of Irish nationalism - the exercise of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole - cannot be achieved without the agreement of the people of Northern Ireland. It would, therefore, commit itself to working for institutions of government North and South which would respect the diversity of the people of Ireland but allow them to work their substantial common ground together in order to build the necessary trust for an agreed future.

In order to pursue that strategy the Irish Government would set up a permanent Irish Convention in order to plan and implement the steps and policies required to break down the barriers which divide the people of Ireland and which prevent the exercise of agreed self-determination. If the British Government refuse the joint declaration, the Irish Government would proceed to set up the Convention with the additional objective of planning and implementing the policies required to persuade the British Government to adopt our strategy and objectives.

Membership of the Convention would consist of elected representatives of all parties in Ireland who share the objective of a united self-determined Ireland."

All of this led eventually to the Downing Street Declaration which led to the IRA ceasefire and subsequently to the loyalist ceasefire.

Tragically and unfortunately the second stage of the peace process, the all party talks did not take place as soon as we expected. Indeed after eighteen months they had not commenced and the IRA ceasefire broke down leading to the loss of more innocent human lives. Historians will judge the reasons for the delay by the British Government in starting the all party talks but it is my own strong conviction that had they started soon after the ceasefire that we would have lasting peace by now. However, there is no point in development argument on that subject. Let history judge it but let all of us with responsibility do all in our power to have the ceasefire restored and have the current talks take place in a totally peaceful atmosphere with all parties including Sinn Fein, involved. I believe that Prime Minister John Major wants to see that happen, that he wants to achieve lasting peace in our country and that his government can achieve it by reiterating in the clearest possible terms the nature, objectives and timeframe of the talks together with confidence building measures that can improve the atmosphere at the talks themselves.

Let me also say to the IRA that, in spite of any distrust that they may have, the 18 months ceasefire transformed the mood of the people of Ireland North and South, strengthened massively the will for peace and created massive international good will particularly in Europe and the United States which can be translated into real economic benefits for all sections of our people. I ask the IRA to renew their ceasefire and create the circumstances where all the energies of all our people are devoted to building a new Ireland based on respect for both of our traditions.

In doing so we will be strengthening the international good will towards our country. We will also be recognising the reality that 1996 is neither 1690 nor 1916. We are today in a post-nationalist Europe. Because of the technological, transport and telecommunications revolution, we are living today in a much smaller world. Ireland is closer to France and other European countries today than Derry was to Kerry one hundred years ago. We are in a post nation state Europe. We cannot live apart. We have to shape our evolving relationships in the Single Europe.

Europe has been a central preoccupation of our Party since the foundation. It will continue to be so. We are not an inward looking Party, nor are the people we represent. Our pro-European commitment is beyond doubt and recognised to be so by our colleagues in the rest of Europe. Our commitment to Europe and to the continued development and evolution of European Union is motivated by the inspiring example of peoples of Europe over the last 50 years. If the traditional enmities which led to the slaughter of millions of people in two world wars in this century alone can be removed by peaceful co-operation and respect for diversity then surely we can do the same in Ireland. The knowledge that peace and prosperity are possible, that they are not utopian illusions, that we do not have to imprison ourselves in past conflicts and hatreds are powerful incentives in our search for peace and political agreement. Thanks to European Union we know it can be done. Our future is what we make it, not what the past dictates.

We have never boasted about, or gloried in our successes as a political party. Perhaps we should have done more over the years to point out the extent of our achievements, as testimony to the fact that the political process can be made to work, if you care enough, and put enough effort into it.

Nowhere is this more true than in the European framework. As I have said the SDLP has always been an enthusiastically European Party. We were the only major Party in Northern Ireland to actively campaign for membership of the European Union and through our membership of the Socialist Group - the largest political family in Europe - we have been able to deliver a series of initiatives and programmes which benefit every citizen of Northern Ireland.

Our membership of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament and indeed of the Party of European Socialists right across Europe in which we are directly linked to all our sister parties in every European society gives us enormous influence at European level for the people of Northern Ireland. Indeed as Leader of your Party in recent years I have been invited to be the guest speaker at the Annual Conference of the Spanish Socialist Party by Felipe Gonzalez who was then Prime Minister of Spain and by the powerful German Social Democrat Party. The leader of the Dutch Labour

Party Wim Kok now Prime Minister of Holland invited me to speak during their election campaign in Holland and Jorge Sampaio invited me as his personal guest to his inauguration as President of Portugal. Above all, in the European Parliament the Socialist Group is by far the largest and we have 217 members. Our leader Pauline Green is with us today and I delighted to be able to express my public appreciation to her with all you members today for assuring that all the Socialist votes in the European Parliament made sure that there was no reduction in our peace and reconciliation programme. Similarly in the European Commission we have many members of our socialist family as was Jacques Delors who came to me when the ceasefires were declared and asked how he could help and I suggested an economic programme. He agreed immediately. In addition the Commissioner for Regional Policy Monika Wulf-Mathies takes a great interest in our region and has been a regular visitor. Regional policy is one of our main sources of European funding in roads, harbours, airports and inward investment. Monika is a member of our German sister party the Social Democrats.

At present, district partnerships in every district council area are allocating grants to local enterprises and initiatives from the Peace and Reconciliation Fund. The Northern Ireland Partnership Board, and a number of voluntary agencies, are also distributing part of this funding. Many of our councillors in this conference hall, are involved in that work. £240 million in total will be allocated over a three year period. That money was delivered through the good offices of our friend and colleague, Jacques Delors - a member of the European socialist family - as a tangible demonstration of European support for the peace process here, concrete evidence of the benefit to be gained for our citizens from committed political representation.

It is the latest in a series of European initiatives over the years in which we can take some pride. It may be worth recalling some of those initiatives.

Our relenting campaign in Europe to have the Less Favoured Areas extended played a major part in bringing it about, and extending increased resources to thousands of farmers.

It was our initiative which led to the first and second ADP programmes for the Less Favoured areas - again bringing over a £100 million in extra resources to the Less Favoured Areas.

It was our initiative, leading to the Martin Report, which brought £63 million for housing Belfast.

Our initiative was central to the establishment in Dublin, of the European Bureau of Lesser Spoken Languages. (The Martin Report which laid down a blueprint for an integrated rural development programme, and the Haagerup Report which placed the political affairs of Northern Ireland on the European Agenda, were also the result of our initiative.)

The political process can work and we can make it work in the European context above all, because of the vast reservoir of sympathy and concern for our predicament which exists among our European neighbours.

That sympathy and concern is not confined to our European partners. In the United States and throughout the world - especially in the countries of the Irish diaspora - there is an enormous willingness to help us overcome the difficulties which presently beset us. We should be concentrating all of our efforts on tapping that reservoir of good will and support, to help us make progress, politically and economically. And as we know from our recent experience during the ceasefire peace on our streets will help us enormously.

There must be an end to all violence not only for the lives which would be taken and not only for the advancement of negotiations - there must be an end to all violence so that we can secure the life, and the livelihood, of everyone living here - bread on the table, a job to go to, a place in college, medical care.

Let me give you just two figures to show how much we are held back by violence. In 1995 tourism from the South to the North increased by 67% and exports from the North to the South by 45%. When you reflect on the human reality behind these figures, the nights spent in Northern hotels, restaurants and bars, the conversations, the friendships struck up, the exposure of the North's business people to the reality of the modern economy of the South you realise the potential not just for employment but for reconciliation that has been put at risk by the collapse of the ceasefire.

In the twenty six years of its life the SDLP has ploughed a sometimes lonely furrow in seeking to get priority for tackling Northern Ireland's deep-seated problems of poverty, unemployment and exclusion. We have a vision of the Ireland we want; an open, outward-looking tolerant single island economy with carefully constructed linkages into the US and Europe, with high levels of education, employment and social solidarity. We have a method; it is practical and pragmatic; it is non-partisan and seeks partnership both within Northern Ireland and throughout the world.

With my fellow MEPs we have worked successfully to maintain funding for the European Peace and Reconciliation Package. I pay tribute to their support, the support of Rory Quinn, the President of the Council of Ministers of finance and of Commissioner Wulf-Mathies. In particular I welcome the commitment of President Santer that 'the European Union will support, with all the means at its disposal, the efforts of the two governments to keep the peace process on track'.

But let me say this. It should never have been necessary to defend and restore the funding. That funding should never have been put at risk by inefficiency and bureaucratic delays here in Belfast. Government must support - not hamper and hinder - the superb work of reconciliation and economic development which is under way by the social partners, voluntary and community groups, and by local partnerships, in which SDLP Councillors and Party members are playing an important role.

With my fellow Northern Ireland MEPs we have worked hard to resolve the biggest crisis - BSF - facing our most important local sector - agriculture. Again I pay tribute to the support we have received from Ivan Yates who is President of the Agriculture Council. Let us be clear about the situation; there is only one principle obstacle to the

lifting of the ban on the export of beef from Northern Ireland; that obstacle is the British Government.

The BSE crisis, as my colleague Eddie McGrady pointed out in the Westminster Parliament, is the greatest crisis facing our rural communities since the famine. There has been a catastrophic drop in farm-incomes which is having severe repercussions throughout our society, and not least in our small rural towns and villages. It is the greatest economic crisis in the lifetime of everyone in Northern Ireland.

The backlog of cattle on farms, as they wait to go through the cull system, is literally eating into scarce farm resources and exacerbating the already severe financial problems of many farmers.

The downright unfairness of this situation is keenly felt throughout this community, and there has been an angry, but united and reasoned response from the farmers' representative bodies, the 17 MPs and the three MEPs.

BSE is a problem which arose in Great Britain and spread from there to Northern Ireland, not least because of the incompetence of successive Tory administrations. The incidence of BSE in Northern Ireland is only 1/10 of the incidence in Great Britain, and yet we are the ones suffering most from the EU ban on exports. Britain exports only 20% of its beef product, whereas we have been exporting 80%.

The united, in fact unanimous response of farmers, MPs and MEPs has been to demand separate status for Northern Ireland beef. In pursuit of that demand I have had, along with my colleagues, a number of meetings with Commissioner Fischler and with the President-in-Office of the EU Agriculture Council, Minister Ivan Yates. Eddie McGrady participated in a meeting with Prime Minister Major on the issue, and later initiated a special debate in the House of Commons. And our Agriculture Spokesperson Denis Haughey has had a series of meetings with Agriculture Minister Baroness Denton, and with the farmers' representative bodies.

The consequence of this political representation has been that Commissioner Fischler is sympathetic to our case for special status, the President of the Agriculture Council has expressed support for our case, but the UK government has refused to make the request which is necessary under European Law.

The present situation is completely unacceptable. We have produced, for this Annual Conference a policy document setting out a strategy for recovery from the BSE crisis, and we will continue to work as hard as we can to have government adopt it.

There must be immediate measures to speed up the throughput of animals in the over 30 month cull, so as to reduce the pressure on scarce farm resources, and to put at least some income into farmers' accounts.

We must continue to demand that compensation rates are increased, and that headage payments are topped up to make up some of the losses in farm incomes.

Measures have to be taken urgently to deal with the desperate problem of flagged holdings. We need to insist that flagging attach to the herd and not to the holding, and that a buy-out scheme be introduced to enable farmers with flagged suckler herds to rebuild their enterprises.

But we must not lose sight of the case for separate status. I sincerely hope that the 'certified herd scheme' proposal becomes a reality, in which case it will greatly ease the export situation since about 97% of our herds will qualify. In any event the accelerated cull agreed at Florence must go ahead and it can be completed in Northern Ireland within a week. But in the medium and long term we cannot afford that our agriculture industry's fortunes should be in the hands of a government which has quite different agricultural interests from ours, and which has shown such scant regard for our farming community.

Partnership means working on joint practical projects North and South. Europe, through the Internal Market has created an economic space on the island where we can grow together instead of apart. In almost every sector - agriculture, business, tourism, energy, the main interests and groupings on both sides of the border are calling for a more integrated, harmonised and united approach - to marketing, to planning, to taxation, to regulation. This is an economic and political reality to which all political parties will have to adjust. David Trimble's speech in Dublin last May to the Institute of Directors on these matters was disappointing. He dismisses out-of-hand common-sense and widely supported proposals such as the development of a Belfast-Dublin economic corridor, a single agency to promote tourism on the island and the promotion of Northern Ireland's interests in Europe by both Irish and British Ministers.

We think we have a better vision, which better serves the interests of all people of Northern Ireland. Partnership means no boycotts. Boycotts leave everyone worse-off, they are a breeding ground for suspicion, sectarian hatred, and intimidation.

Partnership means that we will continue to promote multi-party investment missions. The SDLP will step up its commercial diplomacy, exploiting its support within American politics and business for the benefit of all the people encouraging Corporate America to invest here. Our European and American activities reinforce each other. America now sees Ireland as its privileged gate-way into Europe.

And we have been to the forefront over many years as a political party in building special links with America. We have built very special links with the Senate and Congress where we have many constructive and helpful friends and where the friends of Ireland group was set up in contact with us. In 1977 in consultation with ourselves in the SDLP the four horsemen as they were called - Senators Kennedy and Moyihan, Speaker Tip O'Neill and Governor Hugh Carey, persuaded President Carter on St Patrick's Day to issue the first Presidential statement on Northern Ireland calling on the two governments to act together and offering economic assistance to back any agreement. In 1985 when the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed, Speaker Tip O'Neill told me, when I asked him, that they would keep their promise and with the support of Senate and Congress he set up the International Fund for Ireland which to date has created 27,000 jobs in the North and the border counties. His successor Speaker

Foley brought a Congressional delegation to visit us in Northern Ireland and maintained the International Fund. In addition as your Party Leader I have met personally with every American president since Jimmy Carter and have had a series of meetings with President Clinton and his Vice President Al Gore. There is no doubt, as you know from his historic visit to us, of President Clinton's commitment to peace in our country and I have no doubt that all the people of this island would join us today in sending him our warmest congratulations on his re-election as President of the United States.

The Irish diaspora in the United States can be a major factor in our future. Over 40 million people in America have declared their Irish roots from both our traditions and indeed have now reached the top in politics, in the professions and in business and industry and because we live in a much smaller world today we can harness their good will and sympathy to help us with the real development of our country. If we are fully organised they can give us powerful assistance in both seeking inward investment and marketing the products of our small industry. Indeed we in the SDLP have again been to the forefront in beginning this process. Seamus Mallon has been building special links between Newry and Pittsburgh. Eddie McGrady has been doing the same with Chicago and Co Down, Joe Hendron with Belfast and California and myself with Derry and Boston. To date we have taken 200 small companies from all parts of Northern Ireland to America to market their products and create jobs, using our political contacts and friends in America to help us. To date we have achieved \$42 million of orders and I have got inward investment into my city creating 3,000 jobs in the past two years. If we can create lasting peace on our streets and organise ourselves thoroughly on a cross community basis to do the same thing I believe we can have very positive success and in the process build the trust that will help us on the more difficult political front.

We are at present facing the challenge in the more difficult political front in the talks process. In these talks and not for the first time others are perniciously misrepresenting the SDLP. We are getting fed up with the unionist parties and unionist newspapers accusing the SDLP of holding up the talks to get Sinn Fein in. The SDLP have not held up the talks and are not holding them back. We have continually proposed and never opposed the commencement of substantive talks in the three strands.

It was not us who wasted time first trying to get rid of the Independent Chairmen, they trying to get rid of reasonable rules, trying to get rid of some of the parties around the table or trying to rewrite the International Body's Report on Decommissioning and the legislation governing the negotiations. It is not our fixation with decommissioning which has transfixed the negotiating process.

We have never made any preconditions for substantive talks between other parties, the two governments and ourselves. Others are pushing preconditions about Sinn Fein - not us.

We make no apology for working towards having all mandated parties at the table on the same basis - commitment to the Mitchell Principles - in the context of a total cessation of violence. But trying to achieve that very valid objective would not require

or justify the SDLP using stalling tactics or procedural diversions within the Talks as presently constituted.

That is why we have not done so. Turning objectives into preconditions is not good politics. Could our detractors please note?

While what has been seen from the Talks has inspired confusion and concern more than confidence, it is important for members of the SDLP to set things in perspective. We have all heard people saying that we are wasting our time in the Talks, that they should be wound up and a new process created.

Yes, time is being wasted, as I have pointed out. But it has not been a waste of our time or mandate to ensure that the international Independent Chairman were not displaced. Neither was it a waste of time or mandate to protect rules to allow any party to raise any issue in the Talks without veto by other parties. It is not a waste of our time or mandate currently to work to prevent the erection of further obstacles to inclusive talks in the context of a restored ceasefire. Nor is it a waste of our time or mandate to try to find a way through with others, including unionists, the difficulties and differences bound up in the decommissioning issue.

You have received a copy of our presentation on that issue and can clearly see that we are not blind to any of the sensitivities or suspicions involved. We are not trying to avoid the issue, we are trying to advance them on the rational terms suggested by the International Body.

Our efforts, and those of others at the Talks, should not be discounted. I have never believed that just because something is difficult, it is futile. Those nationalists who have suggested that we should stay away from these Talks, or that they should be collapsed to clear the way for some different process need to recognise that their approach would simply satisfy the short term agenda of those unionist parties who want to see the whole exercise diverted, subverted or aborted.

The sort of tensions and frustrations which we face in these talks will be inherent in any inclusive all-party process no matter how much it is re-designed or reconstructed. Nobody should be under any illusions about that. That is why it is important to use timeframes to help to concentrate minds and create some incentive for meaningful advance. That does not mean that we make the whole process hostage to a calendar. I am not advocating a political "sell by" or perhaps "settle by" date after which the process is binned.

Businesses and other organisations use timeframes in the context of planning, developing and setting up. They are used in public policy management all the time including the legislative process. Have we not heard a lot recently about the importance of a timetable for decommissioning legislation? From the same people who express shock and outrage at the suggestion that an indicative timeframe might be helpful to negotiations?

An unequivocal renewal of the IRA ceasefire would be an enormous boost to those negotiations because it would create a totally peaceful atmosphere and all parties

including Sinn Fein would at last be around the table with both Governments for the first time in our history.

The challenge that we all face is both enormous and historic. It is a challenge for the time in our history to reach agreement among our divided people. It will not be easy and it will require new thinking on both sides but we should be strengthened by the knowledge of the massive international good will that will be behind our efforts, a good will that can be translated into economic benefits for all sections of our people.

We should also be strengthened by the knowledge that whatever form the agreement takes once our quarrel is over and we begin to work together in our common interests then the real healing process will begin as we start to break down the barriers of distrust.

Out of that process over a generation or two new relationships will evolve and a new Ireland will evolve. Its model will, as I have said often, probably be very different from any model proposed in the past but it will be based on agreement and respect for our differences. Central to that healing process will be both sections of our community working together on the economic front using our substantial contacts in Europe and America and providing hope for our young people. Let us face the challenge of this new Century that is approaching. Let us make sure that it is the first century without violence on our streets and without emigration of our young. Let us also, in our much smaller world of today, harness the Irish diaspora of both our traditions and we can become one of the most powerful peoples in the world. Our quarrel is out of date. Let us leave it behind us. Let us leave the past behind us. Let us all sit down together now in a totally peaceful atmosphere and face up to our challenges of building a new future.