

A FUTURE TOGETHER

ADDRESS BY

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Members, delegates, friends

Fellow peacemakers

This gathering of party veterans, of party workers, of new party members, comes at a watershed in our history. Behind us lies the long slope up which we have together pushed the rock of our ideals – solid as rock has been our faith in peace, in people, in harmony, in politics.

A future together. These words sum up the history and philosophy of our party. They are the essence of what the SDLP is about. They are the words of hope and imagination, which have inspired our endeavors over the past 28 years. They explain the motivation which has kept us going – even in the dark times when to hope was to be unreasonable and to imagine a better future little short of wishful thinking.

That desire for a better future kept us going, though when grim facts invited despair our philosophy enabled us to reach beyond the bitter realities and to cling to the vision of a peaceful future. In our cities, towns and villages, we have never given up. The label attached to us by the media – moderates – always seems off the mark to me. We have always been extremists in our attachment to peace and justice. And we have gone to extreme lengths in pursuit of those objectives.

So easy would it have been in the wake of violence and obduracy to fall into despair and negativity, into clichéd assumptions about opponents, into the comforting rhythms of old perceptions and conflicts.

I do not want to dwell on the past. Nor, I presume, does anyone in this room want to live in the past. We have always been the party of the future, and are always working towards an agreed Ireland among all the people of our divided society. But our party's achievements should provide us with inspiration in dealing with the future challenges we will face.

We have also implemented the principle of power sharing and partnership in local government. Whenever we have been in a position to do so, we have built partnership arrangements with other parties. By doing this we have provided a model for the future administration of the whole of the North, for North-South relations and the relations between the peoples of these islands. The principle is now well established, and only the most extreme and self-deluded believe it is possible to govern without inclusiveness. Only by incorporating everybody into the decision-making process can we build stable, democratic and legitimate institutions.

Against the slope of traditional distrusts, suspicions and confrontations, together we pushed our ideals of two traditions at peace, of a resolution of ancient conflicts, of the unity in our diversity. We took them to Washington, To Brussels, To London, To

Dublin. To governments of every hue. We took them to fellow nationalists and republicans. We took them to the unionist community and its leadership. We took them to everyone who would listen. We took them to those who would not.

Fellow party members let us today reflect on our progress. Our ideals have found their greatest expression in the principles and practices set out in the Good Friday Agreement. They have been endorsed by all the people of this island in an irrefutable verdict.

1998 has been a momentous year. The Good Friday Agreement, the Referendum and the Assembly Elections are major milestones for the SDLP and more importantly for the citizens of this island and for our neighbours in England, Wales and Scotland.

The agreement would not be possible without international involvement. We have to thank Presidents Clinton, Delors and Santer. We have always argued that our conflict was international in its origins and would be international in its resolution. That contention was dramatically verified by the role of George Mitchell, Harri Holkeri and John de Chastelaine.

Of many things we may be uncertain. But of this we can be sure. The Good Friday Agreement will be judged by history to be a seminal document, a document which sets its stamp on the future course of relations in this island, in this society and between these islands.

This agreement was founded on the unfulfilled potential that we know to be there, the potential to find agreement in the face of paradox and conundrum, to find an agreed constitutional and political accommodation for our people.

Unionists and nationalists have at last taken their future in their hands, have seized control of their history rather than letting history hold them in thrall.

Our party needs to make no apology for our aspiration to the unity of our people.

But let us consider our definition of unity.

What greater unity is possible today than the referendum North and South which endorsed the Good Friday Agreement? What greater unity is possible than the unity of the joint endeavours of those elected to serve in the Assembly and its Executive? What greater unity is possible than the unity of our shared endeavours in the North - South Ministerial Council?

At this point in our history, we have achieved a truly valuable unity.

- the unity of purpose across all previous boundaries of party and tradition that suffuses, informs and directs the institutions and

principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

- the unity of purpose that directs the new politics on behalf of all of the people in this society.
- the unity of purpose undertaken on behalf of all the people of these islands, North and South, East and West.

Nationalists, republicans and unionists - we have all traveled far in our thinking and attitudes over the years of this peace process. It has been a very positive journey the success of which may not be obvious to those who have been directly involved in its creation. What was the inconceivable is now the common place and the norm.

Nationalists and republicans have taken their place in a local Assembly. Nationalists and unionists are preparing to share power in an executive.

Unionists have accepted that the North South Ministerial Council is an essential institution without which neither the Assembly nor the executive would be possible.

Unionists have accepted the operating principle of sufficient consensus, of parallel consent, the recognition that both traditions must be recognised as equally valid symbolically and politically. We have all accepted the expression of the totality of relationships represented by the British - Irish Council.

Without reservation, Commissions on Human Rights and Equality are to be established and embedded as essential institutions for the good government of Northern Ireland on a day-by-day, case-by-case basis. The European Convention on Human Rights is being incorporated as a matter of law and practice. And so much more. Prisoners, victims, policing, security normalisation, criminal justice have become part of a process of profound change and renewal. We have achieved so much.

We have succeeded not because we have challenged others. We have succeeded because we have challenged ourselves. When Gerry Adams and I began our dialogue, we both faced immense challenges.

There were those who felt - honourably and sincerely - that it was wrong to seek inclusive dialogue before a cease-fire. I am sure that there were and there remain those in the republican movement deeply sceptical of any dalliance with politics, with the possibilities of compromise. By engaging in what has become the peace process, the republican movement took on the process of challenging itself - its outlook, its methods, its fears and its hopes.

Gerry Adams, Martin Mc Guinness and their colleagues deserve our commendation for their ongoing leadership and management of that complex and intense process.

There has been enormous courage from unionists. I believe that

David Trimble and his party supporters share the ideals and values of the peace process, ideals and values grounded in the belief that we can find harmony and concord between us as human beings that transcend traditional ideologies - without damage to those ideologies. In the May referendum the unionist community overcame its reservations about aspects of the Agreement like prisoners and decommissioning. They joined in the chorus on this island that said YES. They said yes not to a document over which they had sole authorship and control but to a document that was a collective effort by eight parties, three governments and two traditions, forged with help of the remarkable group of independent chairmen led by Senator Mitchell.

Each party to the Agreement has challenged itself to accept aspects of it because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We are now at a critical stage in the implementation of the Agreement. As during the negotiations, Seamus Mallon is doing an outstanding job and applying his impeccable good sense as we chart our way forward.

Inevitably, implementation was bound to unveil some differences of interpretation and intention. None more so than on the question of the decommissioning of arms.

Think of what we have decommissioned.

We have decommissioned the reality of violence. We have decommissioned in a profound way the prospect of conflict leading to more victims. Drumcree and Omagh remind us that putting the genie of violence back in the bottle is no easy task. But we live now in the prevalence of peace, not the prevalence of violence.

We have decommissioned mind-sets that saw only difference and division.

We have decommissioned the political paralysis of direct rule and the exclusion of local politicians from power and responsibility.

Let us take that approach and apply it to the issue of decommissioning of arms. This is an issue that received very serious attention in the all party talks and it was the clear and agreed view that this was a matter that could only be dealt with to the satisfaction of all sides by an independent international Commission.

There is no precondition of decommissioning in the Agreement. Nor is there any precondition for decommissioning under the Agreement. The only real precondition for anything under the Agreement was the people's verdict by referendum. It is the will of the people that disarmament takes place as provided for in the Agreement as part of the full implementation of the Agreement in parallel with its other provisions. This party and all other parties are obliged by our own commitments to work constructively with the Independent Commission and use our influence to achieve such disarmament.

We have to ask ourselves whether adopting tactics or rhetoric which create impediments around this issue is the most constructive contribution that can be made to this task. Is it the best use of a party's own influence to adopt negative postures which do little to enhance or encourage the positive influence which we need others to use to good effect? We must all do all we can to make disarmament happen as soon as possible within the time scale for the Commissions work, not least by doing all we can to implement all other aspects of the Agreement in their own terms as soon as possible.

I ask these questions not to answer them now, today. Let us recall our real obligation to move this process forward, to implement in all its aspects the Good Friday Agreement. Let us step back from the challenges to each other across the traditional divides.

Let us step up to the challenge to ourselves.

As we are reminded in this Armistice week of war and peace, consider this. There is an old Latin saying "if you want peace, prepare for war". Just because it is in Latin, does not mean that it is true. In fact, I quote it because I believe it to be profoundly and tragically untrue. It is a philosophy of the old world. It is a philosophy of defeat, of fear, of loathing.

In the new maturity of Ireland and its sense of itself, this week the President of Ireland attended with the British monarch a deeply moving ceremony in Messine to the Irish dead of the Great War. 50,000 Irishmen of different political persuasions found their common humanity in death in those bloody fields in a war made possible by the preparations for it. They were denied the opportunity of finding their common humanity in peace. The lessons of each of the world wars is that there is no greater guarantee of war than preparation for it. Let us now find our common humanity in peace, and work together to develop and strengthen it.

We have won our peace in Northern Ireland because we, as individuals, as a party, as a tradition of constitutional politics, prepared for it and worked for it for as long as we have been in existence.

But the peace we have today is not the end of our achievement, no more than it represents finality for the republican movement or the unionist community. Thus, in our own way, every party to the Agreement is rightly seeking to advance a better more secure peace.

We must ask ourselves about the quality of peace. We must dedicate ourselves to judging the quality of peace we enjoy, to securing a better quality of peace for the future.

Peace is not an absolute. There are varieties of peace. There is a measurable quality to peace. We must hone and define our definition of the peace we want, a peace of real quality.

We want a true peace, a peace of the heart. A peace of truth and understanding. A peace of concord and reconciliation.

Our new and essential tasks will also mean pursuing and improving our relations with unionism. Sufficient consensus can only work as this relationship improves and grows in mutual confidence. As this relationship grows, we will find a consensus across the floor – that is the true purpose of sufficient consensus, the basis of real and lasting stability.

A better quality of peace also means pursuing and improving relations in the entire nationalist community.

This will mean many things, involve us as politicians in many new tasks – the essential tasks of government.

We are and will be in Government. That is where we should be. This is not a question of individuals seeking office. None of us would be here if that were our motive. It is simply ensuring that our political institutions reflect the realities of our society. It is simply ensuring that the talents of our party are exploited for the benefit of society as a whole. We exist to promote change, now we will have the instruments of power to fulfil our purpose.

We are undergoing a revolution in politics – a cultural revolution.

There is the obvious one that most parties, of very different outlooks and traditions, will be working together for the mutual benefit of all. No one should underestimate the political and indeed personal difficulties involved. But the people have spoken. We have a mandate to look to the future. Forgiveness and forgetting are personal matters, but those of us elected to represent the people have been given clear instructions that we are to focus on building a future together.

There is a cultural revolution needed if we are to succeed as a party of Government. There is one thing that unites all parties in the North. All of us, for a quarter of a century, have been in opposition. Not one of us has been in Government. During that time only a handful of people across all the parties has any experience whatsoever of government.

Some parties, of course, have felt happier in opposition and still do so. But for us, it has not been an easy experience. We were not in opposition because it suited us, or because of electoral failure. We were in opposition because of the structural failure to establish a viable democratic and legitimate form of Government. As a party whose *raison d'être* is to build a new society, exclusion from power has been a burden rather than a relief.

As a result, we have been a very effective, imaginative and constructive opposition. Many parties in Europe who have had access to the levers of power would envy our

achievements. But essentially we have been persuaders, proposers and advocates – in other words ideas people.

We must maintain that tradition of thought and imagination but now we need to add a new dimension. We have spent the best part of three decades as formulators of strategies and policies. But now we will be responsible for the definition and implementation of policies. Collectively, the elected representatives will become the decision – makers. This will require new ways of thinking.

We will have to defend our decisions. We will have to explain our decisions. There will be no easy get-out clauses or alibis. So we had better get these decisions right. Of course our party must have policies, as we have, but it must also have priorities.

The key to success in this respect is to establish our priorities as a party, and then to work towards those objectives through the Assembly, the Executive, the North-South Ministerial Council, and the British-Irish Council.

I would define three basic priorities for our new institutions.

First, we must work towards serious economic development to ensure prosperity and equality for all our citizens.

Second, we have to improve our system of education and training so that all our citizens can contribute to the development of our society to the maximum of their potential. Our present system serves the interests of a minority very well. We need a new system that serves the interests of all.

Third, we must create the physical and telecommunications infrastructure needed if we are to be successful in competing in the global economy.

These are ambitious targets. They would be ambitious for any political system, let alone a new one like ours. But in a way the sheer scale of the economic and social challenges we face will be positive for our new institutions. The areas of common ground between us are so big that they should help to carry us beyond the political obstacles that are so evident.

We are at last moving into what we have sought throughout our existence, real politics. We will be working to build an economy, to tackle and solve our serious unemployment problem and to provide a decent standard of living for all of our people. In doing this we shall make the very positive use of the international contacts that we have been building in both Europe and the United States in order to create jobs by seeking inward investment and marketing the products of small and medium sized enterprises. One of the major ways of doing this will be by building on the special relationship that we have with our sister parties in Europe. They are now the government of 11 of the 15 member states of the E.U. and I look forward to using our special relationship not only to ensure that we

retain our necessary economic support as a member of the E.U. but also to assist us in particular with the development of marketing on behalf of our SMEs in their countries.

We must commit ourselves to the social and economic objectives of the marginalised, the poor, the unemployed, the dispossessed, men and women, as Wolfe Tone put it, of "no property". How valuable and enduring is our peace process if those who have had no stake in society continue as the men and women of no property with no investment in the future for themselves and their children?

In implementing an agreement we must advance the cause and status of women in our society. We must address unemployment, the balance of employment, the distribution of wealth, the needs of deprived areas.

Our success will be fuelled by exploiting the great potential of this agreement. No longer obstructed by conflict, our talents and diversity as a people and a society can blossom.

We can rectify the deficit in cross border trade and commerce. We can combine our efforts North and South to cut costs and improve economic opportunities. We can jointly trawl the international economy for inward investment and trade. Through growth and expansion, we can create the opportunities to solve the economic and social problems of our people.

The quality of the peace we have and will have in the future is our responsibility as political leaders in the Departments and institutions of government of which we will be a part.

We have now an opportunity to make manifest the social and economic ideals of our party. That will be the privilege and responsibility of those of our party who find themselves in power, of those who advise and support them and of you, the delegates, who ultimately direct them.

True peace is the peace of harmony, reconciliation and justice in all its forms. If we want this peace we must prepare for it. We must work to it as the transcending principle of government over the life of the Assembly and Executive. Each government must bend its will to that great objective.

Every citizen must do so.

Let us today relish our achievements as individuals, as a party and as a cause. Let us rededicate ourselves to our founding principles of social, economic and political justice. Let us recommit ourselves to the cause of peace and concord in all its true and full potential.

Let us overcome.

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