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Speech by John Hume MP MEP at the SDLP 30th Annual Conference
Slieve Donard Hotel, Newcastle, Co. Down
Saturday 18th November 2000

Party members, delegates and distinguished visitors

It's good to be back for this the thirtieth anniversary conference of our party and the twenty-first occasion I have spoken to you as party leader. It's also great to be back in Newcastle, a town that has always extended a warm welcome to the SDLP, in a constituency that has produced some of our party's most committed and most inspiring members.

Thirty years ago the SDLP set out on a journey of hope. Inspired by the American dream of a tolerant new world, we set out to fulfil the words of Robert Kennedy:

'Give me a place to stand and I will move the world'.

We took a stand then and we moved the world we knew. We take a stand today and our desire to positively change our society is stronger than ever before.

I know the membership of this party. I know that the commitment to social justice, to equality, to social democracy lives within each and every one of you. Many of you took that stand with us in August 1970; many more of you joined us along the way. It is, of course, deeply regrettable that all too many of our colleagues and friends have passed on and are not with us today to celebrate this milestone in our history.

I am greatly encouraged as well to see so many new faces. Many of you were not even alive when the SDLP was founded. Of each of you- young and old alike- I ask you to continue to stand with the SDLP. Keep faith with the dream we have for our country; never give up working towards the fulfilment of our vision that will one day see us achieve the true republican ideal of uniting Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter - a unity that can only be achieved by agreement and respect for difference.

Thirty years ago we set out on a journey of hope. No one could have foretold the tragedies we would be forced to endure as a party. But we survived all the tragedies and overcame the problems and today the SDLP is a stronger political force than we have ever been at any time in our history.

In some ways 30 years seems a long time ago. When you look at the black and white TV footage of those years, the clothes, the haircuts, the buildings and the cars all seem to belong to a vanished era. Politically, too, a huge amount has changed. Richard Nixon, Ted Heath, Jack Lynch, James Chichester-Clark and Brian Faulkner all held high political office in 1970. The Vietnam War still raged. Both Britain and Ireland were still outside the Common Market, as it then was. And, in Northern Ireland, the old regime at Stormont survived, despite the mounting tide of popular and international opposition.

Yes, thirty years is a long time in politics. Many of our younger members, who are today making such a vibrant and creative contribution, had not even been born in 1970. Those of us who were around then know that we are moving into the veteran category - though perhaps there's some life in us yet.

But some very important things have not changed in thirty years. From its foundation, the SDLP has held firm to a number of key principles and beliefs. In 1970, we made clear our total opposition to the use of violence, or the threat of violence, for any purpose and by any organisation. That belief hasn't changed. In 1970, we said that the unity of our people was desirable, but that it could and should only happen by agreement. That aspiration hasn't changed.

We have consistently made it clear that it is the people of this island who are divided, not the territory. Therefore agreement is only road to a solution and violence can have no role to play in bringing about that agreement. It deepens the divisions and makes the problem worse.

In 1970, we set out our vision of a future in which both communities in Northern Ireland, and both traditions in Ireland, would work together through shared political institutions for the common good. That vision hasn't changed.

In 1970, we made clear that what mattered to us most was the welfare of working people and of ordinary families. That determination hasn't changed.

What has changed is that those - both unionists and republicans - who for so long dissented from our analysis and decried our policies have themselves adopted precisely that analysis and those policies. The SDLP never wavered. We never lost the faith, or abandoned hope.

With the rest of the people of Northern Ireland, we endured those terrible years and decades - years and decades of savage violence, of sterile confrontation, of bitterness and of waste. Yes, they were difficult. For those of us who had the honour and the burden of leadership, carrying on was made possible only by the sustaining support and solidarity we always found here in this party and in our consistent public support.

But we believed that, sooner or later, with patience and perseverance, our ideas would triumph. We knew that the goals of peace, of partnership and of justice were not only noble, but also realistic.

Furthermore, the SDLP not only had a vision of a better future, but a strategy to bring it about. We called for a careful analysis of the realities and requirements of our situation. We urged the convening of comprehensive negotiations embracing all of the core relationships on this island and between these islands. And starting in the late 1980s, with great difficulty and against much opposition, we insisted that those negotiations had to include all democratically-elected representatives whose organisations or associates had abandoned violence and were committed to peace. It is now many years since the dialogue with Gerry Adams began, and we produced the paper which went on to form the basis for the Joint Declaration issued by the British and Irish Governments in December 1993. The Declaration in due course led to the cease-fires and the talks process.

The journey from where we started to where we've arrived has been long and arduous. But all along the way we've had a clear idea of where we wanted to go, and a determination to persuade others that this was the right way. Of course, we are still beset by many difficulties. I will talk about these shortly. But any fair-minded assessment must surely concede that the SDLP's policies and programmes have to a quite remarkable degree found expression in the negotiation and in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. It was our vision which won out over the forces of sectarianism and of division.

And even since we last met, in Belfast a little over a year ago, there has been great progress. At the time of our last Conference, it had still not been possible to appoint the Executive and to establish the North/South and British-Irish institutions. Senator Mitchell was still conducting his review. But the signs were hopeful. And indeed it was exactly one year ago, on 18 November, that the Mitchell Review came to a successful conclusion.

As we all know now, that was not the end of our difficulties. We had four months of suspension earlier in the year. We now have the problems surrounding Sinn Fein nominations to the North/South Ministerial Conference. Nevertheless, the process does move on. There are pauses. There are steps back. But often slowly but sometimes dramatically, we are continuing to move ahead.

Just look at what the last year has brought. An Assembly and an Executive in which representatives of both communities are working together to serve all of the people of Northern Ireland, by taking the hard decisions and showing the way forward in areas from agriculture to education to the environment and inward investment policy. A Civic Forum which provides a space for the wider society to feed into and inform the political debate. A North/South Ministerial Council which has met many times in both plenary and sectoral formats, and which is harnessing the combined energies and talents of both

parts of the island of Ireland both through its own decisions and the work of the Implementation Bodies which report to it. A British-Irish Council which establishes a new framework for relationships within these islands.

For most of the past thirty years most people in Northern Ireland - most people everywhere - would have thought this a quite impossible dream. Totally unachievable and unrealistic. But we in the SDLP dared to dream. And we knew that our dream could be made a reality, if we worked hard enough and creatively enough.

The establishment and successful operation of the new institutions owes much to many people. Success required the sustained involvement and determination of generations of Southern politicians and officials, including the present Taoiseach and Minister for Foreign Affairs. It required the commitment of leading British Government figures, notably the Prime Minister. Without the commitment of both David Trimble and Gerry Adams, and of other leading UUP and Sinn Fein figures, the Agreement would not have been possible

At this time, it would be wrong not to pay a very special tribute to one person in particular, whose dedication, even-handedness and understanding have, for eight years now, been a particular inspiration and support: President Bill Clinton.

As leader of the SDLP, I have continuously stressed the political and the economic potential of the American link. However, when I first started journeying to Washington, even I little expected that one day such a good friend of Ireland would occupy the White House. We all owe him an immense debt, and I very much hope that we will have one more chance to salute him personally on Irish soil before he leaves office.

We will, of course, continue to maintain good relations with the US administration, with the US Congress and our friends across the United States.

Over the years we laid the foundations of the positive American involvement in the peace process. Our major contacts became known as the Four Horsemen, the late Speaker Tip O' Neill, Senator Edward Kennedy, Senator Moynihan and Governor Carey. We owe them a great debt of gratitude together with Senator Chris Dodd and the Friends of Ireland in Congress. All of these people have maintained solid contact over the years. Indeed in 1977 the Four Horsemen following contact with us persuaded Jimmy Carter to make the first ever Presidential Statement on our situation based on our strategy. He called on the two governments to work together to solve our problem and promised economic support. When the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed in 1985, my phone rang the following day. It was my great friend Tip O'Neill who said to me: John, we keep our promises, we are setting up an International Fund for Ireland. That Fund, with a substantial EU contribution as well, has since created 24,000 jobs. It would not have happened without the connections we had built with those senior American politicians.

Many people can justifiably claim to have played their part in the achievement of the Agreement. I do not believe, however, that anyone could question the indispensable contribution of our party. What is more, it is the SDLP which is at the heart of making the new institutions work. Seamus Mallon is, as always a tower of strength and of wisdom as Deputy First Minister. His is a complex and difficult task, but he brings to his office integrity, courage and determination. Our Ministers - Mark Durkan, Brid Rogers, Sean Farren and Denis Haughey- are not only making a tremendous success of their own portfolios, but they are making a vital contribution to the overall coherence of the Executive. Eddie McGrady, just as at Westminster, is a masterful Chief Whip. All of the SDLP members of the Assembly are working flat out to serve their constituents and to contribute to debate and deliberation within the Assembly itself. Every one of them deserves our thanks and congratulations.

But none of this work would be possible without the consistent support of the people who have stood shoulder to shoulder with us through these long and difficult years. Every one of them deserves our thanks and congratulations.

We have seen elsewhere in the world just how hard it is reach agreement in difficult and contested situations. Moreover, even after agreements have been reached, implementing them can be still

harder. We are fully aware that completing the implementation of the Agreement will be a long and complex process. And, even once it is implemented in full, maintaining its dynamism and popularity will be a challenge. We cannot afford to be in any way complacent.

Once again, we are at a time of some difficulty for the Agreement. The possible problems stemming from the Ulster Unionist Council decision last month have yet to fully manifest themselves. But we cannot deny that there are problems, and problems which must be resolved sooner rather than later if a full-blown crisis is to be avoided.

I deeply regret that David Trimble has taken the initiative he has. He must know that his course of action is, at the very least, completely contrary to the spirit of the Agreement. There was never any intention that the role of the First and Deputy First Minister in the nomination of Ministers to attend North/South or British-Irish meetings should be other than technical and procedural in nature. It is quite wrong to try to prevent legally-appointed Ministers from discharging one of their basic functions, attendance at the North/South Ministerial Council. It was important that Seamus Mallon should demonstrate, by going to the bi-lateral meeting in Enniskillen, his and our party's determination to act as guardians of the integrity of the Agreement.

Mr Trimble has made clear his views. He should now be prepared to relax his position in the interests of the Agreement as a whole, and of the people of Northern Ireland as a whole. One thing we should all have learned from the peace process is that ultimata and unilateral demands simply do not work. Indeed, while they may provide some short-term relief from political pressure, they are counterproductive in the longer term.

I fully accept that there is a substantial section of the UUP, and of the unionist community as a whole, which is basically opposed to the Agreement, and which continues to dislike the concepts of partnership and inclusivity, But I do not believe that this is true of most unionists or most UUP members.

However, their legitimate interest in stability, in an end to violence, in making Northern Ireland work, will best be served by the full implementation of the Agreement, and by its operation in good faith. Allowing others to cast doubt on their sincerity only weakens the Agreement, and with it moderate unionism. It is the full implementation of the Agreement which will definitely turn the page on our past and open the way to the future. And the best way for Mr Trimble to defeat his critics once and for all is to stand on the high ground of the Agreement.

The most fundamental principle of Unionism since its foundation has been the principle of consent. Unionists should recognise that the people of Northern Ireland have overwhelmingly given their consent to the Good Friday Agreement in the referendum. If the opponents of the Agreement succeed in destroying it they will destroy the principle of consent and undermine completely the unionist people's ability to protect their identity.

David Trimble, and the British Government, have a duty to demonstrate that they remain committed to the Agreement, and to approach their heavy responsibilities in an inclusive and constructive spirit.

Other, too, have responsibilities.

The fact remains that, whether we think it altogether wise or not, the question of arms has assumed great importance for the unionist community as a litmus test of republican commitment to genuinely peaceful means. A basic principle of the peace process has been that any issue of serious significance must be taken seriously. The unionist community's concerns and anxieties must therefore be addressed.

I acknowledge the very considerable strides the IRA have made, above all in opening a number of dumps to inspection, and re-inspection by two most distinguished international figures. The comments of the inspectors about what they have seen, and their assessment of the IRA's approach, have been very encouraging

I believe the IRA are committed to the peace process. They have declared that they are, and most importantly the international inspectors, following their contacts, have said that they are also convinced that the IRA is committed to the peace process.

So I believe that the IRA ought now to take a further step. As promised in May, they should now fully re-engage with the De Chastelain Commission and enter into meaningful discussions. Taking the gun out of Irish politics for ever remains a key objective of the process.

Furthermore a failure to resolve this issue will only foster a climate in which tiny but dangerous dissident groups can operate. It is unthinkable that, after Omagh, and after all the other three thousand plus deaths of the Troubles, there continue to be those who believe that actions that lead to the blowing up of men, women and children, to the destruction of jobs and economic prospects, is the best way to achieve the unity of the Irish people. Truly their stupidity is matched only by their wickedness. There can be no place for violence, republican or loyalist, Orange and Green, in the new society we are building. Violence only drives people apart.

Those who call themselves the Real IRA are the enemies of the Irish people. It should be consistently pointed out to them that for the first time since 1918 the Irish people as a whole, North and South, have spoken as to how they wish to live together. They have approved the Good Friday Agreement with an overwhelming majority. The opponents of the Agreement are therefore the opponents of the Irish people. How can they call themselves republicans.?

The best way to establish basic law and order will be through a new Police Service, one which fully meets the standards set for it in the Good Friday Agreement and as developed in the Patten Report. Such a Service will be one which is representative of and supported by both communities, which is properly accountable and which adheres to the highest and most professional standards. The achievement of a Police Service of this character will be a hugely significant step, both in its own terms and as part of the overall implementation of the Agreement. It will be a prize of immense importance, and should be deeply reassuring to unionists and nationalists alike. That is why we are totally committed to the full implementation of the Patten Report.

I wish to pay particular tribute to the role played by Seamus Mallon, ably supported by Alex Attwood and others in the party, in working to ensure that the Northern Ireland Police Bill and the Implementation Plan are fully and appropriately in line with the Patten Report, and can bring about a Police Service that we in the SDLP would be proud to support.

On this issue, like on so many others both now and over the past thirty years, it is the SDLP which has consistently taken the lead: it is the SDLP which has blended principle and practicality in coming to an approach which is both ambitious and realistic. It is we who have shown the way. And that is because it is we who have provided the most rigorous analysis and the most coherent leadership.

As far back as 1970 we recognised that in order to adequately address the core of our divisions we would have to address the three sets of relationships; the relationship between the people of Northern Ireland; the relationship among the people of Ireland and the people of Britain.

I stated as far back as 1977 that only a real and dynamic partnership between all our people could solve our problems. I quote:

"The necessity of equality, the necessity of consent, can now be promoted only by a partnership between the two Irish traditions. The road towards that partnership will be long and hard...but there must be a beginning, a first step in what may well be a journey of a thousand leagues."

When I first spoke to conference as party leader in 1980 I articulated a vision for our country that would see us join together in shared endeavour. Again, I quote:

"The SDLP believes that there is hope now if we act together, Unionist, Non-Unionist, Southerners and British. We in Northern Ireland, the victims of a miserable past, need not be the prisoners of a catastrophic future. Let us for the first time take control of our future together."

In real terms, it has been the rock solid philosophy of the SDLP that has paved the way for the Good Friday Agreement, the people's agreement. We have worked very hard to turn our dream of a new, inclusive and tolerant Ireland into reality and we can be very proud of all we have achieved.

But while today we stand closer than ever before to the fulfillment of our ideals, we also understand that there is so much more to be achieved, so many more hills to climb.

In real terms, the pursuit of justice and equality can never end. We will never relent in the pursuit of our vision. We will never give up on our dream of an end to poverty, marginalisation and discrimination. We will never grow tired of the pursuit of new jobs, proper education, adequate healthcare, high quality housing. We will never swerve from our objective of a brand new society, based on agreement and consensus.

Today might well be the thirtieth anniversary conference of the SDLP, but it is also the first day of a brand new era for our party. Just as our society is changing forever so too the SDLP is changing. The new political climate demands new dynamism and fresh thinking from us all. We are the first party to rise to that challenge. Over the past two years we have carried out a comprehensive review of our party. We know our strengths, upon which we can build for the future. We also know our weaknesses and we have already begun to address those concerns.

In recent months we have taken our message to the public across a broad range of policy areas. As a party of government we believe it is crucial that we hear the views of the community and act upon what we are being told. Time and again the community is telling us that they trust us to deliver the real and positive change the people long for.

Whether it is in Strabane or Craigavon, Belfast or Derry, Newry or Coleraine the community on the ground across Northern Ireland has faith in the SDLP and in our policies. People trust us. People believe in us. People know we will not let them down.

This weekend brings to life a new and modern party constitution and structure. The complete implementation of the new strategy will give us a much clearer focus and will maximise the talents of the grassroots members in the constituencies. Through the implementation of our new strategy we will become much more effective, much better equipped to build upon our strong electoral base.

The success of the new strategy relies on you- the ordinary members. I encourage you all to play your part in delivering our new party. By working together in the collective interest of the SDLP we will continue to grow.

We have clear objectives for the future. We need more women at every level of the party. We need still more young people coming through the ranks and taking responsibility. We need even more branches in areas where we are strong. We need new branches in areas where our strength has not yet been fully realised.

Among all this there is one thing that does not need to change and that is our core political philosophy. We are in such a strong position today because we have always had complete confidence in our values.

With all these new measures in place I am certain we can face next year's local government and Westminster elections with renewed confidence that we are the party that really delivers at every level throughout the community.

I am very confident that by next year's elections we will have been a party of government for some considerable time and it will be our record in government upon which we will be judged. This is something we warmly welcome.

It is twenty-six years since members of our party could talk to a team of SDLP ministers in government. Today I am deeply proud that the SDLP is leading government in the North of Ireland and making decisions that make a positive impact throughout the whole island.

We have taken a strong and pro-active stance in government. Our imaginative policy objectives are being implemented at every level. We must continue to ensure that the agreement succeeds and that the community enjoys real confidence in the political process. The SDLP is up to that challenge. We are as determined as anyone, and more determined than ever, that the agreement is delivered in all its aspects.

Through the agreement we all have the opportunity to change the face of our society. We stand determined to build a new society, based firmly in the social democratic principles that have always guided us.

We want to make a positive impact on every aspect of our society. We want to initiate change in education, in healthcare, in housing, in infrastructure. We want to build and we want to lead. We are very excited about the future.

Over many years we have worked hard to develop policies and objectives directed towards the needs of all our citizens. We have drawn primarily upon our own experience, and our own analysis of the problems of this society.

However, we have also been able to draw upon the experience and knowledge of our sister parties, in the great European social democratic and labour movement of which we are a part and in which we so strongly believe.

Indeed our forward looking and outward looking party has always appreciated the world beyond our shores. The SDLP has been a true friend of democracy and I am deeply proud of the fact that we, in our own small yet important way, stood by the people of Serbia this year through our support for the democratic opposition to Slobodan Milosevic.

Martin Luther King once said that 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere'. Just as we have stood up for democracy and justice in our own country we can also be proud of the fact that we have played our part in the establishment of those same principles in other parts of Europe.

Our party has always taken pride in being the most pro-European and outward-looking party in Northern Ireland. We should all be proud of our European vision and our ability to maximise the benefits of our membership of the European Union. We have had the vision to recognise the importance and the potential of the European Union. We have had the capacity to play a positive part in the construction of a more unified Europe. We have rescued Northern Ireland from decades of narrow-minded isolationism.

The positive inspiration that the example of the European Union gave us in the search for a political solution to the conflict is obvious.

Equally the practical assistance from the European Union through regional funding, through the European Social Fund, the Special Peace and Reconciliation Package and through community initiatives such as INTERREG and LEADER has had a major impact on our society.

Due to our forward looking approach, our party has always had a direct input into European policy through the European Parliament and close relations with the European Commission and many member state governments in the European Council of Ministers. Our relationship with our European sister parties who provide nine out of the 15 EU heads of government means we have an influence that no other party on this island can have.

As leader of the party, I meet regularly with the leaders of the social democratic sister parties throughout the EU, and indeed increasingly with the leaders of our sisters from Central and Eastern Europe. It was, of course, this special relationship with the leaders of Europe that made sure our initiative in proposing the PEACE package met with success.

The Good Friday institutions can only enhance the potential to maximise our influence in the European Union. Even though it is early days, our ministers in the Executive have been doing great work in the European dimensions of their portfolios. Mark Durkan's role in the structural fund negotiations, Brid Rodgers' tireless work in dealing with the BSE problem and Sean Farren's work in

harnessing European Union resources to ensure that people have the opportunity to acquire the right skills is very encouraging for the future.

We have the will and the ability to develop this work at all levels of the party. And as the party of Europe we are best placed, indeed it is our duty, to ensure that Northern Ireland had a coherent strategy within the European Union.

Recently the Taoiseach has initiated a debate on the future of the European Union, and Ireland's place within it. Similar debates are taking place all over Europe as we strive to modernise the European Union to deal with the new challenges of this century. Many issues have to be addressed- economic and monetary union, enlargement, the development of the information society, the place of agriculture in the world and European economies, as well as the institutions of the European Union themselves.

Major steps forward have been taken. Employment is now the central item on the European agenda. The European Council has even reinstated full employment as a policy objective.

We are taking the measures necessary to equip our economy and our people for the future. We are developing the technological base needed to sustain a modern economy with the establishment of the European Research Area. We are upgrading the Transeuropean Research Internet Network. We are developing the use of new technologies in education and research. We are advancing Europe's lead in mobile communication technology and addressing the areas where we lag behind.

We must turn these developments to our advantage. Our party must be strong and positive advocates for our region in the evolving European Union.

In this respect, we must also maximise the role of the other Good Friday institutions. In particular, the North- South Ministerial Council and the implementation bodies will have a vital role in ensuring that the voice of the island as a whole is heard at the highest levels of the European Union. Nor should we neglect the possibilities of developing the British-Irish Council to ensure common approaches to the European Union with our counterparts in other regions of these islands.

We are the only party capable of providing the necessary leadership in Europe. Let us face up to that responsibility with confidence and commitment.

The principles of justice and equality go to the very heart of our whole approach to government. It was crucially important that the principles, the objectives and the ideals we cherish, and which are part of the mainstream of social democratic thinking in Europe, were injected into the Executive's programme for government.

Just as the Good Friday Agreement was the product of the vision and the analysis of the SDLP, so too the Executive's Programme for Government reflects the economic, social and cultural vision of our party.

More than any other party, the SDLP has shown the capacity and imagination to discern the economic and social problems of this society, and devise imaginative and positive measures to deal with them.

We have already succeeded in gaining the inclusion of many of our major concerns in the Good Friday Agreement itself. The chapter on 'Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity' already commits the Executive to developing policies for:

- sustained economic growth and stability
- the promotion of social inclusion
- the advancement of women
- the protection and enhancement of the environment
- the strengthening of the physical infrastructure

- the development of rural areas and rejuvenation of urban centres
- new measures on employment equality

Now the challenge is to turn the provisions of the Agreement into tangible benefits for the community, whose social and economic needs must always be the fundamental concern of the new political dispensation.

Indeed, it is that principle of targeting social need that will continue to guide the SDLP in the next thirty years. Our aim is to reach out to those who need a helping hand, to the poor, the marginalised.

Our objectives for the future are clear.

We want to create a society that holds justice, equality and opportunity as its benchmarks. I believe that the agreement can take us to the new Ireland we have aspired to since the beginning. Ours is a vision of an Ireland that is dynamic, inclusive and tolerant. I am in no doubt that through the agreement we can unlock the opportunities that have the potential to completely transform our country for the better.

There is no doubt we have come a long way, but we have a long way to go. Compare the Ireland of today with the Ireland of 1970. Imagine the Ireland we can enjoy in thirty years time.

I want to see an Ireland agreed in purpose, an Ireland where all our people stand together in support of tolerance and mutual respect and stand shoulder to shoulder in opposition to bigotry, racism and prejudice.

This is imperative, given the changing nature of our island. By working in partnership in a healing process, we are setting a precedent for the future. We can give our people the confidence in ourselves to fully create and embrace the new multi-cultural Ireland of the twenty-first century. In this century the challenge will be the acceptance and promotion of ethnic diversity and we in the North are duty bound to lead the way.

Our history tells us of the indignity and injustice poured upon those who left our shores in search of a better world. We have suffered greatly at the hands of intolerant people. We know all too well of racial hatred and ignorance.

For that very reason it is essential that Ireland now rises to the challenge of tolerance and inclusion. Now that our country is the destination for immigrants from across the world, we must take a principled stand for a caring and compassionate society. There can be no room for bigotry, no room for racism, no room for exclusion in the Ireland of the twenty-first century.

I want to see an Ireland of opportunity that looks after the weak and the vulnerable. The economic success of our country in the past decade has not led to a better society for all. There are still many, many people who live in abject poverty, with no employment prospects and little hope. I ask, is that the sort of Ireland we want? The answer is, of course, obvious. The challenge is ours. The challenge of real politics

The right to work is fundamental. The right to feed and clothe your family and to live in a decent home is something no one should be expected to do without. Yet there are young parents everywhere who struggle to get by.

The benefits of the new knowledge-based economy we are harnessing in the North must reach everyone. As you know, the traditional industries have been in tragic decline over recent years. Many of our villages, towns and cities have been devastated by the closure of clothing factories and we have a responsibility to ensure that the people who have lost their jobs have the chance to find new employment in the new high-tech sector.

That accentuates the critical importance and value of getting our education system right. If the primary aim of the new administration is the eradication of poverty, then the primary vehicle is first-class education that is accessible to all. We cannot place restrictions on anyone and we owe it to everyone to ensure that our education system is second to none.

We also have a duty to educate our young people beyond the classroom. We must show our young people the value of open-mindedness. A free society will only come about when our young people are free to think for themselves and express themselves positively.

Our young people are our best resource. Our youthful and energetic population has the ability to build a society the limits of which are set only at the limits of their own creativity and imagination.

I believe firmly in our young people. I believe we must invest fully in our young people. We owe it to them to put our faith in them and I am certain they will not let us down.

One of the most tragic consequences of the last thirty years is that we have all been powerless and, as such, we have been denied the opportunity to shape our own destiny. That has changed but I believe it must change further. I want to see much greater community empowerment led by young people, that allows people to play their part in shaping that destiny.

I am greatly inspired today by the amount of hope that exists on the ground in Northern Ireland. Even in the darkest hour the ordinary, decent people never lost hope. Now we can turn unquenchable hope into unstoppable opportunity.

Our party is at the very forefront in building a new Ireland. We have led the way for thirty years and we will continue to lead for the next thirty. With confidence and courage we have a vision and a dream for our country and our people.

Our journey of hope goes on.

The great achievement of the SDLP over its first thirty years has been the transformation of politics in Northern Ireland and the achievement of political equality between our two traditions. Now, over the next period, we have to set ourselves new ambitions. Of course, ensuring the success of the Good Friday Agreement is our most tangible objective. But the success of the Agreement will ultimately be measured in whether or not it develops new ways in which people can live together and share this piece of earth.

The SDLP will face into the challenges of the coming year, and of the coming years, with confidence. We are confident not just because our organisation has been overhauled and radically improved over the past years: not just because we have a record of proven success: but because our fundamental vision of how things can and ought to be is as vibrant and as real as ever it was. It is we who are leading the way to the future, just as we have led the way to the present. Our commitment is to a future in which the two traditions are not just equal, but are equal partners, not rivals. That is an ambitious goal which I know that, together, and with the continued support of our voters, we can realise.

We Shall Overcome.