

SDLP - a positive approach

AN AGREEMENT INSPIRED BY SDLP PRINCIPLES

"There can be a new dawn in politics on this island"

John Hume MP, MEP, Leader of the SDLP, April 10th, 1998

The Good Friday Agreement is rooted in the fundamental principles of the SDLP.

The SDLP has always believed that healing the divisions in our society could only be achieved through an exclusively peaceful political process, based on democratic principles and internationally accepted human rights principles. Violence only deepened division and prolonged our communities suffering and pain.

Northern Ireland is deeply divided by conflicting loyalties. These allegiances transcend the boundaries of the state. We have argued from the start that a solution to our quarrel must accommodate both. That means resolving the relationships ruptured by our conflict:

- relationships between unionists and nationalists;
- I. relationships between North and South;
- II. relationships between Ireland and Britain.

We negotiated secured general acceptance for this analysis which was the basis of the three stranded talks.

The SDLP has consistently argued that peace could only come through agreement between nationalists and unionists, between North and South and between Ireland and Britain. Such an agreement could only be created by exclusively political means.

The SDLP's primary goal has been to achieve an Agreed Ireland - an Ireland in which the consent of Nationalists and Unionists would be secured for a partnership within agreed political institutions based on the highest standards of human rights.

The SDLP has consistently worked to secure an agreed Ireland. Ending the violence and creating the conditions for an inclusive political process became an essential SDLP objective.

The SDLP has delivered on these promises. We have inserted our basic principles into the heart of the agreement and we have ensured that everyone, North and South, will have to chance to give their support and consent to the Agreement. We call on everyone who wants a permanent peace in this country to vote yes on May 22.

A POSITIVE APPROACH

Founded out of the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement, the SDLP has worked long and hard to achieve peace and equality between our various traditions. Throughout the last 30 years we have never deviated from the objective of securing an agreed Ireland. We have worked to seek support and build alliances, at home and abroad, for this approach.

The Good Friday Agreement is proof of the validity of this strategy. It has been a long march to agreement. There have been no short cuts to a lasting peace. At every stage, the SDLP approach has shown itself to be the best way forward.

Key developments on the way to the Good Friday Agreement include the New Ireland Forum, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the dialogue between SDLP and Sinn Fein leaderships, the Downing St. Declaration and the Framework Document. The SDLP has been the inspiration for every major advance towards agreement over the last three decades.

The Definitive Analysis. The SDLP always maintained that in our divided society, agreement would have to be built on three sets of relationships: relationships in the North of Ireland between nationalists and unionists, relationships between the North and South of Ireland and relationships between the people of Ireland and Britain. This analysis became the basis for the three stranded approach to political negotiations. The SDLP identified key requirements for political partnership in the North, strong North-South institutions and a new relationship between Britain and Ireland. Despite the betrayed hopes of Sunningdale, the SDLP persisted with this analysis stressing the need for the two sovereign governments to create a new joint framework within which consensus could be achieved. This approach has been essential to the success of the multiparty talks.

The New Ireland Forum. Set up at the initiative of the SDLP, the New Ireland Forum of 1983-84 brought together the vast majority of nationalists, North and South. Endorsing the views of the SDLP, the Forum concluded that an agreement based on the legitimate rights and interests of nationalists and unionists was the only way forward. Nationalists required effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity as much as unionists did. As a result the relationships between the two communities within the North, between North and South and between Britain and Ireland had to be addressed.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement. The SDLP persuaded the Irish and British governments of their joint responsibility for the resolution of the conflict. The Agreement brought the Irish government into a close working relationship with the British government in the search for a comprehensive agreement and lasting peace. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was an essential stepping stone to the Good Friday Agreement.

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III. *Dialogue for Peace: An Inclusive Process.* In order to build upon this potential for an agreed Ireland, inclusive political dialogue was essential. This could only happen successfully in a totally peaceful atmosphere. The vision displayed by SDLP leader John Hume in the peace process has been crucial. His role in bringing about the cease fires has been widely recognised. The SDLP made possible inclusive dialogue and the multi-party negotiations which produced the Good Friday Agreement.

The Downing St Declaration and the Framework Document. The Downing St. Declaration endorsed the SDLP view that a negotiated solution involving all parties and both governments was possible and realistic. The Irish and British governments pledged to “foster agreement and reconciliation, leading to a new political framework founded on consent and encompassing arrangements within Northern Ireland, for the whole of the island and between these islands”. This principle, the basis of the SDLP, is firmly upheld in the Good Friday Agreement. The Framework Document of 1995 took on board many SDLP proposals for: structures permitting the nationalist and unionist traditions in Northern Ireland to co-operate in government;
equal partnership at all levels between both communities;
North-South structures involving representatives from both parts of the island;
IV. co-operation on social, cultural and economic matters between both parts of Ireland;
co-operation between Ireland and Britain were also advanced.

These ideas are central to the Good Friday Agreement.

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A NEW AGREEMENT, A NEW IRELAND

The SDLP worked hard to bring this agreement about and we commend it to the people. We believe it provides the framework in which the divisions in our society can be addressed and eventually overcome. We do not regard it as a victory for one part or another. Rather it is a victory for all the people of this island. Having worked so positively and decisively to bring this agreement about, we will play a positive and decisive role in making it work.

The Agreement is comprehensive

The Agreement is inclusive. It addresses all the major issues of political structures, constitutional change, human, civil and cultural rights, the reform of policing and justice, prisoners, the demilitarisation of society and the pursuit of economic and social progress.

The Agreement is democratic

The Agreement will empower all the people of Northern Ireland, through institutions based on a new partnership between our communities, to determine our own future, economically and socially as well as politically.

The SDLP priority has been the creation of a new and agreed Ireland. Political institutions within the North and between North and South provide the foundations for this objective. These institutions will be based on the principles of equality and justice for which the SDLP has striven.

The Agreement offers inclusive government

The SDLP has ensured that both communities will be represented at all levels in the new administration, in a way that reflects their democratic mandates. As proposed by the SDLP, a First and Deputy First Minister will be chosen from parties representing both communities and will be jointly elected by the Assembly. Together they will represent and lead this new partnership, at home and abroad.

There will be an Executive Committee, as advocated by the SDLP, bringing together Ministers nominated by the different political parties willing to participate.

The SDLP has ensured that there are strong safeguards to provide for key decisions, in either the Assembly or the Executive, to be taken on a cross-community basis. Alongside the 'parallel consent' mechanism, the SDLP secured further procedures for vetting policies to ensure equality of treatment and compliance with the highest human rights standards.

The Agreement ensures meaningful North-South structures

As proposed by the SDLP, there will be a North-South Ministerial Council in which Ministers from both parts of Ireland will meet to consult and take decisions on a wide range of matters of mutual concern and interest. Supported by a separate Secretariat and Implementation Bodies which will report directly to it, the Council will be a powerful agent

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for developing and co-ordinating policies to meet needs in both parts of the island. The model for the Council's operation is that of the European Council of Ministers and the one long advocated by the SDLP. The SDLP ensured that North-South bodies and the Assembly will be established at the same time and that neither can exist without the other.

The Agreement provides for balanced constitutional change

Conflicting British and Irish Constitutional claims over Northern Ireland have played a significant part in generating unease and uncertainty on both sides of our community about the future. The SDLP has long argued for balanced constitutional change which would recognise the rights and accommodate the aspirations of both major traditions. The Good Friday Agreement does this by reflecting the principles set out in the Downing Street Declaration.

Changes in British Constitutional legislation will entail the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act (1920) in its entirety and not just the repeal of Article 75. It will also entail provision for periodic polls to determine whether, on the basis of consent, the people of Northern Ireland wish by a majority to remain within the UK or become part of a United Ireland. There will also be a legally binding obligation on the British Government to lay before Parliament proposals to give effect to the wishes of the majority, if they decide in such a poll to become part of the Irish state.

Changes to the Irish Constitution will entail changes to Articles 2 and 3, as well as an addition to Article 29 which will empower the Irish Government to act within the new North-South arrangements. The amendments to Articles 2 and 3 will establish the right of everyone born on the island of Ireland to be part of the Irish nation, and will state the firm wish of the Irish nation to unite all the people of Ireland with the consent of a majority, freely given, in each jurisdiction.

From the foundation of the SDLP we have believed in the principle of consent - so much so that we wrote it into our party constitution. The SDLP has now succeeded in placing it at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Agreement addresses the international and European dimensions

The SDLP has always highlighted the international dimension to the origins and resolution of the conflict in Ireland. We have consistently built alliances in America and Europe in order to build a coalition for peace and agreement. Similarly, the US role in the peace process has been immensely beneficial.

The SDLP has been consistently pro-European. We have derived great strength and inspiration from the European Union. It has provided practical and political support to the peace process. It also represents the greatest lesson in conflict resolution in history.

The Agreement therefore ensures that the new political institutions will have a special role to play in our relations with the European Union. Many EU programmes have a cross-border

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dimension. The existence of North-South institutions will enable both parts of Ireland to enhance their influence within the EU.

The involvement of the international community has been personified by the three chairs of the talks: Senator George Mitchell, General de Chastelain of Canada and Prime Minister Holkeri of Finland. The SDLP deeply appreciates the international support which enabled us to achieve the Good Friday Agreement. We will be using our experience in this area to ensure that the EU, the US and the international community work with the new institutions in the creation of a new Ireland.

The Agreement addresses human rights

The Northern Ireland problem has been a blot on the human rights record in Europe. The absence of a social order based on justice and equity has been central to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the negotiations the SDLP sought to achieve strong and effective measures to protect fundamental rights.

The Good Friday Agreement contains clear provisions to ensure that all decisions and future legislation will guarantee equality and fairness to all.

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) will now be incorporated into domestic legislation together with such special provisions as may be agreed by political parties. A Human Rights Commission will be established to monitor all areas of public life and enforce the highest international standards. This Commission will liaise with a counter-part in the South to promote human rights throughout the whole of Ireland.

The Agreement addresses cultural rights

The failure to ensure parity of esteem between our cultural traditions was a significant contributing factor to the conflict. The Irish language received no official recognition or support. Official hostility inspired efforts to inhibit and constrain its use and development.

Parity of linguistic and cultural esteem is a basic civil right which should be safeguarded. International conventions of the United Nations, such as the UN Convention on Cultural Rights and the Council of Europe's Convention on the Rights of Minority Languages provide clear, widely respected criteria and guidelines as to what such respect and esteem should mean.

Throughout the negotiations the SDLP urged that these criteria and guidelines should form the basis for parity of esteem between our traditions. This approach is clearly reflected in the commitments on respecting and promoting cultural and linguistic traditions contained in the Good Friday Agreement.

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The Agreement addresses policing and justice

The absence of a cross-community police service has been a critically divisive element in Northern Ireland. Impartial, cross-community policing to uphold the law, defend public institutions and protect fundamental rights is essential to the well-being of any society. It has been a core part of SDLP policy to achieve a police service that will command the necessary support and confidence that exists in normal societies. Fundamental changes in policing are required if the Good Friday Agreement is to work.

SDLP proposals in the talks led to agreement on the commission on policing which will be established after the referendum. This will make its recommendations available within a year. The SDLP will be seeking to ensure that policing meets the needs of a diverse and forward-looking society.

A wide-ranging review of criminal justice is also essential in creating a genuine democracy. The SDLP came into existence to put an end to discrimination and injustice, whoever the perpetrators might be. The SDLP regards the establishment of cross-community confidence in the administration of justice as a fundamental necessity in a new agreed Ireland. It is identified in the Agreement as a top priority.

The Agreement addresses social and economic development

The economic and social costs of the violence, instability and division have been enormous. Economic investment and development have been retarded. High levels of unemployment, especially of long-term unemployment, persist in many areas. One of the tragic legacies of division has been the creation of severely marginalised and disadvantaged sections in both communities.

While economic growth and prosperity alone will not succeed in breaking down the barriers of mistrust that exist, it would be a grave mistake to believe that growth and socio-economic equity have no role in bringing the conflict to an end.

The SDLP has always insisted, even in the darkest days, that the creation of a viable and productive economy in Northern Ireland must be one of the principal objectives of politics.

The SDLP has always highlighted the potential for cross-border economic cooperation.

In the more favourable economic climate of recent years the need to develop a coherent and co-ordinated all-island approach to economic development has become more and more apparent. This must be based on a North-South partnership encompassing the whole range of socio-economic and business relationships on the island. The SDLP further believes that the success of the island economy will be entirely complementary to the wider economic success of Ireland and Britain within the European Union.

The SDLP has secured agreement from the other parties and governments to address, in a concerted and joint approach, the problems of social and economic disadvantage.

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The Agreement provides for the removal of the gun from political life

Decommissioning is an important confidence building measure, the approach to which is rooted in the Mitchell Principles of Democracy and Non-Violence and for the implementation of which both governments have issued detailed proposals.

The SDLP has never believed that decommissioning should be made a precondition. Modalities and schemes for decommissioning have now been agreed. The Good Friday Agreement makes clear that it is now the responsibility of those with influence in this area to co-operate to ensure that decommissioning does actually take place.

The Agreement addresses the issue of prisoners

Part of the healing process requires a sympathetic review of those imprisoned for politically motivated crime. If we are to put the past behind us those who have been imprisoned must become part of this process as well. The difficulties and sensitivities surrounding this matter are fully appreciated by the SDLP but in keeping with our approach in the negotiations the Good Friday Agreement strikes a just balance in its recommendations.

Agreement for the people, by the people

The Agreement provides for the democratic expression of the will of the people, North and South. This is unprecedented. The people of Ireland, North and South, will determine their own future. It was the SDLP who first proposed that any outcome to negotiations should be endorsed by the people of Ireland voting in referenda on the same day.

Having achieved their historic agreement the political parties now turn to seek the endorsement of the people. The terms of the Agreement will be put to the people of Ireland, North and South, in accordance with commitments already made by both governments. In this way nothing will be imposed which would infringe the basic rights of either community. Viewed positively the referenda will amount to a joint expression of the principle of consent and the right to self-determination.

By jointly expressing the principle of consent and the right to self-determination, the dual referendum will be the most fundamental embodiment of parity of esteem between our traditions. It will represent a new covenant between the two main traditions in Ireland, a covenant wherein each will not only recognise the legitimacy of the other, but the future of all will be dependent on the equal legitimacy of both. The requirement, identified by the SDLP, for new institutions to secure equality of allegiance will therefore be fulfilled by both the nature of those agreed institutions and their validation through referendum.

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"Only once in a generation does an opportunity like this come along, an opportunity to resolve our deep and tragic conflict. No one should diminish the difficulties we face. No one should deny the tough decisions that have been made and tough choices that have to be made. We must draw reassurance that our agreement today reflects the firmest wish of all our people"

John Hume MP, MEP, Leader of the SDLP, April 10th, 1998

OUR TRAGIC LEGACY

As we prepare for a more hopeful and peaceful future we must never forget the lessons and especially the tragedies of the past thirty years. Over three thousand men, women and children have been killed, and more than thirty thousand injured. They include Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, people of all religions or none. They include Irish and British, and people with no connection with our two countries. No one can calculate the cost of the human misery inflicted on the victims of violence and their families. These tragedies and their wounds must never be forgotten or ignored as we chart the healing process of which the Good Friday Agreement has marked but the first step.