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FACING REALITY -

a policy statement issued by S.D.L.P. Headquarters, Monday, September 19, 1977.

There has been a political and constitutional stalemate in Northern Ireland since the fall of the Northern Ireland Executive in 1974. Throughout that period the SDLP has pursued its policies both on the constitutional and socio-economic fronts. On the constitutional front we have sought by every means at our disposal to find the essential agreement between the different political groups that would provide the basis for the reconciliation that we seek.

On the socio-economic front as a Party, founded on social democratic principles, we have striven and will continue to strive for a more equal distribution of wealth; we have opposed and will continue to oppose injustice and deprivation; we stand for an acceptance by the State of its responsibility for those who are unable to care for themselves.

Our concern is reflected in the many socio-economic policy documents published by the Party e.g. "HOUSING - the way ahead"; "Poverty in Northern Ireland"; "Economic Analysis and Strategy"; "EDUCATION - the need for reform"; "AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EXCELLENCE Proposals for Secondary Reorganisation"; "Women in Society"; "Community Relations in the New North"; "ALCOHOLISM - a forgotten problem"; "Agriculture in Northern Ireland". (The Party's concern in this area will be further highlighted in the various papers and motions which will be debated at the forthcoming Annual Conference).

In practice the Party Leader, as our representative in Westminster, has consistently given his support to socially progressive legislation that has benefitted underprivileged people throughout Northern Ireland. He has fully supported the passage of the Fair Employment Act and our councillors throughout Northern Ireland have worked to have it put into practice at local level. The Party continues to strengthen its links on the European and international fronts with social democratic and labour parties through its membership of the Socialist International and the Confederation of the Socialist Parties of the European Community.

On the constitutional front, in spite of our efforts and our clear willingness to negotiate, there has been nothing but complete intransigence from the Loyalist bloc. Their behaviour in the new local Councils has confirmed that not only have the terrible events of the past eight years taught them nothing about the need for genuine reconciliation and justice in this community, but it would appear that they have actually gone backwards. In the light of this intransigence, which represents a clear rejection of policies, overwhelmingly passed by the British Parliament, we have addressed a series of questions to the British Government. These questions amounted to requests to the British Government to state whether they were willing or capable of implementing the democratic will of the British Parliament in relation to Northern Ireland and to consider the consequences of their failure to implement that will.

We have received no answers. Instead, we have the shameful reality of a British Labour Government entering into pacts and undertakings with Unionists at Westminster which amount to an abandonment of those policies and in which the future of the people of Northern Ireland is simply a bargaining counter to be used to keep the present Government in power.

In the light of these developments and of the current speculation about possible political developments, the SDLP have carried out a major review of the situation, recognising, as always the path of political negotiation as the only peaceful way forward and underlining, for the benefit of the British Government that willingness to negotiate does not mean a willingness to abandon basic principles. The SDLP have felt a need to restate its overall position, both in the short term and in the long term. In so doing we point to the remarkable fact that the only Party to the present crisis that has not stated its long term objectives or strategy is the British Government. Now is surely the time for us to ask where are we going?

There is a clear need for the British Government to spell out its longterm strategy for the future of Northern Ireland and for its relationship with the rest of Ireland. While it continues to refuse to do so, and while it leaves as its only basic longterm statement, its continually renewed Unionist pledge it will find no willingness among Unionists to budge one inch from their present intransigent stance. Why should they when they know that failure to achieve their first objective - a restored Stormont - simply leaves them with a highly acceptable - to them - alternative, closer integration with Britain,

The Irish problem--or should it now be more aptly named, the British problem--will continue to rear its ugly head and will continue to be paid for with the lives of soldiers, policemen and innocent civilians. It is clear for all to see that the fundamental basis of past British policy has been, to say the least of it, singularly unsuccessful. Attempts to solve the problem in a purely British context have failed and will continue to fail. Rather than encouraging Unionists to abandon their intransigence and intolerance, it has produced the opposite effect, leading in its turn to the inevitable and tragic round of violent action and reaction with which we have become all too familiar.

Reconciliation and an end to divisions between Irish people is clearly an objective that would command the respect and support of all right-thinking people. The British Government should state clearly and unequivocally its longterm intentions. While remaining in Northern Ireland it should promote reconciliation and an end to divisions between all Irish people, leading to the establishment of structures of Government which allow both traditions in Ireland to flourish freely and to live together in unity and agreement.

Furthermore, all the considerable resources at the command of the British Government should be consistently and continually used to promote that policy. The end result of such a policy, pursued rigorously and positively over the years would undoubtedly be an agreed Ireland; the essential unity of whose people would have evolved in agreement over the years; whose institutions of Government would reflect both its unity and diversity and whose people would live in a harmonious relationship with Britain.

Such should be the bi-partisan approach of the British Government and Parliament and all their actions should be clearly seen as fitting into that longterm strategy. Ad hoc Government is not only no longer enough, it is irresponsible.

In the immediate future and as part of that longterm strategy the British Government should, in conjunction with the Irish Government, initiate talks involving both Governments and the Northern Parties with a view to arriving at an agreed form of Government for the North, within the longterm strategy. At those talks the SDLP will seek a form of government that is fair to all sections of the community and that is based on the principle of partnership.

Irrespective of the outcome of such talks the British Government should enter into immediate discussion with the Irish Government in order to promote jointly matters of common concern to both parts of Ireland. If Governments can co-operate closely on security, there is no reason why they cannot do likewise on a whole range of socio-economic matters that are clearly to the benefit of both parts of Ireland. They should identify a series of such projects and appoint bodies, drawn from both parts of Ireland, to implement them. They should also develop jointly a programme for the harmonisation of the laws and services on both sides of the border. Such an approach would bring not only tangible socio-economic benefits, but would bring too, born of experience of working positively together, the long-term reconciliation between both parts of Ireland that is the ultimate objective. The reality of the Irish Dimension should be clearly visible.

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