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STRICT EMBARGO UNTIL 20.00

SPEECH BY SDLP DEPUTY LEADER SÉAMUS MALLON MP AT THE SDLP ANNUAL PARTY CONFERENCE, WELLINGTON PARK HOTEL, 5 NOVEMBER 1999

Fellow delegates.

It is a year since we last met in Newry.

It has been a hard year, a year of disappointment and frustration.

There have been hard lessons for some.

Those who oppose the Agreement have learned that they cannot sweep aside the will of the vast majority of the people of Ireland, North and South. We know how hard they tried. Some have used violence and threats. Others deceit, playing on people's fears.

And we know that they have failed. Despite all the setbacks, the will of the people has held firm. The people have delivered the same verdict again and again: in the referendums, elections and in opinion polls since. They support the Agreement. They want it to work. They command us to work it.

There have been hard lessons for some who support the Agreement too. They have learned that there can be no escape from its obligations. There must be an inclusive executive. There must be decommissioning.

Although these lessons have been learnt, an unwillingness to put them into practice endures. And so, up to now, we have had deadlock.

This impasse is not of the SDLP's making. For we hold no guns. We keep no bombs. We impose no preconditions. We exclude nobody. And we are fiercely proud of that.

Yet despite our frustration at the deadlock, we have upheld the integrity of the Agreement. Not once have we wavered in its defence. Not even when it meant forgoing office.

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The Mitchell Review

You will all be aware that the Mitchell Review has reached a critical juncture. Since September the Senator has been seeking to discharge the mandate given to him by the two Governments to find a way to implement the three principles endorsed by all the pro-Agreement parties on 25 June.

It has been a difficult nine weeks. A long nine weeks. A tortuous nine weeks. But painfully slow as the whole process has been, progress is being made. We have heard a lot of talk during these weeks about improved atmospherics and a better ambience. And make no mistake – these things are important.

It means that people can talk *to* each other rather than *at* each other. It means that people can listen to each other rather than to the sound of their own voices.

It means that at long last, a real engagement can take place on the core issues. People can get down to brass tacks.

George Mitchell reflected some of these positive developments in his statement on Tuesday. He said that on the basis of the intensive discussions he had held, he was convinced that the parties were sincere and acting in good faith in seeking the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. That they all wanted devolution and decommissioning. That his meetings were well advanced.

But it is clear that we are not fully there yet. Ambience, atmospherics, better mutual understandings are, as I said, important. But they are not enough in themselves.

Political agreement will ultimately only come through hard choices and hard decisions on the fundamental issues.

Could I at this point sound a note of caution about the four words which I believe have become the weasel words of the past year: "They need more time". Those words assume that "more time" means more flexibility, more effort, more chance of success. The experience of the past 18 months has been the opposite. "More time" has led to more indulgence, more self-indulgence and more scope to protract the arguments about decommissioning rather than implement the Agreement. "More time" should not be allowed to become a tactical expediency which could damage the process now and in the future as it has done in the past.

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In drawing matters to a close, George Mitchell has to consult with the Taoiseach, the British Prime Minister and with President Clinton. He has also sought the up-to-date assessment of General de Chastelain, given that his Commission will be the mechanism through which the difficult problem of decommissioning will be processed. That is the business that George Mitchell is about during these days. No one should ignore or under-estimate the significance of those consultations and the collective political weight of a Clinton-Ahern-Blair endorsement of the role of Senator Mitchell.

But when he comes back this weekend, the spotlight will be firmly on those who he has rightly said carry the ultimate responsibility for making this process work – the parties in the North of Ireland.

Of course, the fears of each party are sincerely held. But none of their arguments and none of their fears could ever justify not implementing the Agreement. In the words of George Mitchell: "History might have forgiven failure to reach an agreement, since no one thought it possible. But once the agreement was reached, history will never forgive the failure to carry it out".

Those of us in political leadership face an enormous challenge in these coming days. The SDLP, true to the principles which have guided us for 30 years, is ready for that challenge. It is our deepest hope that others will also be ready for the challenge that lies before us collectively.

The time will never be more right. The circumstances never better. The needs of the moment never more pressing.

For let us be clear. This must be done soon. The well of credibility in the political process is almost dry. Sooner rather than later, the agonising must end and the taking of hard decisions begin. That is what the people demand. The people who gave us our mandate on the 25th June last year. Even more profoundly, the people who voted in such overwhelming numbers for the Good Friday Agreement on the 22nd May last year. This is their Agreement and, as their will, we who serve them have no right to do any other but implement it.

But though we advocate agreement, though we facilitate dialogue and nurture trust, let no one mistake us. We are a party with our own principles; our own policies and our own proposals to solve the present impasse. Like Sunningdale, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Joint Declaration, and the Good Friday Agreement, you can be sure that when this is over you will find the SDLP proposals at the heart of the resolution of this impasse.

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SDLP's contribution

The SDLP has now been almost 30 years in democratic politics. We can be proud that the ideas and concepts developed by our party in that time have found their fullest reflection in the Good Friday Agreement.

- The right of the people of Ireland, North and South, to self-determination. It was the SDLP which initiated the proposal for referendums North and South to give expression to this right.

- The three strands of partnership in government, North-South institutions and East-West co-operation have long been a cornerstone of our policy.

- The need for reconciliation and the principle of consent.

- The commitment to democratic and non-violent means. We have lived by that commitment despite threat and intimidation. We know what it means. We know what we have endured for it.

- And the party which was born out of the Civil Rights movement has enshrined human rights in every aspect of the Agreement.

If others now subscribe to our beliefs, we can only consider ourselves flattered.

But our goals have never been limited to transforming the institutions of government. We have always gone further. As the party of social democracy, our agenda has been to transform society itself.

Transforming society

You will find much of that agenda reflected in the Agreement. It means equality for all. The SDLP wants a Northern Ireland where each child growing up not only has an equal chance of sharing in our wealth, but instinctively knows it. The SDLP wants a society where marginalisation and bigotry are simply no longer tolerated. The SDLP will not rest until that vision is made reality.

There is no doubt that we have a long way to go. But this year we made a start. Taking the Agreement as our basis, the SDLP insisted upon a new equality unit at the heart of government. Its task will be to make all departments pull together in the fight against deprivation and discrimination. To pioneer a new era in equality. And when the Programme of Government is negotiated the SDLP will put equality at its core.

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Transforming society also means the flowering of a new culture of human rights. The SDLP seeks a Northern Ireland with a representative judiciary and independence and accountability in prosecutions. Where the administration of justice is neither alien in its appearance nor in its operation. Where the abuses of the past are but a distant memory. This is what we are working for in the current Criminal Justice Review. We want to see it soon.

And, of course, transforming our society must mean transforming policing.

We are conscious of the sacrifices made by many policemen and women in the past. We are also determined to realise our long held vision of a police service upholding human rights. A police service with which all can identify. A police service with the consent of all the community.

That is why we insisted, when we negotiated the Agreement, on *"a new beginning in policing in Northern Ireland"*. That could only mean change. Real change. The parties to the Agreement knew that. So did the people of Northern Ireland. By voting so overwhelmingly for the Agreement, they not only endorsed this call for change – they demanded it.

Now with the Patten report, that change is brought closer than ever before. For sure, the report has its shortcomings. But if implemented in full, I believe that it will bring us the new policing service that Northern Ireland so desperately needs.

Next week, we will publish our response to Patten. It will be extensive and exhaustive. It will set out how each of the report's recommendations must be translated into reality. It lays the benchmarks against which we will judge the Government's efforts to bring about a new police service. And let nobody doubt our absolute determination to see the report implemented in its entirety. It is what the situation requires. It is what the Agreement anticipates. It is what the people mandated.

In line with long-established SDLP policy, the Agreement has provided for the development of co-operation and action on the island of Ireland. We had considerable success last year in negotiating the areas of North-South implementation and co-operation. But the huge potential of these arrangements is blocked by the impasse between Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionists. But even when agreement is reached, there will still be hard work to be done and significant decisions to be taken in both Belfast and Dublin.

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For example, investment is badly needed in all-Ireland infrastructure in roads, energy and e-commerce to name only the most obvious. The SDLP will not squander the opportunity for the North to link up with an economy forecast to grow by 5% annually over the next decade, a full employment, competitive economy which is attracting record levels of investment.

The SDLP has achieved much in this last year:

In the talks.

In preparing the North/South Ministerial Council.

In proposing a new police service.

In promoting the equality agenda.

In championing reform of criminal justice.

In policies, not slogans.

In the defence of the Good Friday Agreement.

In preparing for government. Ready, willing and able.

Unafraid of power. Unafraid of sharing power.

Wishing to establish true partnership. Yet aware of the real concerns and apprehensions of our partners.

Addressing our partners

And let me address our partners directly.

To Sinn Féin supporters, I ask you to have faith in the ability of us all together to deliver change through the new politics. The politics of equality. The politics of partnership on this island. The politics of inclusivity which the SDLP is determined to ensure. Never before have circumstances been so favourable. They may never be so favourable again. You know that the peace process depends on courage and creativity and not on the dead hand of dogma. I urge you to use courage and creativity and to seize the present chance of success for all the people of Ireland.

And let me also address Unionists. The Agreement embraces all of us, whatever our religion, whatever our politics. Recognise that it allows us to acknowledge each other's fears, to accept each other's rights.

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We know each other. Together we can deliver this. Together we can make it work. Together we can give the next generation, your children and mine, hope and real prospects.

We belong together. We sink or swim together. In the words of Hewitt;

"... We are changed ...
If not to kin, to co-inhabitants
As goat and ox may graze in the same field
And each gain something from proximity."

There are voices among you which are playing on your fears. Do not let your judgement be clouded by them. Think through what is in the best interests of your family, your community. Look beyond the stress and distress of immediate issues to your long-term future. Make sure that the Agreement is implemented in full.

We all have a duty of accountability, not just to ourselves, but to each other as nationalists and unionists. If we make this Agreement work, future generations will thank us that when it mattered, we stood together, as Unionist and Nationalist, neighbour alongside neighbour, and saw it through for the common good.

For eighteen months now prevarication has reigned as the process has sailed recklessly past deadline after deadline. But the time for decision must surely come soon. Time to redeem our reputation. Time to respect the will of the people, the will of the world, the will of history.

Let us not have to explain that the Agreement was jettisoned because two parties were bent on maintaining nothing but the integrity of their quarrel. Let us put an end to this miserable dispute.

Each generation has its own vision. Each generation has its own dreams. Precious few have the chance to realise those dreams.

But at last the full promise of the path of peace and partnership can come to reality.

At last we can set about the great journey of healing that is so desperately needed in our community.

I have said many times before that we as a society have been given a chance which rarely comes along – to write our own page of history. Let us ensure that we take it and take it soon.

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