

SINN FEIN/SDLP.

~~-LETTER OF REVIEW-~~

SF/SDLP/4/AUGUST 88.

51/53 Bothar na bhFal,
Belfast.

August 14, 1988.

John a chara,

In reviewing the dialogue between our two parties and the exchanges of documents I would like to state at the outset that while I am disappointed that we have not made more progress in the task set for us Sinn Féin feels that our discussions have been very worthwhile. At the very least they certainly helped to close a gap in dialogue between the two parties which together represent the majority of six-county nationalists. In that sense alone the talks have been good for the morale of the hard-pressed nationalist community which would clearly support joint action on their behalf on everyday social and economic issues even if the more ambitious goal - outlined in the letter of invitation issued to us by the third party - were to presently elude us.

The invitation to the talks called upon Sinn Féin and your party "to explore whether there could be agreement on an overall nationalist political strategy for justice and peace." As part of the review perhaps I should explain to you how Sinn Féin handled this matter. I brought this letter to the attention of our Ard Comhairle in Dublin which dealt extensively with it. The Ard Comhairle established a monitoring sub-committee which included Tom Hartley (General Secretary), Sean McManus (Party Chairperson), Danny Morrison (Director of Publicity), Martin McGuinness, Councillor Mitchel McLaughlin and myself. Later, after you and I held our first meeting in February, and you agreed to our proposal to include other party members in the talks, we drew our delegation from this monitoring committee.

On March 15 our document, 'Towards a Strategy for Peace', which contained our views on proposals for an overall political strategy to establish justice and peace in Ireland, was presented to you for consideration.

In summary, we stated that the only solution to the present political conflict in Ireland is the ending of partition, a British disengagement from Ireland and the restoration to the Irish people of their right to sovereignty, independence and national self-determination. We stated that an end to the unionist veto and a British declaration of a date for withdrawal was the only way of securing conditions for justice and peace. We also outlined how a firm, united and unambiguous stand from all nationalist parties around these demands would hasten peace. We asserted that those who presently constitute themselves as loyalists must be given, in common with all other Irish citizens, firm guarantees of their religious and civil liberties.

Our analysis included a serious criticism of your presentation of the Hillsborough Treaty. The Treaty is the linchpin of a British government strategy which is aimed at stabilising the six counties in its interests yet your party has attempted to engineer a public perception that the Treaty is the end of loyalist power and the loyalist veto and that the British government has become 'neutral'. We also believe that your analysis helps the British 'internalise' the conflict. In fact, you accept the Union with Britain.

However, to help develop the dialogue and mutual cooperation between the two parties and to advance the interests of nationalistsour first document contained seven proposals. One (no.5) called for us to agree that failure to rule out nationalist participation in a devolved or six-county arrangement actually encourages the British to pursue such politics and in reality would protract the conflict.

The document ended by proposing that Sinn Féin and the SDLP join forces to impress on the Dublin government the need for an international diplomatic offensive to secure national self-determination.

Besides these seven proposals we also called for our two parties in the interim to agree to a common platform of political activity which would safeguard and advance the interests of the nationalist community covering, amongst others, social and economic issues, discrimination in employment and the whole area of repressive laws.

Before the delegations met on March 23 we studied your letter to me of the week before outlining your position. Our sub-committee met twice to discuss it. We felt that it lacked real political depth and analysis, relying on emotional rhetoric but camouflaged in nationalistic language. You ignore the substantial and ongoing contribution which British domination has made in creating and sustaining our political crisis. Your concentration on the symptoms of the problem leads you to blame the attitudes held by nationalists and loyalists as its cause. Because of this the British, in the SDLP's view, suddenly become the victims of Irish political intransigence rather than the cause of the conflict. British state repression and economic deprivation is erroneously presented as a reaction to the IRA's armed struggle.

Your letter, John, did not refer to your party's position on devolution. Subsequently, and presumably as a result of our discussions, SDLP party spokespersons were to state that the SDLP had no 'ideological commitment to devolution'. We are still awaiting a response to what that means 'in practice'. Because you have hedged your answer and refuse to elaborate the British government detect, and intend building upon, your ambivalence on this crucial issue. Your letter ended by posing a number of questions on 'self-determination' and a possible conference organised by the Dublin government.

On March 23 both parties had a good, non-acrimonious meeting which ranged over the political objectives of both. Not surprisingly, we reached an impasse over the role and intentions of the British government which, flying in the face of all the facts, you incredulously pronounce has no self-interest in occupying Ireland. Following this our sub-committee met weekly to discuss this meeting and to draft answers to the questions asked of us. A considerable proportion of Ard Comhairle time was also taken up with the Sinn Féin/SDLP dialogue.

The delegations met again on May 19. We presented you with a detailed written response ('Sinn Féin on national self-determination') to the five questions you had posed to us in your letter. Furthermore, we included a proposal on joint action on fair employment which we regard as one of the most burning injustices suffered by the nationalist people. Our detailed answers on national self-determination were set in the context of international law and of the rights of all the people of Ireland, including the loyalists, their rights and how their consent should be sought and how they should be consulted on the steps necessary for Irish re-unification. We sought your support for a proposal that the London and Dublin governments be called upon to establish Irish re-unification as a policy objective. Lastly, with some reservations as to its value or effectiveness, we responded in a positive manner to your question on a conference to be convened by the Dublin government.

The method of your official response to our first document - into which we had put considerable time and effort - was, to say the least, disappointing. Sean Farren delivered a verbal reply lasting just over ten minutes which was completely negative and left little room for further discussion.

In order to ensure that the talks were not squandered we made a number of proposals. These were: (i) that one more meeting be held which would assess the need for future meetings; (ii) that you clarify in writing what you mean by 'unity by consent'; (iii) that we would look at the possibility of bringing back a proposal on the British role and a conference; and (iv) that you would clarify in writing questions 4 and 5 put to you in 'Towards a Strategy for Peace' on your attitude to the British role and on devolution.

On June 13 the delegations met for the third time. As promised we delivered a document, 'Persuading the British - a joint call.' This document contained a proposal for getting the British to adopt a strategy for ending the union in the context of Irish national independence.

I quote: "As a step towards such a strategy - which is the stated aim of our discussions - and as an exploration of the SDLP's assertion regarding the current British position, we propose that Sinn Féin and the SDLP jointly issue a call to the Dublin and London governments for them to consult together to seek agreement on the policy objective of Irish re-unification. Having agreed this both Governments would issue a public statement outlining the steps they intend taking to bring about a peaceful and orderly British political and military withdrawal from Ireland within a specified period."

We also received two SDLP documents (1) 'SDLP/Sinn Féin 13 June 1988' and (2) 'SDLP comments on Sinn Féin "proposals"'.

At this juncture I had to point out to you that these two documents were not the two you had promised us which were to have been; your political definition of 'unity by consent' and a response to our questions 4 and 5. I also pointed out that the contents of the document 'SDLP comments...' had a number of political changes - in the form of words used - which had not been used by you in the previous meeting, as if you had more an eye to future publication.

We were most disturbed by the SDLP pronouncement in the document 'SDLP/Sinn Féin 13th June' that the unionists have 'a natural veto.' We would ask you to retract that statement as it seriously undermines nationalist presentation and perception of the six-county state as 'artificial'. It does a disservice to those who have struggled for justice and Irish independence over the past 67 years against the gerrymander which is partition.

On July 11 we received another SDLP paper which ignored our written response on the conference proposal mooted earlier. Resting almost exclusively on the Hillsborough Treaty as an expression of British 'neutrality' the document then attempted to shift the responsibility for the continued intransigence of the loyalists onto the shoulders of the republicans (the logic of which could eventually lead the SDLP into 'understanding' or even supporting the suppressing of the IRA and the repressing of Sinn Féin).

In reviewing the dialogue which has taken place I must state that we felt at times that the talks were not being taken seriously since our analysis was dismissed lightly and verbally and only subsequently elicited a written response.

Without prevarication we answered all questions that were put to us and did everything that was asked of us yet we found the SDLP often evasive.

We made reasonable requests but were faced with negative responses.

The SDLP refusal to join with Sinn Féin on social and economic issues means that nationalists' interests suffer. You refused to work with us on fair employment or to join with us in calling upon the London and Dublin governments to adopt a policy of Irish reunification. Conditions, which are not applied to other parties' participation in a conference, are being imposed on Sinn Féin whose mandate is qualitatively as equal as any other party.

Finally, some serious breaches of confidentiality - particularly those which mischievously suggested major differences of opinion in the Sinn Féin delegation - which appeared in the press could only have come from your delegation. These made our task more difficult.

Despite all the foregoing Sinn Féin still believes that the dialogue is worthwhile. The talks were useful and helped each side understand more clearly the views held by the other. They also raised the morale of the nationalist community which, clearly, would like to see more agreement and cooperation.

From our review it is obvious that the SDLP remains to be persuaded that it is the British occupation which is the central problem and the first hurdle to be overcome. The passage of time and British repressive practice will clearly expose the intentions of the Westminster government as anything but 'neutral'.

In conclusion I restate the issues which need to be focussed upon if we are to find agreement. These are:-

1. The role of the British government.
2. The Unionist veto.
3. Improvements in conditions for nationalists in the six counties.

You have our position on all these issues. I invite your party to reconsider your rejection of them. Agreement by our parties, particularly on the proposal contained in 'Persuading the British' would have a major effect upon London and Dublin. In this way, coupled with our other proposals for mobilising international opinion and opinion in Britain itself in support of Irish national self-determination, the whole situation could be moved on and conditions for justice and peace established.

We remain committed to the search for peace in Ireland and we do not consider our dialogue as being concluded. We should remain in regular contact. Given past opposition to face to face talks, the laying aside of that prejudice, I am sure you will agree, was a breakthrough in itself.

Is mise

Gerry Adams M.P.
President Sinn Féin