

**SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY**

***ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES***

**Submission to the Liaison Sub-Committee on Confidence Building**

**15 December 1997**



## INTRODUCTION

1. The SDLP is firmly committed to the principles of equality, social inclusion, partnership and respect for cultural diversity. We are a social democratic party pledged to build a new North within an Agreed Ireland through dialogue, on a basis of consent and agreement. The Party has a vision of a society firmly based on individual freedom and collective concern.

2. The citizen must enjoy social, economic, cultural and political rights set within the context of a strong framework of social responsibility. Our concept of citizenship is therefore broad and embracing. It is based on a mutually re-enforcing partnership between the individual and society, designed to build social solidarity and ensure that the interests of the weakest and poorest are catered for in policy and social provision.

3. In this submission to the *Liaison Sub-Committee on Confidence Building Measures* while we recognise that some issues are more directly relevant to conflict and division in Northern Ireland, our approach is a comprehensive one. Injustice and inequities in whatever sphere, wherever and whomsoever they affect have the potential to produce disharmony, a sense of grievance and, therefore, directly or indirectly add to division in our society. We cannot be selective and so a commitment to address all injustice and all inequity is required if confidence is to be built in the political process. Such a commitment must, necessarily, carry over beyond reaching an agreement into a programme of action to be adopted within whatever new arrangements are to be established.

## Social and Economic Development

4. The economic and social costs of the violence and instability of the past three decades have been enormous. Over three thousand have been killed, more than thirty thousand injured and property destroyed on a large scale. No one can calculate the cost of the human misery inflicted on the victims of violence and their families. No less victims are those in both communities who have been caught up in all forms of violence, their lives and the lives of their families blighted by imprisonment and injustice. The monetary cost of the violence has been enormous and economic development seriously inhibited.

5. One of the tragic legacies of a system of government which, for over 50 years, effectively denied one community an equality of social and economic opportunity has been the creation of severely marginalised and disadvantaged areas within the nationalist community. The



deprivation is, however, not confined to the nationalist community alone; as a result of the contraction of Northern Ireland's traditional industrial base a generation from the unionist community has been reduced to a similar status of socio-economic marginalisation. Details of the location and concentrations of unemployment in Belfast and Derry are included in Appendix 1 to illustrate the scale of this problem in our two major urban areas. Appendix 2 provides unemployment data on a cross-community basis.

**6. A settlement which does not lay the basis for eliminating the inequities and injustice of a society of 'haves' and 'haves nots' would not be a desirable outcome.**

7. While it cannot be hoped that economic growth and prosperity on this island would alone succeed in breaking down the barriers of mistrust that exist, it would be a grave mistake to accept that a renewal of economic growth and greater socio-economic equity has no role in bringing the conflict to an enduring peaceful conclusion. Where opportunity for social and economic advance is believed to be restricted, people become suspicious and unwilling to co-operate.

8. The SDLP has continually urged that it be a declared objective of all parties to encourage and facilitate as much progress as possible towards greater equity and prosperity, initially using the available tools and instruments of local economic governance in a dynamic and creative way while a permanent settlement to the conflict is sought by political means. Within the context of the current negotiations it is imperative that the basis for a concerted attack on deprivation and social injustice be laid.

9. Despite the gains of recent years, serious structural weaknesses persist within the North's economy and these must be urgently addressed if our economy is to develop its full potential and guarantee a meaningful future to all. These weaknesses include serious imbalances in the workforce as well as sectoral deficiencies with respect to the location and type of industrial development currently taking place. Among the weaknesses are:

- a workforce characterised by under-employment as well as unemployment, with high levels of long-term unemployment, and community imbalances;
- a workforce characterised by under-achievement caused by among other factors our highly selective educational system;
- an economy characterised by a conservative and under-developed private sector;
- an economy under-represented in major growth sectors such as software, bio-engineering and medical instrumentation;



- an economy characterised by a weak marketing sector;
- an economy characterised by an under-developed research & development sector;
- an economy characterised by lower levels of productivity than many of our competitors;
- an economy where current job creation is mainly in part-time, lower paid employment than in full-time and higher paid sectors;
- an economy with weak all-island links and an absence of policy co-ordination.

10. Policy making urgently needs to be refocused, re-energised and redirected to address these weaknesses if sustainable long-term growth is to be achieved. Among key focal points for policy making are:

- **a focus on high technology to provide employment to the highly skilled and better qualified;**
- **a focus on strengthening existing cluster development and creating new clusters around innovative technology;**
- **a focus on innovation through the development of strong Research & Development units within industry and between industry and our research institutes.**

11. While clichéd, the need to focus on new technology remains a requirement on which we still have a great deal of action to take. The regular closure of mass production textile units painfully points to a future elsewhere, most particularly in the development and application of advanced technologies. Software, bio-engineering, medical instrumentation together with existing strengths in avionics, food processing and tourism are among the main areas for future development. To serve such development educational and training policies must be recast so as to provide a workforce equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge base. Unless we do so growth will only continue to be registered more in part-time, lower paid employment than in full-time and higher paid sectors;

## **Education and Training**

12. To date we have been failing to fully exploit the potential that exists among our young people and our existing workforce. That failure is pointedly highlighted by the astounding success registered in the Republic over the past two decades. There, high-tech industries, many with significant research and development units, now dominate inward investment and employ a highly skilled workforce. This would not have been



possible merely by offering generous support grants or even low levels of corporation tax. A well educated, flexible workforce has been essential. Despite much lower levels of per capita expenditure than here in the North this is what has been achieved, first through a broad-based school curriculum and second by strengthening post-school education and training in those areas essential to industrial development needs.

13. There is absolutely no reason why that example should not be followed in the North and followed with clear objectives and appropriate levels of funding. Getting rid of the negative and wasteful effects of the selective educational system should be one of these objectives. Another must be investing in stronger research and development units within our universities and in industry itself. The following summarises key emphasises for policy development in these regards:

- **replacing the elitist emphasis of our highly selective educational system with a comprehensive and inclusive system ;**
- **strengthening vocational education at school and further education levels with particular emphasis on new technologies;**
- **increasing university provision in advanced technology education and strengthening industry related research and development ;**
- **extending high quality training to update workforce skill on an on-going basis.**

## **Productivity**

14. Strengthening the broad human infrastructure must be accompanied by policies which ensure and support competitiveness, higher productivity and effective marketing. Despite a strong industrial tradition, productivity in many enterprises lags far below that of key competitors and has been falling: 10% since 1991 vis-à-vis Scotland, for example, a major competitor for inward investment.

15. This is not primarily a shop floor problem but one for leadership at management level. Where such leadership cannot be guaranteed it is questionable whether any form of financial support should be provided. Too often support has gone to enterprises with good, viable products but, which lacking effective management, have not delivered. There is a need, therefore, to provide more to support enterprises which will give more in terms of employment and overall added-value.



## **Marketing**

16. Far too few enterprises are engaged in export marketing on a significant scale and traditional markets still dominate. A level of comfort with modest levels of achievement, notable in many small firms, is widespread where a spirit of enterprise in developing exports would realise considerable benefits in employment expansion as well as profits. A more dynamic export culture linked to IDB & LEDU support packages needs to be cultivated if this goal is to be achieved.

## **North-South Economic Development**

17. The framework for economic development must also take due cognisance of the opportunities and prospects which exist throughout the whole island. As the New Ireland Forum's report on the economic consequences of partition clearly pointed out, many sectors of the island's economy, as well as many areas, especially those along both sides of the border, were seriously inhibited in their development. Also, notwithstanding a strong industrial base in heavy industry, Northern Ireland as whole came to depend to a very high degree on Westminster subventions to maintain its standard of living, while for several decades after 1921 economic development in the South was weak.

18. In the more favourable economic climate which has been emerging in recent years and from which both parts of the island are benefitting, the need to develop a coherent and co-ordinated all-island approach to economic development is becoming more and more apparent. It is the SDLP's view that this approach should 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. So, planning the approach must take account of this wider context and be undertaken in conjunction with its appropriate agencies.

19. In the course of the negotiations the SDLP will be urging, therefore, that the necessary conditions and circumstances which will produce dynamic and successful economic growth throughout the whole of Ireland be identified and the means whereby those conditions and circumstances can be sustained agreed. To realise the full potential for economic development of our island, economic policy making must acquire a *co-ordinated* all-island dimension. To date much North-South co-operation has been



essentially voluntary and ad hoc. It lacks overall co-ordination and has not been addressed on a strategic, medium to long-term basis. If allowed to continue in this manner significant gaps will remain and maximum advantage will not be taken of the opportunities that exist in both parts of the country.

20. The need to move from co-operation to co-ordination has been increasingly recognised by representative groups from many sectors of the economy, North and South. In submissions to the *Forum for Peace and Reconciliation*, such groups have argued that economic and social planning in both parts of the island must no longer proceed on a 'back-to-back' basis. In other words, the authorities and their officials, North and South, need to *co-ordinate* planning from the outset and no longer wait until separate plans have been drawn up to ask whether opportunities might exist for cross-border co-operation.

21. Strategic co-ordinated planning can only be addressed by political intervention since it is at the political level that strategic planning takes place. As the authors of the *The Social and Economic Consequence of Peace and Economic Reconstruction*, (Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Consultancy Studies No. 1), put it " 'North-proofing' and 'South-proofing', to ensure that policies do not inadvertently limit or overlook opportunities for contact and joint working, should be part of policy formulation." Such an approach requires close North-South contact and would be best undertaken in a North-South body with appropriate wider consultation with Belfast, Dublin, London and Brussels.

## **Equality and Equity**

22. The failure to create a social order based on principles of justice and equity has been central to the conflict in Northern Ireland. The SDLP as a party founded out of the maelstrom of the nineteen sixties civil rights campaign is determined that such principles should provide a bedrock for the settlement which negotiations are aimed at achieving. By these principles of equality and equity the SDLP means equality of opportunity, civil liberties and social justice for all.

23. By equality of opportunity we mean the right to a good education, to have a fair opportunity of a job and a reasonable standard of living. While progress has been made in addressing some of the injustices and inequities of the past much remains to be achieved. In education disparities continue to exist in the level of funding and support available to different schools. These must be tackled if all our young people are to be provided with just



an fair opportunities to develop all of their talents. In employment, notwithstanding the work of the Fair Employment Commission, disparities between our communities persist to the point where the likelihood of a Catholic male being unemployed remains more than twice that for a Protestant male while amongst the employed Catholics remain considerably over-represented amongst the lower paid. Such disparities fuel resentment and suspicion. Means for their elimination must receive a high priority within our negotiations.

24. By respect for civil liberties we mean the right of all, no matter what their views, to full participation, subject only to the rule of law, in promoting and developing civic society. There must be no second class citizens, no sense that anyone, or any section of society is excluded from such participation because of one's identity, or the identity, aspirations and traditions of one's community.

25. By social justice we mean the right to a decent standard of living, to protection in employment and to adequate health-care. In this respect the SDLP will be urging that the principles in the Social Chapter of the European Union be endorsed within the context of a settlement.

## **STRATEGY FOR EQUALITY AND PARTNERSHIP**

26. It is the SDLP view that an effective strategy will be multi - dimensional, involving structural elements, legislation, changes in process, target-setting, monitoring, public education programmes and new tolerant attitudes:

**\* At the level of policy the strategy will be based on ensuring access to services based on need, access to jobs based on merit established through an open recruitment procedure and objective assessment at an interview, and access to public space based on a right of mobility for the disabled. At the same time policy will seek to encourage sharing and partnerships across the communities.**

**\* At the legislative level it will require ensuring effective legislation to outlaw discrimination against vulnerable groups and ensure equal treatment.**

**\* At the level of process it will require radical changes in how policies are developed and implemented and will involve mainstreaming to achieve the objectives identified.**



**\* Within the above context an effective strategy will include target - setting and monitoring to ensure that the agreed objectives are met.**

27. The SDLP supports a **Bill of Rights** as being essential to provide an overarching legal framework on which to guarantee the objectives and strategies we have set out.

## **Fair Employment**

28. Since its formation the SDLP has highlighted the critical issue of employment discrimination and other inequities in the workplace as a fundamental cause of social and community division in the North. Despite progress in recent years towards ensuring justice and equality of opportunity in the workplace, much still needs to be done. The Fair Employment Commission continues to provide evidence that Catholics remain significantly over-represented amongst the lowest paid, the unemployed, and particularly the long-term unemployed.

29. The Employment Equality Review, co-ordinated by the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights, highlighted the growing consensus around the need for attention to be now focused on equality-related measures.

30. The SDLP believes the whole process of policy development and implementation needs to be radically altered by the effective use of mainstreaming techniques to ensure that policy options are fully appraised with regard to their impact on different groups and on the poor. In this context the SDLP supports Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (PAFT) and Targeting Social Need (TSN) and is of the view that both should be given statutory backing and proper institutional expression.

31. The SDLP recommends:

**\* Legal aid for applicants making challenges under Fair Employment legislation and targets for redressing inequalities in the job-market.**

**\* The implementation of the recommendations of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights review "Employment Equality: Building for the Future"**



## Gender

32. The SDLP is deeply concerned by the fact that after twenty years of sex discrimination and equal pay legislation there is still a need for a strong lobby on women's issues. Legislation alone is not enough, affirmative action is required to allow women equality of opportunity in the job-market. Given that women are over-represented amongst part-time and low-paid workers, we are particularly committed to arguing for the implementation of a minimum wage and better childcare facilities to facilitate women wishing to train or work.

33. In this area the SDLP believes that action is required along the following lines:

- \* A major overhaul of the law on sex discrimination and equal pay, to produce a single comprehensive piece of legislation, with simplified provisions on procedures, and reform to allow case law to act to its full capacity in establishing policy on particular types of cases;**
- \* Clearly established rights and conditions for all parents in the workforce including universally available childcare;**
- \* Increased confidence-building and training opportunities to be directed at women wishing to enter or re-enter the job-market;**
- \* New Sex Offences legislation.**

## People with Disabilities

34. The SDLP is committed to campaigning for recognition of the needs of disabled people as rights. We believe people with disabilities are entitled to education, work and a chance to live independently. Society should provide the necessary training, facilities and transport to ensure that there is genuine equality of opportunity for people with disabilities.

35. The Party notes the recently enacted Disability Discrimination Act. If this is to be effective it needs a properly resourced and empowered commission along the lines of the Commission on Racial Equality. The SDLP will continue to campaign for legal aid to be made available to claimants.



36. The SDLP believes that action is required along the following lines:

- \* **A single, comprehensive and simplified benefits scheme and a guaranteed reasonable standard of living for all those either partly or totally prevented from working with as much independence as possible.**

- \* **A Commission on Disabilities with the power to take individual cases, and legal aid for claimants.**

- \* **Improved access for children with disabilities in schools, to ensure that they are given the education they deserve to enable them to fulfil their potential.**

## **Children and Young People**

37. The SDLP does not accept that there can be any compromise or two-tier system where the rights of children and young people are concerned. The SDLP is committed to the principle that, regardless of the wealth of the family, all children must be guaranteed a good minimum standard of living, and given the best possible education, health-care and opportunities to develop their potential. We must invest in them and work to build the kind of future they deserve. The Party believes that children also have the right to recognition for what they are now, as individuals with rights, views and preferences. We endorse the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and we support the appointment of a Minister for Children and Young People.

38. The SDLP recommends:

- \* **A commitment on the part of the government to tackle child poverty and disadvantage as a key priority;**

- \* **Funding to ensure the effective implementation of the new Children's Order;**

- \* **The DHSS and DENI to co-ordinate efforts in relation to youth needs including a strategy on lone-parents, benefit levels, benefit to work transition, and training and employment;**

- \* **Urgent action to deal with the dramatic inequalities in child health in Northern Ireland.**

- \* **Support for victims of child abuse who come forward after the three year deadline from their 18th birthday.**



## **Race Relations**

39. The SDLP is committed to the creation of a pluralist society which respects and cherishes all cultures. We believe the ethnic minorities in our society are entitled to protection from discrimination and measures to guarantee equality of opportunity in terms of jobs, accommodation, education and health-care in line with international obligations.

40. The Party welcomes the new Race Relations legislation, and in particular the fact that it specifically protects Travellers.

41. The SDLP recommends:

- \* Proper funding to ensure the effective implementation of the new Race Relations legislation;**
- \* A radical re-think on site-provision for Travellers to ensure that all families have the their right to basic amenities guaranteed;**
- \* A government commitment to adding an ethnic grouping question to the next census form for the North in order to make an accurate assessment of the needs of the various minority ethnic communities;**
- \* The introduction into Northern Irish law of the offences dealing with racial violence and harassment contained in the British version of the Criminal Justice and Public Order legislation;**
- \* The provision of adequate resources to meet the needs of the minority ethnic communities, particularly in the fields of health, education and social service;**
- \* The lifting of the government's veto on the establishment of a European Union Centre to monitor racism.**



## Cultural Rights

42. The failure to ensure parity of esteem between our cultural traditions has been one of the most significant contributing factors to the conflict. Over the fifty years 1922-1972, unionist traditions alone received public acknowledgement, esteem and support with the result that the cultural traditions, customs and language of the nationalist community were virtually non-existent in any official and public sense.

43. With regard to the Irish language in particular, not only was official recognition and support absent but, in addition, official hostility attempted to inhibit and constrain the use and development of the language. In the past twenty years some progress towards addressing this failure has been achieved, but only in response to sustained campaigning by committed language activists and their organisations. None the less, a considerable amount remains to be done before meaningful esteem can be said to exist in the realm of cultural rights.

44. Both governments have stressed that '...any new political arrangements must be based on full respect for, and protection and expression of, the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland and even-handedly afford both communities in Northern Ireland parity of esteem and treatment...' Given that the Irish language and culture is an essential element in the sense of identity of people from the nationalist tradition this statement must receive practical expression in any settlement. Parity of linguistic and cultural esteem is a basic civil right which should be safeguarded. Indeed, 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.

45. The respect and esteem for the Irish language and culture sought by the SDLP should not be seen as a threat to any individual or to the values and traditions of any community. On the contrary, esteem and respect for the language and culture of one community should be seen as adding to the cultural diversity and richness of all.

46. Parity of esteem for all cultural traditions must be the goal and every effort necessary must be made to promote an understanding and appreciation of the rich cultural heritage to which we are heirs as a result of the diverse background which informs and continues to



shape our traditions. This heritage reaches out beyond the shores of our island, to Britain, to Europe and to wherever our people have migrated. A cultural policy which recognises and celebrates such diversity will be an important contribution to building confidence, trust and understanding between our divided communities.

43. The SDLP recommends:

- the enactment of legislation to give Irish legal status in conformity with the provision of the European Convention on the Rights of Minority Languages;
- the immediate review of financial support for Irish medium education to ensure parity of treatment for all children within the education system;
- public recognition and protection for the use and display of the Irish language and other facets of Gaelic culture;
- the adoption of a cultural development policy which will include support for the Irish language, Gaelic culture within a context which has as its central aim the celebration of the cultural diversity of all traditions.