

Txt 42

SDLP SUBMISSION

POLITICAL TALKS

STRAND 2: AGENDA ITEM 6

28 AUGUST 1992

1 This submission addresses issues identified in Item 6 of the agreed Agenda for Strand 2 of the current political talks. Item 6 includes under 'Fundamental aspects of the problem' the following specific issues: underlying realities; identity; allegiance; constitutional.

Underlying Realities, Identity and Allegiance

2 In the SDLP's basic document (1) submitted at the opening of Strand 1 the underlying realities as understood by the Party were carefully outlined. They have not changed and are as pertinent to the issues being addressed in Strand 2 as they are to those in Strand 1.

3 The SDLP believes that the political problems which are being addressed in the present Talks are, in essence, the product of a conflict of two identities, Irish nationalist and Irish unionist, - or more precisely, the failure to devise political structures which accommodate the

differences between, and allow full and mutual expression to those two identities. This has been the abiding reality since the issues were first addressed in the last century. All that has been said in the course of the present Talks has reinforced this fundamental reality.

4 The Nationalist identity defines itself as essentially Irish. Its vision and aspiration are the creation of a new and tolerant society that unites and accommodates all traditions in a new Ireland, where Nationalists and Unionists can co-exist in harmony and mutual respect. The Report of the New Ireland Forum stated that "The new Ireland must be a society within which, subject only to public order, all cultural, political and religious belief can be freely expressed and practiced. Fundamental to such a society are freedom of conscience, social and communal harmony, reconciliation and the cherishing of the diversity of all traditions". The implementation of these principles calls for deepening and broadening of the sense of Irish identity.

5 The Unionist community, on the other hand, perceives itself as British as well as Irish. Unionists regard the Nationalist aspiration to a united Ireland as representing a fundamental threat to their sense of identity; furthermore, they see the Nationalist ethos as pervasively Catholic and incapable of tolerance and respect for the Unionist heritage, tradition, rights and civil liberties.

6 The exclusivity of each tradition in terms of its definition of itself and in terms of its development created the circumstances and conditions in which the country's political partition could be imposed. Once effected partition merely served to reinforce this exclusivity while at the same time creating a new minority of the Nationalist community living in Northern Ireland.

7 While Unionists retained clear expressions for their Britishness through Northern Ireland's continued association with the UK, Nationalists found themselves not only alienated from Northern Ireland's new political structures, but, in addition, they no longer enjoyed any political links with the wider Nationalist community in Ireland as a whole.

8 As the two communities in Northern Ireland increasingly grew apart after 1921, so also did the two parts of Ireland. The effects of this latter division were to become evident in damaging effects on the country's infrastructure, on communications, as well as on the general economic, social and cultural life in both parts of Ireland. These effects were especially evident in border regions whose development was severely arrested for many decades following partition. Details of these effects are contained in several reports specially commissioned by the New Ireland Forum (2,3).

9 Above all, the effect of division between our two main political traditions in Ireland has been a human cost, in the lives of those lost and those injured in civil strife, but also in the bitterness, suspicion and misunderstanding that has been evident between people of these traditions (4).

10 In recent years the situation has begun to change for the better as the effects of division have been addressed by individuals, voluntary groups and public authorities in both parts of the island. Politically, the Anglo-Irish Agreement has effected the most significant change because of its formal acknowledgment by the British Government of the legitimacy of the Irish identity of Northern Nationalists and an acceptance that any way forward has to incorporate a formal "Irish dimension". That Agreement is a formal acknowledgment and

acceptance of the twin identities and allegiances of the people of Northern Ireland as fundamental political realities. As such, these identities and allegiances must form the basis for any new political arrangements.

11 Also, as a result of that Agreement, new forms of co-operation between both parts of Ireland have been made possible, several of which are directly addressing the legacy of partition, both locally in border areas and more widely on an all-Ireland basis. In many respects these forms of co-operation are building upon the prospects identified in a further series of reports commissioned by the New Ireland Forum. These reports investigated the potential benefits which would be gained for the people of Ireland, North and South, from integrated policies in such sectors as transport, energy, agriculture and general economic planning (3, 5, 6, 7). More recently, leading Northern economist, Dr George Quigley, has argued that a significant job-creation potential lies in the development of an integrated Irish economy. (8).

12 Significantly, a key role in fostering this co-operation is being played by the European Community which is supporting a wide range of projects aimed at benefiting communities in both parts of the country. Indeed, the experience of European Community membership is reinforcing the commonality of interests in general economic, social and infrastructural planning between both parts of Ireland and the essential need to build upon these common interest to ensure maximum benefit for the people of the whole island. A recent series of studies published by the Irish government and containing the views of independent experts emphasise the same need (9).

13 While a start has been made to addressing the negative legacy of the past 70 years, a new political framework and new political structures are essential if the necessary planning and co-ordination to underpin co-operation and integration are to be achieved as well as a new climate of mutual respect and tolerance for our different traditions. It is the SDLP's conviction that such structures should have:

- a capacity to represent both the nationalist and unionist identities in a manner which would attract the support of people in both parts of Ireland;
- a capacity to address all matters of mutual concern and interest to the people of the whole island;
- a capacity to promote and achieve harmonious action between institutions and agencies in both parts of Ireland;
- a capacity to promote co-operation and uniformity in relation to matters affecting the whole of Ireland;
- a capacity to provide for the administration of services on a mutually agreed basis;
- a capacity to represent common Irish interests to the European Community and to other international organisations and agencies as appropriate;
- a capacity to break down barriers of distrust which led to past divisions and to lead to a unity, based on agreement, of the people who inhabit the island of Ireland, accepting both diversity within Ireland and the unique relationships between the peoples of Ireland and Britain.

Constitutional Aspects

14 The above analysis and the kinds of political arrangements which are to be proposed are likely to contain constitutional implications. The SDLP notes that discussion within the Talks to date have indicated a willingness to address these implications openly and honestly. The implications are, however, not particular merely to one or other participant to the talks, but to all.

References

- 1 The SDLP Analysis of the Nature of the Problem, May 1991.
- 2 Economic Consequences of the Division of Ireland since 1920. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1984.
- 3 An Analysis of Agriculture Development in the North and South of Ireland and of the effects of Integrated Policy and Planning. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1984.
- 4 Violence - The Cost of Violence Arising from the Northern Ireland Crisis since 1969. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1984.
- 5 The Macroeconomics Consequences of Integrated Economic Policy, Planning and Co-ordination in Ireland. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1984.
- 6 Opportunities for North-South Co-operation and Integration in Energy. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1984.
- 7 Integrated Policy and Planning for Transport in a New Ireland. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1984.
- 8 Paper to the Annual Conference of the Irish Management Institute. Killarney, 1992.
- 9 Ireland in Europe - A Shared Challenge: Economic Co-operation on the Island in an Integrated Europe. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1992.