

SDLP RESPONSE 24 July 1992

This Strand is about relations "among the people on the island of Ireland". In the course of our contributions so far we have been making it clear that addressing those relationships involves matters more fundamental and far-reaching than formalising relations between two supposedly distinct entities or governments on the island.

Both here, and as far back as the New Ireland Forum, and indeed before we have explained that we recognise that there are two traditions on this island - each legitimate and each deserving administrative, symbolic and political expression of its identity. Our challenge is to devise arrangements which can provide these to both identities and accommodate them.

Dr Paisley has told us that "the 1920 Government of Ireland Act partitioned Ireland between the Unionist and Nationalist indigenous populations". Without dwelling on that interpretation's apparent disregard for Northern Nationalists, we would ask has "partition between the indigenous populations" accommodated both traditions with any degree of stability, security or conciliation.

Some people here have set great store by legal and constitutional acts as the source and guarantor of legitimacy. But we are dealing with relations among people. Surely mutual respect and accommodation is the optimum expression of legitimacy. We have made it clear both here and in talks with others that we believe the Unionist tradition has legitimacy in its own right in Ireland, not by virtue of any Act at Westminster. The Forum Report similarly affirmed that recognition of the legitimacy and rights of the Unionist identity on behalf of the nationalist tradition with whom they share the island.

It would not be appropriate at this stage to get bogged down in details or potential details about the Irish Constitution or any other legal instrument. However, we note with interest that a Unionist Party (UDUP) has declared that the Irish Constitution "must ... formalise the Irish Republic's acknowledgment of the two traditions on the Island". Our view is that we must all make such an acknowledgment and that must be a basic feature of any new agreement which might emerge from this process.

Any agreement must then address the realities and requirements which derive from such an acknowledgment. That includes recognising that there are two traditions in Northern Ireland and previous arrangements have not properly accommodated them, either within Northern Ireland or on the island. In support of that we note that the Ulster Unionist Party have said "A lack of understanding and empathy is apparent, not only on an Ireland-wide basis, but more particularly within the Province of Ulster itself".

The logic of all this is that we cannot confuse the legitimacy of the two traditions with the supposed legitimacy of "two distinct entities". It is welcome that, in its demands for changes in the Irish Constitution, the UDUP appear to make a distinction between "acknowledging two traditions on the island" and recognising what they call the "people of Northern Ireland" and what they call "Northern Ireland's right to self determination". That distinction accepts that the two traditions are not coterminous with two jurisdictions or their respective institutions. That being so our task of addressing and accommodating the relationships between the two traditions cannot be pursued simply by reference to relations between two assumed entities or jurisdictions or formal contacts between their respective institutions.

Others here know the importance which we have attached to this Strand within the Talks. We clearly believe that this Strand is crucial to making progress in those matters which are covered by Strand 1. We are encouraged that the British Government recognises this too. The Secretary of State's opening statement said "some of the issues which arise" in this Strand include "how far new relationships within the island of Ireland might help to resolve political tensions and difficulties within the Northern Ireland community" and "how Strand 2 might contribute towards an overall outcome from the Talks which gave expression to the identities of both main parts of the Northern Ireland community and would attract the widest possible degree of allegiance and support".

The SDLP believes that these important considerations and realisations that we have identified in other opening statements can guide us well in our work in this Strand and others.