

SDLP OPENING STATEMENT

Sir Ninian

May I take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to yourself and your staff not only for agreeing to take on this important and arduous task but also for the enormous patience that you have shown to date in waiting for these talks to commence, a patience which I think from experience that you may have to rely heavily upon until such times as we reach agreement, which I naturally hope that we do.

I will be brief in this initial statement since our approach to the talks in general and to this section of them in particular has already been set out in considerable detail particularly in our published analysis of the nature of the problem that faces us.

We have made clear that a lasting solution to our problem must involve the accommodation of both identities, not victories or defeats for one over the other, and that the aspirations and loyalties which go to the heart of those identities transcend the confines of Northern Ireland. There is a widespread acceptance as evidenced by the acceptance of all parties of the original statement that forms the basis of these talks, that the conflict which we are attempting to resolve can only be resolved in the totality of Anglo Irish relations at the heart of which are the three central relationships which are the subject of these talks.

The keys to resolution therefore, as we have said often, are accommodation of difference and agreement. Government which does not accommodate fundamental differences of aspiration among a divided people will not have the consent of those excluded and is ultimately bad government. Whatever comes out of this talks process must therefore enjoy consent across all three relationships. That is the way in which the old fears and mistrust that go to the heart of our problem can be laid to rest and my hope is that the reassurance that consent and agreement lies at the heart of the settlement of all the relationships will ensure that all the parties here today can lay aside any distrusts deep and otherwise which they have and approach these discussions on what we have described as the central relationship, in the fullest confidence that any settlement requires their agreement. Let us finally lay to rest our old fears and mistrusts.

It is clear from what I am saying, Mr Chairman, and what we in the SDLP have repeated often that the relationship that we are discussing under your chairmanship goes most centrally to the heart of the overall problem and our discussions beginning today are therefore the most important of all the discussions that are taking place in these talks. To underline the importance of what I am saying let me quote from the SDLP analysis of the nature of our problem:

"In the discussions the SDLP held with Sinn Fein in 1988 we stated: "It seems to us to reveal a deep misunderstanding of the Ulster Protestant tradition to suggest that it is largely the British influence and not their own reasons that make (the unionist tradition) wish to live apart from the rest of the people of Ireland." We also stated: "the harsh reality is that whether or not (Unionists) have the academic right to a veto on Irish unity, they have it as a matter of fact based on numbers, geography and history and they have it in the exact same way as Greek or Turkish Cypriots have a factual veto on the exercise of self determinations on the island of Cyprus."

We stand behind this analysis. It must be clear to everyone that the arrangements to date for sharing the island among the two traditions have manifestly failed to bring peace and stability.

A major factor in this failure has been Unionist distrust of the rest of the people of the island. This was the reason why they rejected Home Rule with all the consequences of that rejection. This was why they excluded the Nationalist population from any say whatsoever at any level under Stormont. That exclusion, in the end, brought Stormont down and was the beginning of the present phase of the crisis. That was why they opposed power-sharing and the Sunningdale Agreement and that is why they are opposed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

It therefore seems logical to us that until that relationship is settled, to Unionist satisfaction as well as to everyone else's there can be no progress towards a satisfactory resolution of the conflict.

The lesson to be drawn is a clear and simple one - we need to reach a new level of political consensus which allows the positive interaction of the Unionist and Nationalist viewpoints in a new, enriching and sustaining arrangement."

It goes without saying that such political consensus should allow us to develop major economic consensus as well as the serious social and economic problems that face both sections of the people of Ireland as reflected in our heavy emigration and in the highest unemployment in the EC. It goes without saying that our lack of political consensus has been a major factor in these serious economic problems since the energies of political leaders have been devoted more to the matters of distrust and division than to matters that should be at the heart of all political activity - economics and the consistent improvement of the way of life of all our people and hope to our young. All of this is underlined by the fact that independent consultants have estimated that the present troubles have cost the Irish economy North and South at least £1 billion per year.

It goes without saying and as we have made clear in our submission to Strand One that any new relationships agreed should have institutional expression so that our working together in our common interest can continue the process of breaking down distrust. It follows that any such North/South institutions should contain certain essential characteristics - as our proposal will make clear - such as the following:-

- 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 cooperation 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 allow the breaking down of the barriers of distrust that have led to the divisions of the past and lead to a unity of the people who inhabit the island of Ireland based on agreement, on the acceptance of diversity and on the unique relationships that exist between the peoples of both islands.

In order to underline our commitment to the principles that any new arrangement should be subject to agreement the SDLP have made clear that we believe that any such agreement which would be a historic one should be submitted in a referendum to the people North and South requiring a yes from each. Should that happen we would have no doubt that we would have created lasting peace in Ireland, not only because it is the first time that the people of Ireland North and South have spoken or been asked to speak on how they are governed not only because it would remove any basis of any description for paramilitary activity but it would produce an enthusiasm and an energy among all our people to work together to build an island North and South and by spilling our sweat together and not our blood to break down the destructive barriers of distrust.

To achieve such an objective as we all know, will not be easy but we should approach the task with a confidence born of the fact that today's world is very different from the world of 1920. It is a smaller world. People are closer and are interdependent. In today's world because of its technological advances and smallness we cannot live apart. We should draw confidence too from this fact that the deeply divided people of Western Europe, whose distrust and divisions ran far deeper than ours is reflected in the slaughter of centuries have now found the means not only of ending their conflict but of working together, of building their substantial common ground, of breaking down the barrier of distrust while at the same time preserving and accommodating their differences.

We are also, both parts of Ireland, together part of that evolutionary European process. That too should help and encourage us. After all both parts of Ireland voted to pool sovereignty with Greeks, Italians, French, Germans, Spanish etc on working our substantial common ground, peoples whose differences are far greater with us than we have with one another. Is it not long past time when we sat down to make a similar agreement with one another. We are now sitting down, let us hope that the outcome is agreement. Our quarrel began in 1690s. Let us at least end it in the 1990s.