

STRAND II

SUBMISSION BY THE SDLP

September 1992

INTRODUCTION

1 The issues to be discussed in Strand 2, involving as they do representatives of Ireland's two major political traditions and concentrating on relationships between their respective communities, are at the heart of the conflict which we are endeavouring to resolve. Only in so far as these relationships and the problems inherent in them are openly and honestly addressed, and agreed proposals developed, will we be able to provide new structures to achieve this goal. We begin this submission with a brief summary of the nature of that conflict and of the problems to which we are now seeking a solution.

2 The origins of the problem lie directly in the wider historical relationships between the two islands of Ireland and Britain. For centuries these were characterised by conflict and instability.

3 These relationships, embracing the peoples of Northern Ireland, of the whole island of Ireland and of Britain, are inter-locking and inter-dependent. No single relationship can be addressed in isolation from the others. This interaction and inter-dependency must be reflected in any new institutions which may be devised to give expression to those relationships. While all these relationships are crucial to the overall totality, it is, in the view of the SDLP, the set of relationships within the island of Ireland which goes most centrally to the heart of the problem.

4 Specifically, the conflict at the heart of these relationships is a conflict which derives from the existence of two identities held by different sections of the Irish people - one which can be described as nationalist, the second as unionist.

5 As stated in the Report of the New Ireland Forum (4.6) "For nationalists, a central aim has been the survival and development of an Irish identity, an objective that continues in Northern Ireland today as nationalists seek effective full recognition of their Irish identity and pursue their rights and aspirations through political means. For historical reasons, Irish nationalism may have tended to define itself in terms of separation from Britain and opposition to British domination of Ireland. The positive vision of Irish nationalism, however, has been to create a society that transcends religious differences and that can accommodate all traditions in a sovereign independent Ireland united by agreement. The aim of nationalists, therefore, in seeking Irish unity is to develop and promote an Irishness that demonstrates convincingly to unionists that the concerns of the unionist and Protestant heritage can be accommodated in a credible way and that institutions can be created which would protect such concerns and provide fully for their legitimate self-expression".

6 The context in which the aim for Irish unity is now expressed is in many respects radically different to what it was seventy years ago. Today, both parts of Ireland share membership of the European Community which is uniting people in an unprecedented experiment in continental democracy. To achieve its aims the European Community is overcoming barriers of history, geography, language, nationality and religion. The people of Ireland, North and South, are making a significant contribution to this process in ways which cannot fail to impact positively on relationships within the island itself. The SDLP believes, therefore, that as we plan new structures for future relationships between the people of Ireland, we should be conscious of the principles and experiences of the European Community.

7 At the heart of the principles upon which the European Community has developed has been a respect for difference. So, in common with the other parties to the New Ireland Forum the SDLP believes that the structures of the new Ireland which we are now planning must accommodate together to sets of legitimate rights: - the right of nationalists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity; and - the right of unionists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life." (NIF Report, 4.15).

8 For as long, therefore, as people in Ireland define themselves in terms of these identities, and irrespective of the constitutional context, the right to express themselves accordingly must be regarded as inalienable and must therefore be upheld. This is why the SDLP's proposals tabled at Strand contain some provision for the accommodation of the nationalist identity as well as a strong provision for the unionist identity. These proposals, of course, remain on the table.

9 The New Ireland Forum Report highlighted the negative effects of division in Ireland saying that "it gave rise to the unconscious development in both parts of Ireland of partitionist attitudes on many political, economic, cultural and social questions of importance, diminishing significantly the development of a prosperous democratic society on the whole of the island". It must be one of our aims to replace such attitudes, and the negative effects which have flowed from them, with a more positive and cooperative approach. There is, therefore, an urgent need to make sustained efforts, and take practical steps in all spheres of public life to, as the Forum Report also stated, "transform the present nationalist/unionist relationship and to promote and secure consensus" (NIF Report 4.7) Essential Characteristics of new North-South Structure.

10 To achieve the aims indicated above, new North-South structures must contain certain characteristics, among which the SDLP would regard the following to be essential: - 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 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 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 people of Ireland and Britain.

Proposals

11 New structures will only have such characteristics if they are truly representative of the people of both parts of Ireland and are provided with effective means of operation. In the SDLP's document 'Agreeing New Political Structures', the Party indicated an overall set of proposals for new structures, including proposals for North-South structures which it believes would meet the aims and objectives as set out above. This section of the Party's present submission is essentially an elaboration upon the Strand 2 proposals contained in that original document.

12 Given the SDLP's proposals already made for the Heads of Departments/Ministers of State to take day to day responsibility for the running of Northern Ireland Departments of Government, and in keeping with the European model the SDLP proposes the establishment of a North-South Council/Council of Ministers as an expression of relationships between the people of the whole island.

13 Such a Council would have responsibility for the overall development of relationships between both parts of the island. As indicated in the SDLP's earlier submission the major functional areas which we would envisage coming under the remit of such a Council would be:

- economic development, including industrial investment,
- agriculture and rural development,
- tourism and transport,
- security and legal affairs, including matters relating to human, civil and communal rights,
- environment,
- health and social welfare,
- cultural and educational matters.

A special function which the SDLP would envisage becoming a responsibility of the Council would be with respect to European Community issues with implications for the whole island. The SDLP will be submitting detailed discussion papers as to how the proposed Council would deal with the above areas and functions as strand 2 develops.

14 The membership of such a Council would consist of the relevant Head of Department from Northern Ireland and his/her Ministerial counterpart from the South, depending on the issues under discussion. It would be necessary to make provision for Council meetings involving more than one Minister from each part of the island, as well as meetings of all Ministers with relevant responsibilities to review overall policy and to ensure harmonious action between institutions North and South.

15 By virtue of the scope of its responsibilities and the nature of its operation and to ensure the efficient discharge thereof the SDLP envisage that it would require the support and services of an established secretariat.

16 The SDLP would envisage an appropriate parliamentary dimension to be associated with the Council, detailed proposals for which will be submitted at a later stage in the Strand 2 discussions.