

IRISH TIMES
19/9/1988

Campaign 'in conflict with Tone's vision

THE FOLLOWING is the full text of the SDLP response to questions raised in discussion and in previous Sinn Féin papers.

In its response to our questions in our document of 17 March Sinn Féin lists a number of academic questions on the question of self-determination but appears to avoid the reality that when all such questions are boiled down to their essentials it is *people* who have rights not *pieces* of territory, and it is the *Irish people* who have the right to self-determination. Unfortunately the Irish people are divided as to how that right should be exercised. We are accepting the Sinn Féin statement that it is the Irish people as a whole who have the right and the Irish people should be defined as those people committed on the island of Ireland.

It is clear that there has been a profound disagreement between different sections of the Irish people, a disagreement that has been strengthened and made more difficult to resolve by the geographical concentration of the substantial minority who disagree in one corner of our island. We can have as many academic discussions or statements as we wish but the hard realities and the hard facts of the situation are that the Irish people are divided as to the exercise of the right to self-determination and it is to be hoped that they will come together. The other hard fact is that if that disagreement is to be eradicated it must mean agreement between both the 'majority' and the 'minority' on the island of Ireland.

It is purely academic to argue that the Unionist people have no right to a veto on Irish unity or to exercise self-determination. That British policy confers such a right on them. The hard reality is that, whether or not that is the academic right to veto on Irish unity, they have it as a matter of fact based on numbers, geography and history and they have it in the fact that any direct or indirect veto on the exercise of self-determination on the island of Ireland is against the background of that reality.

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Mr John Hume

ment reached at it. This declaration would mean in practice that the British Government were accepting the right of the Irish people as a whole to exercise self-determination. They have already made clear that if such agreement took the form of Irish unity that they would endorse it. It is surely logical that if the spirit of the declaration is to be followed, the form of something less than Irish unity that they would also endorse it.

Would not such a declaration relating to such a conference by a British Government remove the stated justification of the IRA for their campaign, such as that the British are preventing the exercise of the right to self-determination by the Irish people and are in Ireland defending Britain's own interests by force?

Hence our serious preoccupation with such a conference. For the IRA would have ceased its campaign. What possible use would an IRA campaign have in persuading fellow-Irishmen?

In the event of representatives of the Unionist people uniting, refusing to participate in such a conference we asked whether Sinn Féin would join with an Irish Government and other parties in negotiating a peaceful and comprehensive approach to achieving self-determination in Ireland. The same two 'preconditions' obviously apply here because the only obstacle in the way of achieving the exercise of self-determination would be the attitude of people who, as Sinn Féin's own definition are fellow Irish people. That is an obstacle that cannot be removed by force. It can only be strengthened.

In addition it seems to us to be a deep misunderstanding of the Ulster Protestant position to suggest that it is barely the British influence that is an

Chronology of talks

- January 11th: Adams and Hume meet at the instigation of a "third party interested in creating political dialogue".
- March 3rd: Brief meeting of the party leaders to agree on agenda followed by exchange of position papers some days later.
- March 24th: First meeting of party delegations. Adams stresses talks aim "to find out and seek agreement on conditions in which peace and justice can be established". Main point of disagreement role of Britain (SDLP argues Britain is "neutral").
- May 19th: Delegations meet. Sinn Féin presents papers: "Sunlight on Self-determination: Scenario for Peace" and "A Proposal on Joint Action on Irish Employment". No SDLP paper.
- June 13th: Another delegates' meeting. Exchange of papers. From Sinn Féin: "Retaining the British" and "Joint Call". SDLP: "Comments on Sinn Féin Document, SDLP Comments on Sinn Féin Proposals". There's disagreement on Unionist right to veto.
- July 11th: Party leaders only. Papers from SDLP: "SDLP Response to Questions Raised in Discussions and in Previous Sinn Féin Papers".
- August 10th: Sinn Féin sends letter of review of the talks from Gerry Adams to John Hume.
- September 5th: Simultaneous release of party statements closing this round of talks.
- Only the Sinn Féin letter of August 14th remains to be published.



Mr Gerry Adams

own choice and their own reasons that make them wish to live apart from the rest of the people of Ireland. Do we not accept, whether we like it or not, that they have deep seated and deeply felt reasons of their own based on many historical factors for their differences, differences which go back beyond reasoning beyond even the Plantation, differences which were visible as far back as the 6th Century?

To underestimate the role of really economic interests and the role of the Irish people is to really intensify our central problem and to continue to push difference to the point of division.

The SDLP accept that the British Government could play an influential role in assisting us to persuade the Ulster Protestant Unionist that their best interests lie in coming together with us to build a new Ireland and to accommodate our diversity in the way that other nations have done and would be willing to join with others in persuading them. Hence our deep concern that the proposal contained in question 5, in our response to you (pp 2-3) on 13 June.

We believe that agreement to such a proposal would be overwhelmingly received by the Irish people and would release enormous constructive energies within Ireland as well as massive international goodwill and support. We also believe that it would have a powerful response within Britain itself and within considerable sections of the Unionist people. We do not underestimate the difficulties in achieving our objectives but believe that for the first time we would be concentrating all our energies on the real Irish problem and would make consistent and steady progress.

From our study of your document together with reflection on our discussions we believe that there are two basic differences between us that prevent us reaching agreement on a peaceful and political way forward, both of which are interlinked. The first difference is as to whether the Unionists have a right to a veto on Irish self-determination. The second relates to our stated belief that Britain has no interest of her own in remaining in Ireland, that she has no strategic, military or economic interests and that if Irish people reached agreement among themselves on, for example, Irish unity that Britain would facilitate it, legislate for it and leave the Irish to govern themselves.

The SDLP welcome the willingness of Sinn Féin, as expressed in their paper of 13 June, to "explore" our stated belief as to British interests. In the SDLP view, this belief is given expression in Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In this article the British Government formally state for the first time in an international agreement that, given the existence of the required consent to change, they would be prepared to facilitate and support legislation in principle "to the establishment of a united Ireland". It is axiomatic therefore that it is exclusively a matter for the Irish people of the two traditions, without interference from Britain, and without British interest standing in the way, to agree on the terms on which they can mutually share this island.

concentrate on the task of achieving agreement among the Irish people. The question is if our belief is correct, do Sinn Féin accept that the consequences for the IRA campaign are as we state and would they ask the IRA to create its campaign. If so, then it would be our responsibility in the campaign to demonstrate to Sinn Féin that our belief was correct and we would believe that this should be a major topic of discussion between us as to how we could best do so.

The other and interlinked issue of disagreement between us is whether or not the Unionists have a right to a veto on Irish unity, a subject that has already been dealt with above. The SDLP can fully understand why Sinn Féin say that "the Unionists have no right to maintain partition and the Union in opposition to a national majority".

As we have already said however the argument as to whether or not they have a right is purely academic and we are a party of realistic politicians, not a team of theologians. We must deal with factual reality. The art of politics must be to respond to, and try to reach beyond, the many complex relationships which history has bequeathed us and which are a part of the political reality of this island.

Whether or not the Unionists have a right to a veto on Irish unity, they in reality possess such a veto and have done so for a very long time. Solutions to the problem of division in Ireland have been postponed by nationalist-republican concentration on the language of ideological rectitude rather than trying to face the political reality. The challenge is to change this reality by political

dialogue and not to estrange further by the continued bitter, unproductive use of force against fellow Irish people.

The SDLP welcome the acceptance by Sinn Féin in previous papers that the search for agreement as to the future shape of Ireland must of course involve Northern Protestants and that every effort must be made to get their agreement and involvement in the process. We also welcome the sensitivity expressed towards "the least able, the civil and religious liberties held by Northern Protestants" and about the need for those liberties to be "guaranteed and protected" in your paper of 13 June. It is, however, an unfortunate reality that the Unionist people believe that their most fundamental liberty — the right to life — has been for some considerable time under severe threat. That such should be the case is surely repugnant to republicanism with its vision of an Ireland embracing all Irish men and women irrespective of their history, traditions and beliefs.

The SDLP sincerely ask Sinn Féin to consider whether the achievement of this republican vision is being advanced and whether the tone of "to abolish the memory of past divisions" is being furthered in any way by the IRA campaign, which is directed largely against indigenous people seen by the Protestant people as the defenders and protectors of their heritage? This campaign is in our view, and we agree with the logic, thrust and in many cases, the classic republican vision and generosity of the language of the Sinn Féin paper.

The SDLP believe that politically the positions of Sinn Féin and ourselves are not unduly removed from one another and are bridgeable. In particular, each of us have stated our commitment to protecting and preserving the ethos of Ireland's two great traditions. Our most significant difference, as stated above, and as reflected in our central arguments, is the degree to which we believe that British policy towards Ireland is now neutral and assertive. The SDLP believe and assert that this is not the case. We further assert that this removes all justification for the IRA campaign if placed against their own reasons for justification.

We accept that to date Sinn Féin remain unconvinced of our belief but ask them if our belief is correct that they agree that the IRA campaign should cease and will they formally ask the IRA to end their campaign and use their considerable influence to persuade them to do so. If so it is for the SDLP to convince Sinn Féin that our belief and assertion are correct and let us discuss how best we can do so. This issue is the crucial and central test of our joint willingness to present a clear political alternative in what has been a "armed struggle" in order to achieve peace and justice in Ireland.