

**OPENING STATEMENT BY JOHN HUME MP, MEP, LEADER OF THE SDLP AT THE  
LAUNCH OF STRAND ONE  
7-10-97**

These talks are about agreement; agreement between all of us around this table and agreement between those we represent. Our objective therefore should be the creation of a new agreed Ireland, which respects the rights, cultures and aspirations of our communities.

The origins of the Northern Ireland problem lie directly in the wider historical relationships between the two islands of Ireland and Britain. For centuries this was a relationship characterised by conflict and instability centering on the question whether and to what extent Ireland should enjoy self-determination, vis-a-vis Great Britain. At the heart of the problem is a conflict between two distinct identities, identities which still involve the conflicting allegiances that have always divided Unionists from Nationalists and which, inherently, transcend the confines of Northern Ireland.

However deep the divide between the people of Northern Ireland, healing that division can only be achieved through an exclusively peaceful political process in which the parties and the people involved are fully committed to upholding democratic principles and internationally accepted principles of human and civil rights. Violence has made no contribution to healing this division. Recourse to it has been devoid of any democratic mandate as well being totally counter-productive and futile in terms of achieving the stated goals of its proponents.

As a result of the ceasefires we are now enjoying freedom from persistent violence. Nonetheless, the effects of the violence of the past three decades remain and are evident in many ways. Most tragically these effects are evident in thousand of lives and relationships blighted by the tragedies of these years. These tragedies and their wounds must never be forgotten or ignored as we chart the healing process of which the present negotiations will, hopefully, mark a new beginning

The effects are also evident in other ways, notably by increased levels of sectarianism in both communities. Sectarianism is evident in the attacks on congregations and churches of all denominations, in the attacks on community property such as schools, halls and community centres, as well as in the controversies surrounding parades.

In our negotiations we must determine to eliminate the conditions and the attitudes contributing to such sectarianism, to such inter-communal strife and, above all, to the use of violence for political ends. In doing so, we will have to abandon our historic mind-sets and replace them with a new openness towards each other if our efforts to create an agreed accommodation are to be successful.

The Northern Ireland problem has had the most profound implications for the whole issue of human rights, particularly in the legal, security and policing areas. As the



New Ireland Forum stated: "Law and order in democratic societies depend on a basic consensus about society itself and its institutions. Present security policy has arisen from an absence of political consensus". The failure to create a social order based on principles of justice, equity and parity of esteem, has also been central to the conflict. The SDLP as a party founded out of the maelstrom of the nineteen sixties civil rights campaign is determined that such principles should provide a bedrock for the settlement which these negotiations are aimed at achieving.

That agreed accommodation will only be achieved if we are willing to take full account of the identities and aspirations of all sections of the people we represent.

The SDLP and the nationalist community shares a sense of Irishness with the wider nationalist community throughout the island. Its ultimate vision and aspiration are the creation of a new and tolerant society that unites and accommodates all traditions in an agreed Ireland where Nationalists and Unionists can co-exist in harmony and mutual respect. This aspiration has withstood political separation since 1921.

The new agreed Ireland to which Nationalists aspire has been described as "a society within which... all cultural, political and religious belief can be freely expressed and practised. Fundamental to such a society are freedom of conscience, social and communal harmony, reconciliation and the cherishing of the diversity of all traditions..." (*New Ireland Forum Report*)

This aspiration is based on the conviction that the people of Ireland, North and South, despite their very significant differences, share a great deal in common and have the capacity to combine their talents to the mutual benefit of all through agreed political institutions. Religious, economic and political differences which long pre-dated partition but which were exploited to the point of division, prevented the creation of an independent united Ireland.

The approach to an agreed and united Ireland, acquired its most profound expression in the *New Ireland Forum* in 1983-84, which aimed to consult "on the manner in which lasting peace and stability could be achieved in a new Ireland through the democratic process".

In its report, the Forum parties recognised that unity "would require a general and explicit acknowledgement of a broader and more comprehensive Irish identity (than that of nationalists alone). Such unity would...be different from the existing Irish State and the existing arrangements in Northern Ireland because it would necessarily accommodate all the fundamental elements in both traditions."

As the Forum parties emphasised and as the SDLP has stressed since its very inception, unity can only be achieved by agreement and consent, embracing both parts of Ireland and providing entrenched guarantees for the protection of both the unionist and nationalist identities.



The Forum report emphasises that any agreement must accommodate two sets of legitimate rights (par.4.15):

- the right of the 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.

These two principles are key to the success of the negotiations upon which we are now embarking.

It follows from the above that an agreed settlement must be one that earns the support and allegiance of both communities because it satisfactorily takes account of both unionist and nationalist identities and aspirations together with a commitment to upholding fundamental human and civil rights. Furthermore, because such a settlement will need to be endorsed North and South, that endorsement will amount to a popular expression of the right to self-determination on behalf of the people of Ireland. A settlement agreed to and arrived at on this basis will, by definition, entail the consent of both communities and, in doing so, will not repeat the failure of the 1920-21 arrangements.

To achieve such a settlement structures must be agreed within a framework which acknowledges and expresses the nationalist sense of identity alongside that of the unionist community. Neither identity can be expressed in any settlement to the exclusion of the other. Therefore, the Irish-British context, being the framework of the conflict, must necessarily also be the framework of a solution.

Reflecting as they do the realities of life in North and South in Ireland today, these are practical not abstract principles. In effect, these principles mean that negotiations will be focused within the framework which embraces and addresses the key political, social, economic and cultural *relationships* between the communities within the North, between communities North and South and, thirdly, on relationships between Ireland and Britain.

It is only within this framework that the totality of relationships affected by the present conflict can be fully addressed and resolved. Each set of relationships is part of the whole complex of relationships that must be satisfactorily accommodated and none can be dealt with to the exclusion of the others. Indeed, the very structure within which the current negotiations are taking place is a direct expression of these realities.

Strand one of these talks, dealing with relationships within the North, touch on the most immediate realities of the people affected by the conflict. Addressing these relationships is essential in order to agree workable political structures which will attract the support and allegiance of both communities and help provide means whereby reconciliation and co-operation to the mutual benefit of all can be effectively promoted.

Addressing relationships within the island of Ireland, Strand Two, is essential in order that effective political structures can be agreed which will also attract the support and allegiance of both communities and will promote reconciliation, co-operation and co-



ordination with respect to the political, social and economic needs of all of the people of Ireland.

Some progress has already been achieved with respect to Irish-British relationships, Strand Three, over recent years, notably since the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed in 1985. Consultative mechanisms are now in place to address issues of concern to either side. Nonetheless, the need to strengthen co-operation and understanding on a wide range of political, social and economic issues between the people of our two islands, is an on-going process and one which will demand detailed attention in the course of the present negotiations.

In addressing all of these relationships, the SDLP will require that all existing constitutional and political structures affecting these relationships be thoroughly reviewed with the objective of agreeing new constitutional and structural arrangements to express those relationships in a manner acceptable to all sides.