

## Strand One

### Opening Address Tuesday October 7

Labour welcomes the opening of Strand One and hopes that all Parties will participate in a spirit of understanding of the views of all other participants.

While Labour holds no strong views on the traditional constitutional issues it will endeavour to ensure that discussions and agreements reflect the desires and concerns of all traditions. Questions of identity must be addressed openly and honestly and our objective must be to establish a society where cultural pluralism is the norm and is cherished by all. Such pluralism should not threaten any but bind all in recognition of our different but interwoven history.

The central principle of all discussions must be directed towards creating a genuine integrated society at peace with itself and to this end agreement must include removing the barriers to integration. Fundamentally and crucially we must aim to create not two communities treated equally but one community where everyone is treated equally.

Such integration of our people must be addressed in an innovative way where old paradigms are discarded and we ask the simple question. What arrangements and governance best meet the socio economic needs of our people going into the next century. Just because our ancestors, in these islands, found simple majoritarian government the most efficient method does not mean we inherit it as a tablet of stone. Equally, it is not credible to pretend that N. Ireland has not existed for nearly eighty years and is a mere aberration that will be consigned to history. Northern Ireland is here so let's stop pretending that it will either go away or that it can return to the old ways. Neither view is credible and we do our people a disservice to pretend otherwise.

We must search for schemes and systems that best meet our needs going forward not going backward. This means being open and honest not only with each other in this building but with the people outside who, in many respects, have already grasped these truths.

The absence of acceptable government structures has, through force of necessity, created systems that leave our people totally alienated from decision making. In agreeing to new local structures we must search for innovation and not merely ask how



the 'Westminster Model' can be applied to our situation. It has been attempted here and patently failed.

Simply to agree a legislature to 'run' Northern Ireland may not be the answer in itself. We should examine how people can actively participate in all facets of government so that power is diffuse and as near to the people and their aspirations as possible. Local government, Boards and all other such structures should form part of these discussions.

Labour supports the introduction of a comprehensive Bill of Rights and looks forward to discussing this and the mechanisms for ensuring that collective and individual rights are protected. We also look forward to discussions on current legislation and its effectiveness.

Every society requires a police service and in envisaging our police of the future we cannot proceed simply from the position of retaining or disbanding the RUC. No, we must ask what kind of society will we have and what kind of policing will best service that community. Widespread community support, and we mean widespread, and an efficient police service must be the only benchmark in our deliberations.

Finally, all of these matters and, no doubt others, lead to the background by which it will all be judged; the social and economic well being of all our people. We all know that Northern Ireland has held together, socially and economically, despite itself but this is a situation that will not go on forever. The notion that we can play at politics and never suffer the consequences will change as the world grows tired of our irresponsibility. Our communities will then inherit the consequences. Are we simply prepared to let that happen. It's an old saying, but a true one, and probably increasingly relevant in the future, you and your children cannot eat flags or be sustained on slogans.

What is being presented to us here is the opportunity to not only reach agreed political arrangements but to unleash the real potential of the people. To create a dynamic region that is a place where people vote with their feet to come to, rather than driving its brightest and best away.



That unleashing of our dynamism will allow us to address the real areas of concern in education, health, elderly, poverty and numerous other 'bread and butter' issues. As of now we are impotent to deliver as we merely lobby in hope of benefit. Lets us grasp this opportunity to settle old fashion disagreements and really change the lives of our people for the better and forever.