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## SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood's Conference Speech | 2018 | News

19-24 minutes

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SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood MLA's Annual Conference Speech from Conference on Saturday 7th April 2018 in Titanic Belfast.

“Conference, we gather tonight at a moment of immense challenge and change.

Fond memories of commemoration and achievement find themselves clashing uncomfortably with the rawness of our current political failure.

20 years after the Good Friday Agreement, our politics finds itself in a very bad way.

Even though this party did not collude in the failure of the last year - we are all paying the price.

There's no point in dressing it up. Any attempt to do so would be fundamentally dishonest.

Having been left without a government, left without power, left without a voice on Brexit - the very least people deserve is the truth.

It would be easy for me to rehearse and repeat tonight how that failure has come to pass....

..... to add more layers and language to the blame game – a blame game that relentlessly soaks up our communal political energy.

.....it would probably begin with wood pellet boilers, with references to crocodiles, yoghurts, loaves of bread and even bolt-cutters.

.... it would glide along a bizarre timeline of moving deadlines and meaningless milestones.

.... It would probably mention red lines that once shone bright only to fade away in the private rooms of negotiation.

....and it would end with a deal that crossed the finish line, only to be walked back again in the presence of two governments.

Conference, though it might be tempting to give that speech, the truth is that it won't get us anywhere.

Northern Ireland doesn't need another speech that sets off another war of words.

I don't think you want to hear it either – you've been hearing it for well over a year.

Since the collapse of our institutions, plenty of water has passed under the broken bridge of our politics.

But whether it was last year or right now - the divisive and destructive tone on our radios and on our TV screens remains the very same.

So tonight, I'm deliberately going to do something very different.

I'm not going to follow the usual party conference routine of kicking lumps out of our political opponents.

By this stage, we should all be humble enough to accept that party politics comes a very distant second given the scale of the political challenge we all now face – or at least it should.

Born out of the Civil Rights Movement 50 years ago, the SDLP has always known the difference between the primacy of the party and the primary purpose of politics.

The SDLP knows that the interests of the country are the immovable purpose of the party – Ireland's interests come first.

That's what marks out our MLAs, our councillors and all of you – our members and supporters.

In these challenging times for our island, that remains a quality to be cherished – and let no-one tell you any different.

There has been plenty of talk in the last few days, so let me say this.

The Ireland that Hume imagined has come to pass - an Ireland at peace with itself and free to decide its own destiny.

The next phase of politics will be centred on the Ireland we now choose to build having been gifted that powerful inheritance.

It will be driven by the understanding that a fractured Ireland will always be an Ireland in waiting.

In terms of re-alignment, the future this party collectively decides will be driven by that primary purpose.

I have been clear, we are up for those challenging conversations and we are up for the challenge of changing.

In the time ahead, we will be true to ourselves and true to each other.

But let me also be clear, those values, that politics and that movement for reconciliation will always, always endure.

None of those values are leaving any stage.

## **Solution**

In that same SDLP spirit conference, tonight I'm not going to speak about what has gone before - I'm only going to speak about what should come next.

Our only focus should be breaking the cycle of failure.

Our only focus should be getting back to the Good Friday Agreement.

Conference, I can genuinely only see one solution that has any hope of ending the current impasse.

Too often the mistake is made of believing that our political process is only internal to Northern Ireland.

In fact, its real underpinning, its real foundation, has always rested on the relationships and agreements between the peoples of Ireland and Britain.

The guarantors of these agreements are the Irish and British Governments.

Together, they represent our ultimate insurance policy.

The role of guarantor means different things at different times.

There is a time for a watching brief and there is a time for facilitation.

Conference - now is a time for the guarantors to intervene actively and positively.

If the parties here wouldn't bring the deal over the line – then the two governments should do it for them.

Since the collapse of the talks I have been calling on the Irish and British Governments, as part of the Intergovernmental Conference, to agree a package of legislation.

I believe that package should include much of February's draft accommodation.

There would be legislation for Acht na Gaeilge and an Ulster Scots Act.

Once and for all, it is time to de-politicise the richness of our languages – languages which belong to us all.

There should also be legislation at Westminster and in the Dáil to establish and resource legacy bodies and to release inquest monies.

20 years ago, in the process of leaving violence behind, victims were left behind too.

It is now time to end that injustice.

I have also proposed that this solution must include the reform of the Petition of Concern.

This unlocks the potential for a new assembly to deliver marriage equality, if Armagh's Conor McGinn hasn't already delivered it through Westminster.

Love is equal whether that love is expressed in Dublin, London or here in Belfast.

Whichever method it takes - let's finally get it done.

Reform of the petition of concern will also help resolve future

difficulties, particularly in the context of Brexit.

It was never intended to be a dead-end veto - so let's reset it and get it back working as originally intended.

Conference, the solution I'm suggesting doesn't need to take long.

With the roadblocks cleared, the Assembly could be up and running the very next day.

So, here is the challenge to the two governments - clear the decks of disagreement and then challenge us to get back to work.

Over recent weeks, I have been genuinely pleased that some other political parties have, more or less, come to adopt these same proposals - and have even presented them as their own.

Some things never change.

This party has always been happy to say it first and to get there first

– but we'll be even happier if our solutions end up being implemented.

Ultimately, that's all that matters.

### **Northern Ireland cannot be left to wait**

We all know that reaching this solution and bringing back our institutions will require an overdue investment of political courage.

The reluctance of the British Government to constructively engage is often explained by the precarious arithmetic it faces in Westminster.

That may very well be true but there is another hesitance which needs to be highlighted and confronted.

The strong suspicion exists that both Governments are reluctant to engage too heavily in the smaller skirmishes of Northern Ireland until the bigger battle and the bigger negotiation of Brexit is resolved.

We cannot be left without a government in Stormont simply because the wider political context is awkward for the British and Irish Governments.

The continued absence of a government, the absence of decisions and direction, comes with a big cost.

It means passively accepting the lowest economic growth on these islands.

It means a business community again left waiting for the long promised reduction in corporation tax.

It means over 400,000 patients stuck on hospital waiting lists and school budgets cut by millions.

So tonight our message to those governments is clear - Northern Ireland cannot be left to wait.

We've already reached too deep into the well of public patience – we cannot leave our people stranded any longer.

Both Governments can't afford to ignore the lesson of history - vacuums don't end well in Northern Ireland.

We can't be left to wait.

If a vacuum is allowed to persist, people deserve to know the truth as to what that will actually mean.

The statement, often repeated these days, that Direct Rule is not an option is simply ridiculous.

We have to be honest.

A budget delivered in Westminster is not a version of Direct Rule – it is Direct Rule.

After all the years spent trying to bring powers back to this island, the current failure of our politics has returned them all to a dysfunctional Tory Government in London.

In that continuing vacuum, don't believe any politician - myself included – who tells you they can deliver real and radical change to the social and economic fabric of this place.

As of now, no party leader in Northern Ireland can credibly promise you a manifesto of local change – we simply don't have the power.

To borrow a phrase – until we collectively take back control of our own affairs – we will be left unable to shape the political change that is so badly needed.

It's just one more reason why we can't be left to wait any longer.

### **Breaking beyond the narrowness**

Conference, having set out that roadmap for the return of a local government, I do want to add a note of caution and realism.

It would be misleading to tell people that the return of the Assembly would automatically and permanently stabilise our politics.

I think people intuitively know that there is a rocky political road ahead – and they understand that old certainties are no more.

Maybe that widespread understanding is signalled in the fact that you now very rarely hear the once popular sentiment that *'politics doesn't matter'*.

Recent years have shown us all just how much it matters.



The politics of Northern Ireland has long been used to the outside world looking in on us but that time has long since passed.

We're now in a moment when everyone is focused on a much wider horizon.

I think a lot of the frustration and the restlessness of our people stems from the aching sense that the narrowness of our local politics is so at odds with the broadness of the political challenge we face.

People instinctively know that the coming years will raise deeper and more fundamental questions – many of which sit outside the boundaries of local devolution.

On both our islands every aspect of our modern accommodation will face change – economic, social and, yes, constitutional.

As I deliberately map out the huge scope of that coming change, I know there are many who genuinely wish that some calm and certainty would return to public life.

It is a very natural longing and I understand it.

After so much political instability, many wish that things would just settle down for a while.

They would welcome the chance to breathe in some normality.

But sometimes history doesn't afford us that choice.

It would be wrong to manufacture certainty where none exists.

There is nothing inevitable in the time ahead but change is undoubtedly coming.

## **Brexit**

Conference, the driving catalyst for that change and its instability

comes from the decision of people in British to leave the European Union.

Northern Ireland did not consent to that change.

Nevertheless, we must deal with it and deal with its consequences.

Brexit is now the ever-shifting water table beneath our feet – it is unsettling all of the political ground which rests upon it.

No-one should be in any doubt - the instability of Brexit and the instability faced by the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are inextricably linked.

The intense media focus on Brexit has tempted many people to switch off.

But we shouldn't allow ourselves to lose perspective in terms of its true economic threat.

The opening shots of a trade war between the US and China already threaten the beginning of an era of global protectionism.

What has begun with steel and aluminium could soon escalate - there is no knowing how long that global context will last.

This is the first protectionist American President in several generations.

The President might change, hopefully he will - but there is no guarantee the protectionism will go with him.

And as we know, nowadays the local is never immune from the global.

The recent example at the nearby Bombardier factory is a telling reminder of the precarious environment those global economic powerplays place our workers in.

Thankfully those jobs in Bombardier were secured, but we're gambling with the futures of working families if we're betting that, outside of Europe, every trade dispute will end favourably.

In that volatile global context, the shelter and security provided by the European Single Market doesn't just look like economic sense.

It becomes an economic necessity.

A hard border in Ireland threatens many of our industries - it threatens to position us as a permanent economic backwater.

This is particularly true for communities west of the Bann and along the border – communities already disgracefully neglected.

No-one knows this better than our newly selected West Tyrone candidate - our own man from Strabane - Daniel McCrossan.

Conference - it doesn't have to be like this.

We don't need a new border in Ireland and we don't need a new economic border in the Irish Sea.

That was our position during the referendum, after the referendum and it remains our position now.

But that position is only possible if both our islands remain in the Single Market and the Customs Union.

If the British Government continues to ignore that simple logic - we must maintain full economic alignment across the island and into European markets.

As set out in the December EU text, this must be the agreed backstop.

The Irish Government must know that we need full clarity on the border this side of the summer.

We can't let it slip until the EU Council meeting in October.

The backstop is not our first choice, but it is our ultimate protection.

The only people who will actually end up delivering that backstop are the hardened Brexiteers who are determined to inflict economic self-harm.

Anything short of these proposals, any hardening of the border, will be a deliberate violation of our political process by the British Government.

They have no right.

In Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement is sovereign.

That Agreement belongs to the people of Ireland and we are only people with the right to change it.

There are increasing numbers of politicians on both islands carelessly queuing up to rip it apart.

We cannot and we will not allow it.

## **A New Ireland**

Conference, Brexit has changed everything - and will continue to change everything.

People across this island are speaking openly about that change - in common concern and anticipation of what political future is to come.

As we approach the centenary of partition - a triumph for some and a tragedy for others - meaningful reconciliation between the peoples of this island must remain our top priority.

A new and reconciled Ireland will only ever be built by fully recognising the changing island of today.

For our young people especially, the picture of their world is no longer reflected in the murals of our past.

Old political certainties and old majorities are no more.

On an island of new minorities the only option is to build a broad coalition for change.

That changed Ireland won't be built upon the rubble of our history - it will instead be based on the values we invest in modern nationhood.

The purpose of a New Ireland can't be guided by a blind obsession with historic wrongs - it should be about creating opportunity for our emerging generations.

That means an all-Ireland health service, free at the point of delivery.

A New Ireland that seeks to reach energy independence by 2050.

An Ireland where family farms can survive as part of a thriving Agri-food sector.

An Ireland that gives power and place to all its rich traditions.

An Ireland that ends the disgrace of homelessness and is proud to provide for the most vulnerable.

An Ireland of enterprise where jobs and opportunities exist across the entire island and are not concentrated on the eastern seaboard.

A New Ireland capable of delivering prosperity and fairness for all.

But we will only succeed in reaching that New Ireland if we first provide it with definition and detail.

To do this we believe now is the right moment for the re-establishment of the New Ireland Forum.

No one party can shape that New Ireland and all of us must have an investment in it.

The New Ireland Forum is the best way to produce that blueprint and that plan – no referendum should be called until that work is done.

### **Ian Paisley and Unionism - A tide in the affairs of man**

I am all too aware that talk of a New Ireland risks sending some in this community to the hills - and I am very sensitive to that fact.

But I also know unionism is not limited to, nor defined by, the politics of Arlene Foster.

Too often uniformity is painted on to this society where none exists.

There are many within the unionist community who are willing to engage and who are willing to explore new possibilities.

I always think that one of the most remarkable moments in our modern politics came just before Dr Ian Paisley finally crossed the Rubicon and embraced power-sharing.

Standing outside the door of Downing Street, Dr Paisley recognised that

*".....the time to take it is when the tide is running. There's a tide in the affairs of man taken at a flood, and I think the tide is running in people's minds and hearts..."*

It was a moment of acknowledgement that a changing context needs a changed political response.

It was a moment of true leadership - a leadership that is badly needed now.

Unionism has nothing to fear from a conversation based on

persuasion and consent

We all have a duty to tell our unionist neighbours –

You belong to this place every bit as much as I do - therefore you have the very same right to shape the future of this island.

They also need to hear that while we want to shape the change ahead, we want to make Northern Ireland work right now.

My appeal to unionism is this – don't avoid that future and don't stay silent on it.

Try to convince us of your vision for the future and we'll try to convince you of ours - and then in time let the people decide.

That's the way politics is supposed to work - it's how it works at its best.

### **Building a positive narrative for nationhood**

Conference, there's no point in offering a challenge to others if we don't first challenge ourselves.

Those of us who believe in a New Ireland need to offer a credible and positive vision - we will not protest our way into one.

Those who have framed the inflammatory narrative that unionism as a whole is unchanging, doesn't believe in rights, and can't be worked with – those people need to be faced down.

That cannot be the basis of our vision - this is not 1968 and we are not 2nd class citizens.

I for one am tired of hearing that argument.

We diminish ourselves by its repetition and we diminish the progress which has been secured by previous generations.

Those generations ensured that we now possess the power to shape our future – so let's shape it.

And conference, this is the key point.

We do not seek a New Ireland because we are victims of an old oppression - we seek a New Ireland because it offers opportunity for all.

That is the only basis through which it will come to pass.

The old truism of politics is that people will always opt to vote for something rather than against something.

If we can't provide a place of opportunity and belonging for our unionist neighbours - then it simply isn't worth having.

### **Good Friday Agreement**

Conference, for over a year now, politics has been locked in a cycle of frustration and failure.

But we should never give up hope – because history tells us that cycles are there to be broken.

We know this because 20 years ago, the Good Friday Agreement broke the cycle of conflict which had cast a shadow upon the Irish and British relationship for 800 years.

Now is not the moment to give up on that Agreement – it's the moment to fully embrace it.

As change engulfs our islands, the three strands of relationships at its heart haven't dated - they have truly come of age.

If Good Friday 20 years ago was to be the final destination of slow learners - let us not allow it to fall victim to fast wreckers.



The choice remains the same.

The Irish and British peoples across this island can retreat from each other or we can again choose to work, live and govern together.

In time, when we are forced to look history full in the eye, let us not say that we narrowed our minds and thus narrowed the horizon.

Let us instead say that we acted with courage, generosity and vision.

Let us say that we built a new politics

Let us say that we built a New Ireland.

Thank you.”