

Possible points for use by the SDLP in handling
Unionist claims that the SDLP is not interested in
an "internal settlement"

(One of the claims frequently made by Unionist politicians is that the SDLP is not interested in an "internal settlement" in Northern Ireland and that their true goal is a united, independent Ireland. It can be expected that they will repeat this line during the round-table talks. They may also seek to argue that the SDLP is, as a consequence, not interested in the Northern Ireland strand of the negotiations, seeing the North/South strand as the "real negotiations". This paper suggests some points that the SDLP might use in addressing this line of argument.)

1. It is true that the SDLP analysis is that one of the key relationships at the heart of the problem is that between Unionists and the people of the rest of the island and we will elaborate why in subsequent paragraphs. We reject in the strongest terms, however, the notion that it is axiomatic that we are "not interested" in this strand of the talks dealing with relations within Northern Ireland. It goes without saying in our view that this is a critical aspect of the problem. What we have repeatedly said, however, is that history has shown that that relationship cannot be settled in isolation, that it is centrally inter-linked with the other major relationship on the island - that between the Unionists and the rest of the island - and that only in that wider context can the problem be ultimately resolved to the satisfaction of all of us. We

believe that that is an entirely reasonable position.

2. Let us elaborate on why we attach such crucial importance to the relationship between Unionists and the rest of the island. In our view Unionist mistrust of the rest of the island has been at the very heart of the problem in Ireland. That was the reason why they rejected Home Rule with all the consequences of that rejection. That was why they excluded the Nationalist population from any say whatsoever at any level under Stormont. That in the end brought Stormont down and was the beginning of the present phase of the crisis. That was why they opposed power-sharing and the Sunningdale Agreement and that is why they are opposed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement.
3. It therefore seems logical to us that until that relationship is settled, to Unionist satisfaction as well as to everyone else's, there can be no real progress towards a mutually satisfactory resolution of our problems.
4. We believe that the whole debate about "internal settlements" is a facile one in essence. When Unionists speak about settling arrangements "within Northern Ireland" and "without outside interference" they clearly cannot be talking in absolute terms. Their vision of an "internal settlement" would see Northern Ireland still giving ultimate loyalty to the British Crown, with ultimate Parliamentary authority lying at Westminster and with ultimate Executive authority resting with the British Government. Scarcely an "internal settlement". In our view, the only arrangement which could in the proper sense of the term be described as an "internal settlement" would be a fully autonomous and independent Northern Ireland. We hear nobody around this table speaking in those terms.
5. So let us be fully clear, therefore, about what we are debating here. Essentially what Unionists appear to be saying to us is that the agenda which we should work from in these negotiations is theirs and theirs alone. It is the same message which they have been dispensing for seventy

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*Internal arrangement
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UK dimension
= general*

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excludes the wider Irish
dimension or the island
but includes the
British dimension*

years. It has never worked. It can never work. The reality which Unionists must come to terms with if we are to make progress is that we cannot go on as we have before; from now on the agenda must be a common one, based on partnership and equal respect for traditions, identities and aspirations. This is one of the cornerstones of the Anglo-Irish Agreement - a formal international Treaty signed by the British Government, ratified with an overwhelming majority by the British Parliament and lodged at the United Nations. We repeat these facts merely to put the context in full relief. And in concrete terms what that context means is that Nationalists are no longer second class citizens, that their identity and aspirations have equal validity and legitimacy to those of the Unionist community and that if it is their wish that one of the means of expressing that identity should be through a role for the Irish Government in their affairs in Northern Ireland, then that is their right - no more and no less than it is the right of Unionists to wish and have the involvement of London and the Crown.

6. Unionists might argue that the Irish Government previously had no role in the affairs of Northern Ireland, that they are a "foreign power" and should be excluded from having anything to do with the "internal affairs" of the North. In other words the case for the status quo ante. In logical terms, it is scarcely a sustainable case. On that basis, Nationalists could with equal validity argue that there was a time when Britain was not involved in the affairs of Ireland - North or South - and that it is **they** (the British) who are the real foreigners. The case for the "status quo ante ante". Where does one draw the line in such a debate? One draws it with what there is. It is the only logical and equitable starting point. For all of us that means some compromise on absolute aspirations. For Nationalists it means accepting the London presence and for Unionists the Dublin presence. It is as simple - and difficult - as that.
7. No doubt Unionists would also argue that the presence of the Irish Government in Northern Ireland - through the Anglo-

Irish Agreement - has not brought peace and stability. In absolute terms that is true, but it was never claimed for the Agreement that it would be such a panacea. What it is is a framework for a process which ultimately can bring such peace and stability. And it can do so because it is founded on those principles which alone can bring peace and stability to a divided society - accommodation of differences and consent.

8. As to the charge that all we are interested in is a united Ireland, we say that, at the very least, this represents an inadequate and partial understanding of our position. Just as Unionists should not be expected to abandon their aspiration to the ideal of the full, unconditional and undiluted expression of their loyalties to the Crown and the British way of life, Nationalists are entitled to retain their ultimate vision of an independent, unified Ireland. But even more fundamental to most Nationalists, and certainly to the SDLP, is the reality that the way forward in Ireland can only be on the basis of dialogue, accommodation of differences and consent, in other words the search for the common agenda. It is that process which will dictate the ultimate shape of the new Ireland and not the absolutist vision of any one tradition on the island. Let the record show that at the historic juncture represented by these negotiations, we once more formally pledge and reiterate our commitment to that process and to that process alone.
9. In the light of the presentation which we have just made, we hope that it is now fully clear why we attach such importance to the settlement of the relationship between the Unionists and the rest of the island. The settlement of that relationship has the most profound implications not just for North/South relations but also for relations within Northern Ireland. By definition, therefore, it also has the most profound implications for the structures which may emerge to give expression to those relations. Against that background, it is logical that discussions in this strand about new structures and institutions within Northern

Ireland will necessarily be preliminary and incomplete in character.