

Draft

Possible SDLP (Oral) Response to Unionist
Arguments for Integration

[This paper assumes that the position tabled by the Unionists at the first strand of the Roundtable talks will include integrationist elements such as the strengthening of Westminster's role in Northern Ireland (Select Committee etc). These elements will in all probability not be described by the Unionists as integrationist, but that is in effect what they will be. This paper outlines possible points to be made by the SDLP in rebutting such an approach.]

1. The argument that integration with Britain is the ultimate resolution to the Northern Ireland conflict ignores a number of fundamental realities.
2. To begin with, even the very nomenclature, "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland", testifies to the "otherness" of Northern Ireland.
3. The reality is that, in British terms, Northern Ireland is a place apart, differing in fundamental ways from every other region in "mainland" UK. These differences express themselves across a broad range of levels - geographic, historical, political, cultural etc.. The crucial differences, of course, are at the historical and political levels. They are self-evident and do not require elaboration. Moreover, in the SDLP view, their

message in terms of resolving the issue of how Northern Ireland is to be governed is equally clear, namely that Belfast is not Yorkshire; any attempt to devise enduring political structures for Northern Ireland which ignores that reality - as integration does - is doomed to failure.

4. Moreover the numerical facts of life at Westminster - eg 17 Northern Ireland MPs from a Commons total of 650 - dictate that Northern Ireland can never expect a role there other than that of the peripheral player. Individual crises in Northern Ireland - eg in the security area - may give it centre stage from time to time but, inevitably, realpolitik will dictate that it will never feature among the "routine priorities" at Westminster. We all know that; we are sure that your MPs have felt the frustration of that reality many, many times. And waiting around for the day when the political arithmetic might somehow produce a hung Parliament in which Unionists held the balance of power is surely the politics of smoke and mirrors and scarcely a basis for sound, long-term policy. (We should point out moreover, that the SDLP could, of course, play the same game! There is as much chance of a hung Parliament with 3 seats as the key as there is with 13 or 14!) Our belief - and we feel that it is one shared by a great many people across both communities in Northern Ireland - is that Westminster is not going to be the source of enduring solutions for Northern Ireland. We must look to our own hands here on this island we share for the shaping of our destiny. That is the task we are about in the common journey we are undertaking in these talks.

5. One of the arguments frequently put forward by integrationists is that integration with Britain would remove any ambiguity in the constitutional situation and end the constitutional debate. One of the extraordinary implications of this argument is that by simply legislating such an "end" to the constitutional debate, nationalists would somehow "fold their tents" and surrender their aspirations to structures of government which fairly reflected their identity and ethos. This is surely a naive belief, contradicted by the lessons of the last several centuries let alone decades.

6. A further argument put forward by integrationists is that direct rule and even the Anglo Irish Agreement are somehow "undemocratic" and that only full integration would bring full democracy for Northern Ireland. Such thinking is surely somewhat confused. If sovereignty rests with the British people and if the democratically elected Government of that people chooses - with the overwhelming support of Parliament - to administer Northern Ireland by direct rule or to sign the Anglo Irish Agreement, are these not classically democratic decisions? No, it is not the principle of democracy which is at issue here but rather its form. Northern Ireland is a unique society, bound together by the three sets of relationships which are at the heart of our current discussions. To succeed, the form of democracy deployed in administering Northern Ireland must reflect and accommodate this reality. The classic maxim of orthodox democracy that majority rules, cannot be applied in blunt and simple terms in the Northern Ireland context, whether the majority in question is in London (the British Government/Parliament vis-a-vis Unionists), Belfast (Unionists vis-a-vis Nationalists) or Dublin

(Nationalists islandwide vis-a-vis Unionists). The keys, therefore, are accommodation of differences and consent. The reality is that government which does not accommodate fundamental differences of aspiration among people will not have the consent of those excluded and is ultimately bad government. That is why we have agreed that whatever comes out of this current process must enjoy consent across all three relationships. Integration can never deliver such consent.

7. But, of course, we do not have to rely on our arguments alone in seeking to show you why integration cannot work as a solution to our problems in Northern Ireland. A great many people within your own community have the most serious reservations about, and have argued cogently and eloquently against, going down that road. We say this not in any wish to be divisive but simply as a matter of record. We would ask you to listen carefully to what those voices within your own community are saying. They recognise that while intellectually integration may have a superficial attraction in seeming to cement the union, we all know in our hearts that it cannot work. Even at the very basic level of the arithmetic, as we pointed out earlier, the odds are stacked extremely heavily against us at Westminster. Between us we command all of about 2.5% of the seats in the Commons. We believe that that statistic speaks for itself! Even in your terms, therefore, integration cannot and will not work.
8. One final point: in pointing out why integration has no chance of providing a basis for a solution to our problems in Northern Ireland, we must emphasise that we are not seeking to undermine your sense of Britishness. How you define yourselves is a matter for you and you

alone. That is a right which we in the SDLP respect totally. But the structures of government here cannot simply be an exclusive expression of your identity - as integration would be - any more than it would be reasonable that they be an exclusive expression of our Nationalist identity. Once again we are back to the issues of accommodation of differences and consent. They are the key to everything we are about in these discussions. In simple terms, integration does not accommodate the nationalist identity nor its difference from yours; it will therefore never have the consent of that community and cannot succeed as a basis for stability and peace.