

Agreeing the Nature of the Problem

Introduction

1. It is the view of the SDLP, clearly stated in our initial submission to the Talks last May, that "before we seek solutions to the Northern Ireland problem we ensure that we understand what the nature of that problem is and, just as importantly, that to the greatest extent possible we understand each other's perception of it is". We believe that it is essential, as we recommence our dialogue, that we remind ourselves of the central points of that analysis of the problem and that we seek, in so far as it is possible to do so, agreement on the nature of the problem. The greater the degree of agreement which can be reached on the fundamental nature of the problem, the greater we believe is the likelihood of agreement on the structures we shall seek to build to address that problem.

2. What follows, therefore, is a brief reiteration of the SDLP's analysis, but one which draws on the exchanges which took place during last year's Talks.

Identities

3. The SDLP believes that in its contemporary manifestation the Northern Ireland problem is in essence a conflict of two identities -or, more precisely, the failure to devise political structures which accommodate the differences between, and allow full and mutual expression to, those two identities.

4. The **Nationalist community** in Northern Ireland sees its identity as essentially Irish and part of the wider Irish family on the island of Ireland. Its vision and aspiration are the creation of a new and tolerant society that unites and accommodates all traditions in a new Ireland, where Nationalists and Unionists can co-exist in harmony and mutual respect.

5. The **Unionist community**, on the other hand, perceives itself as British. The majority of Unionists are also Protestant and, as such, are strengthened in their allegiance to the British Crown by the latter's essential Protestantism.

6. We believe that the statements in par. 4 and par 5 recognise and accept the essence of nationalist and unionist perceptions of themselves and, as such, they express the basic realities underlying the conflict which we are attempting to address and resolve. However, despite all the discussion during the Talks last year we are still concerned at the manner and extent to which Unionists perceive the nationalist identity and Irishness generally.

7. Our concern is not an academic concern, but one based on a conviction that without a fuller and more acceptable acknowledgement of that identity, progress towards new political structures will be slow. In the paragraphs which follow we attempt to identify our concerns as precisely and as succinctly as possible.

down-salts of legitimate rights.

Unionist Perceptions of Irishness and the Nationalist Identity

8. Referring to his Irishness, the Leader of the DUP described it merely in geographic terms, *Dr. Paisley, June 1991*, p19 . Others imply a cultural identity with "this part of Ireland", *Common Issues and Propositions (UUP)* p6, but fail to indicate the nature of that identity in a context which very deliberately indicates key features of Britishness. Indeed, the same UUP submission appears to want to dilute the SDLP's statement of Irishness as "the feeling of being a part of the 'wider Irish family on the island of Ireland', by offering the alternative claim that "all of us, both in the United Kingdom and in the Irish Republic, are part of the larger Irish family within this archipelago" ,p4. Whatever truth this claim may have it does not address the political significance which the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland places on its more immediate contact with the 'wider Irish family on the island of Ireland'.

9. Dr. Paisley's submission furthermore suggested that all of the people of Northern Ireland together form "a race apart" and on that basis "only Ulstermen can solve this problem", a position which fails to acknowledge both the SDLP's. The later DUP paper of 28 June 1991 provides an interesting and welcome modification of this position. While still claiming the people of Northern Ireland to be "one community" it acknowledges that "we cannot but recognise that there are separate identities which reach out beyond the confines of Northern Ireland itself" par4). What these traditions are, how they manifest themselves, or what they might imply for new political structures is not stated.

Implications of the above for Political Progress

10. The SDLP welcomes the growing understanding which the Unionist parties have expressed of the Nationalist identity. As yet we believe this understanding to be incomplete because, in neither the UUP or the DUP submissions, is that identity acknowledged in terms of its essential characteristics and its relationships within the island of Ireland. Only when such an acknowledgement is granted will that 'parity of esteem' for our respective identities which is necessary for building new political structures exist and only then will real political progress be possible.