

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 what 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.

1 Conflict of Identities

2. 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. Therefore, the first step towards ensuring that we do not fail at this attempt should be a full and open acknowledgement of those identities.

3. What follows is a brief, succinct reiteration of the essential characteristics of the nationalist and unionist identities as understood by the SDLP and the three other parties which participated with us in the New Ireland Forum.

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. Unionists generally also regard themselves as being Irish, although this does not include a willingness to live under all-Ireland institutions. However, many of them identify with Ireland and with various features of Irish life and their culture and way of life embrace much that is common to people throughout Ireland.

6. The SDLP acknowledges that the inter-party talks of last year contributed significantly to deepening our understanding of each other's points of view and, in particular, of our respective identities. At this early point in our renewed dialogue we invite all participants to agree a clear statement of the nature of the problem we are addressing and a determination to build new

structures to accommodate the indentities which lie at the heart of that problem.

7. We note that insofar as papers tabled last year by the two unionist parties defined the identity of the unionist community, nothing contradicted any element of the SDLP's outline definition. That definition was consistent with the analysis of the new Ireland Forum. It is worth pointing out that the Forum sought to project a more inclusive sense or definition of Irishness but not to relegate or subsume anyone's sense of Britishness within it. However, we note that the UUP (*Common Issues and Propositions*, p6) seems to be attempting to put forward a more inclusive definition of Britishness but we are concerned that there is an apparent tendency to subsume the Irish identity within it.

8. The fact that there is an interest in finding more inclusive definitions and expressions of either identity is encouraging. It is not that we anticipate or propose that we can agree to define either identity within the other. Rather we find attempts to be more inclusive an acknowledgement that the issue before us is accommodation of the two identities and that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive .

9. Accommodation of the two identities requires parity of esteem including the right to recognition and expression of the respective identities. We have noted the DUP's statement, 28 June 1991, that the two identities "reach out beyond the confines of Northern Ireland itself". We acknowledge that Unionists require institutional expression of their lateral affinities with Britain. This was recognised by the Forum and is corroborated by unionist papers. It is not yet clear that Unionists recognise the requirement to accommodate the lateral affinities of those of the Irish identity who reside in Northern Ireland by allowing them appropriate institutional and symbolic expression for those affinities.

Implications for Political Progress

10. The SDLP does not see it as part of its task to convince Unionists of a particular definition of their identity. We seek to understand and to respect their definition of that identity. Not only do we realise that Unionists will test any political proposals against the requirements of respecting the unionist identity, but we too will have that consideration in mind in our own evaluations. We seek an acknowledgement that the nationalist community should have its definition of its own identity respected and that political proposals should be tested against the requirements of respecting the nationalist identity.

11. Given the essential characteristics of nationalist and unionist identities, the new political structures which we are seeking to build must ensure parity of esteem for both. We welcome the common recognition that the conflict of identities here has its context in the wider relationships between the two islands. We believe that the European Community offers both an example and context in which we can fully respect diversity of identity while working together on our common problems and interests.