



SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND
LABOUR PARTY

**TWELFTH ANNUAL
CONFERENCE**

ADDRESS BY
PARTY LEADER

MR. JOHN HUME

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path to peace. Politics is about
the reconciliation of difference
- one of the most noble tasks
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Belfast Europa Hotel
28th - 30th January, 1983.

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As we meet for our Twelfth Annual Conference there is no disguising the bleakness of the scene that confronts us. It confronts not just the SDLP. It confronts this entire community. In no matter what sphere we look at life in Northern Ireland today, whether it be politics, security, or the economy, the outlook is grim. The challenge therefore to us is great. We have been facing challenges for the last bloody decade. We are still here. My mother used to say, "If you are reared in your bare feet, you will never get pneumonia in the snow." The SDLP have been in their political bare feet throughout this past terrible decade. Now that the snows and the storms are coming, we shall not get pneumonia. We shall meet the challenge, and we shall overcome. The situation is grim.

They say that we have an economic crisis. We have. But have we an economy? What economy?

The numbers of unemployed outstrip those in the manufacturing industry. Our traditional industry - once the symbol of Unionism's so-called sturdy resilience - is now no more than a museum exhibit of all that pathetic chauvinism. Our new industries are either shrinking or departed. There is no new inward investment. The spreading economic Sahara, symbolised by Strabane, Dungannon and Newry, with half of their menfolk on the dole, has engulfed us all. Because this community has not gathered its courage, because we have failed to share power, we have condemned ourselves to share poverty instead.

Meanwhile violence thrives in this barren place. The IRA and INLA compete with each other in the league tables of cruelty and death. The security forces, or a section of them persist in their attempts to bend the law and succeed only in adding to the toll of deaths lending sick justification to the men of violence. Loyalist extremists will not be left out of this test of their manhood. Urged on relentlessly by ambitious bigoted demagogues, and by the ever sounding bugle in the blood they murder the innocent and arm for the showdown.

Politics, our only hope, have never been bleaker. The British Government is dominated by a woman who doesn't give a damn about Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland, she says, is as British as Finchley. Let us hope, at least for the sake of Finchley, that she doesn't mean it. She is not, it would appear, friendly with her Secretary of State. We are asked to take Mr Prior's Assembly seriously. It is, we are told, a major Government initiative. Yet she didn't mention it when she visited Northern Ireland or indeed anywhere else. We are again, what we have so often been for British politicians: either an embarrassing nuisance to be concealed from view if possible, or a political football in a match which they play to defeat each other, but in which our fortunes are usually neglected.

On the ground here, political deadlock shows no signs of decongealing. Our opponents outdo each other in intransigence and bigotry. In Mr Prior's Assembly we are regularly presented with the unedifying spectacle of adults slugging it out over arcane disputes which amount to literally nothing. This might be diverting in a children's story book: in the black circumstances of Northern Ireland today, it can only be described as the most irresponsible show on earth.

And it hasn't yet occurred to any of them that perhaps it is Northern Ireland itself that is the problem.

Fellow members of the SDLP, our community is in a stark and dangerous plight. Justice and humanity demand that men and women of goodwill everywhere throughout the world should cry out now for a solution. Everyone - not just someone - must now shout "STOP". This has not happened. The SDLP must make it happen. And, we must succeed.

Again and again we must insist that there is only one way forward: the peaceful and constitutional way. Unlike violence, this way does not kill, it does not destroy, it does not coerce, it does not intimidate, it does not impoverish. Unlike violence, it can succeed. What has the violence of 12 years achieved, what has it created, besides hatred, despair and dead bodies? Last year I attempted to sum up the real achievements of the Provisionals as seen by ourselves:

“We want to know in what way the killing has advanced the reconciliation of the people of Ireland.

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“We also see in those parts of the community where the Provisional IRA are more active, the spread of a foul social cancer. The cohesion of society, at the best of times, is both deep-rooted and fragile. Its roots - the shared principles of respect for life, liberty and disorder - can go deep, but they must be tended and watered assiduously and incessantly. There are now communities in Northern Ireland where these roots have not alone been neglected, but have been hacked away and poisoned by the Provisional IRA's campaign against the fundamental human right to live until God calls us. What has followed is a gross distortion of moral values in society, the promotion of the pornography of death and nihilism on our gable walls, and the deep corruption of the young.”

This judgement seems to me to be doubly true today. The Provisionals now seek support at the ballot box for their campaign. They have had some measure of success. Not a vote for violence, some have said. The result of frustration, resentments, the negative nature of the Assembly election, a protest vote. Maybe so. But from this moment onwards, let there be no confusion. Let there be no misunderstanding. Let the stark choice be clear.

A vote for these people is - and let their own words say it - a vote for “unambivalent support for the armed struggle.” Translated into the reality of the streets that is a vote for killing industrialists and destroying investment in a community starved of work. It is a vote for killing working men and women in the Protestant community who have donned uniforms and who see themselves, no matter how we or anyone else see them, as the defenders of the Protestant tradition and way of life in this island. It is a vote for the murder of public figures as they leave their place of worship, striking at religious traditions that are deep and dear to the people of this country. It is a vote to justify the planting of bombs in places of entertainment, classified as “legitimate” targets and the killing and maiming of the innocent. It is the use of the ballot paper to encourage the young to use the Armalite and to spend the best years of their lives behind prison walls.

What has twelve years of this campaign achieved?

Apart from graves, mangled bodies, overpopulated prisons and lengthening dole queues what has this policy of armed struggle achieved? Perhaps those who advocate it would like to tell us. Perhaps they would like to tell the young people that they seek to attract to their ranks.

We will ask these questions. We will confront them in every single constituency. We want to hear, not more lies about two wrongs making a right, not more use of one atrocity to justify another, not an endless list of what abouts. We want to know in what way the killing has advanced the reconciliation and unity of the people of Ireland. We even want to know how it can cure the dampness in Rossville Flats or the desperate living conditions of the people of Moyard. We want to know how it can give hope to our unemployed and in particular to our young.

We are not a flag-waving party. We do not play on people's emotions. Our record in exposing injustice in Northern Ireland is clear and unequivocal. Our record in exposing and opposing the dispensers of death, whether it be the excesses of security forces or the planned murder of paramilitaries is writ for all to see. Our commitment to non-violence is unflinching because it is right. And we will put our commitment again to the people and give them the stark choice. I am confident that the people, disillusioned and disappointed so often, will have the guts to choose life instead of nihilism. We will, as we have never done before, have to ensure that they understand that stark choice clearly.

Our alternative is neither dramatic nor romantic. Neither is the reality which we face. We offer politics alone as the path to peace. Politics is about the reconciliation of difference - one of the most noble tasks facing this world today in the many theatres of conflict that threaten to engulf us.

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Does anybody think that violence can solve the problems of the divided peoples of the Lebanon? Does anybody think that violence will solve the problems of the divided people of Cyprus? Does anybody think that violence will solve the problems of the Middle East? Does anybody think that war will bring world peace? Does anybody with even two thoughts to rub together in their heads believe for one moment that violence will solve the problems of the divided people of Ireland? Neither vengeance nor victory is a solution.

We offer patient political negotiation. It is undramatic. It is unspectacular. As I have said before "Patient political effort will not fill graves or jails. Violence will. Patient political effort will not lengthen a dole queue. Violence will. Patient political and non-violent effort has in fact brought about the only real achievements and benefits that we can claim over the past fifteen years.

We have not so far received any help from the people who bear responsibility for our present nightmare, the British Government. They are, after all, the Government of Northern Ireland with full power and responsibility. We are the victims, not of mere neglect, but of conscious and malevolent contempt. There is in the UK no problem of comparable urgency or danger, yet there is no evidence of any serious thinking in the Government. Secretary of State after Secretary of State chooses the softest option - Pontius Pilate's - "Let them sort it out for themselves". They refuse to intervene down here among us mortals.

What we are asking for from the British Government and what everyone in this bitter land has a right to get from the British Government are wisdom and courage. Their basic policy - maintenance of the Unionist veto - has manifestly been a disaster, to be maintained only for irrational, triumphalist but self-defeating reasons.

For the truth is that apart from that the British Government has no policy on Northern Ireland. There has been an abject failure to face up to the causes of the problem. There has been a complete failure to engage the principle parties to the conflict in realistic negotiation about the future. There has been a total failure to identify British interests, or to develop a purposeful government strategy for solution of the problem. If there is a strategy, what and where is it? This failure has led to the deadly impasse which paralyses us today. The net result has been to embroil Britain in a long term military commitment in which she has no vital interest commensurate with the expenditure of money and life involved.

A further result is the generation of a climate of despair in Northern Ireland which steadily erodes belief in the political process. Despair of political progress, coupled with despair of economic revival, is the essential ingredient in the anger which nourishes and sustains violence. It is despair, not hope, which drives people to arms.

In the absence of a policy, British Governments have fallen back upon a sterile unthinking reinforcement of the status quo, the traditional reflex of an imperial power in decline, a power which has lost interest and lost any sense of purpose in the maintenance of dominion. In the Northern Ireland context that has meant unquestioning acceptance of the tired old canard that any real change, or any attempt to treat the problem in a wider context would threaten the identity of the Protestant population. Thus has one, relatively small lobby gained a stranglehold over government. Thus has government allowed itself to be trapped in a situation where unionists need only refuse to negotiate, to paralyse all of us.

One does not have to look far to find a parallel. As the enormous cost of the Falklands debacle sinks into the consciousness of the British people they will perhaps learn the folly of a policy which sacrifices the entire British interest to the consent or the veto of a tiny lobby. Here in Ireland the consent or the veto of 900,000 people has been allowed to paralyse the common sense of the other sixty million in these islands - at great cost to all.

When the SDLP ask the British to change the basis of their policy we are accused of "coercion" of Unionists. If this charge is true it would appear that our accusers take no exception to the fact that the maintenance of the present basis of policy has mounted to coercion of the Northern Minority for the past 62 years with such dire human consequences. We are of course not asking that anyone is coerced. We are asking that the British Government set a new objective of policy and that they begin the process of persuading everyone that this objective is to everyone's benefit. Is that not what all governments and political parties do when they produce policy that they believe to be beneficial to society as a whole but with which some people disagree. Would any political change ever take place if opposition to it by a substantial number of people at the outset led to its abandonment because to persuade them otherwise is described as "coercion".

Reinforcing the identity of one section of a community, while ignoring the other is coercion of the other. It begets alienation. Alienation begets violence. Violence begets repression and repression begets violence. This whole vicious circle familiar throughout the history of our island must be broken. It must be broken by ourselves for it will not be broken by anyone else. And it must be broken by challenging effectively the assumption which is the cornerstone of all British policy - that any settlement in the wider Irish framework threatens the fundamental interests of the Protestant community.

As for the Unionists themselves, they have become a petty people. They (Unionists) represent themselves as the defenders and protectors of the Protestant heritage in Ireland. no one has done more to destroy it. Ourselves alone is their motto. Let us hold all power in our own hands. Exclusivism. That is a deeply violent attitude and it is no wonder that one can no longer find in such a philosophy any trace of the civil and religious liberty that is their proud heritage and that is such a necessary first principle for any solution to the problems of Ireland. It is a devastating commentary on their commitment to peace and stability that not once in the past sixty-two years, and in particular not once in the past bloody decade have they produced a single new idea, a single new proposal. "What we have we hold". What they hold isn't very much anymore but they don't even see it. Where else in the world would a powerful and influential government such as the British, tie the whole basis of their policy to such a pathetic and leaderless lot of politicians. We have had one ray of light. We have had the advantage of the yelping Mr McCusker giving us his definition of democracy - majority rule as long as we are the majority. They don't even accept the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state, created for them. Their only legitimacy is themselves alone. Does anyone need to look any further for the roots of violence? At least we no longer have to waste our energies in exposing British policies as a defence of "democracy" in Northern Ireland. For this relief, thank you Mr. McCusker.

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I genuinely believe that it is in the interests of this whole island that the majority population in the North be given the opportunity now to consider a settlement in a wider framework rather than waiting till it is imposed on them by much less favourable circumstances. There is a lot of writing on the wall. It should be faced up to now rather than in a more tense situation as the population distribution between majority and minority narrows and reverses. Economically what they have is hardly worth holding. The economic power of which they hold a monopoly is adrift. Political opinion in British is changing. The British Labour Party has changed its policy and they have in Mr. Clive Soley one of the few British politicians who has shown himself capable of giving his mind seriously to the problems of a society so fundamentally divided as ours is. This island would be a richer place if a leadership in that community were to emerge now and negotiate a genuine base of civil and religious liberty as the hallmark of a new Ireland. Unfortunately it will not happen because again the assumption which underlies their fear and which paralyses movement is that they cannot trust the rest of this island to guarantee that liberty. Again, as with the British, that fundamental assumption must be challenged and challenged effectively. The only people who can do this are ourselves.

The only initiative that remains open therefore is to mount that challenge and in doing so effectively, in demonstrating that our new Ireland threatens no one and will open up the possibility of transforming the debate on Anglo-Irish relations and on our sad and destructive quarrel.

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Armed with a blueprint for our new Ireland, the product of agreement between democrats North and South, which patently demonstrates that all interests are protected, we can then with some strength and justification ask for a change of British policy and a commitment together with everyone else to a campaign of persuasion of all those who still remain doubtful. That is the political road towards a new Ireland. Firstly, of course, and as a first step, we have to convince our fellow democrats South of the border, from the three parties represented here today. The SDLP held a memorable conference earlier this year to commemorate the bicentenary of Grattan's Parliament. On that occasion Dr. Garret Fitzgerald, now Taoiseach, said:

“The key to progress thus lies in the hands of the Nationalist people of this island North and South, through the power, if they are prepared to exercise it, to dispel the legitimate fears of Northern Unionists and to remove the most crucial obstacle to fresh thinking about political structures in this island.

The ball is at our feet in Dublin and Northern Nationalists have the capacity to influence us to play the game, if they commit themselves to demanding action from the people of the Irish State.”

We agree. And we are now seeking that action. In proposing the setting up of a Council for a New Ireland, where all constitutional politicians committed to a new Ireland would together define what we really wish this new Ireland to be, the SDLP is doing no more than asking the democratic parties of the republic to join with us in challenging the underlying assumption of British and Unionist unwillingness to change and in unlocking the key to meaningful dialogue with both.

I am convinced that the difficult process of examining the obstacles in the way of a new Ireland will force those parties and ourselves to take many harsh and painful decisions about the definition of Irishness, about the economic implications of unity by consent, about church/state relations, about Anglo/Irish relations, decisions which they would ordinarily prefer to avoid and which public opinion in the South ordinarily does not consider. In proposing this decision-making process, the SDLP is concerned primarily to define and secure the rights of those who often for good historical reasons, take refuge in the embattled past rather than face today's frightening reality. This means that democrats in the South and in the SDLP must find the humility to acknowledge that we have so far failed to conceive of and to define an Irish identity which adequately accommodates all the traditions of this island. Our failure - an intellectual and a moral failure - has unwittingly created one of the principal inspirations of violence. Every day young men kill in the name of “Ireland”, their acts of murder reinforce that narrow definition of Ireland which they and so many others have unquestioningly inherited, an “Ireland” defined in narrow sectional and exclusive terms together with a fanatical hatred of Britain, an “Ireland” which exists only in the minds of those who speak of it and who kill for it and who die for it, but which bears no relation to the real Ireland with its rich diversity of traditions and culture. We have for too long stressed this essential unity of Ireland but forgotten about its equally essential diversity. It is this failure to marry both and give them institutional expression that has been the failure of successive generations to solve the Irish problem. ⁴

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There is no inherited wisdom in this matter. Young and old, we must be ready to question our own inherited assumptions about ourselves painfully, vigorously, comprehensively and with humility. The word “new” in our goal of “a new Ireland”, must be given unheard of and unquestionable hard substance. It will surprise, unsettle and shock those in the South as well as the North who believe either that this crisis will simply go away or that it can be solved by benign neglect or that it can be solved by violent conquest. This truly new beginning will have to confront the dilemma set out by Louis MacNeice, a great and fiercely honest Northern poet:

“Why should I want to go back
 To you, Ireland, my Ireland?
 The blots on the page are so black
 That they cannot be covered with shamrock
 I hate your grandiose airs,
 Your sob-stuff, your laugh and your swagger,
 Your assumption that everyone cares
 Who is the king of your castle.
 Castles are out of date,
 The tide flows round the children’s sandy fancy,
 Put up what flag you like, it is too late
 To save your soul with bunting.”

The Council for a new Ireland will have to do more than confront these impossibilities: it will be called upon to reconcile and harmonise them and to forge a new, unheard-of, generous definition of Irishness which will include - not exclude - everything that it means to be a Northern Protestant today including his sense of British identity. It will be called on to cast this definition in the form of concrete proposals and concrete guarantees for an Ireland very different indeed from that of the North or the South today. It will be called on to back up these proposals and guarantees with concrete proposals for action which will give unquestionable evidence of understanding, goodwill and resolute commitment.

The Taoiseach has called the problem of Northern Ireland the greatest problem of Irish history. He is of course right. What I am proposing is a response to that problem which will call upon all the resources - intellectual, imaginative, economic, moral - of all nationalist democrats in Ireland united in a massive effort of generosity to acknowledge and solve the crisis of our island which is nothing less than the crisis of our own identity.

It would be our view that this new body, committed to binding up the wounds of this country, having created an all-inclusive definition of Irishness and suggested forms of institutional expression, having proposed safeguards and roles for all our traditions, should then invite those whom they are intended to include, the Irish Protestant tradition to tell us honestly how our proposals can be improved.

I would see this process as only the first of two major steps towards a solution. The first step, the harsh confrontation of the full dimension of the issue, the definition in new and unheard of terms of the new Ireland will be followed by the presentation of a real and positive alternative for the first time to the men and women who have never so far considered it.

I am under no illusions as to the problems or the difficulties that lie in the way but if there is a political path to reconciliation of the major traditions of this island it must be charted so that hope will replace the despair that paralyses our community at this moment. I am encouraged by the initial responses of the leaders in the Republic who have undertaken together with their parties to give our proposal the attention it deserves. We look forward to early, detailed and fruitful discussions. To the followers of those Unionist leaders who have already predictably rejected our ideas we say, suspend judgment until you see the fruits of our deliberations. We will be happy to be judged then.

As the horizons darken over our community, as the gunmen strut our streets more brazenly, as our remaining economic muscle slackens to a final decline, as communal fear and despair mount sickeningly with the rising toll of murder, as the intransigence of ignorance and bigotry hardens into roaring belligerency, as the British retreat yet more cravenly into their contemptuous indifference - so it is ever the more up to the patient men and women of the SDLP to gird ourselves to fight for the survival of life and reason in the North. For this we must harden our wills and organise with all our determination. We welcome advice from those on the sidelines but we now say to those advisors that there is no time left for casual reflection. Join us. It is no longer enough to leave it to the few. We must expand our numbers and deepen our organisation in every quarter of Northern Ireland. We need the help of all men and women of goodwill throughout Ireland. We are now in a fight against time, anarchy, cruelty, stupidity and contempt. Undaunted, we cannot, Northern Ireland cannot, this island cannot allow ourselves to be overwhelmed. There is a solution. Let us now begin to construct it. It is too late to save our souls with bunting.