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**LEADER OF THE SDLP**



**ADDRESS TO**  
**23RD ANNUAL CONFERENCE**  
**GLENAVON HOUSE HOTEL, COOKSTOWN**  
**26 NOVEMBER 1993**





We meet for our 23rd Annual Conference. We meet, to put it mildly, at one of the most crucial periods, indeed in one of the most crucial weeks in the sad history of our island people. In the current era of that sad history, the past quarter of a century, 3106 people have died.

1765 of those people were like the victims of Shankhill and Greysteel, totally innocent civilians with no connection of any description with either paramilitary organisations or the security forces. 293 members of the RUC have lost their lives. 201 members of the UDR have lost their lives. 442 British soldiers, most of them from working class family back grounds like our own, have lost their lives. 252 members of the Provisional IRA have lost their lives. 94 Loyalist paramilitaries have lost their lives. 38 members of INLA have lost their lives. 26 members of the official IRA have lost their lives.

All of those people who have lost their lives were human beings. All of their families suffered the same sense of loss and grief. All are victims of our history and our failure to solve our problem. The greatest challenge and the most important challenge that faces us is to end this violence, to remove the gun and the bomb from our country and our future.

Every section of our community has the major responsibility to make that their number one priority. For while violence from any source continues, our central problem, the divisions among the people of this small island will intensify as the bitterness and distrust deepens. That is why the number one priority of all parties to our problem and of both Governments must be a total cessation of all violence and the removal forever of the gun, the bomb and the bullet from our society and our politics.

That is the number one priority of this party and I apologise to no one for that. We have had up to 20,000 soldiers on our streets in the past 20 years, 12,000 armed policemen and the strictest security and emergency laws in Western Europe. None have succeeded in ending the violence. If we can do so by direct dialogue it is not only our duty to do so, it is the duty of every party.

Indeed the reaction of certain other parties to our efforts I can only describe not only as cynical but as playing politics with human life. That viewpoint is underlined when I draw attention to the fact that this party - the SDLP - is one of the few parties on this island that has never been associated with the gun. Almost all parties were founded out of physical force.

I say that to underline the role that the gun has historically played in the history of our relations, from the cannons of the Siege of Derry to the bombs and bullets of today. It does not require a genius to note the mess in which it has left us and the utter impossibility of healing the divisions of our deeply divided people by such methods.

People are more important than concepts, slogans or flags. "We cannot save our souls with bunting", to quote Louis McNeice. Without people this piece of land which we inhabit is but a jungle and we will never heal our divisions nor accommodate our differences by any form of coercion or conquest. Can both Governments and all parties not stand together now and make that obvious and self evident truth a declared reality?

I have no doubt from my personal experience of recent weeks that that is the mass view of both sections of our community here in the North of Ireland. I have clear and powerful evidence of that. That desire for a total cessation of violence is very powerful among the grass roots of the Unionist people. That has not been reflected in some of the strange attitudes and statements from some of their politicians and indeed many people are beginning to wonder do those politicians want violence to end.

**L**et me remind those politicians of their own tradition and roots and of the role of the gun in helping to bring the people of Northern Ireland to where we are today. They have always told us that they are British and of their loyalty to the Crown in Parliament. The basis of the rule of law in Britain has always been the sovereignty of parliament. If that is overthrown there is no basis for the rule of law. That was overthrown twice in this century by Unionist physical force and threat of force - 1912 and 1974. We have never had therefore the basis of order - agreement on how we are governed. Agreement on how we are governed must be our basic objective for if we really want peace, order and stability, which I assume everyone wants, that must be our objective. Consent has never been a principle of Unionism. They have never accepted nor sought the consent of anyone other than themselves.

Sir Edward Carson in 1912 said, in opposition to the democratic decision of the people of Britain and Ireland represented in the British Parliament proposing, not independence, but autonomy or Home Rule for Ireland: "In the event of this proposed parliament being thrust upon us, we solemnly and mutually pledge ourselves not to recognise its authority. I do not care twopence if it is treason or not.

"We will set up a Government. I am told it will be illegal. Of course it will. The volunteers are illegal and the Government does not interfere with them. Don't be afraid of illegalities".

"The Attorney General has been giving me a lecture", said Carson. "He says that the course of action that I am taking will lead to anarchy. Does he think that I do not know that". What have we had since?

If the language of the 1990s had been used in 1912 Edward Carson and his followers would have been described as terrorists. The British Government of the day bowed to that threat and Northern Ireland was set up, in Carson's own words, based on illegality and treason. It was doomed to failure for it had within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The rule of law had been broken by Ulster Unionists and their Conservative friends. It has never obtained in Ireland since and from that initial infringement has derived the violence and counter violence that has periodically scarred the face of modern Ireland.

Carson lived to regret his mistake. After the sad experience and reaction which was 1916 - born of the lesson taught by Carson, that the only thing the British understand is force - and after the partition of Ireland which he did not want. In 1921 he said, "I was in earnest. I was not playing politics. I was only a puppet and so was Ulster and so was Ireland in the political game that was to get the Conservative party into power".

That tradition of the use of violence - the Orange Card - has been used several times since by Ulster Unionists, with the same devastating consequences. When Terence O'Neill moved gently towards a more just society in Northern Ireland, the first violence of the last quarter of a century emerged to bring him down. The Ulster Protestant Volunteers did so with the use of bombs - the Silent Valley, Ballyshannon etc., and the first member of the RUC to be shot, Constable Arbuckle, died on the Shankhill Road. Then in 1969 during the Civil Rights Movement when the Official IRA declared a total abandonment of violence, a DUP member of Parliament came with a mob into the Falls Road, burned Bombay Street to the ground and killed nine innocent Catholic residents. Out of that shameful attack was born the Provisional IRA.

Again when the first British Government to take action, led by Mr Heath and Mr Whitelaw, took positive steps to face up to the reality of the Irish situation and to promote agreement and when Brian Faulkner courageously led his people forward, Ulster Unionists again sat around the table with paramilitaries to work together to bring down that agreement. In spite of all that we in the SDLP have never refused to talk to them.

I restate all this, not to concentrate on the what aboutery of the past but to point out to those masses of Unionist people who want peace the hypocrisy of those Unionist politicians who say that they refuse to talk to the SDLP because I am talking to Gerry Adams. I have never, and never has the SDLP and never will we, sit round the table with anyone to plan the use of violence together to achieve common political objectives. Our objective in such dialogue as has been clearly stated is a total cessation of all violence, an objective which is the responsibility of both Governments and all parties to do everything in their power to achieve. The least that can be done to achieve that honourable objective is direct dialogue, leading to direct dialogue of both Governments and all parties.

None of this Unionist history absolves the nationalist community from its responsibilities as well and in particular its responsibilities to do all in its power to bring violence to an end. The Provisional IRA are not just a product of past British and Unionist attitudes, which they are, but they are also a product of the attitudes of nationalist Ireland. The concept of nationalist patriotism which has been honoured by nationalist Ireland is the martyr complex that was born from the execution of the leaders of 1916. Dying for Ireland became the highly emotional concept of patriotism with which generations have been reared in this century. The harsh reality is that dying for Ireland is part of a philosophy that has resulted in killing for Ireland as well.

The condemnation by and disagreement of nationalist Ireland in general has been unequivocal and the results of such violence is there for all to see particularly in the terrible tragedies that so many families have suffered. To have as one's method of achieving human rights the taking of the most fundamental human right of all, the right to life is not only wrong, it is totally counter-productive.

The SDLP position on the use of violence has been made clear throughout. There is not a single injustice in Northern Ireland today that justifies the taking of a single human life. But condemnation of their methods is one part of the process of bringing these methods to an end. I obviously believe that these methods should never have been used. Addressing their reasons for these methods is also essential.

**T**he Provisional Republican movement has been repeatedly dismissed as mindless, as criminals and gangsters. I wish they were because if they were they would be easily dealt with. It is the fact that they believe in their reasons that has made them the force that they are and has led successive British Governments to say that they cannot be defeated. The logic of that is to address those reasons. Indeed that was central to our discussions with Sinn Féin in 1988, discussions which are on the public record.

It has also been central to a public debate between us and them since which is also on the public record and doesn't seem to have been noticed by anyone outside of the nationalist community in the North and which led directly to my dialogue with Mr Adams. Indeed the flexibility that they have shown in the language of that debate and in our direct dialogue has convinced me that they are serious about lasting peace and a total cessation of violence.

Leaving aside my total disagreement with their methods it has been my case that while their reasons were historically correct and correct in the past when the heart of the British - Irish conflict was a conflict of sovereignty, those reasons are out of date and no longer valid in today's new Europe. Their challenge is simple and obvious - prove it. I cannot prove that alone. The major role in proving it rests with the British Government, which is what Mr Adams and I are asking them to do.

My view also is that while these reasons are out of date, their legacy remains, the legacy is a deeply divided people in the island of Ireland, a division that can only be healed with the agreement of the people North and South. Both Governments, the Unionist parties and ourselves have agreed that if our problem is to be solved then three sets of relationships have to be settled, British, Irish, North - South and internal relationships in the North.

We have argued that the central relationship is the North - South relationship. It is the fear of that relationship that led to Unionist opposition to Home Rule. It is the fear of that relationship that led them to discriminate totally against the nationalist minority throughout 50 years of one party rule. It led them to oppose Sunningdale and the Anglo Irish Agreement. The logic of that is that until that relationship is settled, to the satisfaction of the people of the North as well as the South, nothing will work. That agreement should therefore be the priority of any Government or indeed any party that seeks a lasting solution.

The reasons that the Provisional Republican movement give have been stated by them often as justification for their paramilitary campaign. The British are here defending their own interests by force and they are preventing the Irish people as a whole from exercising their right to self-determination, a right that they quote often from the declarations of the United Nations. In my view it should not be too difficult for the British Government to make clear that these reasons no longer exist and Mr Adams and I have proposed to them how this should be done.

**T**he present Secretary of State and his predecessor have stated that Britain has no longer any selfish economic or strategic interest in Ireland and that their sole objective is to see peace and stability and reconciliation established by agreement among the people who inhabit the island.



On the question of self-determination Mr Adams and myself have made clear in our first joint statement that we agree that the people of Ireland as a whole have the right to self-determination. We also agreed that not all the people of Ireland agreed with that or how to give it expression. In other words that they are divided on how the right is to be exercised and it is the search for agreement and the means of reaching it on which our talks were concentrating.

In our subsequent statement we made clear that we had made substantial progress towards a peace process and that the objective of that process, involving both Governments and all parties would be agreement among the divided people of Ireland, an agreement that would have to earn the allegiance and agreement of all our traditions and respect their diversity. That is a process, which as I have repeatedly said offers no threat to any section of our people but challenges all parties and both Governments to apply their minds to resolving our conflict and to promote such agreement actively.

The major challenge in all of this is to the British Government. It is not a difficult challenge nor is it one that should pose any difficulty to them. There is however some evidence that internal differences or bitternesses within the Government Party about their own matters may lead some of them, as some appear to be doing, to indulge opportunistic self interest by exploiting our situation. Those who are have never shown the slightest interest in Northern Ireland. Now they have suddenly become very interested. If it is for the opportunistic reasons that I suspect, that have nothing to do with the interests of any of the people of Northern Ireland, then they are the Bonar Laws of the 1990s, Bonar Law exploited the Irish situation as leader of his party and made a substantial contribution to the mess that was created in Ireland and led to Carson's ultimate charge of puppetry.

Law told a UVF inspired audience in Belfast in 1912 that there were stronger things than parliamentary democracy. The people of Northern Ireland in particular have paid a terrible price for his alternative.

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uccessive British Governments throughout this century have insisted that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. Yet given the serious problems that have always existed here, the 50 years of outrageous discrimination and the last 20 years of awful instability, violence and death, not one British Government until Mr Heath and Mr Whitelaw had any policy or any sense of direction. Can anyone imagine what would have been the case if the same problems existed on the streets of Britain. There is no problem of similar urgency or danger anywhere in Britain yet where is the evidence up till now of any serious thinking by any Government? Everyone of them, except Mr Heath, chose the softest option, that of Pontius Pilate - "Let them sort it out for themselves". Their only policy, maintenance of the Unionist veto on their policy, has been central to the mess that Northern Ireland is in.

Let me be clear, the Unionists have always exercised two vetoes, one on British policy to which they are not entitled. 2% of the population of any country are not entitled to veto Government policy. They are entitled to insist that any new relationships within Ireland must have the agreement of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. That is natural and their real guarantee is their numbers and their geography and the problem cannot be solved without them.

What is needed from them, which apart from Brian Faulkner, they have never shown in 70 years, is the self confidence to stand on their own feet and negotiate an agreed relationship with the people with whom they share a piece of earth, the only agreement that will give us lasting stability. The absence of such agreement is the essence of the problem. If they make sure that they reach agreement then their fear of being subsumed will be gone and natural politics will take over. Instead what they have done is to seek to have all power in their own hands and when they don't get it use their veto on British policy to maintain the status quo with all its instability and tragedy. In reality they are the one party that has never accepted the principle of consent, they have always insisted on a veto on everyone else's consent.

What is required from the British Government is strong and clear leadership in tackling this problem. They should positively commit themselves to actively promoting with the Irish Government agreement among the divided people of Ireland, an agreement which must earn the allegiance and agreement of all traditions and respect their diversity. Both Governments should make clear that whatever agreement emerges will be endorsed by them and they will take the necessary legal and constitutional steps to implement it. They should also of course take the necessary steps to create the framework in which such an agreement can take place.

Such an approach will also be a major challenge to both mind-sets in Northern Ireland, mind-sets which exist everywhere in the world where there is conflict, mind-sets which see difference as a threat, rather than as natural and enriching. The Unionist mind-set - the classic Afrikaaner mind-set - is that the only way to protect their identity, ethos and way of life is to hold all power in their own hands and exclude everyone else.

That has been their mind-set since 1921 without the slightest evidence throughout about any thinking of any description that could lead to an agreed relationship with those with whom they share the island. What is amazing is that they tell us that they are the defenders and protectors of the Protestant heritage in Ireland. No one has done more to destroy it. Ourselves alone, all power in our own hands, is their attitude, in essence a deeply violent attitude.

Where is the proud heritage of civil and religious liberty that is the deep and true heritage of Protestantism? Where is the strength and self-confidence that gave 11 Presidents to the United States of America? Where is the creativity of their 'forefathers who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution whose central principle - E pluribus unum - from many we are one, is a deep reflection of the Protestant ethic and is the basic principle and approach - respect for diversity - that Ireland has been crying out for throughout all this troubled century?

Instead all we have heard is "what we have we hold", "No Surrender", "Not an Inch", "Ulster Says No". Have they the self-confidence to reach an agreement with the rest of the island which will protect their heritage rather than carry on as they do, without a positive thought, until something is imposed on them in much less favourable circumstances, when they may be no longer a majority.

Surely agreement now is the best way for them to ensure and for us to assure the protection of their heritage and rights for the future. Can they not see that such an agreement is much easier in today's post-nationalist Europe where inter-dependence rather than independence is the essential order of the day. Is there no one around who agrees with what Lord Craigavon said in 1938: "In this island we cannot always live separate from one another. We are too small to be apart or for the Border to be there for all time. The change will not come in my time but it will come".

The Border in European terms is already gone with free movement of goods, people and services already under way. Borders have gone all over Europe but French are still French and Germans are still German. Any change in our relations that will come must come by agreement. As we in the SDLP believe, whatever form that agreement takes, if the quarrel is over, we will start working together to build hope for our people and the old prejudices and distrusts will be eroded by working together and a new Ireland will evolve in future generations based on respect for diversity, built together by agreement and probably in a form that bears no resemblance to any of our traditional models.

The approach will also challenge the traditional nationalist mind-set which in essence is a territorial mind-set. It is people who have rights, not territory, not land. Our people, unfortunately are divided and cannot be brought together by any form of coercion, only by agreement. When we reach agreement for the first time we can draw a line over the past and let history judge it and look to the future as we enter the 21st century. Let us then harness our diversity of talents to work together.



we are by nature a very diverse people. Our very blood is diverse, one of the most diverse peoples in the world. Because of our island location our blood is Milesian, Celt, Norman, Viking, Spanish, Huguenot, Scots, English. We are also the biggest wandering people in the world and both our traditions have built many countries. Can we as we approach the 21st century, harness all our talents and capitalise on all our friendships across the world, offering the quality of life that we have in our land to attract investment and jobs for our young people to what is the offshore island of the United States of Europe from which we got our blood and the offshore island of the United States of America to which we have given it.

The key to opening the doors, the key of peace, that will lead to all of this now exists. John Major is in possession of that key. It will require no great effort from him to turn that key and open the door to our new future, based on agreement and respect for diversity. It is a key that will threaten no section of our people for it is a key that will open the door to a future that must be agreed by all of them.