

SDLP PARTY CONFERENCE 1999
Address by party leader,
John Hume MP, MEP

Saturday 6th November 1999

Fellow party members and distinguished visitors,

It's good to be back.

I have to admit, it's been a fairly tough few months. But I've drawn huge comfort not just from the ceaseless support of Pat and my family, but from the good wishes of my friends all over the country and of course in particular from you my friends in the SDLP.

I was determined that nothing would stop me from being here today. This is the twentieth occasion on which I have spoken to you as party leader of this great party. And once again we meet at a time rich in both challenge and in opportunity - at a time when our vision and determination are needed more than ever.

A huge amount has happened in the twenty years since I was elected leader in 1979. For too long during those years, we continued to experience the awful consequences of violent conflict. Many people thought that no escape from our bitter divisions was possible. But we in the SDLP knew they were wrong. There was a way forward. We had a vision, not just of the future we wanted, but of how it might be brought about.

WB Yeats once said that in dreams begin responsibilities. The SDLP had a dream- a dream, which still inspires us. And the realisation of that dream will mean, for us, new and exciting responsibilities. Those responsibilities will fall to us as we take our place, our rightful place, at the core of the government of Northern Ireland and at the cutting edge of the creation of a new relationship among the people of our island.

Yes, we had, and we have, a dream. And that dream is on the verge of becoming a reality - a reality founded on our enduring values as a party.

Time and again, it was we who thought the unthinkable, and said the unsayable. We said it first. And we were the first to get it right. Let me give a few examples- not to boast, but to emphasise the unswerving consistency of our fundamental approach.

We began back in 1972 by emphasising that there could be no solution to our difficulties without "a genuine analysis of the constitutional and institutional difficulties, which have led to the present situation." Analysis had to come before prescription.

In our analysis, we recognised that the fundamental problem was not the division of our country, but the division of our people: not the line on a map but the line in our hearts. I said in 1993: "It is people who have rights, not territory, not land and when people are divided the requirement for solution is agreement not victory". And in 1985, "so long as the legitimate rights of both nationalists and the Unionists are not accommodated together in new political structures acceptable to both, the situation will continue to give rise to conflict and instability."

We have always known, as we put it in 1979, that division can only be overcome through "partnership between the differing traditions in the North, and partnership between both parts of Ireland." It certainly couldn't be overcome through the "unjust domination of any one Irish tradition by another."

We recognised, moreover, that our problem was complex and has many dimensions. The solution had to be found through a process which recognised and reflected all of the relationships which mattered: that between people in Northern Ireland, between people in Ireland, and between people in our islands. The problem we in the North had to overcome was by no means all of our own making. Therefore it was quite unrealistic to think that we could solve it on our own.

As early as 1979, the SDLP called for a joint Anglo - Irish political initiative. Throughout the two decades since then, through all the lengthy preparations for the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, we continued to insist on the need for the two Governments to be centrally involved. And early on, we recognised the value and importance of the American dimension - which today has found such remarkable expression in the continued support of President Clinton, and the extraordinary dedication of Senator George Mitchell.

The example and the context offered by the quest for European Union, led by the bitterest of past enemies, has also been an unfailing inspiration.

It was the SDLP who, in 1981, insisted that the outcome of round-table talks would "have to be ratified by two separate referenda, one in the North, and one in the South". This became a reality last year.

All the way along, we have, as a core value, totally and completely opposed violence for political ends. We knew it was absolutely wrong. We also knew that it was utterly counterproductive. Even at the most difficult of times, we have stood proudly and firmly by the principle of non-violence. This wasn't easy. Many of the people in this hall have had, in the course of their political careers to endure vilification and intimidation - from many different quarters. But we weren't deflected from saying and doing the right thing.

At the same time, while opposing violence in all its forms, we knew that a political alternative had to be on offer. Yes, we rightly had to condemn. But we also had to understand that violence had deep roots in the political culture of the island, and in both traditions. A viable path out of the morass had to be mapped. We in the SDLP took on the task of showing republicans, through patient analysis and argument, that there was a better

way. We stuck at it when the doubters and detractors howled scorn. And throughout, we have argued that the political process had to be open to those who had committed themselves to exclusively political and democratic means.

We also stand for inclusivity - for using the talents and abilities of all sections of our people. We have resisted, and we will in future resist, any efforts to exclude from its entitlements any party which is faithful to its commitments to peace and democracy.

There's much more that could be said about the evolution of our party's policy. But I think I've said enough. We can all agree it's not a bad record. In fact, it's a record we can all be proud of.

I said earlier that a huge amount had happened in the past twenty years. In 1979, would it have seemed likely that the leaders of the republican movement would have committed themselves to exclusively peaceful and democratic means, and would be pressing for an Executive to be set up? Would it have seemed likely that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party would be committed to a fully inclusive partnership approach, and would have negotiated meaningful North/South structures? Would it have seemed likely that the British Prime Minister would be working closely and deeply in co-operation with the Taoiseach and the US President? Would it have seemed likely that every party in Ireland, North and South, with a nationalist tradition, would accept the principle of consent?

When I first spoke to Gerry Adams in 1988 it did not seem popular. Now his meetings with David Trimble have become an almost everyday occurrence.

There are times when dreams do come true. At times it might seem that everyone has joined the SDLP and shares our vision.

The Good Friday Agreement belongs to all of our people, North and South, But the method of its negotiation; the method of its ratification; its emphasis on partnership and reconciliation, the interlocking three stranded institutional structures: all of these find their origin in our party's thinking and in our party's advocacy.

That's why we, alone of all the major parties, were able to welcome the Agreement unreservedly. And it's because we are so firmly committed to everything the Agreement promises and stands for that the stalemate of the past year has been so deeply frustrating for us.

For too long, we have been waiting for others - I mean the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Fein to reach a pragmatic and workable agreement on the issue of decommissioning and on its relationship with the rest of the Agreement. I don't deny that their views are deeply and sincerely held, and I don't doubt that they both want the Agreement to work.

But so far neither has quite managed, despite definite progress, to overcome the obstacles they have placed in each other's way.

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Viewed in its own terms, the decommissioning issue has been given an absolutely disproportionate significance. Future historians will ask themselves how on earth this matter came to so dominate a political agenda. What really matters in practical terms is whether violence has actually ended, which it has. Only through political methods can the underlying causes of conflict be resolved.

But in another sense the decommissioning impasse is about a lack of trust. Building trust is a necessary condition for its resolution. And for that reason the developing engagement among the parties at the Mitchell Review is deeply important.

I believe that the Review will result in agreement on how to proceed. Last night, Séamus Mallon gave us a report on the Review. I want to say that, in leading our team at the Review, Séamus has done a quite tremendous job, backed up by the other members of our Assembly team. Nobody has done more to try to make the Agreement work, in the most difficult circumstances, than Séamus.

As we have watched other parties manoeuvre for advantage, we in the SDLP have throughout been faithful to our long-standing indifference to narrow sectional or party interest. It's frustrating to watch an Agreement we have worked so hard to create placed at risk. I know that our Assembly members, our activists and our supporters all feel impatient at the media and public attention devoted to others trying to resolve a dispute of their own making.

But, once the current impasse is resolved, we'll come into our own. Of all the parties, we are the one which has prepared longest and with most determination to take its place in the Northern Ireland, North/South and British/Irish institutions. We'll have four members in the Executive, and our other Assembly members will play key roles in Committees. We'll be working to make all of the institutions a success, because the success of one will only reinforce the success of the others.

It is through working together in the institutions, on the practical issues which should be the stuff of day-to-day politics - health, education, jobs, agriculture - that we will turn partnership from a slogan or an aspiration into a living reality. Over many years we've shown the way at local government level. Now, in a larger arena, there's so much more to be done.

Within Northern Ireland, there are issues which are crying out for a fresh approach, and which will benefit from being addressed by the directly elected representatives of our people. I'll list only a few.

We need to put in place new policies to alleviate and resolve the crisis in agriculture. We need to reform our educational system so that the wonderful achievements of our top students are matched by those of the less able. We need to ensure that our healthcare system uses the most modern technologies while not losing touch with human values and its close connection with individual areas. In particular we need to find ways of tackling the long term social and economic inequalities which still persist, despite worthwhile reforms. We need to harness the abilities of our people, and the solidarity of our friends overseas, to bring about in Northern Ireland an economic miracle similar to that witnessed in the South.

Not only will there be practical benefits, but there will be, through working together, a real beginning to the healing process. As we build trust and respect and erode distrust.

The same is true of the North/South Ministerial Council and implementation bodies. There is a very great deal to be done on a cross-border and all-island basis across all the sectors of our social and economic life - whether in the areas of energy, economic development the environment, transport, health or education. For the first time ever, Ministers from North and South will be coming together, in a systematic and focussed way, with the support of a standing Secretariat, to agree common policies and take common actions. But this must be done by agreement and for mutual benefit.

The SDLP also supports the new British/Irish structures and will play a full and enthusiastic part in making them work.

If we as public representatives and political leaders can work together in a true spirit of partnership we will, I am convinced, gradually transform the environment across Northern Ireland and in our island. The barriers which matter - those between people - will erode. But there is much to be done.

There are fine words in the Good Friday Agreement about tolerance, mutual respect and reconciliation. We must strive to ensure that they become the touchstones by which we live.

There are still too many places which are disfigured and divided by raw sectarianism. SDLP members have been at the forefront in fighting sectarianism, often at personal risk

- I think here of our colleague Danny O'Connor, for example.

We need to find, through dialogue and mutual respect for the rights of all, ways to resolve the continuing dispute over parades, particularly that at Drumcree, which has had the most severe and enduring consequences for the residents of the Garvaghy Road and which has also blighted the life not just of Portadown but of the North as a whole. In general, the example set in Derry by the Apprentice Boys and the residents is one to be commended.

We want to create a society where the civil rights of all sections of our people are respected and where it is recognised that to every right there corresponds a duty to exercise the right responsibly.

The Agreement must be implemented in full, and the new Equality and Human Rights Commissions must have the

resources and the support needed for them to do their work properly.

It is also clearly vital, as Séamus Mallon said last night and as Conference agreed, that the Patten Report on Policing be implemented in its entirety, so that the Agreement's concept of a police service belonging to all of the people, representing all of the people, and serving all of the people, be realised. Again, there is much in Patten that reflects our party's consistent policy throughout the years.

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However, the world does not stand still while we continue the protracted task of ending our conflict once and for all.

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This party has always been forward looking and outward looking. This has been one of our great strengths.

We have promoted a vision of the future while others wallow in the delusions of the past. Our ability to concentrate on shaping the future is now more important than ever.

You just have to look at the changes going on in Europe and in the wider international arena to see how important it is that we in this region play our part in determining the future. We cannot afford the luxury of being passive victims of the rapid social, economic, technological and political changes. We need to put in place the new political system which was agreed and endorsed 18 months ago if we are to have a voice in the new world. And those new institutions will have to prepare our society for the forthcoming transformations.

Economic and monetary union has been one of the great achievements of the European Union in recent years. The vast majority of our fellow EU citizens are now part of a

single currency zone. We in this corner of Europe are in the unfortunate position of being, temporarily it is to be hoped, excluded from this zone. We all know the disruptive effects of the division of this island into two currency areas. Equally, it is obvious that promoting inward investment is not made easier by our second-class status within the EU. Any rational investor is going to consider the implications of locating in an area which is not playing a full role in the EU. We must make the case for EMU because it is a case for our own future.

We also have to be honest about the political implications of economic and monetary union. We cannot pretend that it is simply a technical question of economic management. EMU gives a big impetus towards closer political integration in Europe. It is going to affect a wide range of economic and social policies. There will be increased pressure to work towards common standards for all our citizens in whatever part of EU territory they live. It would be a mistake not to face up to this reality. We should emphasise the positive benefits of closer integration. We should face up to eurosceptic propaganda. We should not be creeping backwards towards membership of EMU. We need our new projected institutions to work towards greater involvement in the construction of a united Europe.

We in Northern Ireland must be involved in shaping the future of the European Union.

We must ensure that our region's interests are represented at every level in the decision-making process. We must cooperate with others to make sure that the process of change works to our advantage, not to our detriment.

We are all aware of the crisis occurring in our biggest industry - agriculture. This is a classic case of the limitations imposed by the lack of political structures. We are constrained by an agricultural policy determined by the completely different conditions in Britain.

We have no regional representation in the EU Council of Agriculture Ministers.

That is the situation we have to change. We need a regionally realistic agricultural policy within the framework of the CAP, and a CAP that we can play a part in shaping. We need a political direction for agriculture within Northern Ireland, and cross-border institutions to ensure equal treatment for all farmers on this island. Our voice must be heard within the Council of Ministers. And the CAP must be developed so that European-style agriculture will be guaranteed a future.

The theme of this Conference is "A New Beginning - A New Century". In Towards a New Ireland. in 1972, we said, speaking of our outdated quarrel, that "We in this island cannot remain in the seventeenth century". We in the SDLP can be proud of what we have done over the past three decades to bring our country to the verge not just of a new century but of a new millennium. We have been at the forefront in seeking a resolution of our long conflict. We have never been closer to success than we now are.

Now is not a time to rest on our laurels. The new year and the new century will bring fresh and crucial challenges as we seek to demonstrate that our dream of a new, agreed Ireland, based on partnership and on peace, is no illusion. We in the SDLP have a unique and irreplaceable contribution to make. Let us all, together, continue to work tirelessly to reach our goal.

We have the future in our hands and our approach to that future will undoubtedly be strengthened by the great number of talented and committed young people who have been steadily joining the party in recent times.

We look forward to their role not only in strengthening the party but also in joining with all of us to shape our future, to lay the foundations for the new beginning in the new century.