

Speech by SDLP leader John Hume

Constitutional conference- Saturday 24th June, 2000

A RECORD TO BE PROUD OF

Delegates, members, friends, we meet again today at a time of great hope and wonderful opportunity. The purpose of today's conference is to agree a new party constitution that will allow us to implement fully the structural and political provisions of the Strategic Review that we have carried out over the last twelve months.

I endorse fully the findings of that review. It sets out the challenges for the SDLP for the new millennium. Its implementation will place us in our rightful position as a core participant in the political process and a key driver of political progress both in the North and on the island of Ireland for many years to come. The onus is on each of us to live the changes, to rise to the challenges and to realise the opportunities that lie ahead. I know that we can and will succeed over the next three decades, just as we have done over the last three.

Thirty years ago the SDLP set out on a journey of hope. Born of the civil rights movement that was so greatly inspired by the American dream of a tolerant new world, we sought simply equality and justice for all. We saw a system that was wrong and we tried to put it right. Our aim was to replace discrimination with equality; to create agreed political institutions for the people of Ireland, North and South.

We never swerved from our total opposition to violence of any nature. We saw violence as counter-productive and wrong. We were joined in our rejection of violence by the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland and beyond. We drew inspiration from the people of Northern Ireland, whose courage proved that the human spirit could triumph over human frailty. As I said in my Nobel peace prize speech:

"Amid shattered lives, a quiet heroism has borne silent rebuke to the evil that violence represents, to the carnage and waste of violence, to its utter futility."

That human spirit did indeed triumph. I pay tribute today to all those who lost their lives and to their families. And I pledge to them that the SDLP will continue to work endlessly to build the most potent monument of all to their tragic loss- that of permanent peace in our country.

From the beginning it was our party who had the vision to awaken from the nightmare that Joyce called our history. It was the SDLP who had the courage to challenge those who denied change. But we also had the courage to challenge ourselves, realising that our people need and rely on each other, that we are destined to work with each other, for each other.

We understood that the roots of our problem were deep and complex and that any solution to those problems required something more than the rhetoric and slogans that promised much but ultimately delivered nothing.

Our thinking, our philosophy, our whole approach was new. It put the fundamental rights of people, before claims over territory. It recognised that the deep divisions that existed among the people of these islands could only be solved when we created a society, centred around agreed political institutions, in which all traditions could participate. We can be justifiably proud that today our party is playing a central role in the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, making those institutions work for the community, delivering positive change. We are making politics work.

It was the SDLP that dared to 'dream things that never were and say why not?' We thought the unthinkable and said the unsayable. We said it first and we got it right first. Perhaps it is appropriate that we look at a few examples of how our consistent approach has shaped the political process.

As far back as 1970 we recognised that in order to adequately address the core of our divisions we would have to address the three sets of relationships: the relationship between the people of Northern Ireland, the relationship among the people of Ireland, and the relationship between Ireland and Britain.

We stated as far back as 1977 that only a real and dynamic partnership between all our people could solve our problems. I quote:

"The necessity of equality, the necessity of consent, can now be promoted only by a partnership between the two Irish traditions. The road towards that partnership will be long and hard... but there must be a beginning, a first step in what may well be a journey of a thousand leagues."

It was that three stranded approach that inspired the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. It was the eventual acceptance from all participants that ours was the correct analysis that led to the Framework Document and the Downing Street Declaration. It was our approach that demanded that any agreement would have to be ratified by the people of Ireland, North and South, in referenda.

In other words, it was the SDLP approach that led to the Good Friday Agreement, the people's Agreement. We have worked hard to turn our dream of a new, inclusive and tolerant Ireland into reality and we can be very proud of all we have achieved.

IRELAND'S PLACE IN THE 21st CENTURY WORLD

But we cannot, and will not, rest on our laurels. Our record so far is excellent, but the challenges for the future are immense. There is much work to be done.

The SDLP understands better than anyone that the depth of our diversity can become the very essence of our unity. I firmly believe that our people are now in a position to embrace the new politics of hope. Now is the time to transcend the politics of division and engage in a new partnership that will transform forever our island.

In the last century the expression of cultural identity was sadly mixed up in sectarianism and the integrity of both the British and Irish cultural identities were undermined and devalued.

In this century our goal must be to define our cultural identity in positive terms of what we are in favour of. We must display the confidence to express our rich identities with creativity, able to understand that not only can both identities live side by side but that both must live side by side.
DEVELOP THIS

I am certain that we can now fulfil the promise of the motto of the city of Belfast: 'E Pluribus Unum'- 'from many, we are one'.

Now is the time to work fully the institutions of government for the benefit of all our people. The world is rapidly changing around us and we must keep pace with that change. We must now concentrate our minds on the social and economic needs of the community.

We have to address in a radical and creative way the housing needs of the community. We have to develop new and imaginative ways of sustaining and developing our agriculture sector and our rural communities.

Unemployment and poverty continue to plague our towns, cities and communities. So many of our social problems spring directly from the frustration and disenfranchisement that the shadow of poverty casts over our people and our young people in particular. So many solutions will flow from the creation of new jobs, the empowerment of the community and the emancipation of self-belief and opportunity.

I believe that the primary aim of the new administration must be the eradication of poverty on our island. The new knowledge based economy towards which we are working must be capable of delivering for all. While there have been many positive announcements of new jobs in the IT sector, we must not forget the terrible difficulties being faced by the textiles and manufacturing industries. Everyone must be given the opportunity to participate in the new economy and that will require the provision of adequate training for those currently employed in other sectors.

And if our primary aim is the eradication of poverty then the primary vehicle must be our system of education. I cannot stress this point enough. Quality education is the key that can unlock the door to our new society. From nursery level to graduation, we must provide access to first-class education for all. We cannot place restrictions on anyone and we owe it to everyone to ensure that our education system is second to none.

We must educate our young people too to be open-minded. A free society will only come about when our young people are free to think and express themselves positively and free from prejudice.

And it is imperative that we work towards this, given the changing nature of our island. By working in partnership, Unionist and Nationalist, we can set a precedent for tolerance and mutual respect. We can give our people the confidence in ourselves to fully embrace the new multi-cultural Ireland of the Twenty-first century. In this century the challenge will be of the acceptance of ethnic diversity and we in the North are duty bound to lead the way.

Our history tells us of the indignity and injustice poured upon those who left our shores in search of a better world. We have suffered greatly at the hands of intolerant people. We know all too well of racial hatred and ignorance.

Now the shoe is on the other foot. Now our island is the destination for immigrants from across Europe and further afield. Now that it is our turn, can Ireland be the touchstone for tolerance? There can be no room for bigotry, no room for racism and no room for exclusion in the Ireland of the twenty-first century.

I am pleased to say that I will be signing the anti-racism protocol at Stormont on Monday morning on behalf of our party. This will commit the SDLP to the fight against prejudice in all its forms. We hope that others will join with us in this fight. And let us make no mistake it will not be an easy fight.

The responsibility is ours to reach out to those on the margins of society. DEVELOP THIS

The question for our society in this century will be: 'from many, will we be one?'

And of course, all this change will occur in the context of a new and expanding European Union. The rapid pace of change in Europe and internationally spell out how important it is that we in this region play a constructive role in determining the future.

The changing world also demands changes from the SDLP. We have realised that we cannot stand still and that positive change is essential. We know what is required of ourselves if we are to continue to grow. We need to attract more people of all ages, more women... DEVELOP THIS

The next thirty years will be no less easy than the first thirty. It is clear that as a party and as a people there are many daunting challenges ahead. But we will turn each challenge into an opportunity. We will rise to meet the challenges of a truly new and genuinely inclusive Ireland.

Our journey of hope continues.