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8th November, 1980

EMBARGO: 2.30 P.M., SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 9

SPEECH BY MR JOHN HUME, SDLP PARTY LEADER, TO THE PARTY'S  
TENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE IN THE SLIEVE DONARD HOTEL, NEWCASTLE:

The SDLP now begins its second decade. We have no time, indeed, the SDLP as a Party has no inclination to congratulate ourselves on our achievements, or any on our very survival. We will leave it to the historians to assess our efforts hitherto and I believe we can do so with confidence. Our concern now is to confront the dangers and the opportunities of this moment and of the eighties.

Equally, we refuse to indulge our racial/<sup>weakness</sup> common to every tradition in this island. We will not wallow in the grievances of history. Be they the grievances of 1640 or 1690; of 1847 or 1974. "What's past is prologue" is an attitude we cannot afford, either as members of this Party or as members of this society. Neither can we afford to allow reverence for the past, as so many do, as so many have done before us, to paralys~~is~~ our attitude to the future. What's done is done. The future with its dark or with its bright perspectives for Northern Ireland and for all of Ireland is our concern as a Party and our theatre of action. The SDLP, despite the abundance/<sup>of</sup> evidence we see to the contrary every day in Northern Ireland, believes in the essential goodness of human nature and in the rationality and dignity of every

man and women. That is the ground of our hope. But we are not naive. We are not blind to the evidence of evil, of weakness, of sheer stupidity, of intransigence, of hatred and of fear that is all around us every day. We know that it cannot be simply wished out of existence. That is not the ground of our despair but of our realism. We are realists, optimistic realists.

This in fact is why we exist as a Party. We do not claim to have a monopoly on virtue or on wisdom. We do claim, however, to be the first and the strongest organised serious alternative to Unionism in the history of Northern Ireland. Our strength is based not alone on our principles, which are, we believe, rational and reasonable. Not on our numbers which are, and have been repeatedly shown impressive, and indeed which have increased by twenty-five per cent in the past twelve months, but also on the fact that we are professional, grass-roots organisation. This Party has grown, to quote an immortal phrase: "grown from the soil of the people's hard necessities". It is now grown up.

It is a serious Party. By that I mean that it is not, and it refuses to be a mouthpiece of individuals or a mere echoing chamber for idiosyncrasies or ambitions. The problems of Northern Ireland are too serious for us to afford such indulgences. The SDLP is not the property of John Hume or Seamus Mallon or Brid Rodgers or Sean Farren, or of any individual. We are the voice of all our members and our supporters. We offer a solid alternative to the splinter groups and individualism of the past. The individualist politician, however charismatic, however brilliant or the

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splinter group has nothing permanent to offer society. An organised and permanent democratic party has and that is one of our strengths. We also try to represent many who have never thought of voting for us. Not in an attempt to secure their support, although we would of course welcome that, but because we are a serious Party in a deadly serious situation.

And while we are on the point, and with great emphasis, say that we are not the agents of any interest or group or individual outside our Party. We are not the agents of Fianna Fail or Fine Gael or the Irish Labour Party. Our consistent policy, no matter who is in Government, and we do not elect the government of the Republic, is to preserve good relations with them all. The Constitutional issue which we represent to them is too serious to be made a party-political issue in the South. Those who say otherwise misrepresent us and mislead the public. I believe that the fact that people sometimes try to misrepresent us reflects the reality that we try hard as we must continue to do to persuade those with power or influence, whether they be in Northern Ireland, in London, in Dublin, in Europe or in the United States, to consider the problem of Northern Ireland in a serious way and to use their influence to help solve it.

We say to them all, whether here in our native North, or in Dublin, or in London, or in Brussels, or in Washington - if you measure Northern Ireland today against the rest of Europe

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on a scale of one to ten you will find that we score either one or ten depending your assessment is one of wellbeing or sheer misery. We score <sup>ten</sup>/on unemployment, ten on the rate of emigration, ten on infant mortality. We score one on the standard of housing, one on life expectancy and one on industrial earnings. We score ten on prison population, ten on civil disturbance, ten on economic dependency on outsiders, ten on communal tension, one on economic development, one on local industrial initiative, one on standard of living and zero as a community on belief in our own future. As we look down the eighties and further we ask everyone concerned with Northern Ireland, including particularly our adverseries, be they political adverseries or the men of violence, to face up to a very harsh reality. We know that unless there are radical changes November 1990 and November 2000 will find all of us in Northern Ireland and all our children still suffering the highest unemployment, the highest rate of emigration, the highest infant mortality, the worst housing, the lowest life expectancy, the lowest earnings and the worst communal hatred and despair, not alone in Europe but probably by then in the world. Under present circumstances the future will inevitably be worse than the past if no action is taken.

This is the reality which we ask you our adverseries to face. It is a reality which now seems inevitable given the general feeling that the problem is too intractable, or worse, that realities should be avoided because they are either too painful or too uncomfortable. It need not be inevitable.

We ask you to join us in replacing with despair with opportunity and hope. "We should all be concerned about the future", wrote Charles Kettering, "because we will all have to spend the rest of our lives there". Northern Ireland does not have a future at present. It does not have a future because there are too many people who are not prepared to face the harsh readjustments that facing reality demands. We ask our adversaries to join us in building a future for the first time for this community. It is <sup>our</sup> / challenge to those who differ from us.

I am, of course talking about partnership. The SDLP has never stopped talking about partnership. It has used every opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to it. Our record in the Northern Ireland Executive and since then in local government is unswervingly consistent. It demonstrates that our policy is correct, practical and effective. In Newry, in Derry, in Down, where we dominate the Councils we have demonstrated our commitment to partnership and to generosity. In Belfast, where we are in the minority, we have used our vote in the interests of partnership leadership of that torn and divided city. By ~~our~~ actions let us be judged. Not by the cheap sneers which would portray us as an entrenched intransigent Party. Yet, in contrast, in Ballymena, in Cookstown, in Craigavon, in Larne, in Linavady and in Arragh, we still witness Unionist and Loyalist intransigence. Unionists continue, where they can, to refuse any role to those who do not share their desperate selfishness and obscurantism. Theirs is a policy of despair about the future. A policy of perpetual separation and division. A policy whose logic is violence and conflict and is disguised from their supporters and themselves as a policy of self interest.

I believe it is now recognised that there is only one significant obstacle to an agreed solution to our future and that that is precisely the extraordinary triangle of prejudice, fear and despair and sheer selfishness which constitutes Unionism today. There are some good reasons for the fear and the despair and there are historical circumstances which account for the prejudice. "Selfishness", Gladstone once said, "is the curse of the human race". It is the curse of Northern Ireland today and it is a curse which must be exorcised if we are not to be condemned to repeat the misery of the past again and again.

A curious and destructive myth has developed since we last met in Conference. It is that the SDLP has abandoned its policy on partnership in government and now insists on a united Ireland, whether Unionists agree or not. Neither proposition is true. I would like to place on record certain facts which reveal the lengths to which we as a Party have been prepared to go to seek a partnership agreement in Northern Ireland. Unionists have argued that powersharing is a trojan horse or that it will not work. We offered that the agreement would last only for a limited period. The life of two Parliaments, ten years, and could then be reviewed. We suggested that relations between North and South be freely negotiated and agreed between the two. We were told bluntly that there were no circumstances in which Unionists would share power with SDLP. So much for the myth of SDLP intransigence. So much for those who refuse to stare the real Northern Ireland problem in the face. We will come to a powersharing agreement today if we can find any Unionists to do so but we must face reality.

I said that the SDLP is composed of realists. It is precisely because we are realists that we have been forced to the conclusion that there is some intractable ingredient in Unionism which prevents Unionists, in present circumstances, from making an act of faith in our future together in partnership. Our facing ~~that~~ conclusion, described by our detractors variously as green rhetoric, nationalist fantasy and so on is, far from being an escape from reality, a confrontation of the real world. Would <sup>that</sup> the reality were otherwise. Unfortunately, it seems not to be so. The SDLP is more than ready to be persuaded to the contrary. It is up to Unionists and Loyalists to persuade us. There seems very little likelihood of that happening under present circumstances. Now we have the options of accepting as inevitable and inescapable the unending prospect of intransigence. In other words a future of violence, and sterility for this community. Make no mistake about it those who argue, and they are many and persuasive, that we cannot have any change because Unionists don't want it, are in fact arguing for, at worst, a permanent state of violence or, at best, a permanent risk of violence, is a party which believes that our problems are indeed extreme but that no effort should be spared to confront and overcome them. We will not accept that. Northern Ireland is to be consigned to the dominion of despair.

An alternative exists that is to recognise and confront the fundamental cause of the inability of Unionists to contemplate the future shared with non-Unionists.

Let me say this I believe that there is very little conscious malevolence in basic Unionist demand for majority rule.

however much justice there is and has been in the practical exercise of majority rule. Their demand seems to Unionists, and perhaps even to others, to be natural, to be logical and to be righteous. It does not occur to them that it is based on a British guarantee to them of perpetual supremacy, the guarantee which is in turn based on specious promises, communal division and coercion arising because of the sectarian origins of the political entity which is called Northern Ireland and, correspondingly, it does not occur to them that this demand is unworkable and nothing less than a recipe for endless crisis and has been shown to be so.

It would, it seems, be unrealistic to expect Unionists, habituated over generations to confident supremacy, to surrender their advantages spontaneously or even to recognise its spurious foundations. What is clear is that until this happens they will not be able to bring themselves to share power with those with whom they must share life in Northern Ireland. Unionist selfishness in this generation is the result less of malevolence than of a privilege which they did not themselves institute. They will not, and probably cannot, make the leap of the imagination alone. They must be helped to do so. The British Government, and only then, can do it. In asking that the British Government withdraw their guarantee to Unionists, the SDLP is not <sup>its</sup> self-demanding any advantage. We are not seeking a counter guarantee of a united Ireland. We are merely seeking a situation without guarantees for any side. We are asking that, for the first time, everyone stand on their own feet which is surely the only basis on which there can be a true settlement.



While Unionists have failed to recognise that their situation is fundamentally untenable, several of their leaders have given clear indication of anxiety about the future. They have expressed serious misgivings about future British intentions in Northern Ireland and even about the credibility of the British guarantee.

Unionists generally have been sustained for generations by a self-image of industriousness, of high productivity and of prosperity. Now they have seen with some alarm the disappearance of locally based enterprise. A growing and almost total dependance on external sources of investment and the relentless shrinking of our own industrial base in Northern Ireland.

Most galling of all they have watched with envy mixed with resentment of the rapid industrial development in the South in which local enterprises played a large and confident role. The South has obviously benefitted infinitely more than has the North from Membership of the European Community and this has itself, very rightly, raised doubts in the minds of many Unionists, about the willingness of the British to champion Northern Irish interests in Brussels at the expense of other British concerns. It has even created serious misgivings, again well founded in concrete fact, about the suitability, in terms of Unionists own interests, of a remote and preoccupied British Government on which they are abjectly dependent to deal with their problems generally.

Unionists are also haunted by a Malthusian nightmare in which they will be outbred and outvoted in Northern Ireland. As the demographic structure shifts inexorably against them for reasons which are more than a rise in the birth rate, they see with horror yet another foundation of their supremacy crumble. Like the Romans and like their own forebearers of 1640 they sense the suppressed barbarians stirring more impudently in their midst. They fear the vengeance of this sullen tribe, so recently the object of their contemptuous injustice. They fear that the sectarian murders of the Provisional IRA are but a preview of the genocide which is being prepared for them. These doubts, fears, misgivings and dire forebodings are not without substance. What scenario, for example, could be more frightening than the first referendum on Irish unity on which the issue is in serious doubt. In an Northern Ireland still torn by division and violence such a situation could quite possibly arise within a generation. A generation which, if no fundamental changes occur, will be characterised by a deepening economic decline, a continued weakening of Unionist self-confidence and a growing dependence on an untrustworthy, introspective, impotent and resentful Britain. This is the scenario I had in mind when I said that Northern Ireland has no future unless there is radical change. The SDLP holds that there is a creative and prosperous future for all of us here, Unionist and non-unionist alike. There is a major role for Unionists to play in a new and agreed Ireland and the SDLP will fight with them to ensure that their right to play this role to the full is secured. Our Party has been giving serious and again I use the word deliberately, realistic consideration to the possible structures of an agreed Ireland such as might best accommodate

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substantial anxieties of Loyalists and we have at this Conference published some of the fruits of our reflections in a document entitled 'A Strategy for Peace'. Unionists themselves are obviously the best placed to determine which of the options, a unitary, a federal or a confederal Irish state might best suit their interests. The SDLP has convinced that the most secure, the most prosperous and the most congenial future for Unionists will be found in an agreed Ireland, whatever its structural configuration which is a close and agreed relationship with Great Britain and which gives expression to the many interlocking relationships between the people of these islands. What is more, they will have a greater and more secure role in shaping their own future than they have now for it will be based on their own strength, rather than the transient whims of a British Parliament and Ireland will be the richer too for the diversity which they will create.

Fellow delegates as our second decade begins we look to the eighties with hope and with a courage without which the SDLP would not exist to recognise the full extent of our problem and the difficult measures necessary to overcome them.

As we meet Northern Ireland is once again gripped by rising tension and a renewal of division in our community because of the dangers in the delicate 'H' Block issue. We have debated this in a very full way and we have confirmed our policy. Here I will only repeat that, if requested, we stand ready to use our good offices to defuse the dangers of the situation and to save human lives. 'H' Block is but another grotesque symptom of the basic sickness which is convulsing Northern Ireland. When a system of order is not

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based on the consensus of that society there will always be distortions of that system of order and there are and have been many. But our concern for human rights does not stop at 'H' Block. We have to say and we say again to those organisations and those who engage in violence and their supporters that we in this Party do not need lectures or advice from them on human rights. The most fundamental human right of all is the right to life and those organisations who take life diminish the human rights of everyone in society. Years ago Thomas Davis asked, in condemning a vicious killing, at a time of great deprivation in Ireland, "the people of Munster are in want. Will murder feed them?" To all those organisations who use murder as a political weapon I say today the people of Ulster are in want. Will murder feed them? The choice before our society, epitomised by this latest divisive crisis is are we prepared to preclude the recurrence of such tensions so that we do not have this same problem again in 1990 and again in 2000. Does the North have a future? The SDLP say to Unionists, to London, to Dublin, yes we do. Our adversaries seem to be saying by their actions and their attitudes no we don't. There is nothing to be done. There is no hope. The SDLP believes that there is hope now if we act together, Unionist, Non-Unionist, Southerners and British. We in Northern Ireland, the victims of a miserable past need not be the prisoners of a catastrophic future. Let us for the first time take control of our future together, our destiny. As Leon Uris wrote: "In Ireland there is no future only the past repeating itself over and over and over again". There is some evidence for his comment. Have we in this generation the courage and the vision to break this vicious cycle? I believe we have and the strength of this Conference and the

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remarkable commitment of you the ordinary members of this Party, in spite of great adversity fuels that hope. Let us make our future, not the past, the prologue and the spur for our present actions and decisions.

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