

A UNITED IRELAND AND THE AGREEMENT - SDLP STRATEGY DOCUMENT

November 2003

“We seek a united Ireland that is confident, pluralist and non-sectarian. One that can find the magnanimity to offer a home not only to those who are Irish, but also to those among us who are British. One that is unafraid of differing identities and allegiances. One that will respect and protect them all.”

SDLP Leader Mark Durkan

100% for a United Ireland, 100% for the Good Friday Agreement

The Good Friday Agreement realised the SDLP’s vision of an Agreed Ireland, with commitments to:

- exclusively peaceful and democratic means;
- partnership, inclusivity and cross-community protections;
- equality;
- the right to identify oneself as British or Irish; and
- democratic consent as the basis for constitutional change.

As a nationalist party, the SDLP’s goal has not only been to secure an Agreed Ireland, but also to create a United Ireland. Our vision of a United Ireland respects the same commitments that lie at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. In the United Ireland to which we are committed, all the Agreement’s principles and protections would endure.

That is why, uniquely among parties in the North, the SDLP is 100% for the Good Friday Agreement and 100% for a United Ireland.

The threshold for unity

The Good Friday Agreement is clear that the British Government must enter into negotiations with the Irish Government to provide for a United Ireland if in a referendum a majority in the North votes for one. That is also the position of the SDLP. Of course, there also has to be a referendum in the South.

The SDLP recognises that it would be wrong to force Northern Ireland into a United Ireland without the consent of a majority. We are equally opposed to any suggestion that Northern Ireland should be kept in the United Kingdom despite the vote of a majority.

We cannot agree with Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams that unionist “*consent and assent*” would be required. Nor can we agree with Jeffrey Donaldson and other unionists who have advocated the same position. The threshold for a United Ireland cannot be any higher than for a United Kingdom.

Uniquely among the main parties in the North, the SDLP is clear that there must be a United Ireland if a majority votes in favour.

A United Ireland – structures and strategy

In common with other parties, the SDLP seeks a United Ireland. Uniquely among parties in the North, we are clear on the structures of a United Ireland and the strategy for achieving it.

In particular, in the United Ireland that the SDLP seeks:

- *the Assembly would continue, as a regional parliament of a United Ireland with all its cross-community protections.*
- *the Executive would be kept, bringing together all political parties.*
- *all the Agreement's equality and human rights protections, including the Bill of Rights, would still be guaranteed.*
- *The right to identify oneself as British or Irish, or both, and hold British or Irish passports would endure.*
- *East/West cooperation would continue. In particular, just as the Irish Government has a say in the North now, the British Government would have a say in the North in a United Ireland.*
- *Just as there is northern representation in the Seanad at present, those in the North who want it should have representation in the House of Lords in a United Ireland.*

The SDLP's vision of a United Ireland is based on equality. We believe that all the rights, protections and inclusion that nationalists sought within Northern Ireland while it is in the United Kingdom, must equally be guaranteed to unionists within a United Ireland. We are emphatic that unity must not be about the entrapment of a new minority.

That is right in principle - since in a United Ireland we will still need to find a way of sharing our society as equals every bit as much as we do today – and that is what the Agreement is all about. Further, the Agreement enjoys more support than either the continuation of the United Kingdom or a United Ireland. It is a democratic common denominator between nationalists and unionists. It would be perverse for the Agreement not to continue in a United Ireland.

It is also right in practice. Those who rely on demographic change alone must realise that it will not deliver unity any time soon. Nor will it deliver stability. Census politics will never do away with the need for consensus institutions of government.

Making clear that all the Agreement's protections will continue regardless of the referendum's outcome provides the best context for winning unity. A majority is most likely to vote for a United Ireland when reassured that it is neither a vote against the Agreement nor a vote for constitutional uncertainty. People need to know what they are voting for. They need to have certainty that their rights, identity and interests will be protected in a United Ireland.

Voters in the southern referendum will also want to be assured that a United Ireland will not bring instability or uncertainty. They will not want to see the Good Friday Agreement undone.

Holding a referendum

After the elections there will be a review. During that review, the SDLP will be insisting on the full implementation of the Agreement. We will also during the review seek a date for a referendum. We believe that the referendum should be held once the Agreement's institutions have bedded down and are operating stably. All this can be done during the lifetime of the next Assembly.

The SDLP is not alone in wanting a referendum. Sinn Fein, the UUP and the DUP have also said that they are in favour of holding one.

During the talks at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, the SDLP sought the agreement of all the island's parties that the Agreement would continue in a United Ireland. We will continue to seek such an understanding.

That way, when people vote in a referendum, they know that neither the holding of the referendum nor its outcome will in anyway destabilise the Agreement. Rather, it will allow people to express honest differences about honest constitutional preferences.

The SDLP will:

- *Seek the endorsement of all southern parties for our strategy for achieving a United Ireland based on the Good Friday Agreement.*
- *In the forthcoming review, seek agreement on a date for a referendum on a United Ireland.*
- *Campaign vigorously in favour of a yes vote on unity while reassuring unionists of their guaranteed place in a United Ireland.*

Instead of making clear that the Agreement will endure, Sinn Fein has argued that unionists should negotiate the kind of United Ireland that they want.

If Sinn Fein expects unionists to conduct such negotiations now, they are misguided. Unionists are most unlikely to negotiate on a United Ireland before a referendum.

If, on the other hand, Sinn Fein expects negotiations after a referendum, they are also misguided. Winning a referendum will be made much more difficult if voters know nothing of how they will be governed afterwards, other than that there will be negotiations.

Changing Ireland

Although the Agreement will continue, unity will radically change the North and the whole island. The SDLP believes that following the referendum, there will have to be a review under the Agreement where changes to it and the Irish Constitution to provide for a United Ireland will be agreed between nationalists and unionists.

In particular:

- *Instead of sending MP's to Westminster, TD's will be elected to the sovereign parliament, Dáil Éireann. The North will have much greater representation in the Dáil than at Westminster - and therefore more power.*
- *Agreement will have to be reached on the guaranteed inclusion of northern representatives in the Dublin government.*
- *Consideration will need to be given to the powers of the Assembly. It may make sense for the Assembly to have some new powers, and for some of its existing powers to be exercised by Dáil Éireann instead.*
- *The Irish constitution will have to be revised, in particular to:*
 - Guarantee the future of the Assembly as a regional parliament of a United Ireland.
 - Implement all the protections of the Good Friday Agreement.
 - Ensure that Ireland offers an inclusive home not only to those who are Irish, but also to those who are British and to reflect better the pluralist nature of life on the island.
 - Guarantee British citizenship to those who wish to have it in the North.

The SDLP also believes that in the context of unity there would be a realignment of politics, with parties of the left - and right - joining together across the island.

SDLP - Persuaders for Unity

Some have argued that a United Ireland can be brought about simply by demographic change. However, it is clear that this would not achieve unity any time soon. Nor would it deliver stability.

Only the SDLP has the strategy to deliver unity soon and successfully. And only the SDLP, as a party of true republicanism, can deliver on that strategy.

Achieving a United Ireland will require the persuasion of some unionists and the reassurance of many others. Because of our unblemished commitment to exclusively peaceful means and our unqualified commitment to the Agreement, only the SDLP can persuade a majority in the North in favour of unity. That is why only the SDLP can deliver a United Ireland.

In working towards this goal, we believe that nationalism needs to embrace unionism more, not because the numbers tell us we must, but because our desire for a peaceful future on this island as equals and as partners tells us we should.

Those who lecture unionists about their need to prepare for re-unification have to accept that it is not just through words but actions as well that unity will be achieved. It is futile talking in high-minded language about unity while at the same time engaging in the sort of underhand actions that put unionists off even the Agreement, never mind the idea of a united Ireland.

Unity will be delivered by peaceful and democratic persuasion and reassurance. Having persuaded in favour of all the principles of the Agreement, the SDLP is convinced that we can persuade in favour of unity also.

The Agreement – a covenant of honour

The Agreement does not make unionists nationalists in waiting. Nor does it make nationalists unionists in waiting. Rather, it allows a peaceful competition of ideas between unionism and nationalism while also bringing unionists and nationalists to work together to make a better society for us all.

For the SDLP the principles of the Agreement are not temporary, tactical, or transitional. Rather, they are a covenant of honour between nationalists and unionists that should endure regardless of changes in the constitutional status.

For unionists to "smash the Agreement" would be to forego not only their say in the Northern Ireland of today, but their guaranteed position in a future United Ireland. We call on unionists to support the Agreement and not to breach the covenant of honour in their own interest and in the interest of all.

North/South and East/West agendas

As well as seeking unity, the SDLP want to see a strong North/South agenda. We do not pretend that North/South cooperation is a staging post on the road to unity. Rather it involves working together to benefit everybody on the island. We hope that by working together, we will be able to overcome the legacy of suspicion left by the Troubles and progress to an ever closer relationship between North and South.

Most important in this regard are the **North-South consultative Forum** and the **North-South Parliamentary body**. The SDLP wants to see the creation of these without any further delay.

Our priorities for North/South cooperation include:

Energy and infrastructure

- Create a **new all-Ireland transport & infrastructure body** to produce a **strategic development framework** for network air and sea-ports and economic corridors and co-ordinating key projects such as the construction of the "TENS" (Trans-European Networks).
- Accelerate the opening of an **all-Ireland energy market** to increase competition and reduce energy prices.
- Actively encourage Ofreg NI and the regulator in the South, to work together to develop a new **all-Ireland energy planning framework**.
- Continue to advocate recognition of Ireland, North and South, as a **European Energy Zone**, to assist us in reducing costs, meeting targets and improving planning.
- Expand the **gas network** on a North-South and East-West basis.

Economy & Skills

- Agree an **all-Ireland marketing co-operation and investment** strategy.
- Create a new **all-Ireland Research Alliance**, based on the successful Georgia Research Alliance, to work with colleges and other institutions to operate a 'mix and match' service with businesses, maximising the economic potential of new research as quickly as possible.
- Removal of all **cross-border trading impediments**, e.g. reducing bureaucracy associated with livestock sales.
- Establish a **North-South Further & Higher Education body** to encourage collaboration in policy, teaching, research, evaluation, recognition of qualifications and models of excellence.
- **Commission the economic research bodies North and South** to work together to produce proposals for **further all-Ireland co-operation and development** in social and economic policy.

Policing and Justice

- Create an **All-Ireland Criminal Assets Bureau**, modelled on the Criminal Assets Bureau in the South, to deprive criminals of their wrongful gains without fear or favour throughout the island.
- Establish an **all-Ireland Law Commission** to research and promote harmonisation of laws.
- Develop all Ireland **police training at the new police college**.
- Advance **North/South police personnel exchanges** in the agreed areas: serious crime, change management, drugs, community policing, ethical standards, criminal assets, training, immigration, traffic, personnel, fingerprinting and IT.
- Create an **All-Ireland sex offenders register**.

Health, Social Policy and Environment

- Agree **All-Ireland free travel scheme for pensioners** through mutual recognition of pensioner identification, to boost tourism as well as improving cohesion of rights and benefits island-wide.
- Comprehensive all-Ireland research on **anti-poverty strategies**.
- **Advance all-Ireland co-operation in health** to maximise opportunities for investment in specialist services and equipment which would be otherwise unaffordable in either jurisdiction.
- Develop a **waste management strategy** on the basis of North-South and East-West co-operation, to move away from landfill and maximise opportunities to 'reduce, re-use and recycle'.
- Create an **all-Ireland Public Safety Body** to build on the successful collaboration on road safety advertising and education initiatives to work systematically to bring down the incidence of injury and fatalities arising from accidents in the home, at work and on the roads.

Food and Agriculture

- Establish a new **All-Ireland Food Marketing Body** to improve branding of local produce and conduct a vigorous international marketing campaign capitalising on the green, clean image of Ireland
- Complete an **All-Ireland Animal Health Strategy** – centred on the development of an effective contingency plan, with greater control of restricted herds and improved monitoring.
- Develop an **all-Ireland position on reform of the Common Fisheries Policy** to secure the future of Irish fishing.
- Develop and promote an **all-Ireland agenda** for agricultural and rural development.

Equality, community relations and rights

- Work to agree an **all-Ireland Charter of Rights**, to guarantee the highest standards of human rights throughout the North.
- All-Ireland action on **tackling racism**.
- The development of an all-Ireland victim-centred mechanism for **truth and remembrance**.
- Development of common effective **incitement to hatred laws**, North and South.
- Action to promote **community relations and reconciliation**, North and South.

Culture and Irish Language

- Develop all-Ireland arts, culture and leisure strategies.
- Secure all-Ireland coverage of RTE television & TG4.
- Increase all-Ireland funding for Irish-medium television

East West priorities

The SDLP also wants to see work carried out on an East/West basis through the British Irish Council. In order to ensure the Council's efficiency, we want in particular to ensure that it has a proper **secretariat**.

We also want to see the **British Irish Parliamentary Forum** put on proper footing.

Some of our proposals for North/South cooperation can also usefully be complemented by East/West work. Our priorities for East/West cooperation include:

- **Environment**, particularly regarding the **Irish Sea**.
- **Drugs**.
- **Criminal assets recovery** between our proposed all-Ireland body and the GB Assets Recovery Agency.
- **Trafficking of humans**.
- **Communications**.
- Management of **hazardous waste**.
- Cooperation on **tracking of sex offenders**.