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The Future of Northern Nationalism

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May I begin by expressing my thanks to Paul McErlean and the Irish Association for the kind invitation to address this seminar today.

I stand here as a nationalist. As a social democrat. As a supporter of the Good Friday Agreement. As a former Minister who believes deeply in the Agreement's Pledge of Office for Ministers to work for all the people of Northern Ireland equally.

Each belief complements and underwrites the other. My sense of identity as an Irish nationalist is not diminished in any way by my full commitment to the vision and the values of the Agreement. Rather the power of the Agreement is that it gives legitimate expression to my identity just as it does for unionists. It provides a vehicle for the delivery of the social democratic values I espouse. It creates a shared platform from where we must all cultivate a shared purpose.

It is very clear to me today that there are choices to make. Between sectarian hatred and shared hope. Between perpetuating outdated enmities and developing new partnerships. Between the stark realities of economic deprivation and poverty and the endless possibilities of growth and stability. Between the promise of the Agreement and the hopelessness of division and stagnation.

I am clear about where I stand. I want to make the Agreement work in full, for all. I wish other pro-Agreement leaders were equally unambiguous. Unfortunately we have some political leaders who are all on for some of the Agreement and others who are half on for all of the Agreement. It is time for those that signed the Agreement to stand by the Agreement. No more messing.

I would like nothing more than to be able to stand here this morning and speak of a political process that is stable, progressive and dynamic. Instead we have to endure the stop-start-stop politics of false hope and disillusionment.

For five years now since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, the democratic will of the people of Ireland has been held hostage. Sometimes it has been the Ulster Unionist Council. Sometimes, like now, it is the IRA Army Council that stands between the people of Ireland and the Agreement they mandated us all to implement. Between them they have stymied progress and frustrated change. By continually seeking to undermine each other they have failed to honour their democratic duty to the people.

We have all paid a price for their stand-offs and stunts. We often think that the eyes of the world are on us. More often than not the eyes of the world are rolling up to heaven as they watch us time and again snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. It



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would appear that here in the North, two steps back inevitably follow one step forward.

Everywhere I go across the North, people are telling me how frustrated they are. At a time when places like Derry and the Northwest are crying out for job creation, when community and voluntary workers in places I have visited recently - like Portadown, West Belfast and Cookstown - are crying out for the benefits of devolution, people only see their politicians crying at each other. It is little wonder that people on the ground feel so fed up and let down.

Between them the recalcitrant or self-indulgent elements of republicanism and unionism may be able to hold up the political process. But they must not be allowed to stand in the way of the democratic process. The governments must ensure that the Assembly elections go ahead as planned on 29th May. If the political parties cannot provide the clarity and certainty needed to make the Agreement work then the people must be given the opportunity to provide it for them by giving a new mandate for the Agreement to those who are most committed to it.

The SDLP shares in the people's sense of frustration. We want to bring the Agreement back, not just so that we can get back into government, but so that we can get back to delivering for the people. We want to use the institutions of government as the tools with which we will build a new country, partnership as the fuel that drives a better society, and democracy as the machinery with which we can generate a strong economy. We want to make this a better country.

For this, we need to see the full implementation of the whole Agreement. Not just a restoration of the pre-suspension status quo, but the delivery of all the other aspects that had not yet been implemented pre-suspension. This will mean the North South Parliamentary Forum. The North South Consultative Forum. The Charter of Fundamental Rights. The full all-Ireland agenda. And the full East West agenda as well.

We need to see all parties that support the Agreement taking part in all aspects of it. This requires full commitment to the inclusive political institutions and full commitment to the inclusive policing arrangements. No more half measures or double standards. No more messing.

The dangers of today in our political process are clear and self-evident. They can be summed up in one simple question, the answer to which will impact for a generation to come. Are the political parties in Northern Ireland up to the challenge of building a new and better country through the Good Friday Agreement?



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I cannot answer this question for others. But I can say that the SDLP, as the architects and engineers of the Agreement, is up for - and up to - playing our part in building that new Ireland on the foundations of the Agreement.

I am proud to be leader of a party that wants to be part of this great national endeavour. The SDLP is ready and willing to drive forward this agenda. We do so from the North, for the island with those who represent all the people of Ireland.

Born of circumstances we would never have chosen, the SDLP has, from our station in the North, served to set the compass for all the main parties in the South through the dark and difficult journey of a generation. From the non-violent civil rights movement to the Good Friday Agreement, we have brought a community from grievance to governance.

As a Nationalist, I am 100% for a united Ireland, just as I am 100% for the Agreement. I believe unity can be attained. In unity I believe the Agreement can and must be sustained.

Through the Agreement, we have delivered on our pledge to create an agreed Ireland by persuading others of the value and the validity of our thinking about the necessity of partnership and equality. Now we can build a united Ireland, again defined by our vision and values.

Our vision for genuine inclusion defined by our values of respect for diversity.

Our vision for dynamic partnership inspired by our values of guaranteed equality.

Our vision for a prosperous country underlined by our values of social justice for all.

The united Ireland the SDLP believes in will be built upon the rock solid foundations of the Good Friday Agreement. It will be underpinned by the democratic consent of the people of Ireland.

Nationalist Ireland knows in its heart that we cannot achieve the quality or depth of unity we want on our own or in isolation from unionism. In the Agreement, we all accepted that unity must be achieved through consent.

In working towards this goal, 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 are lecturing 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



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time engaging in the sort of underhand actions that put unionists off even the Agreement, never mind the idea of a united Ireland.

We know as well that Irish Nationalism cannot stand still and that in truth the very idea of 'northern nationalism' cannot be defined in isolation from the wider island-wide nationalism. Just as we hope to develop the potential of new partnerships in the North in ways that will encourage people to cross the traditional lines of division, so too do I want to see new lines of partnership across the island that will transcend the traditional lines of co-operation.

The Agreement has created a whole new context for us all and the SDLP is awake to this. We will be at the epicentre of all the realignments that can and must take place.

Last week I was proud to address an SDLP event in the Mansion House in Dublin at which the span of political life in the South was present, from Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour, the PDs, the Greens and Independent TDs. I was just as proud on the Agreement's fifth anniversary - at another SDLP event - to address an audience made up of many of the walks of life and strands of belief that combine to drive forward so much that is positive about Northern Ireland. I did so alongside a member of the Ulster Unionist Party.

There is not another political party on this island that has either the democratic credentials or the integrity to reach across all the divisions in the way that the SDLP can. When the North South Parliamentary Forum gets down to work and when the institutions really open up to the new politics, it will be around the social democratic values and progressive vision of the SDLP that others will rally. We will be catalysts for this development, not casualties of it.

This required island-wide vision must mean that in the early years of the twenty first century, all parties of nationalist and republican outlook must join with the SDLP to make clear that the Agreement will continue no matter the constitutional status of the North. The distinct and inclusive regional government arrangements, proportionality, cross-community protections, equality commitments and human rights safeguards which exist in the North while we are in the UK will at least equally apply in the united Ireland we seek to achieve by democratic consent as provided for by the Agreement. Not only do I believe in this vision for Ireland, I believe in our ability to deliver it.

We must now get ready for the job of persuading the people of Ireland that this vision is the best way forward for us all, that the united Ireland we believe in holds out the guarantee of permanent peace, economic growth and an inclusive and fair society.



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We make no apology for being radical of thought and firm of resolve on the issue of unity. We make no apology either for working to reassure Unionism that our objective is not domination but equal partnership. We believe that unity can be achieved by reaching out to Unionists, not by reaching for them.

The Agreement creates new political givens which allow nationalism to articulate itself in new ways and to participate at new levels - at all levels 'new nationalism'. I also recognise, listening to people like Trevor Ringland, that it allows a new unionism to express itself too. Let the new competition between nationalism and unionism be mutual assurance instead of mutual attrition. The Agreement and the nature of its validation meant that we can underwrite each other's legitimacy and underwrite shared institutions instead of undermining each other's legitimacy and cherished aspirations.

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. I feel heartened not threatened when I hear some unionists sincerely say that they seek a Northern Ireland with those qualities.

The SDLP is proud to call itself a party of true republicanism. In the twenty-first century Irish republicanism must not be allowed to be used as a synonym for a narrow nationalism. Rather it must be a by-word for the relentless pursuit of equality, for the unflinching defence of social justice and the promotion of unity, peacefully and by democratic consent.

Those of us that share in the true republican ideals of unity among Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter must stand against those that would denigrate and degrade those ideals in a rush for domination over other traditions. We must do more to promote bigger ideas and better ideals than that.

The responsibility of nationalist and republican Ireland must not just be about the national security we want for the country at large, but also the social security we promise to young mothers, to senior citizens, to refugees.

Our national values are to be epitomised not by the standards we raise on flagpoles, but by the standards we ensure in economic life, in social conditions, in cultural expression and in environmental protection.



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It must not just be about reducing political differences but overcoming social divisions as well.

Living by these values we can differentiate Ireland as a country and distinguish ourselves as a people.

We must be about providing across this island - Derry to Dublin, Belfast to Bantry - an enhanced national fabric. We can and must strive for the best for our people. The best schools. The best roads. The best hospitals. The best jobs. The best opportunities. The best hope.

Nationalist and unionist alike, we know the Agreement is our country's best bet for a stable and progressive future. That is why we will stand by the Agreement come what may. We recognise its transforming power for Ireland in this new century. We appreciate its promise and believe in its potential. We are for all of the Agreement all of the time, now and for the future. As the clearly mandated will of the people of Ireland, North and South, it provides a rock solid basis for guaranteeing confidence and certainty among all of the people. As the democratic common denominator between Nationalism and Unionism, Republicanism and Loyalism, it can emancipate for us all our biggest and best opportunities.

Our objectives are clear. So too are our motives. Over the past few weeks and months, I have met with children and young people throughout the North. I wish the leaders of all the pro-Agreement parties could meet those young people to see and hear for themselves the responsibility that rests with us all.

They represent every reason why the pro-Agreement parties must make the Agreement work and deliver it in full, for all. They underline for me why we cannot and will not squander the best opportunity in a generation to create a new society where we will live together as equals, work together as partners and grow together as friends. They instil in me an unbreakable confidence that their generation is ready to turn the pages of history and write a new book for themselves and for each other.

In our hands is the capacity to build a future together the limits of which are set only at the limits of our own creativity and imagination. Our own self-belief and belief in each other, our own will for change as equals and desire for stability as partners.

At our fingertips is the chance to cross the traditional lines of division and forge instead new lines of partnership.



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In our sights is an Ireland where diversity radiates, where hope resonates, where opportunity reverberates. Where conflict, division and despair will be the sorry footnotes of our history and peace, equality and justice will be chapter headings in the new book we will write together.