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PRESS RELEASE

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EMBARGO: MIDNIGHT, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

STATEMENT FROM SDLP CONSTITUENCY REPRESENTATIVES

The SDLP has held consistently to the view that the first essential step towards settling the problems of Northern Ireland and providing a framework which could allow for a progressive elimination of the sectarian divisions which disfigure our society is an agreement between both sections of our community. As a Party we have worked hard to achieve such agreement. In 1973 we reached an agreement which was supported by an overwhelming majority of the population of both islands. It was destroyed by Unionist intransigence. Since then we have endeavoured by every means at our disposal to achieve agreement, even entering frameworks for agreement (e.g. the Northern Ireland Convention) about which we had expressed grave reservations in advance. All efforts have foundered on the same rock of intransigence. Unionist politicians will consider no agreement except a return of former power to them at every level. In the context of present British policy, it is the considered view of the SDLP that there can

be no hope of change in Unionist attitudes and therefore no hope of agreement. Indeed given the promised inducements of both the Labour Administration and Tory Opposition, the possibility of agreement is being pushed even further away as Unionists are encouraged to believe that they can achieve their objectives through the Parliamentary desires of both major Parties in Westminster. Indeed Mr. Enoch Powell feels able to promise with certainty that he can achieve a restoration of local Unionist power.

The SDLP therefore believe that if there is to be agreement between both traditions in Ireland essential to lasting peace the context in which agreement is sought must be changed. The basis of British policy since 1920 has been an absolute guarantee to Unionists they remain part of the United Kingdom as long as they wish. It is not unreasonable to point out that as a basis of policy it has provided neither peace, stability, justice nor a means of eroding the outdated sectarian divisions. Is it unreasonable to ask what it has achieved? Indeed, there is a clear case to argue that this policy has acted as a barrier to meaningful dialogue for as long as these guarantees exist there is no incentive for unionists to talk to anyone.

Against this background it was quite predictable that the leadership and membership of the SDLP at its recent Conference should declare the British presence to be an obstacle to genuine dialogue and therefore genuine peace and to call for its eventual removal. There are those who affirm that the British should simply withdraw and leave both sides to hammer out a settlement. The SDLP

does not favour this approach. It is fraught with too many risks for the future peace and stability in Ireland. Instead the SDLP believes that the British have a role to play in bringing both parts of Ireland together in agreement before withdrawing. We believe that Britain should now adopt a new policy, the objective of which is the eventual coming together, in agreement, harmony, unity and independence of both sections of the people of Ireland and that Britain should use all her considerable resources and influence towards that end. The SDLP reiterate yet again that it seeks not a take-over of the North by the South nor the absorption of the Northern Protestants into a purely Catholic state but a new Ireland in which there would be a positive role to play for all sections and positive guarantees for the protection of the rights of all. There are different institutional ways of bringing this about. We are prepared to consider them all.

Following our Conference decision therefore SDLP has decided to launch a New Ireland Campaign designed to harness the support of everyone in Britain, Ireland or elsewhere who have a positive interest in a peaceful, harmonious and lasting settlement to the Irish problem. The immediate objective of the campaign will be to raise the issue in Britain itself by consistent discussion with British Parties and opinion-makers at all levels with a view to achieving a radical change in British policy.

Meetings with Government and Parties in Britain and the Republic are being arranged with this end in view.

International opinion is also in the process of being harnessed. A strong determined approach is required. Strong and clear-cut leadership will be given by the GDLF.

(ENDS)