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28 February, 1983

John Bowman:

In the course of the Assembly elections last October, the SDLP put forward proposals for a Council for a new Ireland. From their manifesto I quote "It is time for those who believe in a new Ireland to spell out their proposals in some detail and towards that end it is the intention of the SDLP to propose to the Irish Government the setting up of a Council for a new Ireland made up of members of the Dail and also those mandated in this Assembly election. The Council", said the SDLP, "should have a limited life and have the specific task of examining the obstacles to the creation of a new Ireland and producing for the first time on behalf of all the elected democratic parties in the country an agreed blueprint so that a debate on real alternatives can begin within the Anglo-Irish framework. The SDLP would hope to play its part in such a body."

Now that proposal has since been put to the Irish Government, the Coalition Government at talks about a week ago by the party leader, John Hume, in Dublin. He also spoke then to the Fianna Fail leader, Charles Haughey; and in the course of Mr Haughey's address at the week-end he said, "We would support as a valuable first step in preparation for the final constitutional settlement the SDLP proposal for a Council for a new Ireland. Such a Council could in advance prepare an outline plan which would command the support of all shades of nationalist opinion and could then be put before the all round constitutional conference". John Hume joins me from Derry.

Now are you happy with the response so far from Charles Haughey?

John Hume:

Oh, yes, we are very pleased that Mr Haughey in his address to the Ard Fheis has specifically endorsed our proposal; just as I welcomed last week the Government's intention to enter into consultation with the parties in the Dail with a view to establishing an agreed approach and we are hopeful that these consultations will now lead to the full acceptance of our proposal.

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John Bowman:

Now there has been some comment quoted from SDLP sources suggesting that those sources are less than happy with the Government's response?

John Hume:

Well, I haven't found that at all. I find that there is a welcome for the Government's response because remember, the Government's response was I think a natural response in the circumstances. It has agreed to take the first step because if we are going to set up an all-party body then clearly there has got to be agreement among the parties so the Government being a government has got to ensure that there is going to be such agreement before committing itself to it. I think that Mr Haughey's week-end response shows that that agreement is now possible.

John Bowman:

Mr Haughey, for instance, in an interview after the Ard Fheis said he didn't quite understand what the Government were saying. He was unsure of what they were at in their response to your suggestion.

John Hume:

Well, I understand them to be saying that they
First of all I have had lengthy discussions with the Government and with Mr Haughey and I understand the Government to be saying that they are now going to enter into consultations with the parties in the Dail with a view to seeing whether in fact such a structure as we proposed can be set up and I hope that of course... I don't underestimate them, neither does anyone, the differences that exist between the parties in the South. I think it's not hiding anything, it's well known that the party differences in the Dail are sharper than they have been for a very long time. So are the personality differences and that makes an agreed approach perhaps more difficult but as against that the crisis in the North is far worse than it has ever been and calls for reserves of generosity and rising above party differences; and indeed if these party differences didn't exist on the North we wouldn't be putting forward such a proposal at this time because we believe that it is absolutely

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essential that there be a united approach in the face of the present crisis in the North to the British Government because if the North is a party political issue in the Republic then there isn't going to be any solution. The British Government will always be able to play off one party's approach against another which is what they have done very successfully to date.

John Bowman:

But not on personalities. It is specifically on policy. Mr Haughey has always emphasised that he hasn't really understood the emphasis on bi-partisanship during perhaps Mr Lynch's term as leader of Fianna Fail and he sees really significant differences between the Fianna Fail policy on Northern Ireland and other parties' policies in this island.

John Hume:

Well, we see differences in their approach as well, of the parties in their emphasis. I think it wouldn't be an unfair summary to suggest that Fianna Fail have always concentrated on the British responsibility and the need for Britain to take the major step to bring about change whereas the Government parties have concentrated more on reconciliation within Ireland. Now we in the SDLP happen to believe that a solution requires actually both approaches to go hand in hand because both the British have got to change their position and so have the Unionists and so indeed have the rest of us because I have often said that the differences in the North, that they have built a wall at the moment in the North between the two sections of the community in Belfast, an actual physical wall. That wall has replaced lines of British soldiers and I mean the very existence of that wall is an indictment of everybody in Ireland because what it actually means is that our past approaches have led us there and if it doesn't force us or doesn't challenge us to have a re-think about our whole approach then nothing ever will. And what we are basically saying is this and this is where I think the area of agreement will emerge, if people sincerely want to solve the Northern problem. If you look at the fundamental British position and the fundamental Unionist position, they are actually identical and therefore if

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you want to change it and remember we are all committed to changing it by political means, then we must do it by the full process of persuasion and that fundamental position is this. Unionism has represented itself in this country as the only protector of the Protestant heritage in Ireland and that any solution outside the Unionist context would, in fact, threaten the Protestant identity. That is not only a challenge to the rest of Ireland. That is, in fact, an insult to the rest of Ireland, because it is saying that we cannot build in Ireland a definition of Irishness which is all-encompassing of all our traditions. Now the British Government's position is that it tacitly accepts that, because that is the only tangible reason for the maintenance of, for Britain maintaining the Unionist veto and change. Now the only people who can actually challenge that are the democratic parties in the Dail and parties like ourselves by coming together and showing that we can rise above party differences and put a blueprint on the table for an Ireland which does encompass and cherish all its traditions.

John Bowman:

Now the SDLP's proposals for a Council for a new Ireland. You want that to have a limited life and to represent democratic parties throughout the island. Are you accepting that realistically that although they would be theoretically entitled to come, that Unionists and in that I am including the Alliance party, wouldn't be arriving at that Council?

John Hume:

Oh I am accepting that. I think you see that people, I think in fairness, particularly in the South tend to all the time not to separate in their minds Unionists and Protestants whereas we do. There is in our proposals all the time a distinct difference when we are talking about Unionists and when we are talking about the Protestant population. We are not excluding the Protestant population in any way from our deliberations. We are excluding Unionists because in effect we are challenging the whole basis of unionism, and we are saying to the rest that you cannot produce a non-sectarian Ireland. That's what

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John Bowman:

Hold on. Are you saying that you would exclude the Unionists from coming to the Council for a new Ireland, or have you just realised that they wouldn't bother arriving?

John Hume:

Well, I don't think it makes sense to invite them because the whole purpose of it is to challenge the whole basis of the unionist philosophy. What we are saying is that there is another form of Ireland which can protect the Protestant tradition and allow it to develop. We are not excluding anybody who believes in a new Ireland. The Unionists have specifically said they don't and so have the Alliance party. But what we would hope would happen would be that if and when the body that we have proposed produces its blueprint and that it does show as I would expect it would or put on the table a very generous vision of a new Ireland; that that would then create quite an amount of debate and discussion within the North and particularly within the Protestant community and that we would have coming forward people who would see that the bogey man that has always been placed before them is not in fact a bogey man and that because for the first time the parties that believe in a new Ireland would be moving out from behind rhetoric and behind slogans because, you know, up to now it has only been sloganising and when we only talk of Irish unity in terms of slogans it is very easy for people like Ian Paisley and those who preceded him to dismiss it as conquests of the Protestant community.....

John Bowman:

As optimum, when do you want the Council for a new Ireland to meet, under whose auspices, who sets it up, who funds it where does it meet, what about those details?

John Hume:

Well, those are details. First of all, naturally, we address our request to the Government of the Republic to set up that body in agreement with the parties in the Dail and it would have, as we said in our original proposal, a limited life. We are not interested in a lengthy talking shop. We want to sit down and look at the problems that lie in the way. Those problems are very serious, very difficult. They are not as simple

as many people would have us believe. It is not simply a matter of removing the British and then finding that the Irish problem is solved. There are serious economic problems.....

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.....I mean it would be quite unwieldy to have everybody, a representative of each of the parties that believe in a new Ireland.

John Bowman:

And sitting in public?

John Hume:

Well, public and private. Public, I don't think the nature of the job we are proposing that it should do. We want it done efficiently. We want it done quickly and what is important is what emerges at the end of the day and not the day to day deliberations. So it would obviously achieve much more if it was to meet in private. But I wouldn't be wedded to that. I think that if there was need for public sessions, particularly if the Council would be inviting groups to make submissions which I hope it would and would leave the making of submissions open to any group in the country from any tradition that wanted to make such submissions...

John Bowman:

In the Assembly election manifesto you said it would be working on behalf of all the elected democratic parties in the country. Now would that include Provisional Sinn Fein since they were elected in the Assembly?

John Hume:

Well, I wouldn't define them as a democratic party. If they wish to lay down their armalites then I think that I would start to accept that they were democratic but I am afraid that that is not the case, and even this morning I see one of their representatives, Mr Carne, saying that their next objective is to destabilise the Republic, to destabilise the South. So, you know, I don't think that I am terribly interested in co-operating with them in that path. If they are prepared to

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achieve their objectives the same as the rest of us by political means of persuasion, then naturally I would welcome their input into any deliberations.

John Bowman:

But you wouldn't expect them to be invited to the Council that you propose?

John Hume:

If they wish to lay down their armalites I would have no hesitation in inviting them.

John Bowman:

When do you expect Dr FitzGerald, on behalf of the Government, to give you a detailed response on his ideas on this Council....?

John Hume:

Well, I would hope that it would be sooner rather than later. As I have already said and as I have said in my own conference speech a few weeks ago the crisis in the North on both the political front and economic front is now extremely serious and the economic situation here is quite disastrous and is interacting very seriously on the hopes for political stability. And that means that there is a great deal of urgency. There is also a political vacuum in that I don't expect much movement from the British Government in terms of an initiative. I think that makes an Irish initiative all the more urgent and I believe, by the way, that if such an initiative were taken for the first time, if you had a united approach and a blueprint on the table which effectively challenged the basis of British policy I think you would get a transformation in the debate in Britain and therefore a transformation in political thinking in Britain which is what, in effect, is the political way to do things.

John Bowman: .

John Hume, thank you very much indeed for joining us.
