



An Chartlann Náisiúnta **National Archives**

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We meet for our Nineteenth Annual Conference. We meet again in Newcastle, Co. Down. The venue underlines one of the great moments of sadness for the Party not just in the past year but in the past nineteen years - the death of Paddy O'Donoghue. Paddy was with us from our foundation. He was a central and powerfully influential figure in the development of the Party and its policies. His soundness, his integrity and his influence were always in evidence at moments of major decision. He has given outstanding service to his Party, and to his country.

1989 was yet another election year for the SDLP. This time we had two elections, local and European. We had our best ever performance since our foundation in local elections in May when the Party won 121 seats. When we recall that in the first local elections that we fought as a Party in 1973, we won 83 seats and were delighted by our performance, one has the real measure of the outstanding nature of our local election performance in that we have increased by almost 50% the number of local government seats we hold since the first election. This success is an enormous compliment to the party organisation, its members and in particular our local Councillors and the work that they have done. Our successes were particularly evident in constituencies where the public have the full-time service of our MPs' Offices. It is our firm intention to be able to extend those services to West Belfast, Mid-Ulster and Fermanagh South Tyrone after the next election.

One month later we had the European Parliament Election when, in spite of the burden thrown on our Party workers by two elections in one month, we received the highest percentage share of the vote that the Party has ever received in any election since its foundation. Both elections are the clearest possible evidence of the steadily growing public support for the steadiness of the SDLP approach summarised by our slogan 'Keep Building'. We have never offered short cuts or instant answers to complex problems of human relations. We have never promised years of victory. We do not spill blood, we do not ask others to spill blood. We spill sweat, we ask others to do the same.

In addition, contrary to the attempts often made by opponents of our Party to dismiss us as a sectional Party, this Party in both its policies and its work addresses all of the issues facing this society and we do so from the genuine standpoint of a Social Democratic and Labour Party, a full member of the Socialist International and the European Confederation of Socialist Parties. One has only to examine the agenda of this Conference, one has only to look at the issues raised by the Party's MPs, one has only to witness the service given on day to day problems of people by our constituency offices and our local Councillors to confirm the extent of our commitment to deal with all problems that affect our society, whether as political, social, economic, environmental, educational or third world issues.

The presence here today of fraternal delegates and messages of solidarity from our sister parties in France, Germany, Spain, Britain, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Portugal, Italy, Greece and of course the Labour Party in the South, together with parties outside the EEC in Austria, Sweden and Norway is the clearest possible evidence that as a Party we have never been, and are not, inward looking. We had the foresight from our earliest days to recognise the growing role of Europe and the outside world on the everyday lives and needs of our people. I will meet next week in Lisbon, as I do several times a year, with the leaders of all these parties, to co-ordinate and plan our concerted approach to the major issues of the European Community and to its evolution and development in the interests of the ordinary men and women of Europe, in the interests of those who build Europe - its workers, and to ensure that the benefits of the new Europe will be spread as evenly as possible not only among the people of Europe but to its poorest regions as well. We meet next week to discuss the means of ensuring that our campaign for a social dimension to the Single Market will be both successful and meaningful and will not only harmonise and protect the rights of working people across Europe but develop policies to attack our biggest human problem in Europe today, those who are not able to exercise the right to work - the unemployed and the poorer sections of all our peoples.

Here in Ireland we are particularly fond of anniversaries. We are perhaps even obsessed by them. Our commemorations of them do not always, to put it mildly, make a positive contribution to the development of our society or to providing a release from our paralysis induced by our obsession with the past.

This month brings the 30th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. It is an anniversary which could be more worthy of consideration and reflection than some others which have been celebrated in this part of the world. Sensitivity to the needs of children and their parents, valuing childhood's nature and gifts and a sense of responsibility to future generations must be at the heart of approaches on political, economic, social, environmental and international affairs. The present and the future are much more important than the past to our real wealth, our young people.

The recent announcement that Child Benefit is to be frozen yet again confirms that Mrs Thatcher's Government pays little regard to children. The Government's intentions on Child Benefit are clearly to allow it to wither as a prelude to abolition similar to the way they killed off universal maternity benefits. They are now claiming that their indifference to Child Benefit is because families on Income Support or Family Credit would not gain from an increase in Child Benefit. That is a totally cynical argument. If their concern is sincere why do they not remove Child Benefit from the means testing for Income Support or Family Credit or properly increase the dependents' allowances on these benefits? Have they no sense of embarrassment about the bizarre logic of an approach which, at best, is moving to means test Child Benefit as a response to the inequities of the means-testing they built into other benefits?

The Government's concern for families on Family Credit and Income Support is not very apparent in their design of those benefits. They took free school meals away with the introduction of Family Credit while the offensive Social Fund attached to Income Support denies families assistance or re-cycles children's needs as debt through a loans system which is really a tax on poverty.

It tells us a lot that the best this Government can say that it is doing for children in the poorest families is their refusal over three years to increase Child Benefit.

Universal Child Benefit should be evidence of a social contract to especially value all children equally. This should also be evidenced in the provision of education. Instead the Government is proposing to compound many of the inequities and anxieties of the present selection-based system. Even with those modifications which we have acknowledged, it is hard to believe that the Government's proposals are properly child-centred. They fail to respect, or even recognise, the essential nature of childhood.

All too consistent with this, they also undervalue the work and vocational dedication of teachers. They obviously underestimate the sorts of pressures and challenges which schools and teachers are already facing in their commitment to educating our children. No Government with a sincere or competent commitment to education would have allowed their relationship with the teaching profession to deteriorate to the depths of demoralisation reached by this Government.

Health Service professions are faring no better. The imposition of new GP contracts, the clumsy and unfair grading structures and pay levels for nurses, midwives and health visitors and a malevolent indifference to the position of health service scientists all advertise contempt for the health service itself. Conference will shortly debate our response to the Government's proposals for the health service and we will make clear our total rejection of even half-baked privatisation. The two-tier health service which would result from the Government's proposals would not just be inequitable but inefficient as well.

The Government claim that their aim is to improve public choice. Where was choice in the closure of rural and small town hospital facilities? The health boards are not being given much choice about the shabby privatisation of hospital services. Who is to have the choice over hospitals opting out - certainly not the public? The choices that will exist will be cruel ones. Family doctors managing budgets will be choosing between expenditure patterns and health needs, between paperwork and time spent with patients, between sick children and their grannies. That is not choice for people that is choice against people.

Our long-standing commitment to promote the dignity of people and the primacy of human need in shaping economic and social programmes must now be matched and balanced by a concern to protect the environment. Mounting scientific evidence is underlining our basic dependence on the environment and our dangerous depletion of that environment. A point I made a number of years ago on this platform about nuclear energy applies to all economic activities and their possible environmental impact. No generation, for its own comfort and economy, has the right to put future generations at risk. It is our duty to our children and succeeding generations that we do not steal their future by neglecting and exploiting the environment in ways that are not sustainable and which threaten our very biosphere.

That has been the long-standing position of this Party and is not a new posture. Our environment spokesman, Eddie McGrady has persistently campaigned on nuclear pollution and conservation matters over many years. His urgent pursuit of such issues was motivated by sound analysis of evidence from responsible scientists. He did not wait, and did not have his Party wait, to be prompted by opinion polls.

The nature of the planet's ecological crisis begs for concerted world action. Such action must be based on true partnership and address the under-development, poverty and debt-burdens of third world countries as part of seeking to protect their environmental features which are vital for all of us. The depletion of global environmental assets in the developing world is a function of the existing unjust and inefficient international economic order.

Perhaps fears over the environment could make world powers more responsive to the call for a New International Economic Order where the appalling catalogue of unemployment, world hunger, debt, poverty, disease and famine have failed to move them to date. Where they have shown insensitivity to the structured malnutrition and illiteracy of children in the third world, and to an economic order which requires children lucky enough to survive shocking infant mortality rates to labour for pittance, is it too much to hope that a threat to their own children's future might motivate them towards a more just and rational way of sharing the world?

Issues of such profound importance and complexity require radical, thorough and urgent responses which, by necessity, must involve re-adjustment of economic processes to which we are accustomed. A truly internationalist approach is required. The scale of such issues vindicates this Party's long-standing commitment to the development of Europe-wide political arrangements and policies if we are to properly address the difficulties and challenges which face us, and will face our children, as we move toward the 21st Century.

The core of the European Community's Programme to complete the Single Market by 1992 is the elimination of all frontiers and borders in Europe to the free movement of goods, services and people. This will mean as a recent Commission document stated:

External frontier areas of Members States will become internal regions of the Community as a whole." It is time that the people of Ireland, North and South, woke up to the implications of this programme for relationships within this island. We must be resolute in our support for this programme. This programme offers a major opportunity for a planned approach in the European context for the social and economic harmonisation of Ireland and the equalisation of living standards over a period of time.

This Party has called repeatedly for action by the Northern Ireland public authorities to prepare for 1992. In June 1988 when we published our information pamphlet on 1992, it was clear that Northern Ireland seemed particularly ill prepared. In April 1989, the Northern Ireland Economic Council concluded that "there has been little substantial analysis of the implications for individual sectors and industries." Today, almost 18 months after our initiative, there has been a totally inadequate response.

We need a revitalised industrial development programme, learning from success elsewhere; for example, in Italy the main source of economic growth has come from grouping together small firms, and establishing networks and supplies between large and small firms. In Massachusetts, economic growth has been based on the commercial application of scientific and technological research. These approaches could work in the circumstances of Northern Ireland.

We need a commitment to rural development; rural areas can no longer be either ignored or considered merely as a physical and social context for agriculture. The rural economy must be treated as such in its own right; the many factors involved in rural development must be recognised and sustained; industrial development; good housing; transport services; accessible services; tourism; training and education facilities; community care provision. More than green trees can grow in the countryside. Communities can bloom, industries can flourish. Ideas and initiatives can bear fruit.

Cross border proposals which are in the process of being prepared, and for which we have set up a special committee of the Party, must be a real and meaningful attack on what are the areas of highest unemployment in both parts of Ireland.

If anything the pace of European integration is quickening. The 1992 Agenda is being overtaken by the drive to create Economic and Monetary Union. The pressure of events in Eastern Europe is obliging the Community to act quickly to provide a strong, coherent unit to which the Eastern European countries can relate. Old nations, strong in their tradition and personality are learning to speak with one voice and act with one purpose; sovereign nations are learning to share sovereignty freely. The fiction of total, undiluted sovereignty of the slogan "Sinn Féin" leads to isolation and powerlessness on the world scene - in its benign form to the cultivation of nostalgia or in its malign form to xenophobia and racism. It is on these islands that we are witnessing the death-throes of a misreading of the true concepts of nationhood, of national identity and of effective sovereignty.

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There are lessons in all of that for us here in Ireland and for the North in particular. Let me mention another anniversary. Fifty years ago this month the slaughter of the Second World War was a few weeks old, a war that would for the second time in a century devastate and destroy the major cities of Europe and slaughter millions of its people with an unparalleled savagery. Xenophobia and racism were on the rampage. The answer to difference was confrontation, conflict and division in spite of its awful consequences.

As I have often said, if someone had stepped forth 50 years ago and said that in 50 years time we would be moving rapidly towards a united Europe and the Germans would still be German and the French would still be French and the Italians would still be Italian and the English still English, that person would have been described as a fool or a dreamer. Yet it has happened. Why? Because the peoples of Europe sought another way.

They recognised that to seek to remove difference by confrontation or conquest was awfully counter productive. They recognised that the essence of stability and unity is the acceptance of diversity. They recognised that humanity transcends nationality and that difference is of the essence of humanity and should not therefore be the source of conflict.

They also recognised that they could not bring about their new vision overnight, so they built institutions to work the common ground in their common interest and to allow them to grow together at their own speed. And they have grown together and they have maintained the richness of their diversity and their cultural identities. And the French are still French and the Germans are still German.

It is sometimes forgotten that the battle at the origin of our quarrel, the Boyne - another anniversary - was fought not just by Protestant and Catholic Irish but by French, German and Walloons fighting English, Dutch, Danes and other Germans. They have long since settled that quarrel and many others since. They have also settled the most bitter and most recent quarrels of all those arising from the two world wars of this century. They have been able to abolish the memory of past dissensions, dissensions much more bitter and far reaching than those which have disfigured Ireland. Only in Ireland does the integrity of the ancient quarrel remain. Is it not about time that we followed the example of those with whom we now share sovereignty throughout Europe?

The Official Unionist Party tells us that they are the party of the '90's. I think that they may forgive me for reminding them that they have always been a party of the '90's - the 1690's. Has their consistent slogan not been Remember 1690? Can we not now agree to forget all our past dissensions and sit down together to agree on how we share this piece of earth together, to build an Agreed Ireland in the recognition that if it is to be a genuinely agreed Ireland then it will have to reflect our diversity in a manner that is truly acceptable to us all.

It is not something that we will achieve overnight but could we not begin, like our fellow Europeans, by building institutions that develop our common ground and allow us to

grow together at our own speed while preserving our basic diversity. And we should be encouraged in this endeavour by the recognition that the subject of deepest difference - sovereignty - has been somewhat altered by the fact that the people of both parts of Ireland, by referendum, agreed with the inhabitants of all 12 countries to pool and share sovereignty in our common interest. We are moving into a new era.

In that era barriers will be broken down all over Europe and within Ireland itself to the point where most social and economic differences within Ireland will be harmonised so leaving only the fundamental differences between Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter? Should we not now begin the process of accommodating those differences to our mutual satisfaction? How?

Over the past 12 months we in the SDLP have put forward clear proposals for talks. Some of the responses to our proposals have been encouraging. None have been negative but to date none have been totally positive. Let me repeat these proposals again and let me make clear that we are open to suggestions from any quarter that could improve these proposals.

1. Let us, together with the Unionists, make a solemn declaration that our talks are without prejudice to our respective attitudes to any previous agreement or piece of legislation.
2. Let us declare in advance that any agreement reached will transcend in importance any previous agreement ever made.
3. Let us agree in advance that we will talk about the problems not about solutions, defining the problems as human relationships that have not been satisfactorily resolved. Let us leave aside all "solutions" until we get to the table.
4. In the SDLP view there are three sets of relationships to be resolved - relations within Northern Ireland, relations between Unionists and the rest of Ireland and relations between Britain and Ireland.

Again in the SDLP view, the central relationship, the one that goes to the heart of the matter is the Unionist people's relationship with the rest of this island or rather their distrust of the rest of this island. Until that relationship is resolved and that distrust is removed then, in our view, nothing will be stable or lasting. That view is drawn from our experience, from standing back and asking ourselves the reasons for past failures. Northern Ireland itself was created because of Unionist distrust of the rest of the island. Stormont fell because Unionists excluded the Catholic population because of the distrust of their links with the rest of the island. The power sharing executive was brought down for precisely the same reason. Unionists oppose the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Why? Because of their perception that Dublin has "a say" in Northern Ireland affairs.

It would appear to any logical mind that until the relationship between the Unionist people and the rest of this island is satisfactorily resolved, not just to the satisfaction of the rest of this island but to the satisfaction of the Unionist people as well, then nothing will be resolved.

The SDLP therefore propose that the representatives of the Unionist people should sit down with the Government in Dublin, and the other parties in the Dail, to discuss how we share this island to our mutual satisfaction. In order to demonstrate that we are serious about the term "mutual satisfaction", we propose an advance agreement that any agreement reached would have to be endorsed by a majority in the North and a majority in the South in joint referenda held on the one day.

The strength of the joint referenda proposal is that it fully assures the Unionists that we mean what we say when we talk of an Agreed Ireland. It also means from a Nationalist/Republican viewpoint that for the first time the people of this island as a whole would have expressed self-determination on how we live together.

It goes without saying that it would be for the representatives of the Unionist people to place on the table their definition of their identity and ethos and their proposed means of protecting and developing it. The rest of us should do likewise in relation to our concepts of identity. The problem for this conference table would be how all can be accommodated.

I have no doubt that such a conference table might last a long time but its very existence would transform the atmosphere on this island. I have no doubt either that there will be times when there will be angry walk-outs but we should have an advance agreement that when and if that happens we will return the next day. What is required is the will to accommodate our differences to our mutual satisfaction. Once we are all satisfied that that is what is sought and not victory, conquest or elimination of any tradition then new and positive ideas will flow.

We should also be encouraged in that approach by the knowledge, as the Taoiseach said recently, that in the new emerging Europe - with major decisions affecting our daily lives being taken at European level on social and economic matters - on virtually every front in Europe the people of this island North and South have an identity of interest. We should have little or no difficulty in pursuing those interests together. But we should settle the old quarrel. If we can agree to pooling sovereignty with, and having decisions taken about our present and future by, Germans, French, Greeks, etc, it is time that we settled the ancient quarrel. As we approach 1990 it is ancient. It is out of date.

In the meantime as we hope for a positive response to our proposals to achieve that historic agreement - that agreement that will be self-evidently far more important than any previous agreement, for such an agreement would provide lasting peace in Ireland - we have to exercise our responsibilities in the real world around us.

In the absence of any agreement between the parties in the North or in the wider dimensions, the best possible way of dealing with our problems is for the two governments responsible to work as closely as possible together. Indeed the reason they came together in the first place was because of the repeated failure over a period of 65 years by the local parties to reach any agreement.

The Anglo-Irish Conference, a permanent Council of Ministers, is the mechanism for permanent discussion on matters relating to problems in Northern Ireland. The two Governments do not always agree but they do make steady progress in a number of areas. The European Council of Ministers disagree frequently but no-one would deny the steady progress that they have made over the years.

In the past I have listed the areas in which change has taken place. In the past year Fair Employment Law has been significantly strengthened. This Party has always had a two pronged approach to the question of Fair Employment. We have always made clear that while such a law is very necessary it will not of itself create fair employment nor indeed create a single job. The most fundamental discrimination in the past was discrimination against areas as evidenced by the unemployed statistics in Derry, Strabane, Newry and West Belfast. To solve that problem we need an affirmative action programme on investment, special encouragement to companies to invest in areas of high unemployment.

In that regard we welcome the decision of the Anglo-Irish Conference to concentrate on and develop a programme of action for the areas of high unemployment on both sides of the border. We have set up a special committee of the Party to bring forward our proposals to both Governments. In that regard also we welcome the review of the Anglo-Irish Agreement which commits the Anglo-Irish Conference to meeting on a fixed and regular basis.

What this means in practice is that the Conference, its Ministers and its Secretariat will be working to a fixed programme of work in all areas rather than giving the impression of being simply a security response to the last atrocity.

The security field, issues of justice, order and violence, continues to be the most difficult area. This Party has always recognised that in the absence of consensus on how we are governed the symptoms of that disease will recur in different forms. The last few months have been no exception.

The SDLP approach to these matters has always been very consistent. We are resolute in our adherence to the impartial and proper application of the rule of law. While others have sought to bend, breach and brutalise the rule of law in the name of protecting society and democracy we have stood firm in our commitment to respect for sound lawful frameworks, due process and civil liberty as the very oxygen of democracy. As we have challenged abuses of authority, miscarriages of justice or untoward security force behaviour we have been continually pilloried and misrepresented as being soft on terrorism. The truth is that our detractors are soft on justice and the proper rule of law and at times descend to the level of the terrorist.

Part and parcel of our commitment to the proper rule of law is our total repudiation of violence as a means of pursuing political ends in this society. We are dedicated to pursuing political change only by non-violent political means consistent with the democratic rule of law. Because of this stance, apologists for paramilitary violence try to brand us as being soft on repression. The truth is that they get high on repression and engage in activities designed to invite it.

We are therefore castigated on both sides for our determined adherence to true democratic standards and the proper rule of law. Ours is sometimes a lonely stance because we do not approach these issues in terms of protecting or advancing political positions but in terms of protecting people. It is at times a particularly lonely task for the person in this Party with the responsibility as spokesman in this most difficult area, Seamus Mallon our Deputy Leader. He knows that he speaks with the full strength of the Party behind him and our admiration, in particular for his handling of the past few difficult months.

We act not on rage but on reason. Those who would abuse power by abandoning the rule of law, and those who want to achieve power by attacking it, inevitably expose ordinary innocent people to grave risk of so-called mistakes. Those risks range from the incarceration of people for crimes they know nothing about to the slaying of a six month old baby, from killing and maiming by plastic bullets to killing and maiming by plastic explosives, from the threatening harassment of young men going about their daily lives to the shattering of old people's nerves by paramilitary house take-overs. We refuse to countenance any abuse of or attack on innocent people as regrettable but acceptable or tolerable mistakes. We recognise that the biggest and most basic mistake is to invite such terrible risks to ordinary citizens by dismissing the proper rule of law or democratic standards.

In recent times we have had stark examples of what I am talking about. The Guildford Four were finally released. It is impossible to imagine the horror of the experience of having to serve a lifetime in prison for a crime that you did not commit. It is therefore all the more remarkable to have heard the magnanimity and lack of bitterness in their remarks to the public afterwards making a specific point of thanking the many English people who campaigned for their releases. I salute them. Their lack of bitterness is a remarkable example to many in this community. I salute too, those British people, eminent in both Church and state who led the campaign for their release. The Birmingham Six remain. They too are innocent. I know one of them personally. I have known him since childhood. The prison authorities who have custody of them know that they are innocent. The law and order authorities in Britain know that they are innocent. The campaign for their release must continue and so must the effort to clear the name of the Maguire family and we must continue to provide every support and encouragement to those leaders of Church and State in Britain who are in the forefront of this campaign as well.

Let us not forget either, those in our midst who are now the dispensers of the greatest injustice of all - the taking of human life. Last year I detailed for the first time the statistics of death in Northern Ireland. The pattern has not changed. Until the end of October 2,770 people died in Northern Ireland arising directly out of what has become known as the troubles. Not one of those people will come out of their graves. The injustices of murder can never be corrected. 61% were killed by Nationalist paramilitaries, 27% by Loyalist paramilitaries, 12% by the Security Forces i.e., 1601 people were killed by Nationalist paramilitaries, 700 by Loyalist paramilitaries and 315 by the Security Forces. Of the people who died 1553 were innocent civilians, 862 were members of the Security Forces, 282 were Nationalist paramilitaries of whom 139 were killed by themselves, 73 were Loyalist paramilitaries of whom 39 were killed by themselves.

It is abundantly clear from these shocking statistics that well over 50% of those who have died over the years have been innocent civilians most of them killed by paramilitary organisations. So-called mistakes are not of recent origin. Is there no-one in any of these paramilitary organisations or in the political groups who have given them unequivocal support who is prepared to admit that if this is the price of their methods of achieving "justice and peace" then it is time that they re-examined those methods.

I find it impossible to believe that they do not see this and therefore I am forced to the conclusion that either their method has become more sacred than their cause or they have not the moral courage to stand up in their own ranks and shout 'stop'. If they were to shout 'stop' there would also be an end to the military presence on our streets with all the consequences of that for ordinary people. How can any political organisation which gives

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“unequivocal support for the armed struggle” that produces such awful human injustices, claim to be public representatives in the pursuit of justice. I repeat, the injustice of their methods, the end of the lives of innocent human beings are injustices in this world that can never be corrected in any way. Their victims cannot come out of their graves.

Recently a six month old baby was killed with her father in front of her mother. We have been told it was a mistake - they only wanted to kill her daddy. Another recent mistake they admitted was shooting a man in front of a school as young children were passing - they meant to shoot someone else. Deadly booby-traps have been placed in school grounds and young children continue to be orphaned but these are not even deemed to be mistakes.

Such is the Provo contribution to the 30th Anniversary of the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

Let ours be to renew our efforts to ensure proper and equitable educational opportunities and social provision for all the children of this society. Let it be to seek to protect the environment on which their well-being depends and to remove the political and economic causes of child hunger in the developing world. Let it be to create a new Europe within which our children can grow and have full expression and opportunity.

Let it be to determine that we will not pass on to the next generation a policy of insecurity, distrust and violence but will instead create arrangements which will allow them to be the first generation to bring up their own children in the peace of a new agreed Ireland.

Let me end by re-iterating what I said to this Conference in 1987:

“The search for agreement among the divided people of this island on how we live together or how we exercise our self-determination has never been seriously undertaken. Have those who are engaged in what they call an armed struggle the self-confidence to lay down their arms and join the rest of us in that search? Can they sit round a table relying like the rest of us on our convictions and abilities? As a people, because of our diverse origins over the centuries we have never had a rigid doctrine of nationhood around which we can construct, for the very first time, a new society on this island founded on reconciliation, based on genuine mutual respect, built by agreement between our different traditions and taking account of our wider relationships - that is the challenge.”