



New Ireland Commission

THE FOUNDATION STONE - MULTIPLE LEVELS of DIALOGUE.

The SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood MP established a party “New Ireland Commission” in recognition of the range and complexity of issues and challenges, current and emerging, in the life of Northern Ireland, Ireland and Britain.

In particular the SDLP New Ireland Commission has been tasked with a number of objectives across 3 pillars:

- to promote dialogue and diligently deepen relationships at local, regional and national levels to understand better the views, concerns and hopes of all our citizens;**
- to interrogate, develop thinking and publish papers on relevant issues including: the political, constitutional and institutional; the social, economic. cultural and environmental; on human rights, women, childrens, youth, and younger adults; social justice, minorities and more;**
- to conduct particular conversations with our new generations, our new citizens and to develop rights and future rights proposals.**

Work is on-going across the 3 pillars including work on new thinking, new concepts and new policies which shall be published for consideration in due course.

Over some time the party has been rolling-out its dialogue pillar. The SDLP believe that “multiple levels of dialogue” is the foundation stone to best shape present and emerging issues and the future. Re-produced here is an abridged version of a briefing document provided to SDLP MLAs and councillors to help inform the conversation which representatives are conducting at local and regional levels.

SDLP NEW IRELAND COMMISSION – “multiple levels of dialogue.”

1. SDLP MLAs and councillors are requested to contact people – such as faith, civic, business, cultural representatives, people of authority and local citizens - with whom to **develop and grow a conversation about the present and the future. This is one pillar of the work of the SDLP New Ireland Commission.**

2. **Good dialogue is the foundation for understanding and agreement.** The SDLP has been the leading political practitioner of good dialogue for over 5 decades. The foundation stone for peace and agreement in the past was multiple levels of dialogue, conducted in public, private and at times in secret; involving governments, political parties and faith groups; with the participations of civic, business, rights and community organisations; structure and organic. In some ways the intensity of the dialogues and the depth of the relationships that emerged 20 and 30 years ago has lessened. **“Multiple levels of dialogue” will again be the foundation for navigating present and coming challenges.**

3. In 80+ conversations conducted to date by the SDLP it is clear people want to talk about the present and the future and seek answers to genuine questions and fears. **The party is seen to bring authority and sincerity to the dialogue. The insights and understanding have been significant. The ambition is now to have 100’s of conversations. No other group or party has both the capacity and the conviction to undertake such a comprehensive exercise.**

4. So the party leadership strongly encourage representatives to make time to develop and deepen local conversations. To date representatives are finding the **experience refreshing, encouraging and there is learning.** Your work is central to informing the party leadership as it best shapes **“this time between times”** as one faith leader has described it. Further, by deepening local relationships and over time working on them, this can help **create a pathway to help navigate the future.**

5. The note addresses key **principles to govern the dialogue and issues of politics around the dialogue.** MLAs and councillors are well placed and best informed to best manage local conversations. This note is therefore for guidance only and is neither prescriptive or exhaustive.

PRINCIPLES and POLITICS

SDLP representatives have long experience of conducting conversations. The new phase of dialogue will require party representatives to clearly show respect and offer reassurance and go further. It will be important to **convey the seriousness of the work of the Commission, that the input of dialogue participants is pivotal to its work, that shaping the future must be a common enterprise and that dialogue contributions will be central in informing how the SDLP shapes its thinking and future proposals.**

In order to secure the best value from the dialogue for all its participants, **a number of principles are outlined below to help govern the dialogue and in addition a number of political issues are identified which may properly be raised in the course of the dialogue including:**

- **Confidentiality** – the party must give certainty that conversations will be private and confidential and not be reported in a local paper or online.
- **Not a pre-determined outcome** – the dialogue does not have a pre-determined outcome. Different, valid, sometimes competing views shall be brought to the dialogue. This is essential and all for the good. The SDLP will consider fully the views that are communicated noting in particular the equal legitimacy of two differing constitutional aspirations.
- **Common-ground** - the party wants to identify and work-up further areas of common ground. Areas of difference should also be acknowledged and how such issues could be a managed and remedied.
- **Questions and Answers:** in the dialogue the party will speak to its current views. It is also the case that the future thinking of the party and the proposals it will bring forward will be influenced by the “multiple levels of dialogue.” So rightly there will not be answers to all questions that might be asked. That is as it should be - one of the purposes of the dialogue is to help populate good answers to valid questions.
- **Respect, reassurance and shaping together** – respect and reassurance are central to the approach of the SDLP. This should come across clear and certain in the conduct of the dialogue as should the conviction that this the future must be shaped by the wisdom of all.
- **Comprehensive conversation** – the SDLP seeks to have a comprehensive conversation across social, economic, environment, cultural, rights and political issues etc. Conversations which are partial only - on important matters around say identity or referendum or constitutional issues - would lead to partial outcomes.
- **Co-design** – SDLP representatives may start the conversation but it should be co-designed with participants. What issues do participants want to speak to, who or what organisations who they think might wish to speak with party representatives, are there key issues where they want the SDLP to concentrate their thinking?
- **Inclusive** – the dialogue shall be inclusive. At times there may be a concentration on particular participants eg new citizens, faith backgrounds, younger generations etc but the ambition is 100’s of conversations, conducted locally, regionally and nationally, across the diversity of our people and communities.
- **Not one-off:** it is intended that conversations will not be one-off, will be ongoing in order to deepen relationships and understandings, to share ideas and map changing views. Dialogue in different phases will be conducted stretching over the coming times.

• **Internal** – an anonymised note of conversations will be shared internally with the party leadership so to better inform thinking.

• **Future** - as a key purpose of the dialogue is to hear a wide range of views to help sharpen the thinking of the party, there will not be answers now to all questions about the future. To do so would be defeating one of the purposes of the dialogue namely to hear views to help shape thinking. However, there will be issues where it will be important to share information and give reassurance including as below.

• **A dynamic and uncertain political context** - Brexit, calls for referendums in Scotland and Ireland, a NI census scheduled for this year, Covid impact and issues of wider inter-dependence, London and its perspective on the Union, Dublin and its perspective on a Shared Island and other matters mean that the SDLP believe it is essential to deepen dialogue and relationships and share in shaping the future.

• **Challenging times** – 2020 and into 2021 has already demonstrated that these are challenging times. Many issues have gathered and require many wise approaches. The dialogue can assist in deeper understandings to navigate current times and as a foundation for coming challenges.

• **The SDLP are committed to making Northern Ireland, Ireland and the islands work** for the benefit of all including North-South and East-West and of re-booting and enhancing the work under the 3 Strands of the GFA. That is immediate and continuing work that needs to be advanced.

• **The promises and protections of Good Friday Agreement** would inform and endure into the future whatever the different shape of political arrangements. Among many issues the SDLP will be publishing papers on this commitment; on “Making the North, North-South and East-West Work” and on the “facts of life” in a shared and future Ireland.

• **Facts of Life and the burden of proof** – be it the current work around a shared island (including the Irish Government) or developing work about the character of a United Ireland, the SDLP accept and agree that, as one person said to the party, the “facts of life” have to be addressed and answered.

How are health, environmental or regional challenges addressed in a shared island? How would welfare, pension, investment and social justice issues be managed in a United Ireland? And what of our different equal identities and their expression? The menu of issues is great and so too is the responsibility.

The SDLP agree and accept that the facts of life have to be faced, interrogated and answered. The party considers that there is a common burden of proof that falls to those who argue for a shared island, for a United Ireland, for the Union as is, a Union in a different shape or otherwise. No advocate should be found wanting.

• **Consent is central** - as Gordon Brown, George Osborne and others have recently observed the future of the Union is in doubt. There are various perspectives including that the Union is coming to an end or that it needs radically re-shaped for the 21st century. Whatever does or does not transpire, the consent provisions of and as articulated in the Good Friday Agreement are central.

• **The SDLP believe that the best possible conditions should be promoted for “a consent referendum”** – there should be a rigorous process including on the “facts of life” on health, pensions, welfare and the multiple issues around the conduct and character of a consent referendum etc should be addressed and answered (see SDLP submission to UCL consultation re-produced elsewhere in this digital platform). There should clearly be application of learning from the deeply problematic Brexit referendum process.

- **The party has been very critical** of those who propose a rush to “a border poll.” Shaping the best possible conversation about the future of the island, designing best possible responses to the impacts of Brexit and much else is not helped by a “rash rush” to a unity poll.

- **The aspiration and ambition of the SDLP** is for the re-unification of Ireland, of a future outside the Union. If a referendum was to occur in the future the SDLP believe it should be conducted very differently from the Brexit vote (in/out). It should acknowledge and a referendum should be shaped around two propositions, fully designed and explained, for the consideration and choice of the people.



**New Ireland
Commission**