

SDLP

STRAND 2: AGENDA ITEM 6

SUB-ITEM 3

Allegiance and Identity

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1. It was not surprising that our discussion yesterday moved to include issues of identity and allegiance. The extent to which identity and allegiance are interdependent has been a major underlying theme in the discussions to date, although I think it is true to say that identity has received much greater consideration than allegiance. As a result we are much clearer in what we have committed ourselves to in terms of respecting identities than we are about the allegiances which are related to them.

2. With respect to identity the *Common Themes* document, 4 May 1992, states that " There are, at least, two distinct communal identities within Northern Ireland, both of which need to be given respect and recognition by the other so that they can be appropriately accommodated in the political system, taking account of the wider framework of relationships within these islands".

3. It was also agreed and stated in the *Subcommittee Report* of 7 May that "each individual and community had the absolute right to define their own identity; and that that right and identity should be respected ...(and)...It was re-affirmed that any new political institutions should be such as to give expression to the identity and validity of each main tradition".

4. Perhaps these statements are sufficiently implicit with respect to what some might want to say about allegiance. Nonetheless, I think that we probably do need to focus much more attention on the issue of allegiance, or more precisely on what we can call political allegiance, using the term political in a broad sense of allegiance to political institutions. Political allegiances are frequently quite closely dependent on a community's sense of its identity. This is especially so in the case of the two major political traditions in Northern Ireland, both of whose

communities live in the country from which they derive their sense of identity.

5. It is, of course, true that in some situations allegiance, can be rather loosely dependent on identity. An example of a loose relationship between identity and allegiance would be an Irish person living outside of Ireland, say in Australia, who feels very deeply about his/her Irish identity, but who gives allegiance to the Australian state because he/she has chosen to reside there. However, to obtain that allegiance it would be important that the state in question respects the identity of the immigrant, though it would not be a requirement that its institutions embody and express that identity.

6. However, the situation in NI is not analogous to this in any meaningful way. Here, both major communities in NI have a very strong sense of their respective identities and the allegiances they hold are closely dependent on those identities and both live in country from which they derive much of their sense of identity. For Unionists their strong sense of identity, with its mixture of Irishness and Britishness, entails allegiance to the British Crown and a desire and a determination to retain the link with the UK. For Nationalists, their sense of identity as Irish people is equally as strong and their sense of allegiance to a wider Irish political entity than NI is equally valid and entitled to respect and be regarded as a fundamental reality in our proposals for new institutions.

7. Unionists seem to argue that while they will respect and recognise the kind of Irish identity professed by Nationalists, they are unwilling to acknowledge as valid the allegiance that follows from it. To uphold their argument they:

- seem to deny that Nationalists really feel as strongly as they themselves do about *their* identity and the allegiance that flows from it and so Nationalists can be satisfied with proportionality as the basis for new institutions, ie with merely being represented in new institutions on the basis of electoral strength

- they deny the possibility of a dual political allegiance within NI and argue that Nationalists are not entitled to express *their* allegiance in any manner similar to how Unionists express theirs because to do so would undermine their own position; in other words they seem to be demanding that Nationalists should give allegiance to political institutions designed to reflect more a unionist identity than a nationalist one;

- they argue that the people living in NI are a *people* in the sense understood in UN declarations and covenants and that, as such, have an unqualified right to self-determination and, it would seem to follow, that allegiance should be exclusive to institutions in NI itself despite their own allegiance to the British Crown.

8. The truth of the matter is that Nationalists do feel equally as strongly about their identity as do Unionists about their Britishness and are equally entitled to an expression of the allegiance that flows from their identity.

9. It is not impossible to devise ways by which the allegiance of Nationalists to a wider Irish political entity can be accommodated alongside the expression of Unionists' allegiance to their Britishness. If Unionists insist, as they are entitled to, that allegiance to the Crown and their identity are interdependent, then they must logically concede the same to the Nationalist community. Our proposals to the Talks have been aimed at demonstrating the feasibility of this proposition, both with respect to arrangements for NI itself and for new North-South arrangements. So in Strand 1, as well as putting forward proposals to ensure fair representation for our communities, we also addressed the question of allegiance through our proposals for Commissioners appointed from outside of NI itself and, as far as Strand 2 relationships are concerned, have indicated in outline form proposals for a N-S Council of Ministers. We were told that our proposals for Strand 1 were unacceptable and that our concerns about accommodating the nationalist position would be very

adequately taken care of when the Unionist parties would table Stand 2 proposals.

10. As to the question of the people of NI being 'a people' with an unqualified right to self-determination, the history of NI makes clear that the coherence and commonality necessary to sustain the 'people' argument are missing in the sense in which that term would be understood in international covenants today. We do not accept that the people living in NI constitute 'a people' in the accepted international usage of the term. They are a divided people consisting of two communities and to see them in isolation from the rest of island, or indeed from Britain is to deny fundamental realities of the problem. Any change in status lies only within the parameters set by these relationships.

#### **Allegiance and Support the Essential Objectives of a New Agreement**

11. The SDLP has emphasised throughout these Talks that it seeks a solution which will succeed in winning cross-community support of the widest possible kind in Northern Ireland and the maximum possible support in the rest of Ireland as well. The SDLP believes that these objectives must place the outcome of our deliberations beyond merely restoring the conduct of affairs in Northern Ireland to directly elected representatives of the people living here, and beyond merely establishing good neighbourly North-South relations as might be done between two states foreign to each other. These objectives are intended to ensure that, in so far as it is possible, that the overwhelming majority in both communities in NI will be able to identify with the institutions to be established and, if necessary, translate that identification into active support against any threat from whatever its source. This is what we were suggesting yesterday in our approach to the policing issue and if we cannot achieve this aim then we are probably wasting our time.

12. Attracting widespread support across our communities will not be easy. However, as we argued in Strand 1, it is the firm view of the SDLP that such support will only be given to institutions which adequately acknowledge the two major political traditions which exist within Northern Ireland, and, by doing so, enable people in both sections of our society to give allegiance and support to them.

### Achieving Allegiance and Support

13. To achieve this allegiance and support for new political institutions will, of course, have to demonstrate fair play, and equality of treatment to the public representatives of both communities and, through them, to society as a whole. However, proposals which are exclusively directed at this objective do not fully address the process of *political identification* on which allegiance is dependent because they do not acknowledge the essence of the nationalist identity and so cannot indicate how that identity might be accommodated alongside the British identity of the Unionist community. So, while, in general terms, such proposals might be both acceptable and sufficient in a society in which equity of treatment for minorities was the only issue, they are not sufficient in a society in which *allegiance* is a central problem.

14. The only means by which the issue of allegiance can be addressed and, in addressing it, render it non-problematic is by placing it at the centre of proposals for new institutions. For this to happen clear institutional expressions of identity are required both for relationships within NI and for North-South relationships. The proposals which the SDLP has tabled have been formulated with this aim as a fundamental requirement and, as far as Strand 2 issues are concerned, our proposals for North-South arrangements have already been outlined in our document *Agreeing New Political Structures* presented in Strand 1.