

From: Philip Mc Garry

For attention of: John Alderdice

Re: SDLP at the Forum on Jan 27

The SDLP's response to Gordon Wilson was fascinating in its exposure of certain underlying attitudes towards those who do not fit in with their world view

They were more uncomfortable dealing with Gordon than with SF

Brid started by immediately stating that Gordon was a unionist (a claim made even more unacceptable by her patronising comment that he was 'no ordinary unionist').

The sense of Gordon's paper, the media interviews which he gave after presenting it and his answers on the 27th (including his comment that he was voting - and encouraging others to vote Alliance over 20 years ago!) give no clear grounds for describing him as a unionist. When Sean put the question to him directly he certainly gave no sense of describing himself in the terms used by Brid.

Gordon went very far with his statements on the inevitability of a united Ireland. And yet The SDLP still felt the need to pigeon-hole him as a unionist. This is despite the fact that Gordon is no political threat to them whatsoever as he has always eschewed party politics.

Here is a man who has suffered grievously at the hands of nationalists, who shows huge forgiveness, who comes to Dublin to political fora and who stands up to so many unionist prejudices. And yet, beyond the platitudes, they are totally unable to assimilate what he is saying.

Such a man, a man who doesn't fit into his allotted place is a huge threat to their whole belief system. In the end they practically end up by insulting his viewpoint. This is extraordinary.

Just as Seamus Mallon got very upset over Dessie describing us (rather than the SDLP!) as the centre-ground, so Mark was very perturbed about being seen as part of the 'Old Ireland'. This kind of reality therapy is so distressing for them that we must expose them to more of it (and others to their over-reaction to it).

Brid's comment on the 20% of Catholic RUC applicants not being nationalists (a theme used by other SDLP people recently) is a real hostage to fortune. Would she call them unionists? If she does how does she know? If she doesn't is she recognising that many people do not fall in to one of the two tribes? If so - doesn't that confirm the validity of your answers which so mystified Seamus Mallon on Jan 13?

Intellectually the SDLP (and one must include capable people like Mark) have no real perception of how to deal with the exceptions (increasing all the time) to John's flawed 'two traditions' concept.

Denis' statement near the end about unionists being less likely to stand up to extremists than nationalists is what most of them believe despite the fact that Protestants have never voted for terrorists and that Molyneaux currently won't be seen dead with Paisley. They are influenced unduly by the more 'honest' and clearly expressed nature of Protestant prejudice. Nationalist fundamentalists on the other hand know that it is more effective to kill, intimidate and brow-beat opponents while simultaneously expressing your deepest regard for them. The media love it and it works every time!

The SDLP are unable and unwilling to accept the patently obvious fact that prejudice is fairly evenly distributed between Catholics and Protestants. This view itself is of course totally sectarian.

Mary Henry said afterwards (and Catherine Mc Guinness seemed to be agreeing with her) that she objected to being lectured by people such as Brid (that Protestants like her didn't feel in any way discriminated against!)

Catherine herself said that she was not surprised but still quite depressed that few nationalists understand that the C of I. is not headed by the Queen!

She made an observation that she told Austin Currie that she understood how he had felt walking into Stormont past Carson's statue, but that he was somewhat nonplussed when she said that she felt uncomfortable going into public hospitals to be surrounded by images of the Sacred Heart!

In NI when the SDLP have had power they have generally used it more fairly than the unionists. The comparison should in reality be with nationalists in the South and particularly Fianna Fail. Their record has not been much better than that of the unionists in the North.

Denis failed to see that if most unionists believe that Irish unity is inevitable (a highly dubious proposition in the first place - much of this wishful thinking arises from the age-old suspicion unionists have about Britain, something which is real but is in no way a prelude towards embracing nationalism) then their paranoid demeanour is all the more understandable. Dangerous and unscientific hype about demography only makes matters worse.

## SUMMARY

- 1) The SDLP's hostile response to Gordon underlines that at the core they remain significantly sectarian, with no understanding of and a contempt for liberals and many misperceptions about unionists.
- 2) For most of the time they don't realise this.
- 3) When these issues are addressed openly they appear as intransigent as the unionists.
- 4) The more exposure the parties in the republic and people like Catherine Mc Guinness have to this (and particularly to Brid) the better.
- 5) The theme of the 'third tradition' or 'the other other' (Mari Fitzduff's term) or whatever we call it can be a winner for us. Despite the SDLP's rhetoric when it comes to practicalities.

(note Barry White's comment on the lack of SDLP response to the IRFU anthem issue) we can show them a clean pair of heels

6) We should hammer away (sensitivity expressed) on the theme of CATHOLIC participation in the state and let the SDLP make what they may of it

7) Perhaps we should be stronger in regard to integrated schools and the need to move on all sides on the issue of symbols

8) The Forum is very useful and comfortable for us, much less so for the SDLP. We are able to queer their pitch quite spectacularly. Let's keep doing it!