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# SDLP seeks to protect gains already made

Since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, the SDLP has perceived itself, and has been perceived by the unionists, as having won a substantial advance on behalf of the nationalist community.

It had won an institutionalised Irish dimension to the Northern Ireland problem. Irish governments, as of right, now represent the views of the nationalist community to the British Government on an almost daily basis through the secretariat and conference, established under the agreement. They deal with the whole range of issues that comprises the nationalist grievance in the North.

Such advances have not often been made by nationalists. In hindsight, the proroguing of Stormont in 1972 started the community's most tangible series of gains. A highly-respected housing executive does not discriminate against Catholics. There is fair employment legislation. There is great fairness on the delivery of public services now, compared with pre-1972 experience.

The other advance of note won through negotiation was the establishment of a power-sharing executive, agreed in 1973. As well as a concession that power in

Northern Ireland must be shared by unionists and nationalists, it established the principle of an institutional Irish dimension.

But the nationalist community never had the opportunity to experience fully the benefits of this. The power-sharing experiment was cut short by militant unionist opposition, to which the British Government surrendered.

There has been no such surrender on the Anglo-Irish Agreement. That advance has developed an air of permanence and consistency. For the SDLP, there is no going back.

And so, while the forthcoming talks offer the prospect for further advances to be made, they also give rise to fear of the unknown; fear that advances slowly and painfully won could be lost again. It was precisely the fear that the unionists would use talks to undermine the agreement that made the SDLP, and the Irish Government, balk at suggestions that internal talks would carry on indefinitely, with unionists having a veto on the timing of Dublin's involvement.

While John Hume has said that his ultimate aim is to find an agreement that will transcend in importance any other agreement

ever made, some in the party express more cautious and modest aims for the imminent talks. They talk of making progress, rather than reaching an ultimate holy grail.

When asked about its proposed solution to the problems facing Northern Ireland, the SDLP will first define the problem. "One of the reasons why we disagree so often with the unionists on our treatment of the problem is that we disagree about what the problem is," Mr John Hume told Frank Millar in an interview in this newspaper in January, 1989.

Mr Hume's definition of the problem is that there are unresolved relationships relating to the North, as most people will have heard by now. In particular, he says, it is about the unresolved relationship between the unionists and the rest of the people of the island.

But this relationship, and the other two said to make up the problem — that between the people in the North and between Ireland and Britain — are now finally to be addressed in an intensive period of talks. Having defined the problem, it may be time to produce some proposed solutions.

But with talks on the North's political future just a week away, it is still not clear that the SDLP has reached a final position on many of the issues that will arise in the next three months.

A "bottom line" on, for example, what power-sharing arrangement the party might accept, is not apparent. Questions such as what powers, functions and responsibilities it would be prepared to assume, what reduc-

tion in the role of the Anglo-Irish Agreement it might contemplate, and what concessions it would require to consider a reduction in that role, say, of the conference and secretariat, may have to be addressed shortly.

Hard bargaining on these matters is envisaged by some of the participants in the talks. But SDLP sources suggest that the party will not initially be placing any blueprint or "magic formula" on the conference table at the outset.

And, although the unionists feign weariness and say that they

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have heard Mr Hume's definition of the problem many times before, that will not stop him devoting some time at the start of the discussions to outlining it again.

The talks, for the SDLP, do not necessarily have the aim of coming up with a power-sharing agreement. Indeed, when asked in Padraig O'Malley's recent work on Northern Ireland politics, *Questions of Nuance*, if the SDLP would use a conference with

unionists to try to come up with such an agreement, Mr Hume's blunt reply was "No."

"Every time we've tried to do that in the past, it failed," he said. "And I'm drawing conclusions from that failure. What I'm saying is, let's discuss all the relationships that are involved, and particularly the central one."

Many unionists are unhappy with this scenario, as they prepare for the talks. They say that Mr Hume is saying, in effect, that discussing internal government and devolution in the initial

interparty talks have little value, until the unionists talk to Dublin.

They cite the fear that the SDLP would not address the internal issues until the talks with Dublin began as one of their reasons for wanting to make "substantial progress" in internal talks a condition for the North-South talks to begin. They want the SDLP to address the internal issues before moving on to relationships with the Republic.

There is no unanimity on Mr Hume's definition of the central problem, anyway. The Alliance Party leader, Dr John Alderdice, has said, for example, that the central relationship is not that between unionists and the rest of the island, but that between the two communities within the North. The Ulster Unionist MP, Mr John Taylor, maintains that the relationship between the North and Westminster is the one that should be defined at the outset.

While the SDLP has not set out an ultimate solution towards which it is aiming, the closest we have got to a preferred model for the future government of Northern Ireland emanating from the party is the view of Mr Seamus Mallon, MP, as outlined as his

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party's annual conference last November.

Devolution, as it has been known, does not work, he declared bluntly, "and we are not going to see it again in Northern Ireland." Devolution is not adequate, "because it hasn't the breadth, scope or depth to be able to deal with and heal the political, security and social problems" that exist in the North.

In rejecting what is known as devolution, Mr Mallon made it clear that he was rejecting the notion that a devolved administration would be dependent on Westminster. What is needed is "the creation of an administration in Northern Ireland which is composed of people from Northern Ireland coping with the problems of Northern Ireland."

This new administration would have fiscal powers, would be able to negotiate in Europe on its own behalf, it would even have control over security. Unionists say that Mr Mallon is talking about an autonomous Northern Ireland within a federal Ireland. At the conference last November, Mr Mallon declined to elaborate, saying that it was up to others to put forward alternative proposals if they had them.

It is a radical view, but given the stated unionist objective of copperfastening the position of Northern Ireland within the UK, it is difficult to see it being relevant to this series of talks. Party sources are talking of smaller steps - the establishment of cross-Border regional councils in certain areas, for example.

But most importantly, the party will be watching out throughout the talks to ensure that it is not being cornered into accepting anything perceived as a step back from the advances in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Any agreed solution, for the SDLP, would have to retain something similar to the structures of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, although nobody would object to calling them something else.

And while not talking about a grand solution, the SDLP does talk about initiating some new process through which a grand solution might some day be found. In aiming to agree on such a process, rather than to agree on a solution, the parties in the North may be aiming for the best prospect of progress.

**Tomorrow: Mark Brennock on the Alliance Party.**