

## SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood outlines his vision of Progressive Nationalism

There is a wave of change coursing its way through the SDLP. People have noticed, and they're paying attention. This is a party which is being talked about again; and being thought of seriously once more.

So I want to talk about the SDLP's nationalism and about how we will make Northern Ireland work whilst building toward a new, reunified Ireland. This is the basis of our new vision of Progressive Nationalism. But in setting out this vision for a New Ireland, we have to be honest with ourselves and others.

It hasn't been an easy few years for those of us who wish to act as persuaders for the re-unification of Ireland. Although I do not necessarily subscribe to the authority of opinion polls, particularly on an ideal as vast and enduring as Irish unity, they can have an effect on general morale.

It is for this reason that it is now so important to intensify thought and debate around the journey toward reunification.

Currently, the collective voice of Irish nationalism and republicanism is failing to convince enough people that the interests of their future lie in a new, reunified Ireland. I don't think we should be afraid to admit that, in fact I think it's much healthier that we do.

So where does the problem lie and more importantly where do we go from here? Let me suggest two principles which should be at the heart of any reunification project.

Irish nationalism and republicanism, the belief that this nation remains incomplete, is not the monopoly of one party, one group or even one generation.

Irish unity is the epitome of a big idea requiring big debate. It is only natural that its needs will be fed, informed and put into action by a broad and diverse church of people.

The SDLP do not own this cause. Sinn Féin do not own it either. Let no-one ever tell you otherwise.

Since this plurality of contribution is so vital nationalism and republicanism must not descend into the preserve or the possession of fundamentalism or fundamentalists.

The ultimate display of such fundamentalism is its expression in the form of violence. This has distorted and degraded the ideals of Irish unity and has unnecessarily delayed the political reunification of this island.

Never, never again can violence be used to corrupt the ideals of a New Ireland.

It is imperative that all of us who believe in Irish reunification hold true to this and that we actively oppose those few who still cling to the folly of death and destruction.

### **Cultivating an appetite for change**

If we stand by those two principles, we can then properly get on with the task of actually persuading for unity.

That, of course, will be no easy challenge.

In a more globalised world, heavily influenced by a particular political hegemony, it is increasingly difficult to convince people of the possibility for transformational change.

People are sceptical as to what politics can actually achieve. That can be seen almost tangibly, hence the cynicism and apathy faced by most of the western world's body politic.

In this political context, it can be difficult for an electorate to break free from the shackles of the familiar. The unnatural partition of Ireland is no longer in living memory.

Northern Ireland is now our 'familiar'. So how do we stimulate and spark a political momentum and desire beyond the 'familiar'?

### **Building a New North**

We think there are two steps on that journey.

In the North, Nationalism must leave behind any crumb of comfort in the idea that Irish unity can be advanced through the North's economic and social weakness.

We have often been quietly comfortable with the notion that the Northern state would eventually wither and fall apart and partition would inevitably and naturally end.

However Nationalism's sneaking regard for the idea of 'a failed political entity' ended with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

Although many have been slow to grasp the significance of that new state of affairs, people should understand this to be a major departure for Northern Nationalism.

Our mission is now set.

Our aspiration to share political union with the rest of the island is now inextricably linked with our ability to build a shared and successful social and economic framework here in the North.

That means building up the strength and knowledge of our economy. It means giving our young people the dignity and security of a job and creating an infrastructure which can support our people.

Building that new North doesn't mean building an economy based on the smuggling of diesel, cigarettes or waste.

There are no 'good republicans' who are involved in that kind of criminality and equally there are no 'good republicans' who implicitly support it. There are no 'good republicans' who are part of a criminal elite.

You can't claim to hate the border if you, and a vast organisation, have spent a lifetime profiting from that border's existence.

The SDLP is committed to building a real economy which gives all our young people the chance to live and work here. We are committed to creating a society with which the South would be happy to integrate.

To do so we must accept the new reality of Nationalism. We now have a selfish and strategic interest in making Northern Ireland work.

### **A new attitude in the South**

The second step on this journey involves civic and political life in the 26 counties. In the South, an evolution of thought and action must take hold. The bedding down of the institutions at Stormont should not have been the beginning of a leave of absence for the South's civic and political involvement in the North.

This betrays the spirit and logic of 1998.

The historic reconciliation of the Anglo-Irish conflict, through the signings of our political agreements, marked perhaps the greatest political change to the 1937 constitution.

In building a post-crash Ireland, the South should understand and re-engage with its responsibilities and its attachment to the North of the country.

The South is a fundamental part of who we are but, equally, we are a fundamental part of who they are too. That spirit can't just express itself on All-Ireland Sunday in Croke Park.

It needs to be broader and more extensive than that.

That cultural and community attachment cannot be allowed to drift as we build for political unity across the island.

### **Putting flesh on the bones**

Most importantly, building a New Ireland means putting flesh on the bones of the idea. Rhetoric will not tear down the border. It won't even put a dent in it. Our people, unionist, nationalist and the many who now don't subscribe to either of these categorisations, have to be given a much fuller and firmer idea of what is meant and imagined within the context of a New Ireland.

Unionism needs to understand how it will be welcomed into it. How their identity, their culture, their political representation will be respected and retained in a reunified state.

They need to feel reassurance that they'll feel, and be made to feel, a sense of belonging.

But what is too often forgotten is that Northern Nationalism also needs reassurance as to what the structures of a New Ireland will look like.

How will our hospitals operate, how would our education systems integrate, how would our taxation rates, our business rates, our domestic rates evolve? If we're not serious about answering these questions and many, many more, then we're not serious about creating a New Ireland.

That is what Progressive Nationalism is serious about.

It is now the job of our new Progressive Nationalism to answer these questions and to put flesh on the bones of what a New Ireland will mean for us all.

That's the task I'm setting out and the challenge the new SDLP will meet under my leadership.

It is a huge job of work. But the enduring challenge of reconciling the division of this island deserves no less of a commitment.

Those who hold these values, and those who hold the aspiration of building a New Ireland, should join us in this challenge.

We'll do it together. Because there is no other way.