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“Humespeak”: The SDLP, Political Discourse, and the Northern Ireland Peace Process

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Keywords: *“Humespeak”, John Hume, Northern Ireland, political discourse, Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)*

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“HUMESPEAK”: THE SDLP, POLITICAL DISCOURSE, AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

P. J. McLoughlin*

Abstract

This paper explores the vital role played by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in the formulation of a new political discourse and conceptual approach to the Northern Ireland problem. In particular, it shows how John Hume, party leader through the 1980s and 1990s, helped to propagate this discourse, and in doing so influenced policy-making in London and Dublin, and thinking within the republican movement. Although the paper emphasises the importance of this influence, it concludes by considering the reasons why the Ulster unionist community have remained so unreceptive to the political discourse of Hume and the SDLP.

Introduction

This article examines the political discourse of Northern Ireland’s SDLP. In doing so, it aims to show that many of the concepts and themes of the SDLP’s discourse helped to shape the ideological parameters of the Northern Ireland peace process. In this, the article is limited in its scope. Clearly, a great number of actors have contributed to the discourse and ideology of the Northern Ireland peace process, and there is not room here to explain the way that the SDLP’s ideas have interacted with those of other parties to the conflict. In particular, changes in northern Irish nationalist thinking – many of which have involved the SDLP – have both fed upon and fed into similar shifts in southern Irish nationalist ideology. As such, whilst the focus here is in on the SDLP, the party should be considered as part of the wider Irish nationalist “family”. Accordingly, this article is intended as a contribution to the wider literature on the evolution of Irish nationalist discourse. For the SDLP’s discursive and ideological innovations must be seen as related to and interactive with changes in the language of other members of the broader nationalist family.¹

In order to draw out the SDLP’s role in this complex process, the article focuses on a select number of concepts which were particularly common to the party’s discourse from the 1970s through to the 1990s. It does not claim that these concepts were completely unique to the SDLP, and indeed aims to show that other actors were often thinking in similar ways.

However, the article explains how the party deployed these concepts in a consistent, almost idiosyncratic fashion, a style which served to make such ideas part of the SDLP’s own distinctive language and ideological approach to the Northern Ireland problem. In turn, it shows how some of the SDLP’s particular word formations were adopted by other parties to the problem, and thus became integral to the language of the Northern Ireland peace process. In doing so, the paper lays great emphasis on the role of John Hume, leader of the SDLP from 1979 to 2001. Such was Hume’s importance in the propagation of the SDLP’s ideas that his distinctive political parlance even earned it own epithet: “Humespeak”. Though this term was often used disparagingly – referring to the repetitiveness of his language – even critics recognise the extent to which Hume’s particular phraseology has dominated the discourse of the peace process (Cunningham, 1997; McGovern, 1997).

The specific concepts which the paper examines are “the three strands”, “the Irish dimension”, “the two traditions”, and finally the notion of “an agreed Ireland”. Whilst exploring each of these terms individually, the paper aims to show that they are interrelated, and together form a mode of political discourse distinctive to the SDLP. Having considered these concepts, and the extent to which they influenced the thinking of the British and Irish governments, the paper then looks at a specific debate which took place between the SDLP and the republican movement from the late-1980s. This dialogue, revolving around the issue of British interests in Northern Ireland, proved crucial to the evolution of republican thinking, and the subsequent Irish Republican Army (IRA) ceasefire of August 1994. In this respect, the etymological origins of the peace process can again be related to the SDLP, and in particular to the party’s leader in this period.

The Three Strands

As Gerard Murray’s meticulous study of the SDLP has shown, a three-level approach towards the resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict was conceived by the party as early as 1971 (1998, pp. 15-16), that is a over a quarter of a century before the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) created a political settlement by the same means. This approach was initiated by John Duffy, one of the SDLP’s earliest policy-makers, in a set of internal party papers which he completed in September 1971. Duffy’s papers described three sets of relationships which he felt must be addressed in order to resolve the Northern Ireland problem: relations between the two communities in Northern Ireland; relations between the North and South of Ireland; and relations between Britain and Ireland (Murray, 1998, p. 15).

It was only in the 1980s, however, that this three relations thinking became evident in the SDLP’s public discourse. Arguably, this reflected the political developments in this period, which created a context more favourable to the three relationships approach. In particular, the warming of relations between the British and Irish governments, culminating in the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of 1985, appeared to broaden the framework within which the Northern Ireland problem was being considered. This met with positive response from the SDLP, with Hume telling the British House of Commons that the AIA provided

[for] the first time ... a real framework within which to address the problem. The problem is not just about relationships within Northern Ireland ... it is about relationships in Ireland and between Britain and Ireland (*Hansard*, sixth series, vol. 87, col. 780).

Through the remainder of the 1980s, Hume continued to articulate this three relationships approach as the most appropriate way to resolve the Northern Ireland problem. His persistence, it seems, eventually paid off. Indeed, for when the Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Brooke, announced his intention to convene political talks between the local parties in March 1991, he told the House of Commons that “discussions must focus on the three main relationships: those in Northern Ireland ... among the people of the island of Ireland; and between the governments” (*Hansard*, sixth series, vol. 188, col. 765).

By the time the Brooke talks began, the three relationships had been rebranded as “the three strands” by British officials. However, the origins of this approach in the thinking of the SDLP were plain to see. Moreover, when Brooke was replaced by Patrick Mayhew in April 1992, the new Northern Ireland Secretary continued to organise inter-party talks in accordance with the three strand model. Although these discussions ended with little progress, when negotiations recommenced in 1996, again they were based upon the three strands. Eventually, the talks concluded in April 1998 with the announcement of the GFA. This Agreement established new political institutions to accommodate the two communities in Northern Ireland; new arrangements to facilitate co-operation between the North and South of Ireland; and new structures to co-ordinate relations throughout the UK and Ireland.²

The particular design of the political institutions created under each strand of the GFA were, of course, the result of bargain and compromise between the Northern Ireland parties and the British and Irish governments (see Hennessy, 2000). However, that the GFA was drawn from the three strands schema shows how the SDLP shaped the basic terms of the

settlement. For, as demonstrated, the three strands approach finds its origins in documents written by the party in the early 1970s. The three-level thinking of these documents, promoted more vigorously by the SDLP from the 1980s onwards, shows the significant influence which the party had in creating the essential parameters of the peace agreement that emerged in 1998.

The Irish Dimension

“The Irish dimension” is a term which the SDLP used to refer to the need for a political settlement which extended beyond Northern Ireland, involving the Irish as well as the British state. In this respect, the concept ties in with the party’s three relationship thinking, and particularly the emphasis on relations between the North and South of Ireland. For the SDLP, political linkages between the two jurisdictions were required to give institutional expression to the identity of Northern Ireland’s nationalist community. Just as the British identity of the Ulster unionist community was reflected in the Union with Great Britain, so, the SDLP argued, the Irish identity of the northern nationalist community must be recognised through political structures connecting it with the Republic of Ireland. As Hume reasoned:

Any solution which does not take account of the Irish dimension is doomed to failure. SDLP policies clearly commit the Party to a solution that takes account of both basic loyalties in the community and both must be taken into account if any solution is to be found (*Irish News*, 22 May 1975).

The party’s emphasis on the need for an Irish dimension to any settlement of the Northern Ireland problem has led the term to become very much associated with the SDLP. However, the phrase was actually first used in a British government document, *The Future of Northern Ireland: A Paper for Discussion* (1972). Here the term was used to suggest that any regional settlement

must also recognise Northern Ireland’s position within Ireland as a whole ... Whatever arrangements are made for the future administration of Northern Ireland must take account of the region’s relationship with the Republic of Ireland (HMSO, 1972, paras. 76, 78).

The SDLP read this as an acceptance by the London government of the arguments advanced in *Towards a New Ireland* – a document which the party had issued a month before the British discussion paper. In *Towards a New Ireland*, the SDLP had firmly set its face against any internal solution to the Northern Ireland problem: “Any re-examination [of constitutional arrangements] must therefore take place, not in a purely Six County³ context,

but in an Irish context” (SDLP, 1972, p. 1). In this, the SDLP made clear that it would not be party to a settlement that did not involve the Irish government in some way. As such, when London seemed to accept this position by recognising an “Irish dimension” to the problem in *The Future of Northern Ireland*, the SDLP seized upon what was actually a Whitehall term (*Irish News*, 8 November 1972), adopting the phrase as part of its own political nomenclature, and using it henceforth.

The Irish dimension found its first institutional expression in the Council of Ireland which formed part of the failed Sunningdale Agreement of 1973. Like the North-South structures created by the GFA 25 years later, the Council of Ireland was intended to promote co-operation between the two parts of the island. However, whereas the all-Ireland institutions of the GFA were sharply defined, the powers and political remit of those agreed in 1973 were more open to interpretation. For this reason, many unionists opposed the Council of Ireland, believing that it would work to erode the Irish border, and undermine Northern Ireland’s position within the UK. This concern ultimately led to the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement, and the inter-communal power-sharing government which it had created for Northern Ireland.

Because unionist opposition to Sunningdale had been directed mainly towards the Council of Ireland, following the Agreement’s demise, the London government moved away from the idea of an institutionalised Irish dimension. The feeling amongst British officials was that the Council of Ireland had been a step too far for unionists. Had the Sunningdale settlement involved only a power-sharing arrangement within Northern Ireland, it may have survived. The SDLP, on the other hand, remained firmly opposed to any internal settlement of the Northern Ireland problem, arguing that this would deny the political identity of the nationalist community. Even in the immediate aftermath of Sunningdale’s collapse, the party responded vigorously to media speculation that this might lead to a weakening of the SDLP’s commitment to North-South institutions. “The Irish dimension is fundamental to SDLP policy”, argued Austin Currie, a co-founder and leading member of the party: “Whether or not it is realised in a Council of Ireland or any other structure is a matter for discussion” (*Irish Times*, 19 June 1974).

Through the political inertia of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the SDLP continued to hold to this line, insisting that the Irish government’s involvement in Northern Ireland was a *sine qua non* of any settlement to which it would be a party. In defending this position, the SDLP used the term “the Irish dimension” so frequently that, as suggested, the phrase came to be

considered as one of party's own. Even the British government – at this time looking to distance itself from the whole notion of an Irish dimension – appeared happy to forget that the phrase had first appeared in one of its own discussion papers. But whilst the term was invented in Whitehall, the *idea* of an Irish dimension was integral to the SDLP's thinking – as was evident in the party's earliest political documents (Murray, 1998, pp.12ff). Moreover, by continually using a phrase coined by British officials, the SDLP made it impossible for the Irish dimension to slip from the political agenda. By refusing to contemplate any settlement which did not involve the Irish government, the SDLP effectively vetoed any movement by London towards an internal solution of the Northern Ireland problem – an option obviously favoured by the unionist community.

Of course, the Dublin government was also crucial in pushing the Irish dimension. In particular, in the early 1980s, the administrations of Garret FitzGerald carefully avoided any anti-partitionist rhetoric, but insisted that Dublin should play some role in the administration of Northern Ireland. An Irish presence in the structures of governance in the region, it was argued, would serve to address the sense of political alienation that had become apparent amongst the nationalist minority in this period (FitzGerald, 1991, pp. 473ff). As such, it was not only the SDLP's obstinacy over the Irish dimension, but also the Dublin government's insistence that it should be involved in Northern Ireland, and indeed the sympathy for this position among the international community, particular in the US, that together pushed the British government towards the logic of the 1985 AIA. Under the terms of this accord, Dublin was given a limited but nonetheless significant role in the governance of Northern Ireland. More than a decade after Sunningdale's demise, the Irish dimension was restored.

Although the 1998 GFA ostensibly “transcended” the AIA, the essential architecture of the earlier accord remains in place. Despite unionist opposition, the inter-governmental institutions of the AIA were reformed rather than replaced by the GFA (O'Leary, 2001, p. 68). The SDLP had some influence in this decision, with the party still opposed to any settlement lacking an Irish input. However, more important was opinion in London and Dublin. In essence, the two governments were unwilling to abandon the political machinery which had, since the mid-1980s, allowed for far more effective management of the Northern Ireland problem. As such, under the terms of the GFA, Dublin retains the role it has held since 1985, as guardian of the nationalist minority's essential interests. This, in addition to the new North-South structures created by the GFA, shows that the Irish dimension is still in effect.

The role in Northern Ireland which the Dublin government acquired through the AIA, and the position which it continues to hold today, is less than the SDLP would have liked. In 1985, the party had been hoping for something closer to joint British-Irish sovereignty over Northern Ireland. In 1998, the SDLP had sought North-South structures with greater political potential, institutions which could have evolved with more dynamism, leading ultimately to the reunification of Ireland. However, the Irish dimension to both the AIA and the GFA owes much to the SDLP’s refusal to accept anything less than the British government had originally offered in its 1972 discussion paper.

The Two Traditions

The idea of “the two traditions” – or the same concept articulated in different terms – appeared in nationalist commentaries some years before the onset of the Northern Ireland conflict. Indeed, John Whyte highlights the 1950s in particular as a period in which mainly southern writers such as Michael Sheehy and Donal Barrington began to consider the problem of partition in terms of “two distinct peoples in Ireland” (Whyte, 1990, pp. 119-20). In this interpretation, partition was not imposed upon Ireland by the British government, but a rather an inevitable response by London to the seemingly irreconcilable differences of these two “peoples”: Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists. Implicit in this thesis was the idea that it was for the “peoples” of Ireland – with the emphasis being on nationalists – to work to overcome those differences. This, it was suggested, was the only way to end partition and unite Ireland.

Following the outbreak of communal violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, and the formation of the SDLP in 1970, the new party clearly drew upon these ideas, articulating a gradualist approach towards Irish unity as the ultimate solution to the conflict.⁴ However, the party also used this discourse of divided peoples – or “the two traditions” as it became in the SDLP’s phraseology – in explaining its immediate proposals for the pacification and stabilisation of Northern Ireland. For this end, the SDLP argued, could only be achieved by establishing political structures which recognised the identity of both political “traditions” in Northern Ireland, Irish nationalist and Ulster unionist (SDLP, 1972, p. 4; 1974a, para. 1.3). In essence, this meant creating an Irish dimension – that is all-Ireland political structures – as a counterbalance to the pre-existing British dimension – namely the political Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As the party plainly stated in its 1975 manifesto: “There is an Irish Dimension to

the problem. There is a British Dimension to the problem. Any solution must take account of both” (SDLP, 1975, p. 3).

In effect, then, the SDLP used this two traditions thesis to support its arguments in favour of an Irish dimension. This tendency was most notable in the period after Sunningdale’s collapse. At this time, many commentators proposed that the SDLP abandon its pursuit of an Irish dimension, and content itself with an internal settlement of the Northern Ireland problem – this, it was claimed, being the only basis on which unionists might be persuaded to share power with the nationalists. The SDLP rejected such suggestions, arguing that without institutional recognition of its Irish identity, the nationalist minority could not be accommodated within the Northern Ireland state (SDLP, 1974a, paragraphs 1.1-1.3). The two traditions thesis thus provided the ideological rationale for the party’s continued commitment to the Sunningdale formula of power-sharing *and* an Irish dimension. As Hume reasoned:

Partnership between our two traditions – both within the North through power-sharing, and between North and South through the Irish dimension – accepting and respecting our differences will in time build trust and confidence to replace distrust and prejudice (*Sunday Press*, 16 March 1975).

In the late 1970s, such arguments made little headway with either the unionist community or the British government. Buoyed by their defeat of Sunningdale, from 1974 onwards, unionists became increasingly inflexible. Not only did they remain opposed to the idea of linkages between the North and South of Ireland, but unionist leaders now refused to share power with the SDLP even within a wholly internal political arrangement. The British government, meanwhile, was unwilling to enforce a settlement upon an intransigent majority, and so appeared to abandon all hope of establishing a local settlement in Northern Ireland. Instead it settled into the role of ruling the region directly from Westminster. This seemed to appease the unionist community. After all, direct rule from London secured the majority’s essential political objective, maintenance of the Union with Britain. The nationalist community, on the other hand, grew increasingly disaffected. Recognising this, the SDLP continued to press for a change in British policy towards an arrangement that would acknowledge the identity of both communities. As Hume argued:

The problem here cannot be solved on the basis of one identity alone and whether wittingly or unwittingly, British politicians run the risk of promoting violence in the North by not accommodating the two different identities in it (*Irish News*, 9 May 1978).

The extent of the minority community’s alienation became apparent in the early 1980s, when republican prisoners began a series of hunger strikes in order to gain political recognition from the British government. The hunger strikes mobilised even moderate sections of the Catholic community, those who had shown no previous sympathy for the republican movement. In turn, this led to fears in both London and Dublin that the moderate nationalism of the SDLP would now be eclipsed by the radical republicanism of Sinn Féin (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 2002, p. 202).

It was partly to restore the credibility of the SDLP that the Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald, established the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4. This initiative, originally proposed by the SDLP (Murray, p. 124),⁵ brought the northern nationalist party into conference with its southern counterparts, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Labour Party. Although contemporary commentators derided the exercise as attempt by the Irish establishment to “save” the SDLP, the party had ambitions beyond its electoral struggle with Sinn Féin. It hoped to use the Forum to forge an ideological consensus among constitutional nationalists in both parts of Ireland, creating a unity of purpose that would, along with the goodwill of the international community, press the British government into action on Northern Ireland (Hume, 1984, p. 24). The SDLP’s success in achieving such consensus was evident in the conclusion of the New Ireland Forum report, which committed all of the participating parties to the two traditions thesis as the basis for a solution:

The validity of both the nationalist and unionist identities in Ireland ... must be accepted; both of these identities must have equally satisfactory, secure and durable, political, administrative and symbolic expression and protection (Dublin Stationery Office, 1984, article 5.2.4).

Although the 1985 AIA did not adopt any of the specific political structures that were proposed by the New Ireland Forum, it certainly drew upon the thinking behind the initiative. As Todd argues:

Explicitly, the AIA recognized the need to acknowledge the rights of the two traditions in Ireland and to ... recognize the identities of the two communities in Northern Ireland ...

The implication, when the AIA is read in the light of the New Ireland Forum Report, is that the nationalist community in Northern Ireland as a part of the wider Irish nationalist tradition has a right to the institutionalized recognition of its identity ... through the involvement of the Irish government in Northern Ireland (1995, p. 822).

The same political logic and discourse informed the terms of the Northern Ireland peace process from its earliest days. This was clear to see in

the Joint Declaration for Peace – or the Downing Street Declaration (DSD) as it is more commonly known – which formally launched the process in December 1993. Here the British government promised to work with its Irish counterpart to

encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of ... an agreement over a period through a process of dialogue and co-operation based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland (HMSO, 1993, para. 4).

In the 1995 Framework Documents – wherein the two governments provided the blueprint for a political settlement in Northern Ireland – the influence of the two traditions discourse was even more evident in the stipulation that “any new political arrangements must be based on full respect for, and protection and expression of, the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland” (HMSO, 1995, para. 10 (iv)). Finally, the GFA was also suffused with a language which recognised the equal legitimacy of the two political traditions in Ireland (see the *Agreement*, Constitutional Issues, para. 1(v-vi)).

All of these references show the extent to which the two traditions discourse became ingrained within the philosophy of the peace process. However, again this mode of thought can be related to ideas first expressed by the SDLP in the 1970s. Although the party was itself drawing on southern nationalist commentaries from the 1950s, the SDLP modified this thinking to reflect the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland. Specifically, the party developed practical proposals which – though based upon the rethinking of the 1950s – were not geared solely towards Irish unification, and in fact provided a conceptual framework within which Irish nationalist and Ulster unionist could both be accommodated in a still partitioned Ireland. In addition, it was the SDLP’s frequent and repeated use of a specific term, “the two traditions”, that led to its subsequent adoption by the British and Irish governments, and thus its establishment as a central discourse of the peace process

An Agreed Ireland

Of all the concepts considered in this paper, the idea of an “agreed Ireland” is the one most intimately associated with Hume. However, it also relates to the concepts already discussed, particularly the two traditions thesis. Indeed, the idea built directly upon this thesis, suggesting that the two political communities in Ireland had to find mutually acceptable constitutional structures that would allow them to co-exist on the island which they shared

– hence an agreed Ireland. Like the two traditions thesis, the concept of an agreed Ireland also became more prominent within the SDLP’s discourse in the aftermath of the failed Sunningdale Agreement, when the party tried to argue the validity of the power-sharing and Irish dimension formula which unionists had rejected (see SDLP, 1974b). However, it also appeared that Hume employed the phrase, an agreed Ireland, as a way to sate or at least to address the traditional nationalist desire for a united Ireland. For he used the term to suggest that any settlement which gave the two communities in Northern Ireland an equal say in the governance of the region, and any agreement which allowed nationalists to express a political affiliation with the southern Irish state, would in itself constitute “Irish unity”. For example, speaking shortly after the collapse of Sunningdale, Hume argued that:

If we get an agreed Ireland that is unity. What constitutional or institutional forms such an agreed Ireland takes is irrelevant because it would represent agreement by the people of this country as to how they should be governed (*Irish Times*, 17 June 1974).

This was an idea which Hume continued to articulate, *ad infinitum*, from the 1970s onwards. But whilst unionists vehemently opposed the all-Ireland implications of his thinking, Hume’s arguments did eventually find favour with the two governments. This was most apparent in the DSD of 1993, where the British government stated that its primary interest was “to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement among all the people who inhabit the island,” and committed itself to “work with the Irish Government to achieve such an agreement ... based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions ...” (HMSO, 1993, para. 4). With this, Hume’s notion of an agreed Ireland became the ideological template for a solution to the Northern Ireland problem (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 2002, pp. 221-2). Though broadly flexible as to the particular political structures that would be created, this model provided two guiding principles to the subsequent inter-party talks. Any solution arising from these discussions would have to include all-Ireland institutions, and must win the consent of both political traditions.

The agreement that eventually emerged in 1998 is consistent with this model. Indeed, with the North-South structures created by the GFA, northern Catholics no longer reside in a polity entirely separate from that of their co-nationals in the Republic of Ireland. The minority community’s Irish identity is explicitly recognised by the Agreement (*Agreement*, Constitutional Issues, para. 1(vi)). By the same token, the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland remains intact; unionists’ political identity has in no way been diminished. In this, the GFA has created a political framework capable

of accommodating both traditions on the island of Ireland. Hume’s contribution to the conception of this framework, and in particular his idea of an agreed Ireland, was highly significant.

“No Selfish Strategic or Economic Interest”

Having explored four major concepts which contributed to the discourse and thinking of the Northern Ireland peace process, it is now worth considering the particular political exchanges which led to the cessation of hostilities in the mid-1990s. For here again, we can see the influence of the SDLP, particularly in the verbal formulations that were used.

Of crucial importance was the dialogue between the SDLP and Sinn Féin which began in 1988. This debate was, in the first instance, inspired by the two parties’ rival interpretations of the 1985 AIA. Sinn Féin saw the Agreement as an imperialist stratagem: by allowing Dublin a limited role in the administration of the region, republicans felt that London was trying to stabilise British rule in Northern Ireland (Sinn Féin, 1986). The SDLP, however, saw the AIA in quite a different light. In particular, Hume focused on Article 1(c) of the Agreement, wherein the British government had promised to support and indeed legislate for a united Ireland if this was shown to be the wish of a majority within Northern Ireland. Hume presented this commitment as, effectively, a declaration of British neutrality on the future of Northern Ireland. With this, he sought to overturn republicans’ imperial interpretation of the conflict:

This is a clear statement by the British government that it has no interest of its own, either strategic or otherwise, in remaining in Ireland. It is a declaration that Irish unity is a matter for Irish people, for those who want it to persuade those who don’t (Hume, 1986, p. 382).

Publicly, Sinn Féin rejected Hume’s reading of the AIA. But behind closed doors, a debate was taking place within the republican movement. After the astonishing electoral gains of the early 1980s, Sinn Féin had reached a ceiling in its political support. This was partly attributable to the AIA, which has restored the confidence of constitutional nationalism, but more important was Sinn Féin’s relationship with the IRA. Whilst it continued to defend the actions of the IRA, Sinn Féin found that it could not win significant support beyond the republican heartlands, where Catholic voters remained loyal to the SDLP. If Sinn Féin was to have any influence beyond its core constituency, it would have to engage with its moderate rival. Recognising this, the Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, began to put out political feelers towards the SDLP (Adams, 2003 pp. 53ff.)

In spite of the risks involved, Hume finally agreed to formal talks with Sinn Féin, beginning in early 1988. In essence, the SDLP used these discussions to restate and refine its reading of the AIA, and in particular its view that the British government was now neutral on the possibility of Irish unity. As Hume argued in a letter delivered to Adams at the outset of the talks: “Britain is now saying that she has no interest of her own in being here and that her only interest is to see agreement among the people who share the island of Ireland” (Hume, 1988, p. 4). For the SDLP, therefore, the British government was not the primary obstacle to Irish reunification. Rather it was the unionist community, and their deep-rooted resistance to that end. Thus, the key to achieving a united Ireland was to persuade unionists to consent to it.

Despite such arguments, throughout the 1988 talks, Sinn Féin stubbornly rejected the idea of British neutrality on Northern Ireland, and restated their old colonial interpretation of the conflict:

The claim that Britain is neutral ignores their role as a pawnbroker and guarantor of unionist hegemony ... Britain’s continuing involvement in Ireland is based on strategic, economic and political interests (Sinn Féin, 1988, p. 12).

Although the SDLP-Sinn Féin talks appeared to end in stalemate, Hume took what republicans had said here as a challenge (Hume, 1996, p. 115). He now turned to London, seeking confirmation – straight from the horse’s mouth as it were – of his conception of the AIA and of British neutrality *vis-à-vis* Irish unity. Peter Brooke, the Northern Ireland Secretary from 1989, proved receptive to Hume’s approaches, and took seriously his suggestion that the republican leadership was becoming more open-minded (Mallie and McKitterick, 1996, pp. 107-8). Brooke responded in a speech to his Westminster constituency on November 9th 1990, in which he famously declared that: “The British government has no selfish strategic or economic interests in Northern Ireland” (*Irish Times*, 10 November 1990). The striking similarities between this formula and the terms in which Sinn Féin had rejected the SDLP’s neutrality thesis seem more than coincidental. It appears that someone was telling Brooke exactly what republicans needed to hear a British minister say.

Following Brooke’s speech, Hume was able to return to Adams claiming vindication of his interpretation of the AIA. This led to further talks between the two leaders which evolved into the so-called “Hume-Adams initiative”. The essential purpose of this initiative was to find agreement on a form of words – acceptable to the British and Irish governments, but also to the republican movement – which would be included in a joint London-

Dublin declaration regarding the terms on which Sinn Féin could join all-party talks towards a settlement in Northern Ireland. Though understandably unnerving Ulster unionists, the Hume-Adams dialogue achieved huge support throughout nationalist Ireland, and eventually forced the two governments to respond with the DSD of December 1993 (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, pp. 117ff.).

The phraseology of the DSD stands as a testament to the extent to which the document drew upon the Hume-Adams initiative, despite presentation to the contrary (Bew, Patterson and Teague, 1997, pp. 205-6). In order to maintain unionist support for the process, the two governments could not be seen to adopt a text which Adams had any part in creating, the Sinn Féin leader being seen as a terrorist in Protestant eyes. But though the terms of the Hume-Adams dialogue were diluted, the primary inspiration for the DSD was plain to see. Most significant in the text was an affirmation of the position given by Brooke three years previously, the British government declaring that it had “no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland”, and thus represented no barrier to a united Ireland achieved by peaceful means (HMSO, 1993, para. 4).

After considerable deliberation with the republican movement, the IRA eventually responded to the DSD by calling a ceasefire in August 1994. The DSD, of course, was not the sole reason for this shift in strategy. Indeed, the republican movement had for some years been moving towards a more political approach (English, 2003, pp. 187ff).

Moreover, if any one explanation can be given for the cessation of the armed campaign, it was the realisation that, though the IRA could no be defeated, neither did it have the military capacity to force the British state from Northern Ireland. By the late 1980s, many senior republicans had accepted this reality. However, persuading the movement as a whole to abandon the armed struggle and adopt a purely political strategy was no easy task. Crucial in the process were the various statements regarding British interests in Northern Ireland that were made in the early 1990s. These allowed the Sinn Féin leadership to suggest that there had been a radical shift in British policy towards Northern Ireland, and that this should be tested by republicans’ also changing tack.

On this level, the early peace process appeared as a game played essentially between the British state and the republican movement. However, as demonstrated, Hume and the SDLP helped to write the script for the crucial first exchanges between the two sides. Prior to the SDLP-Sinn Féin talks of 1988, republicans appeared unwilling to even entertain the idea of British neutrality regarding Northern Ireland. But as well as creating such

thoughts amongst the Sinn Féin leadership, Hume prompted the British government to make public announcements that would encourage the acceptance of such ideas amongst the wider republican movement. These statements proved vital to the development of the Northern Ireland peace process. In particular, without the “no selfish strategic or economic interests” mantra repeated by British officials throughout the early 1990s, there would have been no IRA ceasefire in 1994, and no peace agreement in 1998.

Conclusion

The great historical legacy of the SDLP, and of John Hume in particular, lies in redefining Irish nationalism. I deliberately do not say Northern nationalism, as I believe the SDLP has radically changed the thinking of the mainstream political parties in the South, as well as the broad mass of constitutional nationalist thinking in both North and South. Not only do I make that wider claim, but I also further claim that the SDLP has radically changed the thinking of physical force nationalism or republicanism as well. (Maginness, 2002, p. 33)

Notwithstanding the ostentatious nature of this assertion – and indeed despite the fact that it is made by a member of the SDLP – it has credibility. With its birth in August 1970, the SDLP became the primary political expression of the reformist tendencies that emerged within northern Irish nationalism in the 1960s. Throughout the 1970s, the party consolidated this position by articulating a discourse and approach to the Northern Ireland problem that departed significantly from traditional anti-partitionist nationalism. Even in this early period, the SDLP enjoyed considerable influence within Irish government circles, but the real breakthrough came with the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4. With this, the party had opportunity to fully imbue the southern state with its political philosophy (Murray, 1998, pp. 123, 141), and hereafter successive Irish governments adopted a distinctively SDLP phraseology. In turn, the London government also took on something of the SDLP’s discourse. This was evident in the AIA of 1985, and even more so the DSD of 1993, after which the two governments were united in their use of a lexicon at least partly conditioned by the terminology of Hume and his party. However, as Maginness points out, the SDLP also helped to change the thinking of physical force republicanism. Clearly, it was aided in this effort by the willingness of the British government to confirm the arguments which the party had made to Sinn Féin. But looking at the particular formulations which figures such as Peter Brooke chose to use, it seems that by the early 1990s Hume had established a direct line of

communication with the Northern Ireland Office, which was listening with great interest.

There is, however, one party to the Northern Ireland conflict who have proved impervious to “Humespeak”. Ulster unionists have retained a particular distrust for Hume and his discourse. Cunningham suggests that this is a result of the perceived ambiguities in Hume’s political language. Demonstrating his point, Cunningham provides a quotation from a Protestant clergyman which he suggests “neatly encapsulates criticisms that have been levelled at John Hume”:

Protestants are really puzzled by what they feel is the ambiguous attitude of Catholics and their failure to define ordinary concepts in a clean, straightforward way ... Protestants sometimes find it very difficult to understand the sophistry, the playing with words which we (sometimes) get from Catholics (Cunningham, 1997, p. 13).

Perhaps the best example of such “sophistry” is Hume’s “agreed Ireland”. For many unionists, this phrase provided the “verbal sleight of hand” by which Hume disguised his true ambition (Bew and Patterson, 1985, p. 99). Put simply, an agreed Ireland was Humespeak for a united Ireland. (O’Brien, 1994, p. 177). However, the unionist reading of Hume’s agreed Ireland underestimates the extent to which the concept allowed Irish nationalists, and particularly northern Irish nationalists, to accept a political settlement which fell short of a united Ireland. It did so by promising constitutional arrangements with an all-Ireland dimension, structures which allowed northern nationalists to feel some form of political association with the Irish Republic, the state which best represented their national identity. At the same time, an agreed Ireland offered the same for unionists – that the institutions created would respect their rights and identity, and would require their consent. This, at its most basic level, is what Hume’s agreed Ireland was all about. It was an attempt to square the circle between Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism, to provide political structures which would satisfy both. With the GFA, this Herculean task may have been accomplished. The 1998 Agreement has, for the first time in Irish history, created institutions which have secured widespread acceptance amongst both political traditions on the island.⁶ The GFA has achieved an agreed Ireland, and Hume and the SDLP have played no small part in this.

Endnotes

* I would like to acknowledge the support of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences in carrying out this research. I am also

grateful to Jennifer Todd and the editors for their constructive comments. All errors are my own.

¹ An appreciation of the SDLP’s place within the wider process of change in Irish nationalist discourse can be gained by reading this piece in conjunction with the article by O’Donnell in this volume, and those by Hayward (2004), Ivory (1999), and Shirlow and McGovern (1998).

² For an overview of the different institutions of the GFA, see O’Leary (2001).

³ Northern Ireland comprises six of the 32 counties of Ireland. However, Irish nationalists have traditionally used the term “the six counties” as a means to delegitimise the Northern Ireland state. The implication is that the “six counties” are only a part of what would be a more “natural” political unit: a 32 county united Ireland.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of this thinking, see McLoughlin (2006).

⁵ FitzGerald had been thinking in similar terms, but modified Hume’s idea of a convention of Irish nationalist parties to one which would, at least in principle, be open to Ulster unionist contributions (FitzGerald, 1991, pp. 462ff.). FitzGerald and Hume were alike in much of their political thinking, and their convergence over the New Ireland Forum initiative shows just one example of the overlap and interplay between revisionist nationalist tendencies in both parts of Ireland.⁶

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⁶ Exit polls suggested that the GFA won only a slim majority of support among the unionist community in the 1998 referendum. Unionists’ traditional aversion to power sharing with nationalists was clearly exacerbated by the prospect of republicans also participating in the government of Northern Ireland. Following this, the failure of the IRA to decommission its weapons, allied to instances of continued republican paramilitary activity and Sinn Féin’s refusal to accept new policing arrangements in Northern Ireland, saw unionist backing for the GFA fall further. However, more recently, the resolution of these issues appears to have assured unionists of republicans’ commitment to purely democratic methods. Accordingly, most sections of the Protestant community have now, if not embraced, at least accepted the GFA as providing the most equitable solution for the stable governance of Northern Ireland.

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