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'Shared Future: Building and Sustaining Peace,  
the Northern Ireland Case Study'  
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### **A Shared And Better Society: Principled, Honest And Mature Reflection Required.**

**Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this very important conference. I will endeavour to cover each of the themes to be addressed.**

**By cultivating respect for different traditions it is hoped that we can build a better, shared future.**

**We in the SDLP know how important it is to sell N.Ireland, and that it is important work. But we are concerned that the narrative of economic advance disguises the fact that so much of the promise of the GFA remains unfulfilled.**

**The SDLP has always played a constructive leadership role in the peace process. We acknowledge how far we have all come. We welcome the achievements and the successes. However, we agree with the Tánaiste's recent comments about cementing our peace, and the required next steps.**

**As we approach 15 years from the Good Friday Agreement in 2013, we need honest and mature reflection on where we are. The Irish Language Act joins a queue of outstanding commitments overdue and not delivered. If we want to build a shared and a better society we must give urgent attention to the cornerstones of the new North. On dealing with our past on a principled basis, on language policy, equality, rights, social justice, tackling sectarianism and the whole shared society the news is not good.**

**These will all be central to building for the future; yet many remain blocked or stalled. In fact if you were to look at one of the main party's website they boast about preventing the Irish Language Act! Not much respect for different traditions evident. We need to be open and honest about where we are, and the work remaining to be done. The new beginning in the North has stalled - we cannot pretend otherwise.**

**The coming decade will see a series of anniversaries of momentous events - from the introduction of the Third Home Rule, the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912, The Great War and the Easter Rising, the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Partition and advent of the Civil War.**

**If we approach each of these events with an openness to listen to the different narratives of the past, and as President Michael D Higgins said in his address at Magee College in Derry, "while recognising that different people can hold differing interpretations of the same events, it will be important that the commemoration of these anniversaries is carried out in a spirit not just of tolerance and mutual respect, but of generosity." then not only will we have a better understanding of our shared history but also a better**

understanding of who we are now and it is hoped a reconciled future, north and south and between these islands.

We must also deal with our more recent past. As examples elsewhere have shown e.g. in Spain where a political decision was made to build a narrative which sought to suppress or de-emphasise memories which could be seen as destabilising or threatening of consensus or to put it more bluntly to have a silence about the past. Having meet victims of IRA, Loyalist and State murder I am firmly of the view that forgetting is not the answer. The majority of those murdered by the IRA were catholic yet they are practically forgotten in our peace process. They are being told to get on with the new beginning. To cherish the opportunities peace will create for us all. They are asked to accept a consensus that denies them the right to truth.

"I get down on my knees and do what must be done

And kiss Achilles hand, the killer of my son."

Michael Longley's poem 'Ceasefire' quoted the Iliad and sought to capture the complexity of peace.

The past has a habit of resurrecting itself at all sorts of inconvenient times and levels.

I have only to point to the allegations being made over the last few days at the Smithwick Tribunals to illustrate this point. And with over 3000 unsolved murders in the North we owe to the victims, their families and future generations to learn and tell the truth about the past.

Many argue that we have peace but reconciliation is of course a further state. One which we must urgently seek to achieve knowing that truth and reconciliation are inextricably linked and mutually dependent.

We in the SDLP will play a constructive and positive role in the years ahead. We need to be open and honest about where we now are, and the work remaining to be done.

We agree with the Tánaiste, Eamon Gilmore, who stated: "There remains much which we can do, and should do, and must do.....A shared future for the people of Northern Ireland must be built on the cornerstone of equal respect for the rights of all communities".

We agree. There is much more to do to make this a reality – but not dealing with the past and the right to truth is a principled way that will be the thing that potentially ‘damns’ this generation when people look back and the SDLP will continue to play a leadership role in working constructively for our new Ireland.

