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SDLP Annual Conference 3 - 5 November, 1978

*Taoiseach
to see pl.
We will have a letter
for you on the visit to us
by Messrs. Keene & Keene
7/11*

1. I attended the eighth annual conference of the SDLP, held in Newcastle, Co. Down on 3-5 November. Although some veterans of earlier conferences thought that attendance might be a few percent down on previous years and considered that exchanges between the platform and the floor of the conference less energetic than on some other occasions, my general impression was that from an organisational point of view the party has been successful so far in resisting the erosion which can be expected from direct rule. The conference hall was packed for the main speeches. While Paddy Duffy, the most effective representative of the 'green' line in the party and of whatever anti-platform sentiment there was at the conference, scored some minor victories - the most substantive being a decision to widen the constituency representative committee to include SDLP leaders of District Councils - the leadership had no real difficulty in asserting itself and maintaining the party line on the ground it had chosen in relation to the main policy issues.

2. The Constitutional Question

The central issue of the conference was of course the constitutional question. Debate at the 1977 conference had centred on whether the conference should adopt a policy document called 'Facing Reality', which called on the British Government to spell out its long-term objectives in relation to the North and to pursue actively a policy of uniting the people of Ireland in an agreed Ireland or whether it should approve instead a motion calling for British withdrawal from the North. In the event the 1977 conference overwhelmingly approved the 'Facing Reality' document. In the year since then Unionist attitudes to power-sharing have hardened still further, if that was possible. Any action which the British have taken is seen to favour integration rather than to redress the situation. The mood of frustration and the nationalist reflex which these things engendered among the minority community put the leadership in a position where they felt they had no option but to cater for the call for British withdrawal. They chose to do so through the

following motion (No. 70) sponsored by Currie's Coalisland branch:

Conference believes that British disengagement from Ireland is inevitable and desirable; that it ought to take place as part of an overall political solution which would provide guarantees for both traditions in the North and minimise the possible dangers in the political, security, economic and financial fields and that the British Government immediately after the Westminster election should call a quadripartite conference of the two Sovereign Governments in London and Dublin and representatives of the two traditions in the North with a view to finding a permanent solution to the Irish problem.

While accepting and endorsing British disengagement the motion, from the leadership's point of view, has at least the advantage of emphasising the dangers of precipitate withdrawal and focusing on the preparatory stages for disengagement which could presumably include any internal arrangements in Northern Ireland which were acceptable to the two communities as worked out in quadripartite talks. Of the other eighteen motions down for debate on the constitutional heading, at least a dozen dealt, usually in starker terms, with the withdrawal question. The Duffy controlled Loup branch submitted a motion on a federal state in Ireland (text attached). For what appeared to be tactical and presentational reasons rather than a determined attempt to have his resolution adopted, Duffy succeeded in passing a procedural motion during the sparsely attended opening stage of the conference confining debate on Motion 70 to twenty minutes, and ensuring some debate on his Motion 89. The 20 minutes deadline was later extended and the move did not represent any real dissent from Motion 70 on the part of the floor.

3. The keynote speech on Motion 70 was given by Austin Currie. He emphasised the consistency of the SDLP commitment to unity by consent, repeated their belief in power-sharing and castigated the British Government for refusing to clarify their long-term intentions or living up to their responsibilities to promote a solution. He dwelt strongly on the risks involved in any scenario of withdrawal and called for a quadripartite conference after the next Westminster

election where the role of the British Government would be:

- (a) to use its influence to create the conditions for an agreed Ireland, making it clear that it saw this context as being in the best interest of all the people of these islands; and
- (b) to offer itself as a guarantee for any agreement, particularly in relation to those of the Unionist tradition.

Speakers on the motion after Currie included Hugh Logue, who considered that the adoption of Motion 70 implied rejection of Mason's five point plan, Bríd Rodgers, (the new party chairman), who called on the Irish Government to spell out for Unionists the implications of Irish unity, Seamus Mallon who emphasised the need to see withdrawal as part of a long-term solution and John Hume who criticised British guarantees to Unionists as destroying any motivation Unionists might have to talk to their neighbours. Only one speaker, a young student delegate from Newry, criticised the motion on the grounds that it was unrealistic to expect Unionists to give up the guarantee of the British presence when nothing was being put in its place and who considered the motion a return to the mirages of the old nationalism.

4. Because of the time factor discussion of this motion became somewhat telescoped with that of Motion 89 on a federal state in Ireland. On this John Hume said that he personally favoured the idea but considered it needed more study. Both he and Seamus Mallon undertook that the problem would be studied by the incoming Executive. Paddy Duffy highlighted the extent to which the motion called for action by the South and was applauded for criticising the Irish Government for failing to match its verbal commitment to unity with action. Paddy O'Hanlon deplored in both motions what he saw as a tendency to forget that unity by consent meant the consent of the Protestants. Other speakers observed that the federal option deserved further study and on the understanding that the Executive would give it this study the motion was withdrawn.

5. Other Issues

Of the other conference debates the most interesting politically was the debate on security. An emergency motion, approving the party's recent statement on Long Kesh was carried unanimously. The extent to which delegates were concerned with the issue in spite- or perhaps because of- the way it is being exploited by the Provisionals was shown by the fact that the following motions were carried overwhelmingly, contrary to the intention of the platform:

Conference asserts its commitment to the principle that every person in prison, irrespective of how or for what he or she is held, has an inalienable right to physical and mental exercise and that these are rights which can in no circumstances be taken away by any State Authority.

Conference declares its total opposition to the inhuman and degrading treatment to which persons held in Long Kesh are subjected and calls upon the administration to bring to an end the suffering that is associated with that establishment.

A further motion, proposed by Paddy Duffy that "conference supports the concept of 'emergency status' for political prisoners at present in Long Kesh" required the energetic and impressive intervention of John Hume to have it referred for consideration to the incoming Executive.

6. General Impressions

The conference showed that from an organisational point of view the SDLP is still in quite a healthy state. In terms of SDLP policy, Motion 70 does not represent a new departure. Party policy has always contained a commitment to some form of eventual Irish unity, to be preceded, or brought about by a coming together of people within Northern Ireland. As long as there seemed to be a possibility of agreed power-sharing institutions within Northern Ireland the leadership was able to emphasise the Northern Ireland

as opposed to the all-Ireland dimension. The sustained refusal of the Unionists to agree to operate any power-sharing government undermined, as it was bound to do, the credibility of this stance. As far as one could judge from the vehemently anti-British tone of this conference, the party leadership was justified in thinking that a continuing refusal to cater for the British withdrawal sentiment would leave them and the party as a whole dangerously exposed. Motion 70 allows the party to meet the emotional demand for British withdrawal while retaining to some extent at least the notion that this is still to be seen as the culmination of a political process rather than a first step or a panacea, as the more extreme nationalist groups would maintain. It thus allows the party to maintain its coherence and should not prevent the leadership from re-entering discussions on an acceptable form of devolution if or when such matters again appear in a realistic way on the political agenda in Northern Ireland.

7. These nuances will be quite lost on the Unionists, who will no doubt see in this a simple 'Brits out' policy and a further retrospective justification of their refusal to co-operate with the SDLP. To that extent the conference represents an obstacle in the way of power-sharing but given that this Unionist refusal was maintained with equal and impartial intransigence for all the more moderate stages of SDLP policy it is difficult to blame the SDLP leadership for abandoning hope of any helping hand from the Unionist quarter and settling for the policy which they calculate will best maintain their support. It is difficult to assess to what extent that support is threatened. The new emphasis on British withdrawal appeals least to whatever urban labour strand there is in the party. Gerry Fitt showed an almost obsessive concern in public and private during the conference with the threat posed by the Republican Clubs (Official Sinn Féin). This concern relates mainly to his own margins in the Westminster election but the fact that Republican Clubs candidate Tom French defeated Bríd Rodgers in a local government by-election in Craigavon may indicate the possibility of some losses in marginal areas. However the ideology of the Republican Clubs and their curious alignment with the Unionists on issues such as the return of Stormont etc. must place fairly drastic limits to the impact they could have on the SDLP. The new policy emphasis should however reduce still further the likelihood of any take-off by the Frank McManus Irish Independence Party. The long-term threat which most of the more thoughtful members

consider most dangerous is not that of mass defection to another party but of a 'leakage' or falling away of interest and support. There was no serious evidence of such a trend at this conference. In a situation of political vacuum it is difficult for the SDLP to do anything more than a holding operation. The present conference had every appearance of a successful holding operation.

8. Follow-up to the Conference

The main point of follow-up to the conference is that the party Executive will select a delegation of prominent SDLP members who will seek talks with the British and Irish Governments and the British and Irish Opposition parties on the lines of Motion 70. The incoming Executive is also pledged to study a number of issues in particular the Long Kesh issue and the federal option. One organisational change brought about by the conference - against the wishes of the leadership - is that the Constituency Representatives Committee is being widened to include SDLP leaders of District Councils. This change, which in theory at least should bring a more 'grass-roots' attitude into meetings of constituency representatives, is likely to have little or no impact, since the constituency representatives have scarcely functioned as a collective group during the past year.

Seán Ó hUiginn

Seán Ó hUiginn
6 November, 1978

cc.

PSM

PSS

Mr. D. Nally

Ambassador, London.