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**IRELAND**



<b>Reference Code:</b>	2013/27/1494
<b>Creation Date(s):</b>	22 March 1983
<b>Extent and medium:</b>	2 pages
<b>Creator(s):</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs
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S.D.L.P.

1. PSS
2. PSM

The Minister asked recently for a list of possible ways in which the SDLP could be assisted in the run-up to a Westminster election. In meetings with SDLP members over the past few weeks I have tried to find out the main difficulties as seen from their perspective.

The following were the main points to emerge:

- (a) on the most important short-term matter, the proposal to establish a Council for a New Ireland, the Government have made a positive response with the announcement of the forum. This will give the SDLP a necessary platform to fight the Westminster election on. The exclusion of Sinn Féin helps the SDLP to highlight the difference in approach between them and Sinn Féin and demonstrates the SDLP's ability to make political progress. Already Joe Hendron and Eddie McGrady have challenged Sinn Féin to call a ceasefire and abandon their violent approach;
- (b) the party is seriously short of financial resources and this affects its ability to organise properly. It has, for instance, been unable so far to raise enough money to provide a West Belfast office. In addition, many of the leading figures of the SDLP have suffered financially through the loss of careers in areas such as teaching and now find it difficult to make a living and remain in politics even on a part-time basis. While it is impossible for the Government to assist the SDLP directly with finance, several members have expressed the hope that those attending the Forum should receive financial assistance. This could be done perhaps by giving generous travel and attendance allowances;
- (c) the third main area in which assistance can be given relates to various constituency problems which arise which have a cross-border dimension or where we can put pressure

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on the British to be helpful. Recent examples of this are the proposed reopening of Bessbrook Railway Station, improvement of the Newry/Dundalk road, maintenance of the Dublin/Belfast airlink, support for EEC aid to Belfast and the border areas etc. It can be re-emphasised in our various contacts with the SDLP that we are willing to help in any matters of this nature.

Apart from the financial problems mentioned above the Government have been as helpful as possible to the SDLP. I do not see any way in which the Government can be of direct financial assistance to them. Every effort should, however, be made to ensure that a fairly large number of SDLP Assembly members can attend the Forum and that they are generously treated in terms of travel and subsistence allowances and perhaps some form of attendance allowance.

Martin Burke

22 March 1983