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16 July, 1971

Statement issued by the Social Democratic and Labour Party announcing the Party's withdrawal from Stormont (as reported in the Belfast Irish News of 17 July 1971).

305/14/443

The Parliamentary party of the Social Democratic and Labour Party issued a statement earlier this week in which we demanded an impartial inquiry into the deaths of two young Derry men resulting from British army action, and in which we made it clear that in the event of failure by the authorities to agree to our demand we could take a certain course of action.

Our demand has not been met and we have, therefore, no alternative but to pursue the course of action that we have already outlined in our earlier statement. We will pursue that course of action.

We pointed out that we regarded our demand as a basic test of, and a public questioning of, the sincerity and determination of the British Government to proceed in an impartial manner towards a political solution to the problems of our community.

We have arrived at this point of questioning as a result of a whole series of issues and events of which the Derry deaths were but a culmination and for us the last straw. These events have led to increasing doubts in our minds over a period of time about the usefulness of our role as Parliamentary representatives within the present system.

We have now been driven to the point when we have been faced with a clear choice - either to continue to give credibility to the system which in itself is basically unstable and from which derives the unrest that is destroying our community, or take a stand in order to bring home to those in authority the need for strong political action to solve our problems and to prevent any further tragic loss of life which derives from the instability of our political institutions.

The deaths in Derry were a final but important straw. If, as responsible public representatives, we are unable to obtain action on an issue such as this - an issue which has outraged our constituents - what role is there for us in the present Parliamentary system.

If British troops had shot unarmed civilians dead in a riot situation in the streets of Birmingham, what would have been the reaction of the British public? Would there have been an inquiry?

Human life has been seriously devalued by violent elements in our society. We find it intolerable that it should be devalued by those in Government charged with the responsibility of solving our problems. By doing so they play straight into the hands of those same violent elements.

The actions of both the British Government and the British Army on this issue tend to confirm our increasing suspicions about the role of the Army in the Northern Ireland situation. These suspicions date from the arrival in power of the present administration, instanced by the military action in the 'curfew' of the Lower Falls, a few short weeks after they came to power.

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Instanced by the proposals for a fulltime battalion of the UDR;

Instanced by the unquestioning acceptance of the truths of Army public statements;

Instanced by the admitted policy of virtual internment by using the normal legal processes, and instanced by the obviously decreasing political control of the military under the new British administration.

Then we had the 'shoot on suspicion' policy announced by Mr. Faulkner, a policy now confirmed, despite the subsequent denials that there had been a change. Then we have the obvious and increasing lack of consultations between the British Government and Opposition leaders, an attitude in stark contrast to the previous administration which, without prejudice to either side, sought our view continually.

The attitude of the present Whitehall administration on this matter was either due to deliberate policy or to sheer carelessness - either of which was unpardonable in the present serious situation.

Is it any wonder that we feel that the role of the military has changed from being that of impartial keepers of the peace to that of shoring up and supporting a particular individual in the office of Prime Minister? Has the British Government even yet faced up to the logic of its presence in Northern Ireland? Public memories are short but the memories of those who suffer are not.

We would recall the circumstances of the intervention of August, 1969, when the Army came to the streets to impose law and order, and a reform programme was forced on Stormont. What did that intervention mean other than that the Northern Ireland system itself had failed to produce the basis for peace, justice and stability.

Now two years later, having refused to face that logic, the British Government, without the slightest constitutional guarantee, asked us to believe that the chief architects of our injustice-ridden society, the Unionist Party, are the people who can govern us towards a solution, with the same system!

Throughout those two years we have had legislative reform. We have repeatedly made it clear that the letter of reform is not the reality without a change of heart. Instead of a change of heart we have witnessed the steady and increasing grip upon the system by right-wing forces in Northern Ireland.

Two Prime Ministers have already fallen to their intransigence and intolerance and a third has shown repeated evidence of his willingness to bow the knee to their pressures, culminating in the remarkable sight of a Prime Minister and half his Cabinet obeying a summons from the Orange Order, of which they are members, to attend a meeting in Lurgan to discuss the question of Orange parades.

Does the British Government seriously believe that there can be any real public confidence in a Government which is still dominated by a secret sectarian society and does it believe that its army can be used to back the decisions of such a Government on the question of rerouting of Orange parades which seriously threaten the peace and still be regarded as having an impartial role?

All these factors have led us to the point of questioning the sincerity and determination of the British Government to solve this problem.

Indeed, it would appear to us that the British Government has no real policy beyond that of reacting to events as they happen and hoping that the problem will run away. Such an attitude amounts to one of criminal irresponsibility and negligence, more so because of the representations that we have made and of the accuracy of our forecasts.

Insofar as we can detect any definite policy, it would appear to be the maintenance of Stormont in its present form, carrying out minimum civil rights reforms and involving the Opposition only to the point when the Unionist right-wing would not be alienated.

In other words, British policy is still governed, as it always has been, except for a few short months in 1969, by the threat of the right-wing backlash. There can be no solution till the right-wing is confronted. The present policy, such as it is, has never had any chance of success and has now been totally shattered by our decision to withdraw from the present parliamentary system and set up an alternative assembly.

We hope that by doing so we will bring home to the world the reality of the Northern Ireland situation, which is that Stormont is, and always has been, the voice of Unionism. The assembly that we propose will be the voice of non-Unionists. There can be no solution which does not take account of both and it would be our hope for this community that such account is taken sooner rather than later.

The Party said there were those who would say that their attitude was neither responsible nor constructive. We would draw their attention to our record which has been one of constructive parliamentary and public activity against an increasingly difficult background.

We have consistently condemned violence and have continually urged restraint, often at political cost to ourselves and in unpopular circumstances. We now take this stand in order to bring home to those in authority in London the need for political solutions to end the instability which leads to continuing unrest here. Even the GOC points out the need for a political solution. How long must we wait?

Let us make it clear once again that we deplore and condemn outright violence as a means to political ends. Those who deliberately organise and perpetrate violence in our society are only leading the people to destruction, and the only ones to suffer, to date, and they have suffered grievously, are those people in the areas where violence has taken place.

Violent men must also take their share of responsibility for the suffering and death that results from their actions. When the first stone is thrown or the first shot is fired, no one knows where it will end. But anyone who knowingly starts or creates a violent situation must bear his share of the responsibility for the consequences.

To our supporters we say firmly and clearly - stay off the streets and give no support whatever to the violence or the perpetration of it. We are determined to create a solution to this problem but violence, apart from the suffering and death that it causes in our areas, can only hinder us.

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One year ago the whole world supported our cause. This is not so today because of violence and violent men. We have heard recently the publicly expressed views of some of those who advocate violence. Does anyone really believe that we can build a decent society on such attitudes?

Finally may we say that we welcome the support given to our stand by our parliamentary colleagues and other groups.

We would withhold further details about the nature of the alternative assembly that we propose until we have had, in courtesy, the opportunity of discussing our ideas with those of our parliamentary colleagues at Stormont who have expressed support for our stand.