

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code: 2012/59/1559

Creation Date(s): [December 1982]

Extent and medium: 3 pages

Creator(s): Department of Foreign Affairs

Access Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

British Opposition Parties and Northern Ireland

1. At its conference in October 1981 the Labour Party adopted a comprehensive policy statement on Northern Ireland, a central element of which is the acceptance of the aim of bringing about the unification of Ireland by agreement and consent between the two parts of Ireland. The initial objective is to achieve peace and reconciliation between the two communities in Northern Ireland. The contents and balance of the statement represent in broad terms a compromise between the largely left wing elements in the constituency parties and the more establishment membership of the parliamentary party, supported by some of the large unions. It is not suggested, of course, that support for Irish unity is to be found only on the left of the Labour Party - there is substantial support elsewhere. It is unlikely, however, that the statement would have taken the form it did if it had not been drafted and adopted at a time when Bennism was at its peak and the right wing of the Labour Party was being weakened by the periodic defection of MP's to the SDP, newly established in March 1981. It was also a period when interest in Northern Ireland affairs was very high because of the December 1980 Anglo-Irish Summit and the joint studies which followed and also because of the hunger strike. Accordingly, the statement cannot be taken in literal terms as a guide to the policy of a future Labour Government, any more than it can be assumed that conference policies on unilateral disarmament or withdrawal from the European Community will become Government policy as they stand. It is likely, however, that the commitment to Irish unity will be maintained in rhetorical terms but, as happened at this year's party conference, the emphasis will be placed on the element of consent.

2. It must be said, generally, that over the past year the party has taken a studiously low-key approach towards the promotion of its new policy. When he led a party delegation to Belfast in February last the party leader, Michael Foot, showed a distinct nervousness in regard to its primary political recommendations and concentrated instead on economic matters. In the House of Commons the Party's Northern Ireland spokesman, Mr. Don Concannon, has lent broad support to Mr. Prior's policies on the political and security fronts while calling for greater economic assistance for the province. It has been left to the Deputy Spokesman, Mr. Clive Soley, to articulate in his own sober and non-provocative way some of the more distinctive views to be found within the party. In recent speeches Soley has called for a more widespread public debate on the commitment to unification and outlined some of the measures towards this end which a Labour Government might consider. These include extending and developing the committees set up in the Anglo-Irish framework, creation of an All-Ireland Economic Council, joint citizenship rights, harmonisation of economic, social and political institutions North and South and the establishment of the Parliamentary tier.

3. Although the Labour Party delegation which visited Belfast in February had originally intended coming to Dublin they did not do so following the defeat of the Government in the Dail. The question of a visit to Dublin has been raised several times since and the most recent indication of the Labour Party's intentions came last month from Clive Soley who made it clear that he was very anxious that the postponed visit should take place as soon as possible in the New Year. He felt at that time that it was very important that the delegation should meet with whatever administration was in office and to this end would be pressing within the Party

for a commitment to a visit in January or February next. As previously intended, the delegation would consist of Foot, Concannon, Soley and two or three others. If for some reason it should not prove possible to proceed with a group visit during that period Soley said that he would intend to visit Dublin independently.

4. Neither the SDP nor the Liberal party has a formally adopted policy on Northern Ireland. Generally speaking, leaders of both parties have expressed unexceptionable views, such as support for involvement of the Dublin Government in the search for a solution and the idea that the membership of both parts of the country in the European Community could be used to advantage. Within the SDP, Dr. David Owen's ideas on foreign policy have been somewhat to the right of Denis Healey's and during the Falklands crisis he was extremely critical of the Irish position. Mrs. Shirley Williams, on the other hand, has expressed support for a confederal structure in Ireland, involving both the Republic and the UK while making it clear her views more personal in the absence of an agreed party policy.

3. British public opinion, therefore, is not well prepared to consider radical choices regarding Northern Ireland than is true of the political parties. A disturbing element, from our point of view, is the overwhelming preference, among those who wish to cut Northern Ireland adrift, for an independent state