

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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Options for a New Ireland

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(X P2 refer)

SDLP Conference in Belfast, 5 June, 1982

The papers read at the above conference by Messrs. J. Hume, J.M. Barkley, M. Mansergh and Eric Gallagher have been distributed. It is hoped to get the texts of the contributions of Dr. FitzGerald and Senator John Robb as soon as possible.

In terms of attendance and atmosphere the conference was a success. There were more than two hundred people present up to a third of whom seemed to be non-SDLP, perhaps predominantly Alliance in tendency but with a certain number also of academics and regular conference goers, e.g. Des Rea, Norman Gibson, Paul Arthur and John White.

The meeting was clearly beneficial in its results for the image of the SDLP. The Leader and Deputy Leader by their well publicised contributions to the discussion and the other senior members of the party by their presence and involvement left a favourable impression of constructive concern for reconciliation. At a time of unresolved discussion within the Party about issues connected with the Prior plan (participation in elections, attitude to proposed Assembly) the conference thus played a positive part.

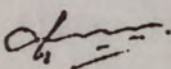
In discussion with participants I encountered some criticism of Dr. Mansergh's paper. Dr. Gibson (N.U.U.) and Dr. White (Q.U.B.) described it as the Government line, explaining when I enquired that they were referring to the statements about the acceptability of the Constitution and of Society in the State. I said I thought these statements had been suitably qualified and that (speaking for myself!) I had no difficulty in endorsing the view ascribed by the speaker to Southern Protestants. Others (Dick Ferguson of the Alliance Party and two members of Paul Arthur's class at the Polytechnic) found that, where everybody was making balanced presentations suggesting that blame lay on both sides, it was a departure to hear a statement which demanded virtually all the movement from one side, viz. the Unionists and the British Government. Senator Shane Ross said that, as an effort to "intellectualise the Fianna Fáil position", Dr. Mansergh's paper was "not bad".

There was agreement on one point in the paper amongst my circle at lunch, that is that the imposition of partition had in itself weakened the Protestant population in the State. Examples were cited of individuals in the older generation who had left the State to move North, including initially some civil servants employed in Dublin before the Treaty.

Mr. Michael Canavan touched on the questions of plastic bullets and the banning of the UDA and said he was encouraged by the interest of the Friends of Ireland group. To him and to other contacts I explained the central, positive purpose of the Government's approach to the U.S. Group and the intention behind this month's visit of establishing an interparliamentary link between Congress and the Oireachtas.

Pascal O'Hare, Brian Feeney and Frank Feeley commented on what the media were saying about the bad state of Anglo-Irish relations. I replied that normal cooperation was continuing (e.g. on gas) and that where the need arose such cooperation would lead to Ministerial meetings. The British authorities had limited themselves to the expression of "disappointment" and "disillusionment" about our "unhelpful" policy on the Falklands. We were not in present circumstances pressing for a summit meeting between the Taoiseach and Mrs. Thatcher, but saw such a meeting as the natural way of taking up again the Anglo-Irish process. The SDLP members in question supported our approach to the Falklands issue, but appeared concerned at the British reaction and the consequent delay in the Anglo-Irish dialogue. Dr. White, and one or two other non-SDLP people I met, were overtly critical of the Government's position.

Fergus McQuillan of Fermanagh raised the question of a resuscitation of the District Council/County Council Monitoring Group for the Erne Catchment measures following a tactical vote in favour in Fermanagh (in the absence of certain Unionists). The Department is pursuing this matter through the Town and County Clerks and the Northern Ireland Office.

  
D.M. Neligan  
9 June, 1982