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① Mr Bell
② POL 19/11

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E.R.

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cc: PS/Secretary of State (B and L)
PS/Ministers (B)
PS/PUS (B and L)
PS/Mr Bell
Mr Blelloch
Mr Marshall (L)
Mr Wyatt
Mr Angel (L)
Mr Blatherwick
Mr Chesterton (L)
Miss MacGlashan
Mr Harrington (L)
Mr I Orr (Dublin)

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

SDLP ANNUAL CONFERENCE

1. The SDLP held their eleventh Annual Conference in Newcastle on 13-15 November; I attended as an observer. Although the proceedings were overshadowed by the shock of Robert Bradford's murder (which John Hume, summing up the feelings of delegates, described as "an outright attack on the democratic process ... /and/ an overt attempt to provoke this community into civil conflict"), the underlying mood of the Conference was optimistic. There were clearly some solid grounds for this confidence: under very unpromising circumstances the party held its ground in the May local elections and maintained its cohesiveness despite the severe pressures of the hunger strike. Membership figures were 16% up on the 1980 total (itself a record), and with one or two exceptions delegates showed little inclination to pursue divisive post-mortems on the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-elections, although some scars remain from this episode. (A resolution condemning the failure to field a candidate was rejected in private session.) Nonetheless it was evident that the party has paid a price for survival: preoccupied with copper-fastening its support in the Catholic community in the face of the extreme republican challenge, the SDLP now shows less sign than ever of understanding the reality of the unionist position or the true scope of the politically possible in Northern Ireland. Apart from some cautionary words from John Hume, the party leadership did little to lessen many delegates' unrealistic expectations about the imminence of major change in the North's constitutional position issuing from the Anglo-Irish process.

2. The two major political events of the Conference came on Saturday afternoon: the leader's address from John Hume, followed by the principa

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constitutional debate on a resolution from the Party Executive which affirmed that a lasting settlement in the North was only possible

> "in the context of a new basis to Anglo-Irish relations which accepts Irish unity"

and called for "the removal of the constitutional guarantee to Unionists" and "the inclusion in the current Anglo-Irish discussion of consideration of the political institutions necessary for a new Ireland North and South". Three main themes emerged from all this:

(i) the SDLP claimed authorship of the current Anglo-Irish process, since the party's view that political development in the North should be placed squarely in the context of Anglo-Irish relations had now been accepted by HMG -

> "our long-standing policy on the way to promote agreement in Ireland has at last been adopted by a British Government" (Hume);

(ii) the "colonial ... constitutional guaranteee to loyalists which has given their representatives an absolute veto over progress" (in the words of party chairman Sean Farren) should be removed as an urgent priority so that unionists would see the necessity to "face reality ... and negotiate the future with us and the British and Irish Governments" (Hume);

(iii) the SDLP wanted little if anything to do with any devolved settlement which was not firmly presented as a step on the road to an all-Ireland framework -

> "we are not in the business of looking for an Assembly which would only govern Northern Ireland" (Paddy Duffy, the agriculture spokesman and unofficial leader of the Party's important mid-Ulster organisation.)

3. On the central question of the guarantee, there was some debate in the Party Executive about the wisdom of sponsoring a call for its removal in the principal constitutional motion after the Taoiseach had specifically accepted it in the 6 November communiqué. In the event hardliners like Seamus Mallon, the deputy leader, ensured that it

remained on the agenda and the resolution was overwhelmingly passed. Nonetheless some delegates (eg Ivan Cooper and Rory McShane, treasurer of the Newry branch) pointed to the illogicality that a party which is formally committed (by clause 2(iv) of its Constitution) to "promote the cause of Irish unity based on the consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland", should demand the withdrawal of a guarantee which is essentially an expression of that requirement for consent. John Hume was clearly conscious of the need to reinject some element of consent into the policy in order to blunt the criticism (made in particular by Alliance) that the SDLP wants to coerce rather than persuade unionists, and therefore chose in his address to revive the old concept of dual referenda:

> "All we demand is that you /loyalists/ and your leaders sit down and negotiate the future with us and the British and Irish Governments. For our part we would insist that the results of such talks would have to be ratified in two separate referenda, one in the North, the other in the South. That is a more secure guarantee of your rights than the cold and increasingly inconvenient device of the '73 Act. The principle of consent will be truly respected."

Hume also alluded briefly, as one possible settlement that might emerge from such talks, to the proposal which he put to the Secretary of State on 22 October -

> "One version, a form of Irish partnership, a sharing of power on the island that we would find acceptable would be the creation of an autonomous North within a federal Ireland, with new links with Britain."

4. In conversation after his address Hume commented that the dual referenda proposal was "as far as I can go", and in effect gave a veto back to the unionists: "if that doesn't bring them on board, nothing ever will". Despite its subtlety, however, the proposal still rests on the supposition that if the guarantee were withdrawn unionists would accept that the game was up and settle for the best terms they could get in an all-Ireland structure. This perception of unionist intransigence as a glove puppet which would collapse once the British

hand was withdrawn seemed to be an article of faith with most delegates, and found repeated expression during the constitutional debate. It was accompanied by a number of demands that the Party should formally commit itself against participating in any devolved settlement in the Province which was not directly linked to the realisation of an all-Ireland structure. (For example Alban Maginness, Party vice-Chairman, urged that the SDLP should dedicate itself to the task of "dismantling the concept of Northern Ireland and abolishing it from the human mind".) Seamus Mallon appeared to answer these demands in winding up the debate when he stressed that there were "no conditions under which the SDLP will participate in an internal settlement". In subsequent conversation Sean Farren (Party chairman) and Denis Haughey (International Secretary, and Hume's principal adviser and confidant) were slightly less dogmatic when I asked if the SDLP was indeed turning its back on a Northern Ireland Assembly: Farren said that the Party hadn't completely written off the possibility, but saw no prospect of a real change in unionist opposition to powersharing, while Haughey commented that if an "acceptable" proposal was put on the table the Party would convene a special Conference to decide its position. (The SDLP Conference is the party's supreme policy-making body.) Farren in particular seemed receptive to the idea that any developments resulting from the Anglo/Irish process would be very long-term indeed and that in the interim it would be in everyone's interest for the SDLP to continue to look seriously for a devolved settlement in which they could work alongside unionists. However he was unrepresentative: I formed the overall impression that the Party's determined optimism about the Anglo/Irish process, coupled with their concern to bind in nationalist support against the extreme republican challenge, made it most unlikely for the time being that they would seriously contemplate any devolved settlement which lacked a prominent Irish dimension.

5. The following miscellaneous points are worth recording:

(i) Local Government. Conference unanimously passed a resolution condemning any proposal to return powers to local councils. Seamus Mallon mentioned "alarming indications" that Government thinking was moving in this direction and speculated that the return of powers might be part of a package of measures: this would be completely unacceptable to the SDLP

in view of the continuing abuse by Unionist councils of such powers as they already had. The return of powers was not a bargaining counter: "our position on this is non-negotiable".

(ii) Chilver. Delegates passed the following motion with only 4 votes against -

"Conference, while recommending the amalgamation of St Mary's and St Joseph's Colleges of Education, in view of the recent statement by the Minister affirms its opposition to a forced removal of these Colleges to the Stranmillis site."

The tone of the debate was depressingly confessional: the main line of argument being that although amalgamation of the two colleges in West Belfast was acceptable, their transference to South Belfast would remove their "independence" and threaten "the only guaranteed source of Catholic teachers for our children". Counter-arguments that the economic realities were overwhelming and that, while seeking every possible safeguard, the SDLP should support a move which would diminish sectarian barriers in education (Rory McShane) and that Catholic teachers who had not been to the training colleges were still quite capable of teaching the faith (P A MacLochlainn, an Executive member from Omagh) attracted little support when it came to the vote - although as McShane commented it was hard to oppose a motion condemning "forced removal". (Interestingly, Seamus Mallon commented to me privately that for all his reputation as the "green reactionary" in the Party, he entirely supported the Chilver proposals.)

(iii) Irish Republic. The leading figure among a number of fraternal delegates and visitors from the Republic was Michael O'Leary (the Tanaiste and Labour Party leader) who in a cautious speech skirted the "constitutional crusade" and urged on delegates the virtues of "appropriate representative institutions" in the North as a contribution to the Anglo/Irish process. The "crusade" came in for much criticism during the Conference, and a resolution viewing with concern "any change in Bunreacht na hEirann which would abandon the commitment to

the ultimate unity of the Irish people" was passed overwhelmingly. (Most speakers followed Pat Devine's argument that it would be disastrous if "the developing Irish dimension should be undermined by any tampering with the Constitution", although a few - apparently without appreciating the irony - repeated Gemma Loughran's line that articles 2 and 3 protected the minority position just as the constitutional guarantee reassured loyalists!) David Neligan of the Department of Foreign Affairs spent much time reassuring delegates that, whatever emerged from the "crusade", there was no question of deleting articles 2 and 3, although they might be cast in a more "aspirational" form.

(iv) Social Democratic Party. Neville Sandelson MP (SDP spokesman on Northern Ireland) appeared for a fringe meeting on Sunday afternoon. Commenting privately beforehand that he was slightly handicapped by the fact that the SDP had not yet decided its policy on Northern Ireland, he was severely heckled by Ivan Cooper when he explained that the SDP was committed to "the search for a sustainable solution which welds together elements of all the absolutes which exist in the current situation", and ended up conceding that the Party in fact favoured a United Ireland by consent. He also indicated that the SDP would be forming a "Northern Ireland Forum" for its members in the Province, although this would not be allowed to put forward candidates for election.

Conclusion

6. Subdued as the proceedings were in the wake of the Bradford murder, the Conference clearly demonstrated that the SDLP is well funded, efficiently organized and has a growing and enthusiastic membership. But in policy terms this enthusiasm is perhaps clouding the Party's judgement: the comfortable belief that an inexorable Anglo/Irish process is sweeping them willy-nilly towards their ultimate objective enables the SDLP to avoid contemplating and adjusting for the hard facts of unionist intransigence. A more realistic view will need to prevail if the SDLP are to play a part in political development within the Province.

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