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SECRETSDLP Conference - 24-25 August 1974

27.8.74

1. I travelled to Bunbeg, Co. Donegal, on the occasion of a Conference of the SDLP Executive and Assembly members held at the Gweedore Hotel on 24 and 25 August 1974. Apparently the only other person invited by the party to Bunbeg was Frank Dunlop, press officer of the Fianna Fáil party. Neither of us was asked to attend any of the formal sessions.
 2. On Saturday there was a meeting of the Assembly members in the morning and one of the Executive in the afternoon. On Sunday there were two joint sessions after the first of which separate briefings were given first to Frank Dunlop and John Wilson T.D. and then to me. The briefers were Gerry Fitt, John Hume and Paddy O'Hanlon. The following account of the briefing contains the substance of present SDLP thinking and was amply confirmed by conversations with a large number of participants outside the formal sessions.
 3. John Hume began the briefing by saying that the purpose of the meeting was to review the present position. A subcommittee had been charged to prepare a consultative document which should be cleared by next Sunday (1 September) and which would be duly forwarded to us.
- Because of the loyalist and British attitude, the SDLP is in an intolerably weak negotiating position. It cannot afford to walk into a Convention election which will clearly produce a loyalist majority. The party has no intention of getting into such a situation.
- The party now seeks a clear statement from the British that power-sharing and the Irish dimension are not negotiable. This must be accepted by loyalists before any election takes place.

If this is rejected by the loyalists (as the SDLP expects) this will mean that one of the two pillars of British policy has gone and therefore the other must go too. (The two pillars in question are firstly the guarantee of the link with Britain and secondly the acceptance in Northern Ireland of British standards.)

The party's aim is thus to bring about a change in British policy to a positive attempt in conjunction with the Irish Government to provide acceptable institutions of government which would lead to peace and justice. It must be borne in upon the British Government that the SDLP and the Irish Government have done all in their power to achieve a reasonable solution but have failed because of loyalist intransigence.

This has serious consequences for Dublin's policy.

Gerry Fitt continued. The SDLP began with six members and at that time was in an intolerably weak position. It fought tenaciously for quadripartite talks to achieve the involvement of the Irish Government in discussions which eventually led to Sunningdale. It has been SDLP policy up to the present to achieve a consensus in politics in Northern Ireland. The downfall of Sunningdale was brought about by loyalist intransigence.

The Convention elections will return a loyalist majority. The SDLP would be absolutely mad to go into them. Such a result would enable the British to point to the majority produced as giving a veneer of legality to any "solution" produced by the loyalists.

The only acceptable solution is one which makes allowance for both aspirations, one which embodies the two fundamental principles of power-sharing and the Irish dimension.

The SDLP cannot envisage a Convention or a future government of the province which requires the party to sit down with people

like Craig, Paisley and West. Without the Irish dimension, the SDLP has no basis and no seats.

The SDLP is going to the British to say that there must be an acceptance of the two principles of power-sharing and the Irish dimension. If the loyalists reject this, then Britain cannot succeed in getting them to accept anything else. This could lead to an indefinite period of British rule. If there is an outward show of loyalist intransigence, some say that the British could come to shooting loyalists. He (Fitt) would have extreme reservations that this would be the case. The minority in Northern Ireland are in a very weak position and look to the Irish Government. The only force on which they can rely is not the illegal organisations but the Irish Army.

The SDLP will do all that is possible to prevent a major civil war in Northern Ireland. Such a war would inevitably spill over into the Republic. The Irish people will be involved whether the Government wants it or not.

Paddy O'Hanlon said that the feeling of the meeting was essentially hardline. The minority in Northern Ireland had been discriminated against, systematically attacked, harassed and brutalised. They now had to take an initiative. They had had enough of the British Army and of the loyalists. The Convention will not produce a solution and the SDLP must therefore endeavour to take a rational approach to the future.

If the British Army will not take on the loyalists, it follows that they will not take on the Irish Army. The two sovereign powers must take a look at the situation. If the Irish Government is positive enough, the loyalist community can become the expendable object (as the minority have been for the past five years).

If the British leave, they should leave viable institutions behind them. The SDLP is practical enough to realise that after the Convention there may be a situation where the British withdraw and leave nothing behind. This the party would wish to avoid.

The Irish Government should have hard talks with the British. There can be no Northern Ireland solution without back-up support on the ground.

Gerry Fitt remarked that up to now the SDLP had lived with the situation. There is now considerable disenchantment at the attitudes and indecision of the British Government and at some attitudes which have been expressed by members of the Irish Government. There is a lot of feeling in the SDLP and there was now a decided swing in the party towards Fianna Fáil.

Paddy O'Hanlon commented that there seemed to be no definite Irish Government policy in relation to the North.

Gerry Fitt urged that in any military exercise, we should consider Belfast and the Glens of Antrim. O'Hanlon mentioned that Portadown would be a stubborn centre of loyalist resistance.

Fitt emphasised that there could be no question of repartition under any circumstances.

John Hume added that the military exercise hinted at must be a joint British-Irish one. The British would never take on the Irish Army. There is no question of the SDLP doing a deal on UDI. I asked whether in a take-over of Northern Ireland we were not risking indefinite loyalist violence.

John Hume replied that it had now come to be a question of a choice among evils. There must not be a precipitate British withdrawal. The British must stay until the thing is sorted out. The big question is whether the British will have the will to do this.

4. The SDLP thus appear to have advanced beyond the position expressed to members of the Government a week ago. They feel that as a result of the UWC strike and present attitudes of London and Dublin, the loyalists think they are on a winning streak with nothing to oppose them. The SDLP are determined not to allow the loyalists to seize power. The loyalists must be faced with the necessity of accepting the two principles of power-sharing and the Irish dimension. If (as is expected) they reject them, Britain must be forced to choose between the loyalists and the friendship of the majority on this island. The party expects Britain to choose the latter and with the assistance of the Irish Army finally to confront the loyalists. The only area of disagreement which I could detect was whether the outcome of such a scenario would be repartition (on the line of the Bann and including South Armagh and South Down) or a united Ireland. At the briefing Gerry Fitt emphatically rejected repartition. Hume confirmed that this rejection was party policy. Some others (all from West of the Bann) did see a repartition as possible and unlikely to give rise to serious problems where the minority was reduced to 15% or thereabouts (assuming a West Berlin-type solution for West Belfast). Aidan Larkin, for instance, sees that as the definitive solution.

5. The SDLP has thus arrived at a position where their policy is to achieve a united Ireland in not less than two years. They appear to have lost faith in the possibility of co-operating with the majority within the framework of Northern Ireland alone. John Hume mentioned that it could still be a federal united Ireland.

and not necessarily a unitary state. The feeling was that if the SDLP had been too successful at Sunningdale, the UWC had erred in the same way last May. A straightforward trial of strength was now approaching.

6. , With regard to an Irish military involvement, Aidan Larkin thought the most important preparation which the Irish Army should make would be to acquire 1,000 lorries, a stock of rifles and such things as gas stoves and provisions. Field hospitals would not meet the case. He saw the Irish Army operating in minority areas while the British Army took on the loyalists. All assured me that the Irish Army would be welcomed by the minority. John Hume emphasised that the party would do all in its power to provide the British with a face-saving rationale for withdrawal with honour. It is generally assumed that the British do wish to withdraw and that a precipitate withdrawal would be disastrous. The joint military operation envisaged might be violent but it would be so mainly for the loyalists. Not much credibility is given to the loyalist para-military forces in such a confrontation.

7. On the question of internment, Aidan Larkin has produced a document which analyses the Emergency Powers Act. He told me that it is not a constructive document as it does not suggest how the Act should be improved or what should take its place. Instead it analyses each Section of the Act pointing out deviations from normally acceptable standards. After approval by the Party the document will be submitted to the Gardiner Committee within a week or so. I was promised a copy.

8. The agreement of the minority community for any form of policing in Northern Ireland can only be given in the context of an overall settlement. Arguments to the effect that there is at the moment a serious need for additional policing do not impress

the SDLP. In present circumstances any force such as that proposed by Merlyn Rees is unlikely to affect the situation (Austin Currie).

Gerry Fitt told me that the SDLP had stopped Mr. Rees' proposed force. Any statement which he (Rees) makes on the subject of policing is likely to be innocuous and his efforts are likely to be limited to efforts to increase the RUC and UDR reserves.

9. There appears to be a general expectation that in the event of a Labour victory in October, Merlyn Rees will not return to his present position. Gerry Fitt would like to see Roy Hattersley and understands that he (Hattersley) would not be averse to the position. There does not appear to be a consensus as to the most likely Conservative Secretary except that it is unlikely to be Gilmour. Heseltine was mentioned but I gathered that the matter had not received much thought since a Conservative victory is considered unlikely.

10. There was sustained and intense criticism of the publicly stated positions of the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. Seamus Mallon expressed irritation at the frequency with which people like John Taylor were being interviewed on RTE. SDLP spokesmen had difficulty in getting their point of view represented on RTE.

11. Aidan Larkin urged early Irish participation in the proposed security conference. He felt that it was important for the heads of both armies to begin contacts in view of the task envisaged for them by the SDLP.

12. There appears to be no agreement as to when the crunch is likely to come. The British could well postpone the Convention. The general feeling appeared to be that it would come at the time

of the election, if held according to the present schedule, or in any event, within two years.

13. Aidan Larkin believes we should be examining closely the history of French disengagement from Algeria which has many parallels with the case of Northern Ireland. He would see many of the majority community leaving Ireland after the final settlement but these would be people of the kind who now support Faulkner, people whose whole mental orientation is towards Britain. Paddy Devlin is greatly concerned at the amount of emigration already taking place, mostly from the minority community.

14. Ivan Cooper told me on Sunday morning that he still saw a condominium as the only acceptable alternative to Sunningdale. I did not see him after the crucial meeting nor did I hear any reference to the idea from others at any stage. I understand otherwise (from John Hume) that he is not to be considered a weighty figure within the party.

15. Frank Feely (who comes from Kiltimagh and has been teaching in Newry for the past 16 years) and Paddy O'Hanlon arrived late on Saturday, having been detained by the power crisis in Newry. It is too early yet to say what significance should be given to the discovery of the loyalist weapon by the IRA. Hume suggested that the Army would re-service the transformers but O'Hanlon did not see this happening. There was some speculation as to whether the IRA would extend the use of this weapon but it seems that it can only hurt the minority. Feely had hard words for the regiment involved, sentiments repeated by O'Hanlon last night.

16. The view was repeatedly expressed that the Irish Government cannot isolate itself from the situation. When the crunch comes (and I understand that this means that when Britain decides to confront the loyalists after their clear rejection of British

standards), it will not be a question of more bombs in the Republic alone but, more importantly, there will be a groundswell of support in the Republic for the minority in Northern Ireland which no government here can afford to ignore. The big difficulty is in forming a British resolve to confront the loyalists and here the party expects the support of the Irish Government by pointing out to the British that the loyalist minority of 1.8% can no longer be allowed to poison relations between two sovereign states. The party also expects us to prepare unilaterally for such a confrontation and not to foreclose that option by negative public statements on a possible role for the Irish Army. Such statements only strengthen the loyalist will to dominance and confirm them in their intransigence. The party appears to believe that the strategy suggested could produce a peaceful solution but inclines rather to think that a final settlement will probably have to be enforced by joint military action.



Gearóid Ó Broin

27 August 1974