

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2006/133/684
Creation Date(s):	15 September 1976
Extent and medium:	7 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

SDLP Position - 15 September 1976

1. I met separately with Messrs. Fitt, Hume, Devlin and Canavan during a visit to Northern Ireland on 14/15 September and the following assessment is based on conversations with them and on recent conversations with Messrs. Currie, Tom Daly and Paddy Duffy.
2. The ending of the SDLP-Unionist talks was not unexpected but the manner in which they were ended took the SDLP by surprise and has added to their frustration. Hume and Devlin thought, for instance, that their relationship with Smyth and Ardill was such that they would have had an early warning of the break but instead the first they knew of the Unionist Party decision not to proceed further with the talks was from newsmen phoning to ask for their views. What must depress the SDLP, however, are reports which indicate that there was no significant group within the Unionist Party in favour of continuing the talks and it is against this background that the current re-thinking of policy is taking place within the SDLP. Two meetings of the former Convention members and the party's Executive have taken place within the last week and the result of these meetings is the attached policy statement to be issued very shortly. It was, as usual, drafted by Hume following the meetings and though it has not been cleared in detail by the party's policy-making bodies, there is no doubt that it accurately reflects the present mood of those bodies. The main features of the statement are:
 - an assertion that agreement between the Northern Ireland political parties is not possible given the present political stance of the majority parties and that no advance is possible in the absence of a clear initiative from the British Government;
 - a demand that the British Government should implement their stated policy (i.e. "impose power-sharing") or "abdicate".
3. The discussion within the SDLP has been on the theme "the British must govern or go" and for all practical purposes the only point at issue at the two meetings seems to have been whether it was better to call now for the British to declare their intention to leave or to initiate a public debate which would lead within a

matter of months to the SDLP's concluding that the only way forward was for the British to make such a declaration. By a majority of only two votes, the SDLP policy-making meetings opted for the latter course and, with the notable exception of Fitt, there now seems to be no one within the SDLP committed to having the British remain in Northern Ireland. Fitt is very concerned at the change in party policy and the pace at which it was proceeding and more than once in our conversation he referred disparagingly to the "united Ireland or nothing" mentality now dominating party thinking for the first time since 1972. That, he said, was not the sort of party he would be prepared to lead or even belong to and he would have to give serious consideration to his position over the next few months.

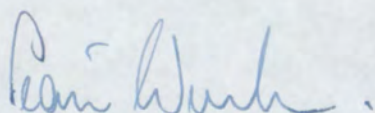
4. All of those to whom I spoke readily concede that the British cannot enforce power-sharing and therefore cannot stay in Northern Ireland on the basis of implementing "their stated policy" but the SDLP do not at the moment seem prepared to accept that the most reasonable alternative at this stage is for the British to exercise their responsibilities by staying in Northern Ireland and carrying on with the system of direct rule which has now survived for over four years and which seems to be broadly acceptable to an overwhelming majority within both sections of the community. There is no evidence of general minority dissatisfaction with direct rule nor is there evidence of pressure on the SDLP from its active members and supporters to move towards the new position. The pressure for change is within the SDLP - it was, of course, already apparent at a policy meeting in Bunbeg in June - and among the elected representatives Paddy Duffy, Seamus Mallon, Frank Feely and Eddie McGrady are leading the "declaration of intent" lobby. The main difference between now and last June is that, following the breakdown of the inter-party talks, Hume and Currie are no longer in fundamental disagreement with this lobby and it is very difficult to see any move within the SDLP in the next few months other than towards asking the British to declare their intention to leave. Ideally, of course, the SDLP would like to see British disengagement emerging as a result of conflict between the British Government and the loyalists but they have never been and are not now optimistic that it will happen in that way. As to what might happen if the British did decide to "abdicate" and leave Northern Ireland, the SDLP believe, with varying degrees of confidence, that the loyalists

would then come to their senses and negotiate the best deal possible with the representatives of the nationalist tradition on the island of Ireland.

5. The SDLP have accepted the offer of a meeting with Ministers and would very much like to discuss their new policy lines. They will certainly ask that the Government press the British Government to answer the questions contained in their new policy statement and they will also press for an indication of Government thinking now that it has become clear that the present policy objective, based as it is on the emergence of agreement between the two sections of the Northern Ireland community, is not attainable in the foreseeable future. They will probably press vigorously on this but there is no indication at the moment that they will try to engage in a public debate with the Government on this or on any other issue. There was some pressure within the party to oppose publicly the new Emergency Powers Bill and it was argued that it would be inconsistent not to do so when they had opposed the introduction of similar powers in Northern Ireland. A party resolution was passed condemning the Bill but an amendment, proposed by Currie and Hume, to the effect that the resolution should not be publicised until the legislation was enacted, was also carried.

6. As far as the appointment of Roy Mason is concerned, the party as a whole does not share Fitt's reservations and Hume, in particular, seems to have a good relationship with Mason. When Mason was under pressure from groups in his Barnsley constituency to support the Troops Out Movement, he approached Hume for advice and help and Hume wrote Mason a letter which was widely used within the constituency against those who argued for the withdrawal of troops. Hume has a particularly warm letter of thanks from Mason and both before and after that episode has found him very helpful on matters involving constituents' difficulties with the Army. Hume's experience is shared by many SDLP representatives who have used Pat Duffy, M.P., Mason's Parliamentary Private Secretary, as their intermediary with Mason on matters involving their constituents and the Army. The gulf between Mason and Fitt is obviously very deep and Fitt complained that he never got any satisfaction from him on any of the numerous cases he brought to his attention. (Interestingly, Fitt cited as a particularly bad example of Mason's negative attitude the case of the shooting of McElhone by the Army three years ago arising out of which

no compensation has ever been paid. This is a case which we have also raised and on which we have received no satisfaction whatever.) He claims that the Prime Minister authorised him to publicise the telephone call in which he assured Fitt that Mason's appointment did not represent any change in British Government policy on Northern Ireland and that he himself would continue to take the closest interest in Northern Ireland affairs. There was one aspect of the conversation which Fitt says he was asked not to publicise and which in any event he is not sure he understands. He quotes the Prime Minister as saying, when asked why he appointed Mason, that he had "set a thief to catch a thief" and he thinks this indicates British Government intention to take a much tougher military line than would have been taken with Rees as Secretary of State.



Seán Donlon

15 September 1976

c.c. PSM
PSS
Mr. Nally (D/Taoiseach)
Ambassador O'Sullivan
Anglo-Irish Section

There can be little doubt in anyone's mind of the overwhelming desire of the people of Northern Ireland for peace and tranquillity. Neither can there be any doubt that to achieve this objective requires a political settlement which is fair and just to all sections of this community. We in the SDLP have been prepared to sit down and discuss with all interested parties in an effort to achieve a devolved government which would involve all the people of Northern Ireland. We have moved a long way in our efforts to reach agreement. We can move no further. We must face the reality now that agreement is not possible given the present political stance of the majority parties and their adherence to the old "not an inch" mentality. In such circumstances inter-party talks are not a vehicle for agreement. The British Government's oft reiterated position that agreement must come only from the people of Northern Ireland themselves, a policy forced on them by the UWC strike, is a policy that can only lead to deadlock and a continuation of the deadly political vacuum. We would point out that, following the UWC strike, which we interpreted at the time as a complete rejection of the authority of the British Government and Parliament by a section of the Loyalist population, that unless the parameters of British policy for the government of Northern Ireland were clearly laid down before the Convention election that the result would be deadlock. We take no pleasure in now saying "We told you so". Yet in spite of our reservations we have made every effort to reach agreement on a basis that impartial people would regard as reasonable and on the basis already overwhelmingly approved by the British Parliament. We must now state clearly that no advance is possible in the absence of a clear initiative of the British Government.

We must also state clearly and unequivocally that we regard the British Government's present attitude as one of putting the Northern Ireland problem on the long finger until the question of devolution in Scotland and Wales is settled. This policy is one that is dictated purely by cynical party advantage in the internal domestic political scene and in view of the seriousness of the Northern Ireland problem and the life and death situation here, is highly irresponsible.

Neither is it enough for the British Government to point to UUUC intransigence in refusing to agreeing to power-sharing as the sole reason for the deadlock. We agree as to the intransigent attitude of the UUUC but we would point out that the refusal of the British Government and Parliament to face up to that intransigence is to give a virtual veto to the UUUC and to make nonsense of the sovereignty of the British Parliament.

Accordingly the SDLP now believe that the British Government has a clear public duty to answer unequivocally and with clarity certain key questions so that the people of Northern Ireland will know exactly where they stand on the following fundamental questions and so that any future talks can take place in a much more realistic atmosphere:

1. The first thing that the British Government should now do is state bluntly what are their intentions both short-term and long-term for the future of Northern Ireland.

2. When the British Government say that the Northern Ireland problem can only be solved by the people of Northern Ireland themselves what do they mean? Are they stating that the British Government and Parliament has no role in the matter and are not capable of governing here? The implications of this question are fundamental and far-reaching and the people of Northern Ireland deserve an answer.

3. When the British Government repeatedly underline their guarantees to the Unionist population of membership of the United Kingdom are these guarantees unconditional? Are there any terms to be fulfilled in order to retain membership of the United Kingdom? If so, what are they? If not are a section of the Unionist population, a tiny percentage of the United Kingdom population, to have a permanent veto on how Northern Ireland is to be governed within the United Kingdom?

4. Are the British Government willing and determined to implement their stated policy democratically approved by virtually the entire British Parliament, as to the fairest method of governing

Northern Ireland? To do so would be to accept what are their sovereign responsibilities. To refuse is to abandon those responsibilities with fundamental consequences for everyone. What is the British position?

Finally, before we are accused of absolving ourselves of any responsibility let us state one important and crucial fact. The British Government and Parliament are the sovereign authority. They have all the resources, the authority, the power. They have the responsibility for governing Northern Ireland. They must be prepared either to accept that the major responsibility for a resolution of the situation here rests with them. Either they accept that responsibility or they abdicate. The uncertainty of their position can no longer be tolerated. The people of Northern Ireland are paying too high a price for it.

The SDLP will pursue a positive and dedicated campaign to obtain answers to these questions, answers which will have fundamental implications not just for the people of Northern Ireland but for all the people of these islands. We have shown ourselves at all stages willing to enter into discussions with other parties to resolve our problems but we are thoroughly convinced that such talks can be meaningful only when we have clear and unequivocal answers to the questions we are posing.
