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Jim. Swift
Mr. O. Higgins
AD 6/12.

SDLP CONFERENCE, 3-5 December 1976

1. Pending the preparation of a more comprehensive report, the following is an account and assessment of the discussion on the items dealing with

- relations between the SDLP and the Government;
- the policy document Partnership in Ireland;
- composite motion 13 (calling on the British Government to declare its intention of withdrawing);
- motion 109 (instructing the SDLP Executive to undertake an immediate study of negotiated independence).

2. There were three motions dealing with relations with the Republic, two of them critical of the Government's unwillingness to exert influence on the British Government (i) to clarify its intentions on the North and (ii) to implement her stated policy of power-sharing in Northern Ireland and the third calling for the development of a pluralist society in the Republic to help lessen tensions between North and South and within the North. These were debated for about half an hour on the Friday afternoon when very few delegates had arrived and the main feature of the debate was strong attacks on the Government's Northern Ireland policy by Seamus Mallon and Frank Feely. Mallon's attack was particularly strong. He accused the Government of building a Berlin wall of indifference between the North and South and said that this was having a devastating effect on the Northern Ireland community, particularly that of the minority. Implicit in everything he said was that the Government should identify itself clearly and exclusively with the minority as represented by the SDLP and he seemed to threaten that if this did not happen, the minority, including at least some of their elected representatives, would take their guidance from "other parties in the North who were making the running" (i.e. the Provos.). Dublin could not, he said, oppose the views of the Northern Ireland minority who wanted Britain to leave Ireland. The enthusiasm with which his intervention was greeted, especially on the platform, forced Hume to speak in defence of the party's relations with the Government. He explained that, of their nature, they were conducted in private and that this method had served the party well over the last five years. There were,

Of course, differences of opinion from time to time but the passing of resolutions at conference was not the way to resolve these differences. The two motions critical of the Government's approach in its contact with the British Government were composited and put to a vote. They were defeated by 26 to 24 but only after a recount. (On my reckoning, the first vote resulted in the motion being carried by two votes. In the interim, additional delegates had been allowed enter the hall.) The significant element in the vote is that a clear majority of both the former Convention members and the party Executive voted in favour of the motion.

3. While the discussion on relations with the Republic was the preliminary round in the tussle between the party leadership (Fitt, Hume and Currie) and the rest of the platform party (former Convention members and the party Executive), the debate on the policy document Partnership in Ireland was clearly the first round proper. The document was submitted to conference by the Executive where it had had a stormy passage and been passed by a majority of one at a poorly attended meeting. Paddy Duffy proposed and Ivan Cooper seconded the proposal that it be referred back to the Executive and they were supported by [redacted], Mallon, McGrady (Downpatrick) and O'Donoghue (Newcastle). Their main objection to the document (Annex I) centred on the wording of the third policy point viz. "maintenance of the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom as long as a majority of the population of Northern Ireland wish it" and they argued that it should be no part of SDLP policy to maintain the union and therefore apparently "to maintain British involvement in Irish affairs". Currie made a very effective defence of the document, relying somewhat shakily on the SDLP constitution, article 4 of which commits the party to the objective of promoting "the cause of Irish unity based on the consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland". Satisfied that they had achieved their objective of casting doubts on a previously sacrosanct policy approach, the Mallon/Duffy group did not pull out all the stops and when the document was put to a vote, it was adopted by 70 to 27. The 27, however, again included an element of the platform party and at least six members of the former Convention (not the party Executive as reported in the Irish Times of 4 December) spoke and voted against the document. Those opposing the document also included a smallish group, mainly from

East Belfast and south Antrim, which objected to the emphasis on the Irish dimension.

4. The main debate at the conference was on composite motion 13 which

"calls on the British Government to declare its intention of withdrawing to give the divided people of Northern Ireland the opportunity to negotiate a final political solution and a lasting peace in Northern Ireland".

It was a lively, comprehensive debate complete with procedural wrangles and, on both sides, a range of speeches which appealed to reason and to emotion. Immediately before the debate on the motion, Gerry Fitt had delivered his annual address to conference and for all practical purposes this was a defence of the British presence and a bitter attack on "the latent Rory O'Bradys" in the party whose objectives were identical to those of the Provos. It was vintage Fitt though with a slightly reduced quota of jokes and a thinly disguised threat that he would leave the party rather than lead it on the basis of a policy of British withdrawal. Paddy Duffy introduced the motion with a poorly delivered intervention listing the reasons why the British presence was the real problem in Ireland. Seamus Mallon made a well-presented, clear intervention backing Duffy, pledging his loyalty to the SDLP constitution and bitterly denying that he was a latent O'Brady. The British presence had failed to resolve the economic, security and political problems of Northern Ireland. At heart, everyone in Ireland wanted to see Britain out and there was no advantage to be gained by suppressing this desire and fudging the real political issue. His style of delivery - he is an experienced producer with amateur dramatic groups and was offered an Abbey Theatre post in 1973 - was brilliantly calculated to appeal to the differing backgrounds and moods of the delegates and his point about the compatibility of the motion with the party constitution was particularly convincing. So powerful was the intervention that Hume, who had planned to speak much later, made a hurried and very obvious arrangement to speak next. It was one of his best speeches at any conference and had an important bearing on the debate as a whole, not least in its cancelling some of the immediate impact made by Mallon. Hume wanted to see Britain go but he also wanted to see a

solution. He had no doubt that others shared his political frustration but frustration was no basis for a new policy. He gave his traditional analysis emphasising that the Northern Ireland problem was primarily one of the conflict between two sections of the community and that Britain alone was not the problem. He questioned the assumptions in the motion being debated and gave a grim warning addressed to the loyalists but written for the conference delegates: "if you want to continue being intransigent, then you are destroying politics, yourselves and Northern Ireland. It can only lead to confrontation in which no politician will have any influence". But Hume in turn was immediately followed by a delegate from Enniskillen (Flanagan) who was the first delegate at any conference to issue such a direct challenge to Hume whom he accused of bending over backwards to the loyalists to the point where he was now doing no more than begging. It was time he stopped begging and stood up to the intransigence of the loyalists and the British. Another relative newcomer to the party, Seán Farren of NUU, made an impressive defence of traditional policy and pointed out that British withdrawal would be a total victory for Irish nationalism. As the cheers were fading away, he pointed out that such victories invited retaliation and in this case would be a clear signal for civil war. There were more good speeches on both sides before Austin Currie got in with an emotional plea to conference to reject the motion. British withdrawal would certainly be the final solution but not in the way some delegates envisaged. (Towards the end of his speech, he made a reference which was largely lost on the conference but which may turn out later to be of significance. He was not, he said, against withdrawal as such but there had to be a right time and in particular, the SDLP had to "keep all options open for any future development". It is clear from private conversations with Currie in recent months that he has not ruled out a radical change in SDLP policy in the near future but he had obviously decided that the mood of the conference was not ripe for change.) Paddy Duffy then wound up the debate with a much better speech than his opening one. He made a very personal attack on Hume and appealed to Currie and himself to "get out of the old moulds". Hume was wrong and should now admit it. His policies had been given more than a fair try and they had not worked. The mood of the minority but he realised Hume had been away for two months and might not know this - was for British withdrawal and the SDLP should formally recognise this by accepting the motion.

5. The motion was defeated by 153 to 111 with 12 abstentions but the platform party split 14 for withdrawal, 15 against and most significantly of the 16 ex-Convention members present, 10 voted in favour of British withdrawal. These were Mallon, Duffy, Devlin, Cooper, McGrady, O'Donoghue, Feely, Tom Daly, Joe Hendron and John Turnly. The seventeenth ex-Convention member, Vincent McCloskey, was not present and has virtually opted out of politics. But he too is known to favour British withdrawal. Fitt and Hume now find themselves leading a party of public representatives a majority of whom are not prepared to accept official party policy.

6. The third round in the contest between the leadership and the rest of the platform party came on a discussion of a motion (109)

"instructing the Executive to undertake an immediate study of negotiated independence and to involve all levels of party machinery in it".

The Cookstown branch (Paddy Duffy) had submitted a discussion paper (Annex II) on Negotiated Independence as a Way Forward and at one stage in the conference it appeared that a motion calling for the acceptance of this document as party policy might have a reasonable chance of being passed. The Duffy/Mallon group saw, however, that they were assured of victory on motion 109 and, as Mallon put it afterwards, they decided to go for a certain point rather than a possible goal. He felt it important from a psychological viewpoint to register at least one victory over the traditional leadership and from a practical viewpoint he wanted to have a definite mandate on which to keep up his campaign in the coming months in the privacy of the party's internal policy making bodies. Thus it was that the debate on independence as an option was conducted on the basis of the harmless sounding motion to undertake a study of independence as a possible option. The main speakers in favour of the motion were Cooper and Mallon and despite strong speeches against it by Currie, Hugh Logue and Bríd Rogers (Lurgan) - Hume and Fitt had by now become fed up with the whole conference and were not even in the hall for most of the discussion or the vote on this item - it was carried by 147 to 51. Many of the 147 votes came, however, from people who are opposed to independence as an option but who do feel that the present political situation calls for a thorough reassessment of the party's

traditional policy and approach. The Duffy/Mallon group will not, however, wait for the reassessment and they now regard themselves as having a mandate for a course of action which does not have to be approved by Hume. Duffy and Devlin had, in the week before the conference, held exploratory discussions on independence with McKeague of the ULCCC and I understand that they intend to pursue these discussions in the coming months, reporting back to the party Executive from time to time.

7. A preliminary assessment of the conference highlights the following points:

- Hume's control over party policy is gone and while it is too early to judge his reaction to this, his first private reactions were ones of bitterness and despair. I have in the past few years participated in some long, bitter SDLP nights but the night after the vote on British withdrawal was the longest and bitterest. Hume had to be persuaded more than once - admittedly well into the night - not to proceed to a dramatic resignation there and then and Fitt's private assessment is that it is now only a matter of time before the party disintegrates. These reactions have to be seen in the somewhat emotional context of the immediate aftermath of battle and it will be necessary to wait for a few weeks before judging the real impact of the conference. Hume has fought back before, though not from such difficult positions and not without considerable help from colleagues, notably Devlin, from whom he has traditionally drawn support. What he really needs within the party in the coming weeks is industrious, unstinted support from Currie and it is not at all certain that this will be forthcoming;

- the influence of the Provos. on SDLP thinking is now a major one. Not only do many SDLP representatives see their positions of local leadership threatened by the Provos. but there are signs that at least two of those now supporting British withdrawal are, at minimum, in contact with prominent Provos. and directly influenced by them. In other cases, the influence of the Provos. is indirect but effective. Paddy Duffy and Eddie McGrady both made the point to me that "all the good young people" in their areas were joining the Provos. since they saw in them the only way forward. Others, particularly those active in local government, said that they were

sick to the teeth of facing loyalist intransigence on even the most minor matters at district council meetings month after month and they felt that the only way to make any impact on the current situation was to go for a less conciliatory position than that tried with such patience over the last four or five years;

- the effective leadership of the party by Hume is under threat and there was no doubt about Mallon's direct bid to replace him. The conspiracies against him were much less private than is customary in the SDLP and, as far as it is possible to judge at this stage, a majority on the new party Executive is no longer loyal to Hume;

- the delegates to the conference, most of whom would not feel the frustrations of the current political situation in any direct way, are not as ready to abandon the traditional policy as the elected representatives seem to be. I noted that though both the west Belfast elected representatives (Devlin and Hendron) voted for withdrawal, almost none of the delegates from the branches in that constituency did so;

- much of the support for British withdrawal is coming either from areas such as Downpatrick (McGrady), Newcastle (O'Donoghue) and the Glens of Antrim (Turnly) which have seen no trouble or from areas such as south Armagh (Mallon), Strabane (Cooper) and Fermanagh (Daly) where access to relative safety in the event of a doomsday situation is virtually guaranteed.

Seán Donlon

6 December 1976