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Twelfth Annual Conference of the SDLP, 28-30 January 1983

1. This year's Annual Conference was dominated by electoral considerations. The task facing the SDLP was how to dispel the gloom cast on their supporters by the success of Provisional Sinn Féin in the recent Assembly elections and how to boost morale to encourage them to maximise their vote at the Westminster elections, which they expect will be held before their next Conference. In short, the Conference was the opening salvo in the election campaign. It was fired directly at Provisional Sinn Féin, though both the British and the Unionists came in for criticism. Help, in the guise of support for the SDLP concept for a Council for a New Ireland, was sought from the parties in the South. Such support, if forthcoming, will, they think, help them defeat Provisional Sinn Féin. According to Seamus Mallon an opportunity has arisen, which should not be lost, for a moderate nationalist Government in Dublin to make nationalist concerns clear to the British.

2. The numbers attending this year were similar to the average in previous years. The Friday night session was, as usual, relatively poorly attended but by the time John Hume gave his formal leadership address on Saturday afternoon the numbers had swelled to about 500. The Conference was well organised and had a very efficient and competent chairman in Seán Farren. Some delegates, as well as many observers, privately drew attention to a distinct absence of young members and it seems possible that, unless the party succeeds in attracting youthful members they may fail to obtain the young vote to the benefit of Sinn Féin.

3. There must remain, however, some doubt as to the ability of the SDLP to maximise the minority vote in favour of politics which plainly condemn violence as a means of seeking political change. This is partly due to some continuing organisational and presentational difficulties in, for example, West Belfast and Fermanagh and to some continuing losses of important personnel. Michael Canavan, who was their spokesman on security, has now resigned from active participation in the party, while Paddy Duffy on the first night of the Conference seriously embarrassed the

leadership by criticising on television their agreement to contest the Assembly election.

4. Overall, the Conference must be seen as a considerable success for the leadership in turning back the tide of gloom. In a private session it was agreed that the SDLP will contest all seventeen seats at the Westminster election. We understand that the only opposition to this came from a small number, led by Seamus Mallon, who thought that instead of using resources both human and financial, in contesting seats with strong inbuilt Unionist majorities the party should throw all its weight into those seats contested by Provisional Sinn Féin, especially in Fermanagh/South Tyrone and West Belfast. The obvious agreement of the leadership to fight the Provisionals, even if it split the nationalist vote, combined with the strong and consistent condemnation of Sinn Féin, lent heart to the delegates and clearly demonstrated a strong resolution in the coming contest.

5. The words used in condemning Provisional Sinn Féin were unequivocal. Quoting their own words, John Hume said that a vote for them is a vote for "unambivalent support for the armed struggle". They use the ballot paper to encourage the young to use the Armalite. When he said that the SDLP will confront them in every single constituency he received loud applause. The SDLP, he claimed, will, as they have never done before, have to ensure that the voters understand the stark choice facing them. Other delegates referred to them as fascists. For his part Seamus Mallon in a rousing speech claimed that they were not a political party but were using politics to support a violent movement. They have mongrelised the cause of Irish unity and the SDLP will not permit the Provisionals to thrash them in West Belfast and Fermanagh.

6. The theme of John Hume's speech, and it found ready support and a convincing echo in the contributions from the other Party leaders, was that both the British Government and the Unionists have failed to produce institutions or attitudes which take account of the two aspirations in Northern Ireland. He strongly attacked the British Prime Minister saying she didn't give "a damn about Northern Ireland". For British

politicians the Northern minority are again either an embarrassing nuisance to be concealed from view or a political football in a match they play to defeat each other. He called on the British to intervene instead of taking the soft option - that of Pontius Pilate - "let them sort it out for themselves". They have no policy other than the maintenance of the Unionist veto, which has been a disaster. There has, he said, been a complete failure to engage the principal parties to the conflict in realistic negotiation about the future. The British have allowed themselves to become trapped in a situation where Unionists need only refuse to negotiate to paralyse everybody. Hume also had harsh words to say to the Unionists and he used the now well-known argument that given population changes it would be better for them to compromise now from their relative position of strength rather than later.

7. The challenge facing nationalists, according to Hume, is to answer the assumption which is the cornerstone of all British policy, and which underlies Unionist fears, that any settlement in the wider Irish framework threatens the fundamental interests of the Protestant community. The SDLP is asking "the democratic parties of the Republic" to join with it in answering this challenge by setting up a Council for a New Ireland to define what it is wished this new Ireland should be. In spelling out a little further what he meant, Hume said that the examination of the obstacles in the way of a new Ireland will force the Southern parties and the SDLP to take many harsh and painful decisions about the definition of Irishness, the economic implications of unity by consent, church/State relations and Anglo/Irish relations. An Irish identity must be defined which adequately accommodates all the traditions of this island. Ireland has an essential diversity as well as an essential unity, which need to be given institutional expression. The definition of Irishness should include the Northern Protestants' sense of British identity.

8. Hume said that this generous definition - "the harsh confrontation of the full dimension of the issue" - will only be

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the first step. The second step will be to present this "real and positive alternative" to those who have never so far considered it.

9. Hume made no attempt in public to give any indication of the time-scale he proposed for this process of defining a new Ireland nor did he indicate how to proceed. It was clear that the Party is behind Hume and is determined to pursue this line of thinking. Obviously SDLP thinking has not gone much beyond the presentation of the concept of a Council for a New Ireland. However, it is possible from comments made both in public and in private to flash out a little what they have in mind. Mallon wants the Council to get to the root of the problem which he sees as partition. The Council should have clearly seen structures and clearly defined functions. It should produce a paper which can form the basis of negotiations (with the Unionists and the British). It should be disbanded on production of the paper. Hugh Logue privately thought the Council might have two stages. The first, which in practice would establish the Council, might sketch out the grounds to be examined later in detail. This stage should not take too long so that the SDLP would be provided with a clear advantage over the Provisionals in presenting a positive programme for the Westminster elections. He saw this part of the process ideally being completed within the next two or three months. The second stage would deal substantively with the issues. He seemed to envisage that this stage might not be complete before the Westminster elections.

10. The Conference welcomed the declaration by the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Deputy Quinn, that the Labour Party will give its full support to the SDLP proposals for a Council for a New Ireland. This promise was contrasted by some delegates with the Taoiseach's letter to John Hume, at annex 7, which promised to give the proposal very careful attention after the Budget. There was some speculation as to whether Deputy Quinn had the prior consent of the Tánaiste for his statement. It was, however, very well received and the Conference heard many interventions call on the parties in the

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South to spell out what they mean by Irish unity, to stop "verbal republicanism" and to state what is on offer to those of the non-nationalist tradition. As expressed by Austin Currie, if they fail to answer the challenge laid down by the SDLP the future of constitutional nationalism in Ireland will never be the same. It is evident from the above that the SDLP is now firmly united on this issue and determined to follow it through by pressurising the political parties in the South.

11. The Irish News political correspondent later spoke to Deputy Quinn about the implications of his statement. The relevant report, carried in the issue of 31 January, reads as follows:

"In an interview last night with the Irish News, Mr Quinn said he was not pre-empting his party's decision on the Council, but he expressed confidence that they would participate.

He said the question of the Irish Government giving its support was distinct from the parties giving their support, and he claimed some confusion had arisen. In the context of the political parties, he envisaged no real problems.

Mr Quinn said Mr Spring had argued that political parties in the South should form a consensus on the question of the North, and stop making it what it recently had become - a domestic political football. There must be a tripartisan voice presented to the community in the North and to London he said.

Mr Quinn said the Council would be a slow process because what they were talking about was a framework governing the legal relations of the island of Ireland for the next 100 years."

12. Hume devoted little of his speech to the Assembly which he claimed to be the most irresponsible show on earth. Paddy Duff wanted a vote taken which would commit the party to continuing abstention from the Assembly. He need not have worried. There was no evidence of any change of heart which might lead to SDLP members taking their seats in the Assembly. It was seen as something which could not play any positive role in furthering

their ends. Minds were concentrated on the forthcoming elections and the need to defeat the Provisionals armed with a blueprint for a new Ireland. It seems very unlikely that the SDLP will change their view about taking their seats in the Assembly.

13. During a debate on the administration of justice there was considerable criticism of the recent killings by the RUC. Several speakers pointed out that the procedures for investigating complaints made against the police were not sufficiently independent of the police. The Conference passed a resolution calling

"for an independent body to be set up for complaints made against members of the RUC to encourage public confidence in the law enforcement system".

14. There was a large contingent of fraternal delegates from Dublin at the Conference including from Fine Gael, the Chief Whip, Deputy Seán Barrett, Minister of State, Deputy George Birmingham, Deputy Maurice Manning and Mr Finbarr Fitzpatrick; from the Labour Party, Minister of State, Deputy Ruairi Quinn; from the Fianna Fáil Party, Deputy Rory O'Hanlon, Mr Des Smith and Dr Martin Mansergh. The Department was represented by the Secretary, Mr Seán Dónlon, Mr Martin Burke and the undersigned.

Dáithí O Ceallaigh

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1 February 1983

List of Annexed Documents

1. Conference Agenda
2. Party Constitution
3. Policy Document on Rent Assessment
4. Policy Document on Defence and Disarmament
5. Speech by the Party Chairman, Mr. Sean Farren
6. Speech by the Party Leader, Mr. John Hume
7. Message from An Taoiseach to the Party Leader.