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SDLP Proposal for establishment of Council for a
New Ireland

Statement of SDLP proposal

1. The following is the section of the SDLP Manifesto for the Assembly elections in which their proposal was advanced:-

The immediate objective of the SDLP is therefore a quick end to the proposed Assembly. We believe that a solution should then be sought once again in its proper framework. It is abundantly clear that a purely internal solution to the problem of Northern Ireland is not possible. A solution must deal with the problem which is one of relationships not only within Northern Ireland but within Ireland and between Britain and Ireland. The Anglo/Irish framework is therefore the proper framework for a solution. It is long past the time when the British Government should allow its policies to be dictated by the intransigence of Unionism. It is also time for those who believe in a New Ireland to spell out their proposals in some detail. Towards that end it is the intention of the SDLP following the Election to propose to the Irish Government the setting up of a Council for a New Ireland made up of members of the Dail and those mandated in this election. The Council should have a limited life and have the specific task of examining the obstacles to the creation of a New Ireland and producing for the first time on behalf of all the elected democratic parties in the country who believe in a New Ireland, an agreed blueprint so that a debate on real alternatives can begin within the Anglo/Irish framework. The SDLP would hope to play its full part in such a body.

Development of proposal by SDLP

2. Other SDLP points on the proposal made in articles by Mr. John Hume and otherwise soon after issue of the manifesto were as follows:-

- (1) the Government in Dublin, together with the other parties in the Dail, should set up the body;
- (2) the body should be representative of all Irish democrats who believe in a New Ireland, would exclude members of Sinn Fein elected to the Assembly and would be open "only to those who believed in the ballot box, not the Armalite";
- (3) the body should have a definite lifespan and specific terms of reference; political, economic and constitutional obstacles to a New Ireland should be examined.

3. John Hume has expanded somewhat on the proposal in discussions with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in his address to the SDLP Annual Conference and in various interviews around the time of the Conference. Among the points he made were:

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To the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

- (1) The function of the body would be to examine in detail the constitutional, economic, legal, administrative and other implications of the type of new Ireland envisaged by Irish nationalists.
- (2) It might be that a range of options rather than one single option might emerge at the end of the examination. Among options, the implications of which needed to be examined were federation, confederation and joint sovereignty.
- (3) The Council should be established very quickly and given a period of 6-12 months within which to complete its work.
- (4) Invitations should be drawn up on a basis that would exclude Sinn Fein and, probably, the Alliance Party.
- (5) He had no fixed ideas about the name of the forum or its method of operation. It should meet in private although some of its deliberations would inevitably become public.

Annual Conference Speech

- (6) The challenge facing nationalists was 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 was 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. The examination of the obstacles in the way of a new Ireland would 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 had an essential diversity as well as an essential unity, which needed to be given institutional expression. The definition of Irishness should include the Northern Protestants sense of British identity.

Interviews

- (8) The forum should bring out what sort of role for the Protestant community, what share of power, what safeguards, what sort of economic situation would exist in a new Ireland and what would be the relations between Church and State.
- (9) The forum should have specific terms of reference and its own secretariat, reporting back within six months.
- (10) While membership of the forum would be confined to democratic parties, North and South who believe in a new Ireland, it would seek the views of concerned Protestants who also believe in such an Ireland.

In interviews, Mr. Hume referred, as he had in his speech to putting the proposals developed by the forum to political leaders in the North and to the British Government. He also referred in interviews and in his speech to his belief that with the production of the envisaged blueprint, the debate would be transformed.

4. It seems fairly clear that the concept has been developed within a fairly small circle in the leadership. Points made or emphasised by others in that leadership group are as follows:-

Mallon

He had some doubts from the outset that the proposal was somewhat gimmicky but this reflected (a) his view that the party should boycott the Assembly election and (b) his tendency to be critical of all practical proposals for near-time political action other than a conference producing an ultimate settlement in short order, as by a magic wand! He now wants the forum to get to the root of the problem which he sees as partition. It should have clearly seen structures and clearly defined functions and should produce a paper which could form the basis for negotiations with the Unionists and the British (again, apparently, looking to a short order solution). It should be disbanded on production of the paper.

Farren and O'Hanlon

It is vital that there be greater consensus among the parties in the South in their approach to the Northern Ireland problem and the proposed Council should be approached on this basis.

Currie

Reflecting the impatience with parties in the Republic he has evinced in recent years, they should "put their money where their mouths have been over the years".

Logue

He is preoccupied with developing an SDLP platform for the Westminster election. Against this background, he thought that the Council might have two stages. In the first, during which it was established, it might sketch out the grounds to be examined later in detail. This stage should not last long so that the SDLP would have a positive programme for the Westminster election. In a second stage which might not be concluded before the Westminster election, the issues would be dealt with substantively.

5. It is apparent that the proposal now enjoys full and united support from the SDLP leadership and party. John Hume is strongly committed to it personally. It appears likely that he and the SDLP would back away from the idea only if presented with an alternative approach which they saw as meeting the needs of the situation and of their Party equally effectively.

Reactions to the proposal in the State

6. This initial Fine Gael reaction described the proposal as "an interesting proposition". A statement of 1 October said:-

"It is especially interesting in the light of Garret FitzGerald's speech in Pittsburgh in which he proposed consultations between the Government and opposition parties and all those in Northern Ireland who may be willing to talk to us and help us to identify those aspects of the Constitution, laws and social arrangements of the State which pose obstacles to understanding among the people of our island".

Fine Gael said that they would study "with interest this proposal and the other proposals in the SDLP manifesto".

7. In the speech he made about the Northern Ireland situation on 18 November in the course of the General Election campaign, the Taoiseach, after referring to his intention to seek the support of the people for the removal from our Constitution and laws of elements which pose an obstacle to good relations between Northern Ireland and the State, continued:-

"Finally all of us who share the nationalist aspiration to unity of the people of Ireland, freely achieved by the consent of a majority in the North and in this State, must come together, setting aside all party differences, and, in consultation and co-operation with people representative of Unionist opinion, devise proposals to put before the people of Northern Ireland which will reflect our vision of the kind of Ireland in which they would have a secure place, and in which their British/Irish identity and their interests would be guaranteed in a manner that would admit of no doubt even amongst those in Northern Ireland most suspicious of our intentions".

8. Questioned about Government reaction to the proposal by SDLP members in the course of his visit to Belfast, the Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to the need to hear the detailed thinking behind it and also mentioned the lack of consultation with Fine Gael prior to the announcement of the proposal in the SDLP election manifesto. SDLP members reacted that it was understandable that the Government wished to consider the matter further. In the course of a message to John Hume, for the SDLP Annual Conference, the Taoiseach promised to give the proposal very careful attention after the Budget.

9. Following issue of the SDLP Manifesto, the then Leader of the Labour Party said that the SDLP manifesto deserved careful study by all concerned in the Assembly elections and that he intended to comment at a later stage in some detail on that part of the manifesto concerned with the proposals for a Council of Ireland (sic).

10. More recently, at the SDLP Annual Conference the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Mr. Quinn, said that the Labour Party will give its full support to the SDLP proposals for a Council for a New Ireland. There was some speculation as to whether Deputy Quinn had the prior consent of the Tanaiste for his statement which was very well received. 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".

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11. The formal Fianna Fail position is as published in the editions of 18 October, and 23 November of the Irish News. In the issue of 18 October, in response to an inspired query, Mr. Haughey indicated that the proposal for such a Council was an interesting one and that the then Government looked forward to discussions with the SDLP and others in the North following the Assembly elections. The following is an extract from an article on policy in relation to Northern Ireland, published under Mr. Haughey's name, in the edition of 23 November:-

"The Irish Government has been urged by leaders in the Nationalist community in the meantime to take our own initiative, and to attempt to define more closely, within the framework of a "Council For A New Ireland" the type of Ireland that most of us in this country would like eventually to see, an Ireland that can accommodate and find a special place for all its people and traditions.

The results of its work could form the basis of an Irish position at an all-party constitutional conference to solve the Northern Ireland problem. I believe this could be useful, and I look forward to discussing it with the SDLP when the elections are over".

12. Dr. Mansergh, the former Special Adviser on Northern Affairs had indicated before 23 November that the Taoiseach's predecessor was favourably disposed to the SDLP proposal, if it could be brought forward on a basis that did not focus on early change in Articles of the constitution that would be contentious between the political parties in the State but that there was no firm commitment to the idea. This appears to tie in with the 23 November newspaper article.

13. Mr. Hume told the Minister for Foreign Affairs on 21 December that Fianna Fail had so far refrained from opting for or against the proposal but he (Hume) thought it likely that Mr. Haughey would go along with it. He referred to the Irish News material and also said that in his own private conversations with Mr. Haughey, including one since with election in the South, he had established that Mr. Haughey was "not opposed" to the proposal.

In Northern Ireland

14. In the North, the attitudes expressed by the OUP and DUP at the time the proposal was unveiled make it clear that they regarded the proposal as unwelcome or irrelevant in its focus on an all-Ireland objective. The Alliance Party described the proposal as the Dungiven

Parliament, slightly updated, in new clothes. They totally rejected any participation in such a forum and expressed no interest in such an initiative.

15. The Irish Independence Party in Northern Ireland in a statement on 1 October, heartily welcomed what they termed "the SDLP endorsement of their proposal for an alternative forum in Dublin". This referred to a proposal they had put forward in July last that the Irish Government might consider the establishment in Dublin of an alternative non-legislative assembly, apparently with an indefinite life-span. It would be composed of representatives of interested political parties in Northern Ireland based on their respective strengths in the 1981 local government elections or the Assembly elections, representatives from Dáil Éireann, all Irish MEPs and invited or visiting organisations and individuals. Its functions were seen as deliberative, advisory (to the Governments involved and international organisations) and representative generally. The October statement called for early establishment of a body along these lines.

16. Sinn Féin, while maintaining a chorus of criticism of John Hume and the SDLP, have not entered into detailed comment on the Council for a New Ireland proposal.

17. In contacts with the former Special Adviser, Dr. Mansergh, Barry White of the Belfast Telegraph and Canon Elliott of the Church of Ireland, directly or by implication, welcomed the idea of a Council for a New Ireland that would spell out the elements of such a future Ireland. White has since taken a broadly "can't do any harm but will the Southern parties agree to do it" line in his Belfast Telegraph column. Senator John Robb was more reserved but offered some suggestions as to how the idea might be made more acceptable to people of unionist outlook.

British reaction

18. An initial reaction was expressed by the Secretary of State to Ambassador Kennedy on 13 October. Mr. Prior considered that the proposals would be very much resented by the Unionist majority and in Westminster and would cause a further deterioration in Anglo-Irish relations. He said they went against and rivalled the concept of an Anglo-Irish Inter-governmental Council. These comments were made before the Assembly election, when Mr. Prior may still have hoped that the SDLP would enter his Assembly brainchild and also, of course, before the change of Government in Dublin.

19. More recently, in his tete-a-tete discussion with the Minister for Foreign Affairs on 1 February, Mr. Prior, while indicating that he wished to be helpful to the SDLP, evinced frustration at the difficulty of dealing with the party and revealed an inability to perceive how he could help them in concrete terms. In this general context, referring to the proposal for a Council for a New Ireland, he said that he understood John Hume's approach was to clarify people's thinking on the Nationalist side. If it did not involve Unionists, however, it was likely to have the same effect as Unionist behaviour i.e. to create further deadlock. In trying to move forward, he was conscious of the two identities and the two traditions. It was important to give reassurance to the Unionists. The Council idea would be seen as a move towards a united Ireland.

20. However, at a later stage in the meeting, Mr. Prior said that if Fianna Fail were to take part, he could see some advantage in the Council idea. He had reservations, however, about calling it a "Council for a New Ireland". It was a grandiose title. If the Council in itself took on a threatening appearance, it would be likely to get the Unionists worked up. That was his main worry about the proposal.

Pros and Cons of Council for a New Ireland proposal

21. The following are the main headings under which it could be argued that the proposal suffers from potentially serious drawbacks:

- (1) To effectively launch and sustain it would involve a readiness on the part of the Opposition to treat the Northern issues as a basis for all-party consensus other than inter-party disagreement; and a broadly consensual approach that (a) might be difficult to retain (b) might limit the Government's freedom of action in policy.
- (2) possible adverse reaction among people of influence in Britain who actively or passively favour political evolution towards eventual Irish unity on an acceptable basis.
- (3) possible unionist perception of the body's establishment as a threatening move leading to alienation in some quarters and violent reaction, political or physical, from others.
- (4) the possibility that the body could be a forum for dissension between Northern and Southern nationalists.
- (5) the exercise would involve Irish nationalists shooting off their bargaining ammunition before battle was joined at all.

22. On (1) above, difficulties in regard to an agreed approach among Southern parties, it would clearly be most unhelpful for Irish objectives in regard to Northern Ireland if a Council were seen to be a forum for public disagreement between parties in the Republic (or between Northern nationalist parties or between the latter and the "Southern" parties generally.) The previous history of inter-party committees, discussions etc. on Northern Ireland is not particularly encouraging and there has been a good deal of controversy between the parties in this general area over the last two years. As previously indicated, the SDLP are most anxious to see an end to this. It is a matter for political assessment as to whether that desire is shared on all sides or whether political advantage may be seen by some in keeping the issue alive as a subject of controversy. From attitudes evinced in the past and from what is known of present views, the possibility of ^{an} agreed approach would probably require that in regard to constitutional and legal issues, some matters such as Articles 2 and 3 be avoided. This would point in the direction of agreeing in advance to concentrate on constitutional and legal aspects of an ultimate agreed Ireland in which Articles 2 and 3 would be irrelevant i.e. jumping over the problem. This could be an inhibiting factor in regard to continuation of the Taoiseach's previous constitutional initiative directed at nearer term change in the Constitution. It would be for political assessment as to the comparative benefits of an all-Party approach directed to an ultimate blueprint as compared with an approach directed to the shorter-term which might be opposed by the Opposition but might have more immediate effects on the attitudes of unionists or some of them. One factor to be considered is that if it were possible to reach all-Party agreement on an ultimate blueprint, it might be easier subsequently to get acceptance of nearer term constitutional change. Certainly, if it could be obtained, it would be very advantageous to make the proposed body a vehicle for a significant exhibition of unity among constitutional Irish nationalists on a positive report. The tenor of the recent Dáil debate on Dail reform gives some grounds for believing that many individuals Deputies would have a welcome for involvement in such an approach.

23. On (2) above, possible adverse reaction in Britain, such a reaction on the part of sympathetic and influential people - in the political parties, the civil service and media - could pre-empt the steps being taken towards revival of a meaningful Anglo-Irish process. However,

if the proposal could be presented and seen to be complementary rather than antipathetic to the Anglo-Irish approach, and not unduly upsetting to unionists, the British establishment may not be hostile to its implementation. It had been the intention of the Irish side to present material on structures for a future Ireland achieved by consent within the framework of the Anglo-Irish Joint Study on Possible New Institutional Structures. While the British side made clear that they could only listen to what we had to say on this subject, some interest was expressed in hearing our views. This is consistent with the belief found in some British circles that Irish Governments are not really serious about unity that the expression of our wish for it has a "sacred" or "ritual" aspect and even that advantage is seen in permanently having it as an unsolved problem. In the event, the Irish side did not have the opportunity, in the joint study, to proceed as intended. Suitably developed, the Council idea could deal with these views in such a way that influential British circles could be brought to regard it as having positive effects. The recent comments by Mr. Prior suggest that he is concerned about the Unionist perception of and reaction to the idea but that if the presentation were non-threatening, he might even see advantage in it.

24. On (3) above, unionist reaction, it could be argued that the likely line-up of participants in the proposed Council, in contrast to that in the Northern Assembly, would underline the basic division in Ireland between nationalists and unionists and that this would be seen as deepening the polarisation which emerged so clearly in the results of the Assembly elections. Such a perception could perhaps lead Northern Protestants not strongly opposed to the idea of a united Ireland in the longer-term to opt instead for a policy of containment. More extreme unionists could be led to step up sectarian violence in the North or to again extend violence across the Border.

25. On the other hand, it might be possible to develop and present the Council concept in such a way that these conceivable disadvantages would be minimised. The exclusion of Sinn Fein could help in this regard. If the Council set out, in positive and attractive, even if somewhat general terms, what such an ultimate new Ireland would be like and if there were emphasis on its achievement by consent, Protestant reaction might not be particularly negative and could be, at least in some quarters, reasonably positive. It might also be necessary to ensure that it emerged that there was not an expectation of immediate negotiations to bring about such a united Ireland in short order, as Mr. Mallon

and possibly others in the SDLP, may envisage. One may, however, question whether as suggested by Mr. Hume, the situation would be transformed - certainly so far as unionist attitudes are concerned.

26. On (5) above, shooting off nationalist bargaining ammunition too early, This, it could be argued, would allow the unionists, at a time when they are not under pressure from the British, to reject any proposals produced by the Council which, if held over for a later time when a shift in British policy was putting pressure on the Unionists would receive a better hearing. One might reply that Unionists already know what is the nationalist objective and already, at this stage, reject it. Change in their position will come about, if at all, by the pressure of circumstances (e.g. continued economic decline, the perception of a changing demographic balance), British political pressure (e.g. modification of the guarantee), and action from the Irish side designed to bring out the benefits of moving towards unity and to assuage fears. An outline, in general terms of options for constitutional structures and provisions and of the protections, role and power that would be an offer to the Irish Protestant tradition in a new Ireland could, however, be helpful and worth presenting even before the other pressures become sufficiently compelling - and could help to advance the application of British pressure e.g. from a British Labour Party Government.

27. Possible advantages of the proposal are that it could:-

- (1) provide support for the constitutional nationalist parties in Northern Ireland, much-needed in the wake of the Assembly election results;
- (2) have a beneficial effect on Protestant opinion in Northern Ireland and tend to increase the number of Protestants there prepared to contemplate a united Ireland;
- (3) wrest the initiative from the Provisional IRA, Sinn Fein and the INLA;
- (4) possibly promote convergence between the SDLP and IIP on policy; and
- (5) be advantageous in its impact on the British Government and British public opinion, in that they would be faced with a broadly united nationalist front on the subject-matter of the Council's work and could not take refuge in instability or unpredictability of Irish policy as an excuse for inaction.

Terms of Reference and Work Programme

28. If the ultimate blueprint approach were adopted, the purpose and work of the body could be to establish the maximum possible area of agreement between the constitutional nationalist parties in Ireland, North and South on the shape of a New Ireland or an options, to any one of which the parties could agree, for such an Ireland. The shape to be set out would embrace constitutional structures and provisions and legal provisions, as necessary, and bring out, in particular, the role and influence or power of former unionists in such an Ireland and the safeguards for Protestants and those of the British-Irish tradition.

29. A problem in an approach concentrating on a future objective is that it assumes away the economic and financial problems, in a situation where commentators would note that the solution of the latter could not be brought about simply by an act of political will and would probably require continued British financial involvement over a lengthy period. This obstacle to unity would have to be dealt with but there could be problems about giving clues to one's intentions, specifying periods over which the difficulties would be resolved, etc. In general if the forum were established, a work programme along the lines suggested by SDLP spokesmen should be acceptable and should probably lead to a published report.

Name of and duration of existence of body

30. The title suggested by the SDLP for the body is Council for a New Ireland. Mr. Prior characterised this as a grandiose title. The IIP proposal referred to an Assembly. The word Council has connotations of permanence while Assembly suggests wider functions than appear desirable, as well as a continuing existence. As the body would have a particular job to do, its duration should probably be finite and not too extended - somewhere, say, between 6 months and a year. Given this span and its suggested purpose, a possible alternative title might be "Convention for a New Ireland". This would also help to present it as not running counter to the Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Council.

Membership and Proceedings

31. It appears clear that participation in the body would be open to constitutional political parties, North and South, who are committed to an eventual new united Ireland. Clearly, it would be desirable to take account of the views of Northern Protestants and bodies

representative of them who might be prepared to meet members of the body.

32. Whether the Irish Independence Party in Northern Ireland would be invited is a difficult question. The SDLP would certainly wish that they should not be invited. Moreover, it is questionable whether they now have any niche between the SDLP and Sinn Féin. On the other hand, they are a constitutional party with some reasonable leaders and with a not insignificant number of elected representatives on District Councils in the North. The principal Opposition party might favour their inclusion. The matter would require careful consideration and consultation but it would probably be best, on balance, to invite their participation.

33. The SDLP are looking for a body that will provide an alternative forum for involvement of their elected Assembly members. One possibility is that membership could be open to Northern elected representatives and to a similar number of Oireachtas members nominated by the parties. While one would not have to adhere to the suggested equality of representation, there could be some practical advantage in it. It would be desirable, in current circumstances to involve all 15 SDLP representatives elected to the Assembly. Proportionate IIP (and Workers Party?) representation based on the results of the 1981 local elections in the North might bring the number of Northern members to or close to 20. To have "Southern" representation on a proportionate basis might give too large a body and an equal number (say 20) from the Oireachtas might be preferable.

34. Other practical difficulties can be foreseen. The Opposition parties here would probably be in a position to nominate their leading members. This would argue for Ministerial involvement on the Government side but experience shows that the pressures on Ministers' time might considerably reduce the time and energy they could devote to the body's work. A system of alternates, at least for Ministers, might be helpful in this regard. Some - or all - Northern Ireland-based members would probably have other commitments that would prevent their continuous attendance in Dublin over a period of months.

35. Having regard to these considerations, to other practical aspects and to policy and confidentiality considerations, it might be helpful to envisage the body meeting in public for an initial launching session, made by co-ordinated speeches striking the right, pre-agreed notes, following by private committee sessions in which the

report or draft report was presented and debated. Such a procedure might best promote consensus and would in any case minimise public perceptions of differences. It would also minimise requirements for verbatim reporting, as in the Oireachtas. Another advantage would be that continuous attendance by all members should not be necessary.

36. Other practical aspects, including secretariat, finance, meeting place, receipt of submissions or delegations etc. could be considered if it were decided to proceed with the idea.

Department of the Taoiseach.
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