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Fifteenth Annual Conference of the SDLP,
Belfast, 8-10 November, 1985

1. SUMMARY

The SDLP's fifteenth Annual Conference is judged to have been a considerable success, in particular for the party leader. Hume's speech was widely praised and had an uplifting effect on the conference. The SDLP leadership's studied demonstration of party unity at the present time undoubtedly reassured delegates and boosted party morale. The confidence inspired by Hume's speech, together with the relative restraint exercised by Mallon in an intervention widely viewed as a comment on the Taoiseach's Brussels speech, went a long way towards dispelling unease caused by the distorted account of the latter which appeared in the Irish press on 9 November. While not on the conference agenda as such, the Anglo-Irish talks were the subject of considerable informal discussion among delegates. The overall impression gained from such discussion is that the SDLP stands united behind the Government in terms of the likely outcome to the talks. Based on the view that it at least provides a basis on which to build further, there is very broad support for the package which appears to be emerging.

Local Government

2. The conference opened with a debate on local government. A motion condemning the behaviour of the Unionist members of Craigavon Council was proposed by Senator Brid Rodgers, supported by Eddie McGrady and carried overwhelmingly. A further motion deplored more generally the behaviour of

both Unionists and Sinn Fein on local councils and the unwillingness of Unionist-controlled councils "to allow all representatives a role in the exercise of council functions". Speaking to this motion, Seamus Mallon charged that it was not just Unionist-controlled Councils who were attempting to limit the role of democratically elected representatives: "I refer to the British Government and, yes, I refer to the Irish Government". Any tampering with the electoral process in an artificial and contrived way would potentially do as much damage as Unionist councils were doing, and more. We must be aware, he continued, that "this is in the minds of Governments at the present time". Needham had made it clear (when a SDLP delegation had met him recently) "that they were thinking along those lines". The SDLP had told Needham that they would refuse to sign declarations or take oaths against violence because the very lives of their Councillors were testimony to the party's opposition to violence. "We are not going down that road and we must make it perfectly clear". There would be those who would sign a declaration but could say whatever they liked under privilege once they reached the House of Commons or the Assembly. Such a declaration, therefore, would be worthless. The SDLP must say clearly to the British Government that they would sign no oaths or declarations and to the Irish Government that they would not allow any "contrived democracy", which would be counter productive and would amount to an attack on the very principles which the party had fought so long to sustain. Mallon asked "the Governments" not to retard the SDLP's efforts by "going down that road for very short-term gains".

(Note: I drew Mallon's attention on 9 November to the "Irish Times" account of these remarks, in particular the claim attributed to him that, according to Needham, the Irish and British Governments had agreed on the need for an anti-violence oath for elected representatives as part

of an Anglo-Irish settlement. Mallon said that this report was completely inaccurate and that he had neither said, nor wished to imply, that there was any understanding of this sort. In referring to Needham, he had been speaking of the British Government only. I commented that it would be quite inconceivable that the Irish Government would engage in discussions of this kind with the British Government).

Chairman's Address

3. In a well-received address, Alban Maginness, the party chairman, expanded on this year's conference theme, "Creating equality - Building peace". Without political, social and economic equality, he argued, there can be no peace in Ireland. Nationalism must be recognised as the legitimate political expression of 40% of the population of Northern Ireland and given a status equal to that of Unionism in the institutions of Northern Ireland. A proper political balance within Northern Ireland will not of itself bring about peace but it will provide the foundation on which to build peace. No internal solution to the problems of Northern Ireland will be acceptable to the SDLP. Maginness recalled the party's efforts before, during and since the Forum to create an Anglo-Irish framework for dealing with these problems. While it would be idle and wrong to speculate on the outcome of the present talks, the party expects nonetheless that the realities and analysis of the Forum Report will form the basis of any agreement. The Anglo-Irish process deserves the SDLP's support and the party confidently awaits the conclusion of the negotiations, tempered with the knowledge that the latter have been long and arduous. Maginness also called on the SDLP to challenge, through peaceful political action, the countless structural injustices which exist in Northern Ireland and he denounced the "monstrous lie" propagated by the Provisional IRA that only violence can effect change.

Administration of Justice

4. On the morning of 9 November there was a debate on the administration of justice in Northern Ireland which focussed on an emergency motion moved by Seamus Mallon. The speakers (who all showed rhetorical flair and made very effective presentations) were Mallon, Adrian Colton and Alex Attwood (the most prominent of the "young tigers" in the SDLP), Paddy O'Hanlon and Brid Rodgers. Referring at the outset to the Stalker Report, Mallon said he had been impressed by the Stalker team's thoroughness and tenacity and by their appalled reaction when confronted with the evidence of police attitudes and behaviour in Northern Ireland. The Report must be made public and whatever action it recommended must be taken. Mallon went on to reaffirm SDLP policy on four key areas of the administration of justice. Recalling that the last party conference had called for the disbandment of the UDR (and that the Kilbrandon Report had made a similar recommendation), he said that he had in his possession a copy of a confidential report drawn up by Lord Hunt for the Liberal-SDP Alliance in which Sir Kenneth Newman and Field Marshal Brammel (a senior British Army strategist) were both quoted as wishing to see the UDR phased out (with the word "abolished", in fact, being attributed to the former). On the RUC, the party could not support a police force which included persons who had committed serious crimes and had not been brought to justice. "Tinkering at the edges" would not suffice - there would have to be real structural changes in the authority under which the RUC operated before the SDLP could give its unequivocal support to the force. Mallon detected also in the Hunt report an acknowledgement by Newman that the RUC's special unit was still in existence. On extradition, Mallon said the party opposed this because of the low quality of justice in Northern Ireland and preferred use to be made of the Criminal Law Jurisdiction

Act. He spoke disparagingly of the Quinn, McGlinchey and Shannon cases. Finally, he pressed for changes in the composition of the judiciary. Mallon was followed by Colton, who said that there could be no justice within the confines of Northern Ireland and welcomed the fact that the Irish and British Governments were currently discussing ways of transcending the Northern Ireland context. An Anglo-Irish agreement would be judged by Northern nationalists in terms of "what it means for justice on the streets of Northern Ireland". Alex Attwood focussed on prison issues and plastic bullets and declared that the SDLP's policies in the various areas of justice "will remain our policies tomorrow - irrespective of what tomorrow may bring". In an eloquent and much applauded intervention, Paddy O'Hanlon successively attacked the hypocrisy of Paisley, the Provisional IRA and the British Government on justice issues. Recalling a protest he had made to an RUC officer about a recent instance of injustice, he quoted the officer's reply: "It mightn't be justice, Mr. O'Hanlon, but it's the nearest you're going to get!" Brid Rodgers, finally, urged early and full publication of the Stalker Report in order to remove suspicions that the forces of law and order in Northern Ireland considered themselves to be above the law. Mallon's motion (which demanded publication of the Stalker Report and reaffirmed party policy on the administration of justice) was carried.

Hume's Speech

5. The highlight of the conference was undoubtedly the party leader's speech on the afternoon of 9 November. (A copy is annexed; departures from this text in actual delivery are noted in manuscript). It was an impressive performance. Delivered in a dramatic key, the speech (which, running to just under an hour, was almost twice as long as usual) dealt with a wide range of issues and held

the conference's attention from beginning to end. It received a standing ovation, many delegates being visibly moved by the sight of the leader and deputy leader standing hand in hand as they acknowledged the tumultuous applause. A delegate not normally given to praise for the leader described it as the best speech he had ever heard from Hume. (He understood, however, that the gesture of holding hands with Mallon had been agreed between the two men in advance.) Two elements went down particularly well: Hume's singling out by name (in a departure from his prepared text) of SDLP members who hold key Council Chairmanships at present and his deliberate endorsement of Mallon's views on security issues.

6. Hume began by observing that, after fifteen years marked by continual predictions of the SDLP's imminent demise, the party was still in existence - "and we are here to stay". Noting its achievements in various sectors and its international standing, he defined its task as one of trying to "narrow the gap between what is and what ought to be". He attacked the social and economic policies of the Thatcher Government. On human rights, he said that justice and law and order in any democratic society must be based on consensus and not on repression. In pursuing this principle, Seamus Mallon, as justice spokesman, had had to confront people with some unpalatable truths "leading to the accusation that he speaks only for a wing of this party". Mallon, Hume declared to sustained applause, "speaks for this entire party". He is to be commended, in particular, for his ruthless expose of the "shoot-to-kill" policy which led to the Stalker Report. Hume then criticised "the three unionist parties, Alliance, DUP and OUP". When speaking of law and order, Unionists mean "their law and their order". The only lesson they ever learned was in 1912 and they have never forgotten it. This lesson was repeated again in 1974 and (Hume added in a departure from his text) they think that

it will be repeated again "now". Until the British Government confronts this threat fairly and squarely, there can be no movement towards real peace and stability in Ireland. Hume also criticised, to loud acclaim, the hypocrisy of Provisional Sinn Fein's conduct. The SDLP, he declared, is and has been the only alternative. The young people of Northern Ireland are "our real wealth" and "the only explosive weapons that either this society or this party will ever need".

In charting a path for the future which young people can understand, there can be "no instant solutions"; there can only be a "healing process, leading to the unity of the people of Ireland". (This longer description of the "healing process", incidentally, was an addition to Hume's prepared script). There is no alternative to the path of steady political progress. The first step is the creation of total equality of treatment. On the basis of that equality, reconciliation will become possible. This will lead to the only unity that really matters, "a unity that respects diversity". Every democratic country in the world that is united is united because it accepts difference and diversity.

Hume identified the "British-Irish framework" as the correct framework for the problem. The framework for the problem should be the framework for its solution. The process was begun by Mr. Haughey's Government in 1980. Quoting remarks made by the Fianna Fail leader at the time, Hume said that the SDLP strongly supported Mr. Haughey because they believed that the decision to establish an Anglo-Irish framework represented a "real breakthrough". Moving to the present talks, he said that the SDLP has encouraged and supported them but does not expect a final settlement or an immediate solution. Its yardstick for measuring their outcome will be simple - will the proposals involved help in the healing process?

Hume warned also that, whether or not there is an agreement, the SDLP will still face major challenges and risks on the road towards peace and stability. Recalling ideas which he had formulated in an article in "Foreign Affairs" in 1979, he hoped that the Anglo-Irish talks would "report a progress that we can all support and that all the parties to the Forum can support". The SDLP knows that the path of progress is long and stony. Whatever the challenges that lie ahead, however, "we shall not change".

Message from the Taoiseach and Speech by Minister for Labour

7. Following Hume's speech, fraternal delegates and distinguished visitors were introduced. The first to speak was the Minister for Labour, Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D., who saluted the SDLP's survival over the past fifteen years as testimony to the party's extraordinary courage, not just at leadership level but also among rank-and-file members. The Irish and British Governments were now at the edge of a possible agreement, thanks in large measure to the initiative of the SDLP in launching the Forum process. The presence of Southern politicians at the conference indicated the latter's admiration for the SDLP's courage, their solidarity with its struggle and, above all, their trust in its judgement. The Party Chairman read out the message from the Taoiseach (copy annexed), which was well received, and also made reference to a message received from the Fianna Fail leader.

Political Affairs Debate

8. Later in the afternoon, Mallon availed of a political affairs motion calling on Conference to reiterate its opposition to violence for political ends in order to respond to the Taoiseach's Brussels speech. He said that the essential question for democratic nationalists in Ireland was: have we the will, the capacity and the

commitment to make progress towards Irish unity? Since the foundation of the Irish State, the nationalist aspiration had found expression either in violence or in a frustrated sterility. The challenge was not just to condemn violence but also to ensure that the motivating force of the aspiration to Irish unity was at all times sustained. The "beacon light" of the democratic nationalist aspiration must be kept shining. It was only in the realisation of this aspiration that peace and stability could come about and Unionists could find the real security of knowing that a vibrant, non-violent nationalism had prevailed over the Provisional IRA's approach. Addressing people in the South, Mallon said that there were nuances in nationalism which only people living in Northern Ireland could appreciate. "We cannot, will not and must not put this aspiration on the back burner. We cannot make liars of ourselves, we cannot leave it in suspended isolation for any length of time because, if we do, the boys in balaclavas in Co. Armagh will come along and say 'we are the only people pursuing this course'." It was an "absolute contradiction in terms" to suggest that the suspension of legitimate aspirations would bring peace. Mallon asked people in the South, "well meaning as they may be", to appreciate this and specifically asked "those in the Irish Government not to make this a premise because it is a contradiction in terms". Irrespective of what might shortly be agreed, the SDLP must seek to create a new political order in Ireland which would allow Unionists to appreciate the motivating force of the aspiration to Irish unity and nationalists, perhaps, to appreciate the Unionist position.

Mallon's remarks proved milder and more conciliatory than expected; earlier in the day, he had threatened a major attack on the Taoiseach but in the event wiser counsels prevailed. His intervention was well-received, one delegate describing it as "a shot across the bows which,

thankfully, succeeded in hitting nothing". The comment from another delegate was that Mallon, as usual, had qualified his criticisms on closer reflection. "Caveat" is his middle name" and this applies also, according to the delegate, to the attitude he is likely to take towards an Anglo-Irish agreement.

9. Later in the political affairs debate, Austin Currie, in a rare intervention, endorsed Mallon's view that the only solution which would bring lasting peace was a united Ireland. Along the way, however, there were other jobs to do and the SDLP had the will, the capacity and the commitment to do them. Recalling that when he had travelled to Dublin in the sixties on behalf of the Nationalist Party "we got plenty of platitudes but very little practical assistance", Currie said that he and his colleagues had decided eventually that "our future lies in our hands". This is why the SDLP had been successful. They had responsibility for the welfare of the community in Northern Ireland, both Catholic and Protestant. One day, in a united Ireland, they would be able to live up to these responsibilities. In the meantime, however, they had a responsibility to do something "here and now".

Other Debates

10. The conference also debated the health and social services situation, which Hume described as "the major issue" (its importance being reflected in the favourable time-slot allocated to it). In a separate debate on the economic situation, Hugh Logue warned that there must be "a sound economic element" in any Anglo-Irish deal: the latter would be doomed to failure if youth unemployment in Northern Ireland continued to rise. There were also debates on environment and housing, energy, agriculture, education, international affairs and other issues but to a large extent these were set-pieces containing little that

was new. The conference adopted policy documents on energy, the Fowler proposals, hospital services, workers' cooperatives and an integrated rural development programme for Northern Ireland.

The only surprise in the elections to party offices was Adrian Colton's replacement of Frank Mc Ilvanna as one of the party's Vice-Chairmen. A number of other younger members succeeded in winning places on the Executive (one-third of which now consists of people below the age of 30).

Attendance

The conference attracted a higher attendance than usual (over 200). The absence of Paschal O'Hare was adversely commented on by many people and deemed likely to undermine the credibility of any views which O'Hare may wish to express on an Anglo-Irish agreement. The attendance from Dublin included the Minister for Labour, Mr. Ruairi Quinn T.D., the Minister of State for Labour, Mr. George Birmingham T.D., Deputies Maurice Manning, Nora Owens, David Moloney, Rory O'Hanlon, John Wilson and Mary Harney as well as a large number of party activists from all three major parties. The Department of Foreign Affairs was represented by Mr. D. O'Ceallaigh and the undersigned.

12. Conclusion

The conference was marked by a confident and buoyant mood, particularly after Hume's speech, and has helped the SDLP to close ranks at a particularly difficult time. Hume's personal authority has been reinforced while at the same time Mallon's popularity remains undiminished. In substantive terms, the conference did not set out to achieve much, its sparse agenda reflecting the organisers'

expectation that, with different timing, there might have been weightier issues to debate. As it was, the debates were largely pedestrian and uneventful and produced no significant policy changes. The value of this Conference, accordingly, lies essentially in the psychological and atmospheric gains for the party at the present time.

David Donoghue.

David Donoghue

12 November, 1985

Annex: Hume's speech
Taoiseach's message

c.c. PSM
PSS
Box
A-I Section
Embassies London and Washington
Consulates in United States