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TWENTY-FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE SDLP

ENNIISKILLEN. 22-24 NOVEMBER 1991

General

by J. Keating
29/11

1. In contrast to the optimism generated by last year's conference, the mood at this year's SDLP Conference was more subdued. Contributory factors included the current hiatus in relation to political progress; sharp policy differences on a number of social issues; and the party's budgetary crisis (which has been receiving intense media attention).

Attendance was somewhat down on last year and fewer motions were submitted by the branches. Overall, there was a sense that the party is at present frustrated and adrift to some extent, in particular because of the political uncertainty and the budgetary pressures.

2. The principal events were John Hume's address, the political affairs debate, a debate on social issues which focussed on the proposed Brooke's Pregnancy Advisory Centre, a debate on the administration of justice and a private budgetary session. The Taoiseach's message was read out to delegates just before Hume's address. //

3. Hume's address, which some considered made less of an impact than usual, was essentially a restatement of his familiar themes. Developing the emphasis laid in his 1990 address on NI's position in the new Europe, he examined in some detail the importance of 1992 for Ireland North and South. Describing the Single European Market as "the single most powerful development affecting this country for

centuries'', he listed the various conferences which the SDLP had organised to discuss its implications. He also underlined his own contribution over the past few years in the European Parliament. Mentioning his forthcoming attendance at a meeting of European Socialist leaders in advance of the Maastricht summit, he listed the various policies (a Social Charter, increased funding for poorer regions, the promotion of rural development and agricultural reform, etc) to which the SDLP is committed at the European level. Hume urged the British Government to ''emulate the success of Dublin'' in trying to maximise the benefits available for Northern Ireland under present and future Community programmes.

4. Observing that Britain's presence in Ireland arises historically from a desire to protect itself from invasions through the ''back door'', Hume pointed out that ''in today's new Europe all that has changed'' and that, even by its own terms, the IRA has no longer any reason for the use of arms or bombs. Noting the British Government's declaration that it no longer has a selfish interest in a presence in Ireland, he urged Britain to continue to say this but also, in conjunction with the Irish Government, to indicate its firm intention to do anything possible to overcome the legacy of bitterness and division.

5. Hume then challenged the IRA to accept that no unity is possible without agreement and to lay down their arms and ''join with the rest of us in the challenging process of finally breaking down the barriers between the people of Ireland''. He continued with a plea to the Unionists (borrowed from his 1987 Conference address) to recognize that the security they seek lies not in a defensive siege mentality but in ''positively coming out, working in cooperation and partnership with the other tradition and building an entirely new society''. Unionists could best protect their identity by standing on their own two feet and ''addressing the

relationships which go to the heart of the problem''. Hume invited Unionists to follow the European model for their relations with the rest of the island, agreeing to institutions which would respect diversity but would also allow a working of ''our considerable common ground''. In conclusion, he called on the Secretary of State to convene talks without delay and he hoped that the Unionist leaders would ''respond in the same spirit''.

Political affairs

6. The political affairs debate was based on a motion whose terms were so obscure, and which proved so contentious, that it was eventually not voted upon but was referred back to the Executive. The party's failure to adopt a fresh policy position in this vital area was the subject of critical comment by delegates in private afterwards. It was recognised, however, that it would be dangerous to adopt as policy a motion which could be interpreted variously as proposing joint sovereignty or an independent Northern Ireland.

7. The debate was dominated by a powerful and well-received intervention from Seamus Mallon, who declared that a solution to the problem could only be found through the political process. The British Government bore the primary responsibility to get the issue off the back-burner but was not discharging this responsibility. There had been no reference to Northern Ireland in the recent Queen's Speech (or, for that matter, in Neil Kinnock's). The Secretary of State, acting in conjunction with the Irish Government, should name a date for the reconvening of the negotiations which were adjourned last summer. Those not prepared to attend would have to explain to the people of Northern Ireland why they would not be there.

8. Mallon went on to suggest that it was inherently wrong (he used the word 'humiliating' at one point) that NI politicians should have to ask the Secretary of State to try to solve their problem. In asking Brooke to do this, and in asking the Irish Government to have the problem recognised as a major issue on the floor of the Dail, NI politicians would have to recognize that there was a challenge to them also. They should prepare their own blueprint and should not be dependent on the whim of the Secretary of State. Nationalist politicians had a responsibility to reach out to the Unionists, so that the latter might help in the creation of this blueprint. Nationalist Ireland should not simply analyse the problem but should start to 'put flesh on those bones' and to present its vision to the Unionist people, who were leaderless and rudderless. This was a politically risky course but it could result in the beginning of a solution to the problem. (Comment: There is, of course, nothing new in Mallon's emphasis on the desirability of NI politicians standing on their own feet and not depending on the two Governments to bring them together. He struck this note in an Irish Times interview two years ago and has returned to it on a number of occasions, most recently in an Oxford debate a fortnight ago. What was new, however, was an inference in his remarks that the SDLP would put specific proposals to the Unionists. This is believed to have irritated Hume, as it could be interpreted as signalling a change of policy on the SDLP's part in relation to the talks process).

9. Other notable contributions to the political debate came from the Vice-Chairman of the party, Angela Hegarty, who disagreed with the Hume position on Britain's neutrality in relation to NI and held that the SDLP's aim should be the unity of the Irish people in a federal Europe. Alex Attwood (a Belfast Councillor) supported Ms Hegarty with reference to a range of security policies which, he argued, showed that the British Government was not neutral in its approach to NI.

Criticising Fine Gael's present stance on Articles 2 and 3, Hugh Carr (a Newry Councillor) regretted the party's recent change of leadership.

Social issues

10. There was a lively debate on the proposed Brooke Pregnancy Advisory Centre, which brought into the open the differences between the liberal and Catholic/conservative elements in the party. The former underlined the pressing need for advice for young people on sexual matters while the latter claimed that the new centre would be an abortion referral agency. The matter was resolved by having motions for and against the centre referred back to the Executive. Seamus Mallon commented privately that it was ridiculous that the party should devote such time and energy to this issue. On balance, however, there was satisfaction among delegates that the party's ability to debate a serious issue of this kind had been clearly demonstrated, not least to the media.

Administration of justice

11. The main issue in the debate on the administration of justice was internment. Seamus Mallon said that it was "pathetically poignant" that this was still a subject for debate twenty-one years after the founding of the party. Reiterating his standard points on this subject, he dismissed as simplistic Ken Maginnis' view of internment and said that a British Government decision to reintroduce it would be tantamount to surrender and an admission of complete failure, from which only the paramilitaries would benefit. Other issues which received attention included the banning of the UDA; changes in the rules on inquests (on which the party's Legal Affairs Group had submitted a discussion document); and border road closures (with Fermanagh Councillor Tommy Gallagher arguing for a joint security policy by both

Governments to permit reopenings).

Budgetary crisis

12. The Conference concluded with a private session on budgetary and organisational matters, which confirmed the Executive's decision to reduce the number of HQ staff (from five to two). The party's finances were the subject of much heated discussion by delegates over the weekend. Expressions of personal sympathy with the outgoing General Secretary (Patsy McGlone) were, on the whole, balanced by a realisation that the party's dire financial straits made this action necessary and by some irritation with individual party members for directing media attention to the issue.

Anglo-Irish Division

Department of Foreign Affairs

27 November 1991

cc. PSM
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