



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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DEVELOPMENT OF  
BRITISH LABOUR PARTY POLICY ON NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Background:

Political developments since the Downing Street Joint Declaration together with the new British Labour party leadership have led to a development of, and change of emphasis in traditional Labour Party policy on Northern Ireland.

Prior to the election of Tony Blair as party leader Labour Party policy on NI was based on the position adopted at the 1981 Party conference when the party declared itself in favour of a united Ireland " by agreement and consent between the two parts of Ireland". The policy was further elaborated in the 1988 document "Towards a united Ireland " and in the 1989 document "Policy Review for the 1990s" largely written by the then Labour Party spokesman on NI Kevin Mc Namara. In that document they supported the Anglo Irish Agreement and saw a united Ireland as the long term solution subject to the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. They did not believe, however, that the requirement for consent should be allowed to constitute a veto on political progress. The document expressed commitment to building consent for a united Ireland.

2. **Tony Blair and "New Labour":**

The election of Tony Blair as leader of the Labour Party in July 1994 involved the Labour Party in a significant shift towards the central ground in British politics, a strategy which has since proved politically successful. The traditional strongly pro united Ireland policy of the Party is more associated with the centre and the left of the Party and with "Old Labour". The October '94 Party conference coming relatively quickly after the election of Tony Blair did not lead to any major shift in Northern Ireland policy. The statement from the National Executive

Committee, adopted by an overwhelming majority at the conference, reaffirmed the Party's "historic commitment to Irish unity by consent" but with a new emphasis on the need for a balanced constitutional settlement reflecting the principle of consent as outlined in the Downing Street Declaration. The invitation to John Hume to address the conference and the enthusiastic reception accorded him also appeared to signal a continuity in policy. Subsequently, however, the new leader, and his team, were particularly careful since the cease-fire not to appear out of step with the general position being taken by the British Government, particularly in regard to dialogue with Sinn Fein and issues such as the decommissioning of arms. Northern Ireland is perceived as an area in which John Major has been successful and one where Labour has nothing to gain politically from opposition quite apart from the sensitive nature of the problem.

### **3. Appointment of Dr. Marjorie (Mo) Mowlam as Shadow Secretary of State.**

The replacement of McNamara as Labour Party spokesperson on NI followed his failure to be elected to the shadow cabinet.

The new spokesperson, Dr. Marjorie (Mo) Mowlam, is of the same generation as Blair and is seen as more closely reflecting his general "New Labour" philosophy as well as his view of Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair also changed the junior spokesmen replacing Roger Stott and his deputy Bill O'Brien with Paul Murphy and John Speller respectively. (Paul Murphy was later replaced by Tony Worthington in April '95 and Speller was replaced by Jim Dowd in October '95. An additional member of the frontbench team from October '95 is Eric Illsley )

Dr Mowlam has paid several visits to Dublin and has been a particularly frequent visitor to Northern Ireland. She is generally regarded as having improved relations between the Labour Party and the UUP. Since taking over as Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland she has expressed Labour Party policy in more neutral terms describing Labour as "persuaders for a balanced constitutional settlement" and she has emphasised the concept of

consent as outlined in the Downing Street Declaration and the Framework Document. While broadly supporting the general thrust of British Government policy on Northern Ireland she has taken somewhat more forward positions on issues such as prisoners in Britain and emergency legislation.

#### 4. Party Conference October 1995:

Mr Blair, accompanied by MO Mowlam visited Dublin in early September for meetings with the Taoiseach and Tanaiste before going on to Belfast for meetings with John Hume and Unionist representatives. To coincide with his visit to Dublin the Irish Times carried a detailed interview with Blair. In this interview, and generally in his press comments throughout his visit, Mr Blair adopted a very cautious approach with regard to the current Northern Ireland related issues and fully supported the British Government position on decommissioning seeing the Washington decommissioning principles as prerequisites for political talks. On the desirability or otherwise of a united Ireland he adopted an unambiguously neutral position.

These remarks on Northern Ireland, as well as general concern with the shift towards the right in the Party, led to the resignation of Kevin McNamara from the front bench. The McNamara statement on his resignation provided a focus for the supporters of the more traditional view within the Party prior to the annual conference. The conference, with the acceptance of the Party leadership, adopted a composite motion which contained strong support for North South Bodies, criticism of the release of Private Clegg, calls for changes in the police and the dismantling of emergency legislation as well as supporting progress "towards an agreed Ireland". The language of the motion reflected clearly some of the elements of the more traditional McNamara view on Northern Ireland. At the same time acceptance by the Party leadership was facilitated by the avoidance of any reference to the decommissioning issue. The effect of the conference was to emphasise an evolution in Labour party policy as distinct from a dramatic break with the policies of the past fifteen years. While Party unity was maintained around the composite resolution, it

is clear that the leadership will continue to emphasise a broadly bipartisan approach in the run up to the next general election.

#### **5. Commons Debate on the Report of the Mitchell Decommissioning Body:**

The Labour leader fully supported the position of the Prime Minister who essentially sidelined the main recommendations of the report and placed a new emphasis on the Unionist proposal for elections. In the debate Kevin McNamara was by way of contrast critical of the Prime Minister. The position adopted by Mr Blair led to subsequent difficulties between Blair/Mowlam and the SDLP leader John Hume.

The developments surrounding the Mitchell report were generally interpreted as confirming the primacy of maintaining the bipartisan approach in Labour Party policy. This was further demonstrated in the reaction of Labour to the London bombings.

#### **6. Renewal of Prevention of Terrorism Act - March 1996**

The relationship between the Labour leadership and McNamara/SDLP was further aggravated by the Labour decision to abstain on, rather than oppose as it had since 1981, the renewal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act on 14 March 1996. The decision was reported to have been taken by the Labour Leader, Tony Blair, in consultation with shadow Home Secretary, Jack Straw. The members of the Party with an interest in Northern Ireland, including reportedly the shadow NI Secretary Mo Mowlam, were not consulted. The Labour decision attracted significant criticism from leaders of the Irish community in Britain in the main Irish newspaper in Britain, the Irish Post. The legislation is associated with harassment of Irish people and with miscarriages of justice as in the cases of the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four etc.,.

The SDLP opposed the renewal and twenty three Labour Mps defied the party whip to vote against the renewal. Those Mps voting against included Kevin McNamara, Dennis Canavan, Chairman of the Party Backbench Committee on Northern Ireland and his deputy Roger Stott as well as Mps associated with the

Troops Out tendency and the far left of the party such as Ken Livingstone , Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn. Left-winger Harry Barnes from the Democracy Now grouping also opposed the legislation.

Relations between the Labour leadership and the SDLP (John Hume in particular) are now generally regarded as (temporarily) strained.

The Fianna Fáil leader , Bertie Ahern, criticised the British Labour Party approach to NI in his speech to the Dáil following the London bombings.

### 7. Different Pressures and Groupings within Labour:

#### **The Agreed Ireland Forum:**

This group was launched at the '95 Party conference with the support of a significant number of MPs including Kevin McNamara, Clive Soley and Ken Livingstone. The new grouping has the potential to be a very significant voice in the Labour Party. It brings together the now less influential "old guard" associated with McNamara , the hard left "Troops Out" tendency as represented by Ken Livingstone, "ethnic" Irish MPs as well a broad range of MPs with an interest in Northern Ireland. Differences between the pro SDLP McNamara group and the pro Sinn Fein "Troops Out" tendency have reemerged following the breakdown in the IRA ceasefire. Its Chairman , Clive Soley , who is also Chairman of the Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland, is regarded as having the confidence of Mo Mowlam and could possibly provide a bridge between the group and the Party leadership.

Relations between the Labour leadership and Kevin McNamara are now very poor. Following the Labour Party reaction to the Mitchell report and the breakdown in the IRA ceasefire Kevin Mc Namara has been more openly critical of Labour's support for the Conservative government in speeches and in press articles. Developments regarding the PTA renewal have further complicated the prospects for a united Labour voice on Northern Ireland.

#### **Labour Party Backbench Committee on NI:**

The Backbench Committee on NI under the chairmanship of Dennis Canavan includes in it's membership Kevin Mc Namara and Roger Stott from the previous

Labour Party NI team. The Committee plays an ongoing constructive role with regard to the Northern Ireland debate and a number of its members are active in a positive way in debates in the House of Commons. The Committee would more closely reflect the traditional Labour Party Northern Ireland policy seeing Labour as "persuaders for an agreed/united Ireland". Delegations from the Committee have visited Dublin on a number of occasions.

**Democracy Now:**

There has been a certain support within a small section of the Labour party for the integrationist view that the Labour Party should be established in Northern Ireland in opposition to the SDLP.

This view has been articulated mainly by the pressure group "Democracy Now". Members of Parliament associated with this group include Harry Barnes and Kate Hoey who supported the election campaign of independent Unionist MP for North Down, Bob McCartney. While the emergence of left wing voices in Unionism (McGimpsey, McCartney, Loyalist fringe parties) has been an encouragement to this view Democracy Now remains a fringe grouping for the present but possibly with growing support. The policy of not establishing the Labour Party in Northern Ireland has been consistently supported by the new Labour leadership. There is, however, some support for the proposal that residents of Northern Ireland be permitted to join the Party.

Mairtin Ó Fainín  
Anglo-Irish Division  
March 1996