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Meeting with Dr. Joe Hendron
31 March 1987

The following are points made by Dr. Joe Hendron when we spoke in Belfast on 31 March 1987.

West Belfast

As from the next day (1 April) he would open an SDLP Advice Centre full time in West Belfast. The centre had been closed for some time due to a lack of workers. He reopened it on a part time basis two months ago. Since then, Party workers have been manning it during the evening. He now spends every Wednesday evening at the Centre.

Alex Attwood, the SDLP City Councillor from Lenadoon, has taken leave of absence from his law firm and will work full-time as campaign manager for Dr. Hendron's challenge for the West Belfast Westminster seat. Dr. Hendron told me that Jim Fitzpatrick, the owner/editor of the Irish News, had contributed £3,000 to his campaign fund and had agreed that it could be spent to provide a salary for Alex Attwood while he was acting as campaign manager.

The SDLP has no money, at present, for fighting elections and he has had to raise his own campaign funds. John Hume raised a good deal of money in America, during his recent trip there, but most of this is earmarked to pay off part of the Party's relatively large accumulated debt. The problem in West Belfast is that, since many of his voters are in the very low income group, it is impossible to raise very much money in the area. He is, therefore, forced to look elsewhere. He has been able to get some cash from Americans and from supporters and friends in other parts of Belfast.

Party fund raising, as such, by the SDLP, is almost non-existent and it, accordingly, falls to the candidates and their constituencies to raise their own campaign funds.

He has a great deal of work to do in West Belfast before he is in a position to mount a serious challenge to Gerry Adams for the seat. However, he is encouraged by the response from the area and he is cautiously confident about his chances of victory on this occasion. He recalled that, when he ran for the seat in the 1983 Westminster general election, he was considered to be very much an outside bet compared to Gerry Adams and Gerry Fitt. On that occasion he got 600 more votes than Fitt (10,934 to 10,326) and Gerry Adams was 5,445 in front (16,379 votes). In contrast, it will be a straight contest this time between Sinn Fein and the SDLP. While he will not get many of Fitt's 5,000 or so protestant votes, he hopes to get some. Some time ago, an Official Unionist City Councillor, Fred Proctor, whose ward is in the constituency, said he would advise people to vote for Dr. Hendron in order to prevent Gerry Adams getting the seat. While he knows that many unionists would not now vote for a member of the SDLP, he hopes, nevertheless, to convince enough of them that if they do not support him they will be helping to re-gain the seat for Sinn Fein.

He has always found it very difficult to organise West Belfast. Gerry Fitt and Paddy Devlin had their own organisations which were 'personal' organisations. He, therefore, inherited no party organisations. Dr. Hendron stressed that West Belfast was unlike anything else in Northern Ireland. It, he thought, more like the most deprived part of Dublin with the additional problems brought about by the political turmoil in Northern Ireland. He pointed out that more nationalists were located there than in any other constituency in Northern Ireland, including the Foyle constituency. However, the population there, like the population in the rest of Belfast, was in decline. SDLP supporters, because they came from the upwardly mobile families to a greater extent than Sinn Fein supporters, were inclined to move out of the area.

He is well known in the area because he has worked there among the people for a good many years. His practice which he shares with five other doctors covers 11,000 people and takes him into most areas of West Belfast.

He is very concerned about the dreadful unemployment in most of West Belfast. The area continues to be neglected and, because of that, it is an excellent breeding ground for the PIRA. He has been concerned about RUC treatment of local youth. The police and the security forces systematically pick on these young people and question them in a provocative way. Most of the time, the youngsters have done nothing and indeed have no connection with the paramilitaries. He does his best to reduce this type of harrassment and he generally gets satisfaction when he intervenes with the RUC. However, in most cases the youths are innocent and the RUC attitude leaves a legacy of bitterness which tends to push such people into the hands of the Provos.

Unity Flats

He was invited recently, by the Unity Flats Residents Association, to address a meeting to campaign for the demolition of the Flats. They said that, since the SDLP and the Anglo-Irish Agreement had been responsible for the decision to demolish Divis Flats (never admitted by the Divis Residents Association who are mostly PIRA), they were seeking the same help to have Unity Flats demolished. After he addressed the meeting, he got a very warm reception from the people there. While he knew some of them individually, he was surprised at the overall public acceptance of the SDLP. Gerry Adams and Sinn Fein were also present but were not as enthusiastically received. Unity Flats is in the middle of a hardline loyalist area on the North of the city and behind the Shankill Road. People there are very vulnerable. There have been threats in the past from the loyalists that if Unity Flats were knocked down they would not allow nationalists to occupy alternative single-family homes in the neighbourhood.

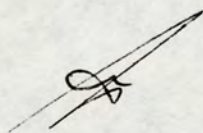
He will ask John Hume, who received a letter from the group asking him to intercede for them, to meet them and take up their case.

Government - SDLP Meeting

He believes it would be extremely useful if the SDLP could have a meeting with the Government as soon as possible to get the Government's views on its future plans.

Paddy O'Donoghue

Dr. Hendron was very concerned about the SDLP's spokesman on Education, Culture and the Irish Language, Paddy O'Donoghue, who is very seriously ill (cancer is suspected). Mr. O'Donoghue was a founding member of the SDLP and a major figure in the GAA in Northern Ireland in Irish language organisations.



Liam Canniffe
2 April, 1987.

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