

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

### IRELAND



<b>Reference Code:</b>	2005/151/691
<b>Title:</b>	Report by Sean Donlon, Assistant Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs on his attendance at the fourth annual conference of the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party]
<b>Creation Date(s):</b>	21 January 1975
<b>Level of description:</b>	Item
<b>Extent and medium:</b>	7 pages
<b>Creator(s):</b>	Department of the Taoiseach
<b>Access Conditions:</b>	Open
<b>Copyright:</b>	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

1. The registered number of delegates was slightly down on last year's 500. But it was a lively, efficiently-run conference which though it met when public attention in Northern Ireland was centred on the comings and goings related to the IRA's non-ceasefire, showed that minority confidence and participation in the political process seemed to have survived the events of the past year remarkably well. The "mood of tangible, not to say surprising, strength and self-confidence" (Jim Downey in the Irish Times) was in marked contrast to that of hopelessness and depression which prevailed after the events of May and which was particularly evident at a major SDLP gathering in Bunbeg in August 1974. The improved security situation since the end of the revenge assassinations in November and the euphoria created by the recent ration of peace helped to create this positive mood but as far as the SDLP was concerned an even more significant factor must have been the cumulative effect of the routine work of the party machine - the weekly meetings of the 19 Assemblymen in room 16 in Stormont even when they had nothing new to discuss, the party executive meetings roughly once every three weeks and the regular meetings of the four standing committees, policy committees, nine sub-committees, constituency councils, district executives and branches.

2. Topics of major interest this year were policing and the Irish dimension and the public and private discussions on both showed some development in the party's thought on these questions. In marked contrast to last year's conference where internment was a serious issue, this year there were only the ritual, enthusiastically applauded references together with Fitt's dramatic, if not entirely well-based, revelation that Rees would end internment at a stroke if the IRA declared a permanent ceasefire. The heated debate at last year's conference about the



SDLP's joining in any administration before the ending of internment is forgotten and the subsequent setting up of an unauthorised and now defunct ad hoc group on internment was noted in the party executive's report to the conference as something which did not call for any disciplinary action. It is also noteworthy that the controversy in the Spring and early Summer on the stance taken by the leaders, notably Currie, while in office on the ending of the rent and rates strike was not an issue.

3. In my report on last year's conference, I noted that "the party leaders (viz. the original six) so dominate that there seemed to be a general reluctance, even on the part of the thirteen new Assemblymen, to challenge their views in any way". Perhaps the biggest change which has taken place in the last year is the opening out of discussion within the party and no where was this more evident than in the discussion on policing. The conference had before it a motion calling for the adoption of a five hundred word policy document on "policing: realities and responsibilities". (The policy document on "alcoholism, a forgotten problem, ran to fifteen hundred words). The document had been drafted by a Derry group consisting of Hume, Canavan and ex-London policeman Sidney Courtney and it was based on the principle that policing could not be "considered in isolation but as part of an overall political settlement". The only positive proposal in the document was

"It is our intention to help create the conditions in which community identification with policing is possible. To effect major progress in that direction the Party has taken the initiative in calling for talks between elected representatives to discuss the whole range of problems confronting N. Ireland, urgently proposing definite liaison machinery to prepare an agenda. We intend discussion to involve security, law and order and policing in their proper perspective. Those who refuse to participate must stand exposed as the real enemies of acceptable policing and as a real enemy of peace in the province."

but this was hardly consistent with the party's refusal to



participate in policing discussions in the last year which was referred to in the executive's report as follows:

"The Party Chairman sent a note to all District Councillors on 24 January (1974) indicating that the SDLP Councillors should delay entering into (local police) liaison committees until Executive had time to discuss the matter more fully. Consultations, which involved the Assembly Party then took place, and the General Secretary wrote to District Councillors on 11 February setting out your Party's reservations about participation in these Committees at that time."

Hume and Canavan proposed the adoption of the policy document and Hume put forward his views with great conviction and persuasiveness but he did not reckon either with the overwhelming desire for policing in minority areas, especially in Belfast, or with the fact that hostility towards the R.U.C. was never as great in some minority areas (e.g. Newry) as it was in Derry. Nor did he expect his position to be attacked so forcibly, constructively and logically as it was, notably by Seán Hollywood of Newry and Gemma Loughran, a lecturer in a teachers training college in Belfast, both of whose interventions contributed to the defeat of the resolution by 62 to 53. The small size of the vote is explained by the fact that it was taken on Friday evening before the arrival of many of the non-Belfast delegations and indeed it is very doubtful that the defeat would have taken place on the Saturday or Sunday when the Derry delegates - County Derry has 20 branches as compared to e.g. Belfast's 7 - had arrived in strength. Technically, the policy document is now referred back to the Executive for consideration but the defeat is unlikely to inhibit Hume from taking more or less the same position on the R.U.C. as he has always taken, particularly as the elections produced a Derry-dominated party Executive. But the defeat has considerably strengthened the hand of those - particularly outside Derry, Fermanagh, Tyrone and South Armagh - who want to begin now at local level the process of identifying the minority community with the R.U.C. which in some areas has had a complete change of personnel since 1971. (The Chief Constable is reported recently as saying that about 50% of the present R.U.C. have joined since 1970.)



4. The conference debate on the Irish dimension - it took place on the basis of a composite motion on the "Constitution of Northern Ireland" - was less controversial and a predictably *united* ~~united~~ line was taken all round. There was no serious support for a motion from the North Belfast branch which as worded, called on the party to "face up to the reality of the present situation, that there is no prospect of peace, until more emphasis is placed on local political co-operation, and less on the Irish dimension". There is little doubt that the views expressed in the motion would have considerable support among SDLP supporters in greater Belfast and it would certainly be privately endorsed by, among others, Fitt and Devlin. But they do not feel that these views can be expressed publicly in a pre-election and pre-negotiating situation and a relatively minor incident the week before the conference forced Fitt to take a stronger line on the Irish dimension than he might otherwise have done. An RTE Seven Days team interviewed Seamus Mallon of Armagh about the Irish dimension and then went on to interview Fitt on the same subject, but without telling him that they had interviewed Mallon. They put some of Mallon's views to Fitt without identifying them and, not unexpectedly, got him to contradict them. This caused considerable embarrassment to Fitt who then used the conference to try to restore the balance. It also forced the party leaders to close ranks on the subject even more than they might otherwise have done and the Hume statement that "there are no differences in the party on this and to suggest that the Irish dimension is a bargaining counter demeans our position" is unlikely to reflect the real position. Assemblyman Tom Donnelly, the author of the motion put down by the North Belfast branch, made a carefully thought out intervention which probably reflects the views of many SDLP supporters in and around Belfast. While accepting that "there must be partnership between North and South" he emphasised that the "future success of that partnership would totally depend on the success of power-sharing and the creation of a real Irish dimension in Northern Ireland".



● In an obvious reference to the more orthodox party position on the matter he warned of the dangers of negotiating "not with arrogance and pride but with dignity and compassion". Donnelly's approach and attitude is a minority one within the SDLP but the very fact of its expression not only shows the changing nature of the party but is bound to have some influence on the formulation of policy. The formal post-Conference position of the SDLP on the Irish dimension is that it is committed in principle to an institutional expression of the dimension as a prerequisite to participation in government in Northern Ireland but the tone of the debate suggests that the leadership has a very generous margin indeed in interpreting this position. Austin Currie pointed out that though the Irish dimension was a "fundamental reality", it would be stupid to cling to a Council of Ireland as the only institution which could reflect it. He was also, incidentally, the only speaker who drew attention to the fact that circumstances had already forced the SDLP to change its position on a Council of Ireland in the last days of the power-sharing Executive. In an interesting contribution Eddie McGrady who commands considerable respect and support within the party went some way towards Tom Donnelly's position when, after saying that an Irish dimension was a prerequisite to the SDLP's entering government in Northern Ireland, he explained that "the Irish dimension means different things to different people. It can mean the simple wish to have one's children taught the geography and history of their native land - which they are not; to learn to sing the songs and dance the dances of their Irish inheritance". He had earlier articulated the views of some of those at the Conference when he said that "a sad thing is that the true custodians of the Irish dimension is the political minority of the North and not, to their shame, the citizenry of the Republic of Ireland". (Others had expressed similar views in giving the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs a "mixed reception" while yet others had, in the early hours of Sunday morning,



disrupted the singing of the last verse of the Northern Ireland version of the civil rights hymn "We Shall Overcome" which has as its main line "North and South together"!

5. The election of a new executive provides an accurate indication of the geographical balance within the SDLP. Only one of the five elected officers and one of the fifteen other executive members is from Belfast, and the direct Derry representation on the executive is six. In addition a number of the others are clearly linked in one way or another with John Hume so that, notwithstanding his defeat at conference on the policing issue, his overall position within the party machine is still a dominant one. Gerry Fitt continues to operate largely independently of the party. It should, however, be noted that he attended six out of seventeen executive committee meetings this year in comparison with two out of seventeen last year and in addition I am reliably informed that he recently completed the necessary formalities to become for the first time a member of a branch and therefore a member in good standing of the SDLP. The Hume/Devlin axis is still working very smoothly and this combined with their respect for and long standing friendship with Currie and O'Hanlon is enough to ensure that between them the four are likely to retain their firm grip on policy matters in the coming year. The Devlin/Cooper link has weakened considerably in the last year with the result that Cooper's position and influence is now minimal. Of the newer political generation Eddie McGrady, Paddy Duffy, Seamus Mallon and Denis Haughey all have their supporters and their own positions on particular issues but it cannot be said that they offer any serious challenge to the traditional leaders.

6. Another interesting sidelight on the 1975 SDLP is that it is now a solidly middle class, white collar party. The executive has at least six teachers, an engineer, a solicitor, a pharmacist and an accountant. In a rough analysis of the 34 SDLP office holders



(19 Assemblymen and 15 non-Assembly members of the Executive), I estimate that at least 20 received second and/or third level education under the free education scheme introduced under the Education Act (N.I.) 1947. The sections of the minority community not evident in the SDLP at the moment are the working class, particularly of Belfast, and the farming community. The party's organisation in Belfast is poor, with only two branches in the whole of the Westminster West Belfast constituency - the only constituency which elects an SDLP M.P. By contrast the Derry constituency has 20 branches and Fermanagh/South Tyrone has 9.

7. On the organisational side, John Duffy's departure will be a blow but he leaves behind a machine which his less dynamic successor Dan McAreavy should be able to keep going, provided he is given the money to do the job. Duffy has built an expensive organisation - not including election expenses, the SDLP headquarters now costs £40,000 per annum to run. It has a full-time staff of seven, a large suburban house as its headquarters and raises only a few thousand pounds a year in Northern Ireland. It gets some help from the Rowntree Trust but the bulk of its income is still generated by its Dublin support group led by Dr. John Kelly of the UCD Engineering School.

*P. Warden*

*21 January 1975*