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Title: Note by Sean Donlon, Assistant Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs, referring to SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] reaction to an interview given to RTE by the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien

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I cut short my weekend visit to Northern Ireland to come back and report on the SDLP reactions to the interview given to RTE at lunchtime on 4 May by the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. I was with Hume when the interview was broadcast and just after it had concluded he was telephoned by the other prominent SDLP leaders, except Austin Currie. Before I left Derry, Hume asked me to convey the following message to the Taoiseach from the SDLP:

- the SDLP had grave doubts about the Convention but after careful consideration decided to take the political and physical risks and stand. Their attitude was dominated by the fear that if they withdrew from the constitutional political process at this stage, the IRA would emerge as the leading influence on the minority community;
- because of the danger of violence, both the SDLP and UUUC decided when the results were coming in that they would restrict their immediate comments and emphasise that the Convention chamber rather than a radio-TV studio was the best place to conduct the debate on the future of NI.

Both sides took particular care not to anticipate the Convention discussion mainly to ensure that if, as seems inevitable, the Convention fails it will do so in a way calculated (a) to have the best possible impact in Britain and (b) to minimise the reactions on the streets in NI.

- the SDLP, in common with the Governments and Opposition in Dublin and London, are formally committed to policies based on power-sharing and an Irish dimension. The principles of policy may well need to be re-assessed in

light of the Convention results but the SDLP had hoped that their views might be taken into account by the Government here in any re-assessment. They had always kept the Government here fully and completely informed of what they were doing and during the power-sharing talks of 1973 and the UWC strike of 1974 did so virtually on a daily basis. They find it unacceptable that a Dublin Government spokesman should announce within 24 hours of the election results that (i) the policies to which the Government had been committed are now unattainable and (ii) the alternative is a continuation of direct rule without any consultation with or advance notice to the SDLP. They feel that their participation in the Convention is now extremely difficult and that their credibility in the eyes of the minority community will be drastically reduced if they participate in a Convention on the basis of an electoral mandate based on policies said by a Dublin Government spokesman to be unattainable.

- the SDLP feel that the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs has underestimated the capacity and potential of the IRA to influence developments in Northern Ireland (and eventually in both parts of Ireland) and that he has a mistaken impression of the general attitude of the minority community. His analysis of the consequences of the Convention's failing is therefore inaccurate.

En route back from Derry, I called to see Austin Currie in Donaghmore. His attitude to the Minister's interview was similar to Hume's but was expressed much more bitterly. He pointed out that, against his better judgement, he had been persuaded to stand for the Convention and thereby expose himself and his family to considerable physical and financial distress. The least he had

hoped for was that people like himself would be listened to by the Government in Dublin before they publicly announced their abandonment of the old Northern Ireland policy and the announcement of a new one.

Hume and Currie said that they personally, and they hoped most of their colleagues, would not react publicly to the Minister's interview though individual members such as Devlin and Mallon would probably continue to make their own comments. (Mallon is in some difficulties within the party. As a result of a constituency row, he did not accept party direction on the organisation of the election campaign in Armagh and ran a strong personal campaign which was at least a contributory factor in Paddy O'Hanlon's failure to win a seat.) If the Taoiseach had any message to convey to the SDLP arising out of the Convention results, they would appreciate receiving it as soon as possible. The newly elected Convention members would be meeting this week, probably on Wednesday and a reaction before then would obviously be helpful.

Seán Donlon

Seán Donlon

5 May 1975

c.c. Mr. D. Nally (D/Taoiseach)
PSM
PSS

*Sean Pagan
Dougal 2 yrs ago
FIS
End party news?
Seamus Mallon - P.*