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SDLP Seventh Annual Conference
November 1977

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1. The debate on the constitutional issue at this year's conference might best be examined under four topics on which, in one way or another, there were noteworthy developments. The topics are

- the party's policy document "Facing Reality";
- a composite motion on British withdrawal;
- a motion on Northern Ireland independence;
- the party's attitude on interim devolution.

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An indication of the extent to which the conference was managed by the leadership is the fact that only one of these topics, viz. the "Facing Reality" document, was discussed in detail by the delegates.

2. If the size of the attendance and the size of the conference documentation pack is a reliable guide, the SDLP is certainly very much alive and active. There were an estimated 350 accredited delegates which would suggest a paid-up party membership in the region of 4,000 - 4,500. There are about 120 branches. It is likely that, over the last two years, there has been a slight drop in paid-up membership but that the branches which now exist are almost all active and well integrated in the party machine. In addition to the 350 delegates, there were probably another 250 members present as visitors and the total attendance was as high as it has been at any conference. There were fraternal delegates from the Irish Labour Party (led by Mr. Frank Cluskey who also represented the Socialist International) and delegates from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Confederation of EEC Socialist Parties. Unlike previous years, none of the British political parties were represented and most of the British media also seemed to consider it unnecessary to send representatives. Only the Guardian and BBC had reporters present. One indication of the extent of the SDLP's activity is the collection of documents in the conference pack. The full list is contained in annex I. "Facing Reality" is attached as annex II and the opening statement by the Chairman of the party, Mr. Denis Haughey is attached as annex III.

3. The debate on "Facing Reality" was based on a motion submitted by the party Executive asking the conference to approve the document. It will be recalled that the document was prepared during the Summer and eventually published in September amid general speculation that it represented a victory for the green wing of the party. Indeed it was on the basis of this document that Paddy Devlin differed with his colleagues and was finally expelled from the party. The contents of the document were therefore very familiar to the delegates and branches, including Paddy Devlin's former branch, had had plenty of time to consider their reactions. In the event the debate was remarkable mainly

for the unanimity of support for the document and for the standard of the speeches. Only one speaker, John Turnly from North Antrim, seriously challenged the central theme of the document and said that the only real solution was permanent British withdrawal. John Hume, in one of his best conference speeches ever, explained that the document was based on the principles on which the party had acted since its foundation. He denied that it represented any significant shift and argued that since the basic problem in Northern Ireland had not changed, the principles on which SDLP policy since its foundation were based were as valid now as they had been seven years ago. Perhaps the most remarkable appeal for unanimity of support for the document was that made by Seamus Mallon who at last year's conference was one of those challenging the traditional approach and pressing the party strongly in the direction of a British declaration of intent. Turnly's position was not helped by the fact that as a member both of the party's constituency representatives group and of the party Executive - both of which had already approved the document - he had not until now presented any active opposition and Currie, in particular, exploited this point fully. It was also pointed out to him that asking the British to leave was a simple statement of objective but could not in any way be regarded as an alternative policy. In the event "Facing Reality" was approved almost unanimously. Of the estimated 300 delegates present for the vote, about 5 voted against its adoption and 4 abstained.

4. Composite motion no. 6 called "for a declaration from Britain that it intends to withdraw politically and militarily from Ireland and give to the divided people of Northern Ireland the opportunity to work together". Motions expressing this general sentiment had been submitted by the Pomeroy, Ballycastle and Strabane branches. In the course of the debate on "Facing Reality", representatives of the three branches concerned announced that they were withdrawing their motions and the composite motion therefore fell. There seem to have been two main reasons why the party Executive which had approved the conference agenda only a fortnight ago wanted to avoid a conference debate on a British withdrawal motion. Firstly, there had been, within the past ten days, developments which suggest that talks on interim devolution are imminent and it was clear that those who might be involved in these talks did not wish to have unnecessary difficulties created for them. At last year's conference, a debate on the same topic had resulted in 111 delegates voting for British withdrawal and 153 voting against. Secondly, it is not without significance that John Hume was absent abroad when the conference agenda was being finalised and he made no secret of his view that acceptance by conference of the "Facing Reality" document implied that motions such as composite motion 6 would be automatically dropped. There was a short and relatively sharp procedural debate on the dropping of the composite motion and allegations were made both publicly and privately that the leadership in general and Hume in particular had indulged in a good deal of arm twisting. When a procedural motion was put, conference overwhelmingly agreed not to debate the composite motion and moved on to next business. It would be wrong, however, to assume that British withdrawal is no longer a live and potentially divisive issue within the SDLP. Indeed in private conversations with delegates I formed the impression, which is also noted in an editorial in the Irish Times of 7 November, that if the composite motion had been put to a vote, a majority of delegates

would have voted in favour. It should, of course, be borne in mind that the organisation of the SDLP is very weak in Belfast - there are only about 12 branches in the greater Belfast area where about one-third of the minority live - and the mood of conference on British withdrawal is predominantly a reflection of the view of the minority section of the community in border towns and rural areas.

5. One thing which emerged very clearly at this conference was the complete rejection, as a possible option, of independence for Northern Ireland. A motion in the name of the Enniskillen branch asked conference to take "into consideration the inaction of the British Government in recent times and initiate discussion with all interested parties with the object of establishing an independent Northern Ireland". A similar motion last year had been debated in some detail on the basis of a paper prepared by Paddy Duffy from Dungannon and conference had then instructed the Executive to carry out a full study of the matter. In the course of the year, the General Secretary had formally written to branches asking for views but the response was nil and even a series of reminders produced nothing. It was therefore not surprising that when conference came to debate the Enniskillen motion, no branch could be found to second it and following a formal proposal speech by an Enniskillen delegate, conference passed on to the next item. Given this development, combined with the departure from the party of Paddy Devlin who had been a consistent supporter of Northern Ireland independence, it is unlikely that much more will be heard within the SDLP in the foreseeable future about that particular option.

6. Although there was no motion on the conference agenda about interim devolution, it was foremost in the minds of many delegates. In the week before the conference Denis Haughey had, in indirect contacts with some unionists, indicated support for "interim legislative devolution" and had decided that his opening address should be seen by unionists generally as a gesture of friendship and reconciliation. He had done this largely on his own initiative but when his moves did come to the attention of Gerry Fitt and Austin Currie they were prepared to let him go ahead on the basis that it would be a useful kite flying exercise and might be a reasonable way of taking the unionist temperature prior to renewed talks. Hume has not been very enthusiastic about entering into a round of talks at this stage and he was absent abroad for most of the fortnight before the conference. When he returned and learned of Haughey's moves, he was very annoyed and at one stage contemplated trying to stop Haughey's speech but following considerable activity in the day or two before the conference, Haughey did succeed in producing a draft which was eventually acceptable all round. In the event, the speech was surprisingly well received in unionist circles. Baird of the UUUP said that "it was very honest and encouraging" and Craig welcomed the sincerity of Haughey's speech, the desire to forget the past and to work together in the future. He hoped that when political dialogue got under way again all would have something to contribute and he added that any solution need not necessarily have the support of Paisley and the DUP. If, he said, the vast majority were in favour and the DUP against the will of the majority would prevail. On behalf of the Official Unionist Party, John Taylor also welcomed

Haughey's speech and said that it would go some way towards overcoming the bad image the SDLP had gained in the past few months by ignoring the feelings of unionists and pursuing the goal of a united or agreed Ireland. Encouraged by this response, Fitt publicly indicated the SDLP's willingness to enter into talks on interim devolution and other speakers even indicated a degree of optimism about the outcome. Privately, however, not very much optimism was expressed by people like Hume, Currie and Mallon and there was a strong tendency to the view that it was unrealistic to enter into talks which attempted to dodge the long-term issues rather than face up to them. No one in the SDLP wants to be completely negative about the very idea of talks and it is therefore likely that the party will respond to whatever initiative the Secretary of State might take. It is difficult at this stage to be very optimistic about the progress that can be made in a situation where the SDLP will seek to negotiate the framework of a permanent constitutional arrangement while the Official Unionists - and probably the British - will wish to confine the negotiations to an interim settlement involving partial devolution.

7. Other points of interest from the conference were:

- unanimous support for a motion deploring the ill-treatment of persons in custody. The position at Castlereagh RUC station was referred to by almost all the speakers and even Gerry Fitt found it necessary to refer to the situation there in his keynote address;
- the emergence of Seamus Mallon from Co. Armagh as one of the leaders of the party. Until now he had been prominent in various ginger groups and generally been at odds with the established leadership of Hume, Currie and Fitt. Following the expulsion of Devlin in September, Mallon was elected chairman of the Constituency Representatives and is now working very closely, especially with Hume and Currie;
- the two vice-chairmen of the SDLP elected at conference are Mrs. Bríd Rogers (Craigavon) and Mr. Seán Farren (Coleraine). By coincidence, both are relatively recently "immigrants" from the south to the north. The fifteen man party executive, also elected at the conference, is Pat Brannigan (Armagh), Ben Caraher (Armagh but representing Belfast), Arthur Doherty (Limavady), Gerry Doherty (Newry), Paddy Heron (Co. Derry), Peggy Lavery (Cookstown), Dr. McDonald (Glens of Antrim but representing Belfast), James McGarvey (Coalisland), B. MacIvor (Derry), D. McLaughlin (Strabane), A. Maginness (Belfast), K. Murphy (Newry), J. Ritchie (Downpatrick),

P. Rowan (Lisburn) and Oliver Scallon (Co. Fermanagh).
The low level of Belfast representation is once more
an accurate indication of SDLP strength there.

Seán Donlon

Seán Donlon
8 November, 1977

cc PSM

PSS

Ambassador Keating

Mr. Nally (D. Taisreach) ✓

To: Delegates, ex-officio members and accredited visitors to the Seventh Annual Conference, Slieve Donard Hotel, Newcastle, Friday, November 4 - Sunday, November 6, 1977; copy to members of the Press.

DOCUMENTATION PACK

Your documentation pack contains:-

- (1) Envelope with Credential/Voting Card or Visitors' Pass, reservation tickets (if ordered) and identity disc.
- (2) Copy of the Party Constitution.
- (3) Conference booklet giving agenda and other reports.
- (4) "Facing Reality" (Policy document.) (Motion 72 refers).
- (5) "Agriculture in Northern Ireland - A Time of Opportunity". (Policy document). (Motion 62 refers).
- (6) Submission by Belfast District Executive to Belfast Transportation Enquiry and text of Emergency Motion No. 1 to which document refers.
- (7) An Opportunity For Excellence (the Party's proposals for Secondary Reorganisation. (Motion 27 refers).
- (8) Copy of Department of Education circular (issued 31.8.77) on the procedure for transfer from primary to secondary education. (Motion 26 refers).
- (9) Housing - the Real Solution (submitted by Slieve Gullion Branch.) (Motion 48 refers).
- (10) A note on the payment For Debt (Emergency Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland (1971). (Motion 114 refers).
- (11) The European Community and Northern Ireland. (Paper submitted for information).
- (12) The Community and the Common Good (Booklet submitted for information). (Presented with the compliments of the London Information Office).
- (13) (For Executive members and Constituency Representatives only). A note on the Executive and Constituency Representatives' attitude to various notions with speakers.
- (14) Note re Dublin Group Fifth Annual Cabaret and Dinner on November 11.
- (15) Map giving routes to Newcastle.
- (16) Copy of speaker's request slip which will be available to delegates and ex-officio members throughout Conference.
- (17) Note sheets and pen.