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SECRET

SDLP

1. I met Mr. John Hume on Saturday, September 12th, and drove him to Derry on the morning of September 13th. Later, on the 13th, I met a number of the leaders of the SDLP who had attended a meeting in Derry at which the Party Executive, constituency delegates and representatives, Local Councillors and other members attended. On the evening of September 13th I attended a reception hosted by Radio Foyle to mark a four-hour public debate on radio on "The Future of Derry", at which representatives of both communities in the city (although preponderantly Catholic) were present.

2. Mr. Hume's private conviction is that the hunger strike crisis is now on the wane. A large residue of bitterness towards the British remains in the Catholic community, however. He believes, nevertheless, that the period during which the SDLP had to "hunker down" and "batten down the hatches" is at an end and that the Party must now make an attempt to take the initiative away from the Provisionals.

Note: This view was subsequently put to me by several other Party leaders.

Hume said that the purpose of the Party meeting of September 13th was to give the grass roots an opportunity to "let off steam" and, hopefully, to close the file on the Fermanagh-South Tyrone episode. A much more restricted meeting of the

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Party Executive and Constituency Delegates will take place in Carrigart next Saturday and Sunday, September 19th and 20th, and it is Hume's hope that this intensive think-in will produce more positive proposals and bring the Party "back into the centre of the political ring".

3. I put it to Hume, as a personal view, that regardless of the real politik considerations which had dictated the Party's stance on the Fermanagh-South Tyrone elections, the perception in political circles beyond the SDLP was that the Party had developed a much more narrow sectarian public profile than before. Would it not behove the SDLP's interest, in pursuing the double objective of taking the political ground from the Provisionals and re-establishing a more centrist image, that the SDLP should make a serious attempt to confront Northern Protestant opposition to and fears of the SDLP strategy and objectives, in other words try to open a public dialogue with the other side of the community? Mr. Hume said that this was, of course, what the Party wished now to do but that it would always be very difficult, probably impossible, to involve the Protestant side in a debate in the absence of movement on the part of the British. Nevertheless, he had in hand the preparation of an important initiative, which he had mentioned in confidence to the Taoiseach, and which was known to very few of his Party colleagues, viz.: he has succeeded in assembling approximately ten Protestants of some standing

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who have been SDLP supporters over some time although their political position has, for the most part, not been publicly known. He has asked this group to set out the conditions which they believe people of the Protestant tradition in Northern Ireland would require for the establishment of some political arrangement which would link North and South. He hopes to make an announcement about this initiative in the near future, possibly at the end of the think-in in Carrigart. His own view is that what would be proposed would be a suggestion that the Dublin Government should propose a new Constitution for all the island (he has reservations about the idea that Dublin should unilaterally revise its Constitution, reservations that have to do with the internal political stability of the Republic).

4. I did not, although invited to do so, attend the SDLP meeting on September 13th as an observer for two reasons:

- (a) I had reservations about attending a Party meeting from which the public and the press were excluded and
- (b) I explained to the Party Leader and his colleagues that I did not wish to give the impression to the SDLP that I was the key official in our administration charged with handling the dialogue with Northern political parties or leaders. I spoke, when the meeting had ended, to a considerable number of prominent Party members including

/Mrs.

Mrs. Rodgers and Messrs. Mallon, Currie, Logue, O'Hanlon, Canavan and O'Hare as well as Hume. It seems that the meeting was very well attended and that the great majority of speakers expressed optimism about the future in contrast to previous "post mortems" about Fermanagh-South Tyrone. It was felt that the Party's "nerve" had been restored and that it was ready to take a much more dynamic posture. There is considerable awareness of the need to have full-time Party activists and there are a number of positive developments to report on this issue: Mallon proposes to retire from teaching in the very near future and to become a full-time activist (he hopes to finance his activities out of the sale of insurance policies, for which it seems he had already established a base in his own constituency); a new full-time Party secretary (likely to be Mrs. Rodgers) is to be appointed very soon; it also seems very likely that a full-time agent will be appointed in West Belfast to counter the extensive full-time apparatus of the Provisionals there.

5. Most of those I spoke to agreed with Hume's private assessment of the hunger strike issue, i.e. that it is now definitely on the wane. Mallon is less confident and says that the H Block Committee is almost certain to win a local council by-election which is coming up in Armagh. O'Hare

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felt that the issue was still very much alive in West Belfast and the view was expressed by several, including Hume, that the hunger strike issue had largely contracted as a major problem to Belfast.

6. Most of those with whom I spoke, although they had no clear ideas as to what directions were available for the SDLP to take in policy terms, were very keen that the Party should be seen to take the initiative. Mallon and Duffy, perhaps predictably, insisted that the Party's survival depended on its ability to take the ground from the Provisionals on the issue of promoting Irish unity.

7. I heard a good deal of fairly hostile criticism about Currie for his refusal to fight the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election or even the local elections in his constituency. It was also said that his interventions at the Party meeting were somewhat snide and opportunist in tone. There seemed to be a growing feeling that his political career is very much in decline. His own view, however, was that he had succeeded in re-establishing his position and that his future was for the first time for a period considerably brighter.

8. Both Hume and Currie said that they would like to have a formal Party meeting with the Taoiseach and appropriate

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Members of the Government as soon as possible and asked me to take note of their request formally. I agreed to convey it to the Taoiseach.

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M. Lillis

17th September 1981