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SDLP

During the course of my visit to Belfast on 25/26 June, I had a brief conversation with Brid Rogers, acting general secretary and Sean Farren, Chairman SDLP. Some points of interest arose.

The SDLP have been giving consideration to the forthcoming bye-election in Fermanagh/South-Tyrone. If the hunger-strike continues and if no effort is made by the British Government to resolve the dispute it is unlikely that the SDLP will contest the election. Mr. Farren made the point that the electorate of Fermanagh/South-Tyrone in voting for Bobby Sands called on the British authorities to solve the hunger-strike. If the British made no effort in this direction, the SDLP could justify not contesting the bye-election. In addition the SDLP has problems with the party's supporters in Fermanagh, who would not be prepared to split the vote in the above circumstances. The SDLP have given some consideration to the candidate they would select in the event that it was decided to contest the bye-election. It would appear that Austin Currie is not favoured by the party leadership due to his lack of support in Fermanagh. Fergus McQuillan who was elected to the Fermanagh district council and in effect displaced Tom Murray (former SDLP councillor who signed Sands nomination papers) is the man favoured by the SDLP leadership. It is obvious that the SDLP do not relish the dilemma which another bye-election presents. Mrs. Rogers felt that the rumours circulating in relation to Mr. Owen Carron's possible candidature were misleading. It was her opinion that the eighth man (Michael James Ryan) who escaped from Crumlin Road prison could be put forward. Although charged with murder, he has not yet been convicted.

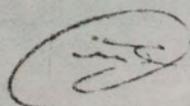
Mrs. Rogers said that the SDLP had been "overjoyed" at the outcome of the local elections. The results in Derry and Newry and Mourne where the SDLP took control of the councils had been particularly welcome. It was in these areas that the SDLP had seen tremendous efforts made by the IIP and H Block supporters to sway SDLP support. Mrs. Rogers felt that SDLP support had increased in these areas because the local people knew

first hand of the destruction and misery caused by the Provos. On the other hand the nationalist community in areas such as Fermanagh who had not experienced first hand this destruction were more inclined to vote IIP and support the hunger-strikers. Mrs. Rogers said that the IIP had done badly (3.8%) given that circumstances could not have been more propitious from their point of view. In addition the IIP were not doing their image any good by their subsequent erratic behaviour on the various Councils. The IIP had said they would not take their seats but Oliver Hughes (brother of the dead hunger-striker) had accepted the Vice-Chairmanship of Magherafelt District Council and was to all intents and purposes following SDLP policy. In other councils, IIP members sometimes take their place at meetings and subsequently walk out. This behaviour would lose them support.

In relation to H Blocks, the SDLP were hopeful that a break through would come via the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP). A solution had to be found to the hunger-strike. It had come to dominate political life in Northern Ireland and had given the Provos centre-stage for the first time in years. John Hume and Seamus Mallon have been impressing on the British in Belfast and at Westminster the urgency of seeking a solution and the need for flexibility in their approach to the hunger strike. Hugh Logue is a member of the ICJP and is personally very optimistic that a solution can be found if the British are willing to adopt a flexible approach involving minor concessions. Mrs. Rogers stressed the damage the hunger-strike was doing among younger people in the minority community. Recruitment to the Provos had increased and there was youthful excitement at being involved in a struggle in which the perception was that "the Brits were being beaten". It would take a long time to undo the damage of the hunger-strike.

Finally, I queried Mr. Farren on the SDLP's position in relation to possible new discussions with the Secretary of State. Mr. Farren said that Mr. Mallon's recent tough statement that such consultations were out of the question at present was a fair reflection of the SDLP position.

No political progress could be made at present in a purely Northern Ireland context.



Martin Burke

1 July 1981

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PSS

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