



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Sinn Fein/SDLP Talks

We understand that the Sinn Fein documents and all but one of the SDLP's documents which were exchanged during the recent talks, have now been given to the press. The SDLP, we believe, will release their final document on Monday next. Besides the written statements by both sides at the conclusion of the talks and the radio interview with both party leaders, the documents have been released without further comment. It is understood that both parties wish to avoid point scoring in order to leave the door open for possible contact at some future date. Apart from the central issue of ending of the PIRA's campaign of violence on which the SDLP asked the question "Is the method more sacred than the cause?", the following is a summary of the main points at issue between the two parties, as revealed by the documents exchanged.

Sinn Fein and the SDLP differ on two crucial points; the SDLP maintain that Britain has declared itself neutral on the issue of Northern Ireland's political status since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement where it agreed to the establishment of a united Ireland should a majority in the North clearly wish for and consent to it. Sinn Fein rejected this notion as one which flew in the face of "all the historical evidence of British domination in Ireland and is wholly contradicted by the events of the past 20 years". It argued that "to confer neutrality on the British Government would be to confer neutrality on the Turkish Government whose military invasion has partitioned the island of Cyprus".

The second point at issue stems from this premise of British neutrality; the SDLP argued that it is "axiomatic therefore that it is exclusively a matter for the Irish people of the two traditions...to agree on the terms on which they can unitedly share this island". In these circumstances, the SDLP pointed out that there was no justification for the PIRA's campaign. It argued that Sinn Fein's concentration on the illegitimacy of the unionist veto viz national self determination is "purely

academic" and failed to recognise that the agreement of the unionist people is essential in any political settlement, and that that agreement can only be secured by persuasion, not coercion. Sinn Fein, on the other hand, re-stated "the nationalist and democratic position that the unionists have no right to maintain partition and the union in opposition to a national majority". It was dismayed that the SDLP recognised and accepted the unionist veto. It shared, nonetheless, the SDLP's view "that the search for agreement on a lasting, democratic and peaceful solution must involve Northern Protestants".

The SDLP raised the issue of an all-Ireland conference convened by the Irish Government but having secured two preconditions - that the British government endorse any agreement reached and that the PIRA end its campaign of violence. Sinn Fein "agreed that a conference of all the political parties in Ireland, convened by the Dublin Government, aimed at reaching agreement on the exercise of national self-determination could make a positive contribution to an eventual, lasting, democratic and peaceful solution".

The talks ended with both sides putting forward a set of proposals.

The SDLP proposed

- 1) "concerted political action" nationally and internationally to persuade the British government to adopt as a matter of policy, a commitment to persuade unionist that their best interest lies "in a new Ireland which can accommodate their interests to their satisfaction and which has a new relationship with Britain".
- 2) "Concerted action to persuade the Unionist people to join together with us in building a new Ireland."
- 3) "In the interim concerted political effort, nationally and

internationally, to alleviate the social and economic problems which affect all our people".

Sinn Fein proposed a joint Sinn Fein/SDLP call "to the Dublin and London governments for them to consult together to seek agreement on the policy objective of Irish reunification". It further proposed "in the interim between the acceptance of a common strategy and British disengagement, [that it] and the SDLP would agree to a common platform of political activity which would safeguard the interests of the nationalist community", including such issues as extradition, prisons and discrimination.

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