

MR GEE

cc PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - m
 PS/PUS (L&B) - m
 Mr Marshall - m
 Mr Hannigan
 Mr Moriarty - m
 Mr Wyatt
 Mr Clift
 Mr Wilson - m
 Mr Gilliland

H. G. G.
Mr. Oliver
For PA on over
Political file
1/16
8/11/79

SDLP CONFERENCE: 2-4 NOVEMBER 1979

I attended the ninth annual Conference of the SDLP on the weekend of 2-4 November 1979 at the Slieve Donard Hotel, Newcastle, Co Down. Mr Masefield covered the Friday evening session. A full record of the debates will be circulated shortly and conference packs are held in Division 3(B) and 4(L).

2. The main points to come out of the Conference debates were

- a. the SDLP's absolute opposition to local government reorganisation and the devolution of more powers to district councils, coupled with a fear that the Conservative government would feel bound by its election manifesto;
- b. the SDLP's fundamental opposition to the government's socio-economic policies, particularly as regards the public expenditure cuts;
- c. the SDLP's demand for the removal of the negative guarantee and a joint commitment by both HMG and the Government of ^{the} Republic to a 'process' (Hume's new word) leading to a positive trial ^{risk} dimension - this process to be, as outlined in the SDLP's new policy document "Towards a New Ireland",

the removal of the negative guarantee, the establishment of a partnership administration in Northern Ireland and the appointment of a quadripartite standing commission to monitor progress towards Irish reunification;

d. Gerry Fitt's emphasis on "unity by the consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland" as in article 4 of the Party's constitution - a restatement of policy which won the day against the more nationalist statements of Paddy Duffy and Pascal O'Hare. Yet only a tiny minority in the party saw the removal of the negative guarantee as being in any way contradictory to the policy of unity by consent;

e. the clear indication from Gerry Fitt that the SDLP would participate in the proposed Conference but without any hope of a successful outcome. Overall, there was a sense of despair and frustration, a hope that the Government would override the Unionist Parties' blanket opposition to any form of power-sharing or political movement, and a dismay at the possibility of an elected advisory council - considered to be "not enough and no ¹⁶¹⁵trial dimension". There had to be some move down the road to ¹⁶¹⁵trial unity, even if it was just closer and more regular consultation and cooperation with the ¹⁶¹⁵trial Government. In addition, there had to be some form of devolved administration in which the minority had fair representation - there could be no return to majority rule. The problem was how to get over the Unionist veto.

f. criticism of the South for selling the SDLP down the river by softening its line on the ^{trial} dimension and by reducing its pressure on HMG to make political progress;

g. re-emphasis on the party's total commitment to the political process and to its implacable opposition to the IRA, notwithstanding its call for an international Red Cross enquiry into the H-blocks and for an independent enquiry into individual allegations of RUC ill-treatment of suspects in police custody;

3. There were no major signs of dissension or division within the party. Despite two motions down in the private session attacking Gerry Fitt's lack of emphasis on the ^{trial} dimension, Gerry Fitt won the day, even if with less of his normal ~~ambulance~~. The key points of his speech were his emphasis on unity by consent, his emphasis that the Southern government had to be involved in the political discussions on the government of Northern Ireland and his comment that "the Consultative document would have to contain something that would make it worthwhile for the SDLP to take part in the Conference". At the conference, he said, the SDLP would be looking for "something like power-sharing ^{trial} allied with positive steps towards an Irish dimension". Yet he saw little prospect of reaching agreement with the Unionists parties, even if they did participate in a Conference - the UUP, he said, were content, in the absence of any progress towards formal integration into the United Kingdom and the creation of an upper tier of local government, to continue with Direct Rule. This block against any form of political progress had to be overcome; the only way that the SDLP could see this being achieved was by the removal of the negative guarantee.

4. This last theme - the removal of the guarantee - was predominant throughout the conference and was echoed by

John Hume, Erid Rodgers, Austin Currie and Seamus Mallon (from his sick bed in Dublin). Seamus Mallon, whose presence at the conference might have underpinned the more radical voices in the SDLP, commented in his Statement issued on 2 November that the Government's current proposals were "a pitiful mouse-like nibble at the problem". A positive constructive Irish dimension was, he said, fundamental to any process of reconciliation within Ireland and no serious consideration would be given to any proposal, such as a consultative authority, which excluded it. It is significant that the tone of the statements from the Party leadership (Pitt, Hume, and Rodgers - in the Chairman's address) were far more pragmatic, though none eschewed the Irish dimension.

Hume
Hume

A E HUCKLE
Div 3(B)

5 November 1979