

PAPER TO  
1978 SDLP Conference

SDLP EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE STATEMENT ON ARDOYNE MEETING  
ON SEPTEMBER 10 AND ON CONDITIONS IN 'H' BLOCK:

The Executive Committee of the SDLP utterly condemns the disgraceful incidents which took place in Ardoyne on Sunday, September 10, 1978 and expresses its solidarity with those Party Leaders who were brutally attacked by a section of the crowd. It is ironic that this incident happened within a few weeks of the 10th anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement. Those of us who marched at that time for social justice and civil rights were abused and harassed by ultra-Loyalists under the leadership of Ian Paisley. The aim of the Paisleyites at that time was to deny us freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. It is tragic that Paisleyism has produced its mirror image in the minority community. The aim in both cases is to impose by force the will of a tiny minority upon the rest of us. The method in both cases is violence and thuggery. The leaders of this rampant fascism, which we saw in Ardoyne last week, will get the answer they deserve from the people - if they ever screw up the courage to face the people in an election.

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Much of the disturbance at the Ardoyne meeting was caused by people who professed concern about the ill-treatment of prisoners in Long Kesh. There is something dangerously irrational and cynical about people who protest about the ill-treatment of prisoners, by brutally attacking and kicking members of the SDLP at a peaceful political meeting. The Relatives Action Committee later attempted to justify the attack by alleging that the SDLP leaders refused to answer questions. If that allegation were true, it still would not justify a brutal physical attack. It is in fact a base lie. The Party representatives who attended that meeting were prevented from speaking by a continual chorus of abuse led by the members of the Relatives Action Committee. It is now well known that meetings of Provisional Sinn Fein and the Relatives Action Committee were held during the week prior to our meeting in order to co-ordinate plans to disrupt it. There is something unprincipled and dishonest about people who deliberately prevent freedom of speech, and then accuse their victims of not speaking freely.

Amid the torrent of abuse hurled at Party Leaders it was clear that some people at the meeting felt that the SDLP were not doing enough about the 'H' Block issue. Since we were prevented from answering that allegation at the time we propose to answer it now.

First, the SDLP does not accept that there is any political justification for the vicious campaign of murder being carried on by the Provisional IRA and other paramilitarities. However, the current protest

being waged by the prisoners in 'H' Block has apparently led to serious infringement of their basic human rights as prisoners and these conditions would need to be investigated. On this point it must be said that the British Government's approach to the problem has been an extremely punitive one and often tinged with vindictiveness.

The position of the Provisional IRA on this issue is hypocritical in the extreme. Having consistently tried to destroy the political process in Northern Ireland they now themselves seek political status for some of their members. Equally ironical is the fact that they, having flouted public opinion for almost eight years now, demand the support of public opinion in what is essentially a propaganda call.

Nor do they appear to want the issue of 'H' Block solved. In their present state of military and political bankruptcy it is the only issue on which they can hope to arouse a certain amount of public sympathy. They are therefore prepared to sacrifice the health of their members in prison, and the peace of mind of their relatives, in order to keep the issue alive.

It is time the public were made aware of the following facts. Firstly, the SDLP have been concerned about the prison situation from the beginning, from a purely humanitarian point of view. Our public representatives have worked hard to help those prisoners and their families who have approached us for help. However, it

ought to be recognised that the Provisionals have ordered members and their relatives to have no contact with the SDLP and therefore those we do help are unable to acknowledge it publicly. Secondly, the Provisionals have ordered their members in Long Kesh not to ask for or accept visits from SDLP public representatives. Therefore, SDLP representatives are unable to visit the prison regularly and have no first-hand information about conditions.

Two examples will illustrate these points. The last time an all-party delegation visited Long Kesh to assess conditions there, following the major fires in the complex, the Provisional prisoners met and spoke to all the delegations with the exception of the SDLP delegation headed by Michael Canavan. In April last a group of families approached John Hume to help them to do something for their families in 'H' Block. He arranged a meeting with a senior official of the Northern Ireland Office for 12 o'clock noon on a Saturday. Late on the Friday night John Hume got a phone call from a member of one of the families concerned to say that no one was coming because they had been ordered by the Provos to stay away.

There are numerous other examples of positive offers of help from the SDLP being rejected out of hand.

Surely there is something false and deceitful about people who, on the one hand, accuse the SDLP of doing nothing, and on the other hand take positive steps to prevent them doing anything. Despite this we will

continue to press the British Government to seek for a way in which humanitarian considerations will be considered as a priority.

The key to the situation in the 'H' Block is the operation of the Emergency Provisions Act. There is serious public disquiet about the legal procedures established by that Act, and particularly about the interrogation methods sanctioned by it. The Government cannot maintain such extraordinary and repressive legislation on the one hand, and yet maintain on the other hand that the present troubles are simply an escalation of criminality. While that contradictory attitude is maintained by the Government, the status of prisoners convicted under the Act will continue to give rise to controversy. We have recently called publicly for the dismantling of the Emergency Provisions Act. We now repeat that call.

It remains true, however, that a full solution of the present security situation is only possible within the context of a political solution. It is the present political uncertainty which is at the root of civil disorder. The Government cannot go on relying on repressive security measures to cope with the problem of violence; it must be tackled at the source by a vigorous political initiative aimed at setting up agreed institutions of government in Ireland. That demand would be greatly strengthened if the Provisional IRA and other paramilitaries were to call off their campaign. It

is abundantly clear that there is no solution to the Northern Ireland problem that can be brought about by force.