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Mr Bourn
Mr Merifield
Mr Burns
Mr Carvill
Mr Abbott
Mr Reeve
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Mr Bickham

(1) Mr Beckett
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SDLP ATTITUDE TO SINN FEIN

Last night's decision by two SDLP councillors to withdraw from a meeting between Dr Boyson and the Belfast City Council Gas Committee provides an interesting foretaste of the sort of problems which are likely to arise with more frequency when Sinn Fein increase their representation at district council level after next May's local elections.

2. Pascal O'Hare and Owen Allen of the SDLP walked out of the meeting after Dr Boyson had refused to allow Sinn Fein's Gas Committee members to attend. (John McNulty of People's Democracy also withdrew). Speaking after the meeting, Mr O'Hare said that whatever Sinn Fein's policy, their councillors had been duly elected and were therefore entitled to be included in the Committee's delegation. He added that he would never again meet with a 'British Minister'.

3. Dr Boyson was congratulated by the DUP's Sammy Wilson; whilst Will Glendenning of Alliance wondered whether the SDLP men would have taken the same line if the meeting had taken place in the Republic of Ireland with Mr Spring. Interviewed on BBC, the SDLP Chairman, Sean Farren, denied that his party was aligning itself with Sinn Fein and added that the SDLP would work with them at 'district council level only'.

4. As well as demonstrating the difficulties which arise from Sinn Fein's involvement in local government, this incident highlights the current dispute and absence of any clear policy within the SDLP over

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their handling of contacts with Sinn Fein. Pascal O'Hare, like his North Belfast colleague Brian Feeney, is perfectly happy to work alongside Sinn Fein representatives. He believes that, unless the SDLP does so, there is the danger of weakening the nationalist voice at district council level and handing over control to unionists. Others argue that the SDLP must take a clear stand against Sinn Fein and refuse to deal with men who support the use of violence. Mr Farren's ambiguous and inconsistent statement reflects these differences of approach. We have been told by John Hume and Denis Haughey that the party leadership, and not men like Brian Feeney, will determine policy as regards Sinn Fein but they seem in no hurry to make their position clear. This is probably an issue which Mr Hume is leaving until after the forthcoming summit or perhaps until the party conference in January. It is to be hoped that the SDLP will soon reach an agreed line and that Mr Hume will be able to impose his views on the rest of the party.



S G HEWITT

Political Affairs Division

6 November 1984

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