

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

Reference Code: 2002/8/484

Title: Note by E Gallagher, Department of Foreign Affairs, reporting meetings with members of the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] in Northern Ireland, discussing mainly the attitude of the British Labour Party to the Northern Ireland situation and the political strategy of the SDLP

Creation Date(s): 15 November, 1971

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 3 pages

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Access Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

File 16/11
3.4.80m

1 Rann C.S.

SECRET

During the past weekend I met Mr. Gerry Fitt for a lengthy conversation at his home, talked briefly on the telephone in Belfast with Mr. Paddy Devlin, visited Mr. Austin Currie and Mr. John Hume and had long conversations with each. The main purpose of the exercise was to discover what had happened in the conference with Mr. James Callaghan last week and what the current views of SDLP members were on a number of subjects.

It appears that Mr. Callaghan took a back seat to Mr. Anthony Wedgewood Benn at the conference between the Labour Parties. I am told that he seemed subdued. Mr. Benn gave the impression that he agreed that Stormont should be suspended. Mr. Callaghan did not demur but did not commit himself either. The Northern Ireland Labour Party and the Irish Labour Party representatives took little part in the conversations which were mainly between the SDLP people present and the British Labour Party group. There is a conflict between Mr. Fitt's description of Mr. Michael O'Leary's remarks, which were leaked to the Irish Times of last Friday, and Mr. Currie's description. Mr. Fitt seemed intent on suggesting that Mr. O'Leary had not urged the SDLP to come to the conference table now while Mr. Devlin and Mr. Currie were quite definite that Mr. O'Leary had made remarks to that effect about which they were extremely irritated. I am satisfied that the Irish Times article was [REDACTED] that the front page item in yesterday's Sunday Press on SDLP attitudes to the Irish Labour Party [REDACTED]

It was agreed all round that the Callaghan visit had been over-shadowed by the announcement of the Wilson visit. This may have contributed to Mr. Callaghan's subdued participation.

The story in the Financial Times of last Saturday by Mr. John Graham resulted from an interview he had with Mr. Gerry Fitt. In essence the Fitt plan, which in fact is an old one and not a new dramatic initiative, runs as follows:

- 1) Stormont should be suspended
- 2) it should be replaced by a Commission
(the SDLP seemed to prefer a non-political Commission)
- 3) a conference should then be held
(Hume wants a quadripartite conference;
I am not sure what kind of conference
Fitt wants).

This begs the question of ending internment. Fitt says that the suspension of Stormont creates a completely new political situation, thus hinting at readiness to engage in conference if Stormont goes even if internment does not also go even in the immediate.

There certainly is no question about the SDLP engaging in conversations in the existing situation. Fitt mentioned the possibility of a special court consisting of two ~~two~~ former Lords Chancellor and "a European socialist". Hume takes the view that getting rid of Stormont is the main objective of policy at present and that internment is an issue which can bring this about.

/..

On the whole, therefore, one can begin to perceive a gradual shift in the SDLP target i.e. to bring down Stormont as a preliminary to anything else.

Hume disclosed to me that the SDLP had a meeting last week at which they agreed on their objective at a future conference. Quite simply it is to bring about Irish unity. I asked him to consider his tactics on this - for example it might be preferable to let the conference continue for a time to talk about radical reform structures in the North plus a connection with Dublin and when, as is reasonably certain, the Unionist conferees prove intransigent about this the ultimate question could be thrown in.

On the question of the Government's deciding whether to have recourse to the European Commission on Human Rights Fitt told me that he has prepared the ground at Westminster on this. I am not sure of the extent to which he might have done this. Currie and Hume both hope that the Government will go immediately after publication of the Compton Report. Among other points they made the important one that the minority community are again beginning to question the Government's interest in them. Going to Strasbourg would alleviate this.

The political leadership is not seriously concerned about the effects of the implementation of recent Stormont statutes in regard to with-holding rents from social welfare benefits etc. They are instructing solicitors to take cases to court on constitutional grounds but even if this is ineffective the with-holding of rents is likely to make the minority all the more determined to resist Stormont in other ways.

There is still some disagreement about whether the Provisional IRA can be beaten by the British Army. Most opinion holds that this is not possible. Fitt and Devlin have a contrary opinion. It is obvious, however, that sizeable areas of the North around the border as well as ghettos in Belfast and Derry and some towns like Coalisland are virtually outside the control of the security forces. It is also obvious that the minority have a very determined confidence that they will not be ruled again by a Unionist Government. This feeling extends into the Catholic middle-class. An illustration is a recent meeting in Derry and another recent meeting in Dungannon in which several hundred people of that class decided to with-hold their ~~rents~~ ^{rates}. There is another move afoot to bring out most of the remaining Catholics in public office. A meeting was held on this subject yesterday but it is intended not to disclose the results until an opportune moment and to carry out the with-holding of services simultaneously by as many people as possible. There are some who will not with-hold their services for a variety of reasons. There is even a move afoot to persuade Maurice Hayes to resign as Chairman of the Community Relations Commission. All these are indicators that Mr. Faulkner's credibility has completely disappeared. If he is to remain in office he can only do so supported by guns.

The collection of documentary evidence of torture, brutality etc. is now proceeding fairly well especially in Belfast. The same unfortunately is not true of Derry where I find it very difficult to organise this matter. Another effort, however, is being made today by Mr. Hume and Mr. Michael Canavan and there may be results before the end of the week.

Other items of interest are:

-3-

(i) one of the men who got 14 days for possession of arms in Dundalk last week [REDACTED]

New Ulster Movement

(ii) the NUM will produce a new document, probably this week, which would probably also recommend the replacement of Stormont by a dual administration;

(iii) [REDACTED]

AS.
15/11