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Title: Report in the Irish Times of a speech given to the annual conference of the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] in Dungiven by the party leader, Gerry Fitt MP, in which he discussed the downfall of the Unionist Party, the socialism of the SDLP, the party's future efforts to attract working-class supporters from across the sectarian divide, the question of Irish unity, talks with the British Secretary of State, William Whitelaw, and forthcoming local elections.

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Report in the Irish Times of 27th November 1972 of speech given to the Annual Conference of the SDLP in Dungiven by the Party Leader, Mr. Gerry Fitt, M.P.

Mr. Fitt said that to the question, what had been achieved by the SDLP since its last conference, he could reply: "The SDLP has achieved the downfall of the Unionist Party. Never again in Northern Ireland will people, either Protestant or Catholic, be inflicted with such an oppressive regime. Unionism as we have known it in our lifetime has gone for ever".

Mr. Fitt said that with the downfall of Unionism, two terms had also disappeared from the North. "These are the terms minority and majority which were deliberately created by the Unionist Party to keep the working-class people divided. As a socialist, never again will I use these terms, but I will simply use the term 'the people of this country'".

He said that in spite of all the predictions that the SDLP would not stick together, and in spite of all the comment that it was a party of individuals, it had stuck together as a party. "Indeed I would say we have demonstrated ourselves as the most responsible political Opposition ever elected by the Northern Ireland people. And we are a socialist party. We don't have to describe ourselves as a radical socialist party because if you are a socialist you don't need any other adjective to describe yourself or your party".

Mr. Fitt said that there was a major task facing the party in this regard. "What we must seek to do now is to put this party on the political map as an uncompromising socialist party", he declared.

"We are not a party of any minority and it has not been our fault that we have not been able to cross the sectarian divide. For, at a time when the working-class population in Northern Ireland should have been thinking of their future in this country, we had the emergence of the fascist Ulster Defence Association and Loyalist Association of Workers. These are people who in any normal society would have been giving their allegiance to a socialist party such as ours and it is certainly not our fault that they didn't give their allegiance to the SDLP. But there can be no doubt, and I would like every member of this party and every person in Northern Ireland and further afield to be assured of this, that we will finally succeed in creating in Ireland what we have never had before - a truly socialist party. Initially it will be for these six sundered counties, but after that it will be for the whole of this country".

It was not enough for the party to pass resolutions and leave it at that. "We must translate our resolutions into positive actions", he said. "We must not be a party that reacts to events that have been brought about by our political opponents. From this day forward, we make the events happen. From now on we don't wait to see how the remains of the Unionist Party act. From now on we will do what we will do and we will see how the others react".

Mr. Fitt said he believed that although the party has shown its awareness, and although it had shown itself to be a party of compassion the one great disappointment had been that it had not been able to breach the great sectarian divide in the North. This was another part of the task before them, he said, and it would not be easy to bring those working-class elements, who had formerly been political opponents of the SDLP, into the SDLP movement.

He said that he believed that the proposed plebiscite on the Border was divisive, harmful and disastrous because it would force people into making decisions which could only divide them against themselves.

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He wanted to make it clear on the question of Irish unity that he didn't want overnight transition into the Irish Republic. "I believe that there are many things in the Constitution of the Irish Republic which are not only offensive to the Protestant majority in the North, but which are offensive to me as a socialist. I am a nationalist because I am a socialist and as a socialist I believe that unity must be brought about by consent, by consent of the ordinary working-class people who must be brought to realise the way they have been betrayed in the past and the need they have for each other in the future. That is our task".

Referring to the question of talks with the British Secretary of State for the North, Mr. Whitelaw, Mr. Fitt said that over the past year the party had been in a rather invidious position. "We have had many meetings with Mr. Whitelaw since direct rule, when we have discussed internment and other matters affecting our constituents. But let me say here, even if I did not have a single supporter in this hall, if I am opposed to special courts and detention in Northern Ireland, which I am most strongly, then I am just as opposed to the same thing in the Republic of Ireland".

Mr. Fitt was loudly applauded for this statement. He went on to say that the attitude of the SDLP must be taken into consideration now.

"If we espouse a united Ireland let us put our cards on the table. Before any White Paper is issued the views of this party must be heard. We were the people who demanded quadripartite talks and yet we have seen tripartite talks take place while our voice has been silenced. Now is the time for the SDLP to make its voice heard in any talks that take place".

If the British Government believed that it could issue a "take it or leave it", White Paper it was wrong, he said, and he believed it would be a recipe for further communal trouble in Northern Ireland. Nor did he believe that the British Government could produce a White Paper on the "charade of Darlington".

Mr. Fitt said that after the plebiscite there would be the local government elections in which, he believed, the SDLP should not just field candidates in constituencies where it had fielded candidates before. "We must be positive", he said, "and I believe that we must field candidates throughout the constituencies in Northern Ireland because it is only by doing this that we can give an opportunity to that working-class population which has formerly been opposed to us to say whether or not they reject or accept our proposals".