

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

Reference Code: 2004/21/670

Title: Copy report by Seán Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs, reporting the proceedings of a meeting of the Social Democratic and Labour Party held to discuss participation in the tripartite conference, and private conversations with Paddy Devlin, John Hume and Gerry Fitt.

Creation Date(s): 18 November, 1973

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.

Mr Mally

1. I telephoned Paddy Devlin from Ballybay on 17 November a.m. and he told me that no document had yet been received from the British. It was, however, too late to call-off their meeting. I told him that I had a message for him about our attitude to the participants in the tripartite conference and he invited me to come to Toome. All 19 members of the Assembly Party were there - though Hume and Currie arrived, separately, only towards the end of the meeting - as were the non-Assembly members of the Party's Executive. Before the meeting started, I conveyed to Fitt and Devlin our view that Paisley and the other leaders who opposed power-sharing should not be invited to the tripartite conference. The formal meeting lasted about an hour and was followed by a two hour informal discussion over a meal at which I was present.

2. At the meeting, I understand that Fitt gave a broad outline of the proposals which were "in the air" but said that since no written proposals had yet been made there was nothing on which the negotiators could make recommendations which would form the basis for a Party decision. The mood during the meal afterwards was one of some tension. The backbenchers seemed to feel that the outline of the proposals which Fitt had given was sufficient at least to enable the Party to take decisions on the scope of the brief which the negotiators would have for the forthcoming meetings but this feeling was firmly squashed by the negotiators who said that they would have no alternative but to say to Whitelaw if and when he gave them a document that they needed to consult the Party before giving any decision. The reasonableness of this argument and the eloquence with which it was expressed tended to mute the expression of the view held privately by many of the backbenchers that they were being left very much out of it all and that they would eventually be presented with proposals for rubber-stamping rather than for genuine discussion. The Newry-Armagh-Tyrone representatives appear to feel strongest on internment and in particular are anxious that nothing should be accepted without "major concessions" on that issue. Within the

negotiating team only Devlin and to a lesser extent Ivan Cooper appear to have the same strength of feeling and Hume and Currie's views seem to be not too far removed from those of Fitt's as expressed in my report of 17 November.

3. Before leaving Toome, I had a brief private conversation with Hume. He was somewhat more pessimistic than he has been in recent weeks about the prospects of getting an acceptable package. He himself had had a secret direct approach from the British about which Department he might head if things worked out and it was suggested to him that his choice should be between Finance and Commerce. Hume said that he told the British to stuff their offer and make whatever proposals they had to make through the normal channels. He added to me that the fact that the SDLP were not being offered both Departments was a bad sign because his understanding of the Party's position was that if they accepted the 6-4-1 formula, the four portfolios would all be substantial ones. I probed him once again on his attitude to the Finance post and he is still unenthusiastic about accepting it. He says that despite all the points made to him by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and others in Dublin and elsewhere about the Finance portfolio, he remains unconvinced of its importance and in particular he does not see how an SDLP Head of Finance could be seen by the minority community as a man who could deliver something to them.

4. I drove Gerry Fitt back to Belfast from Toome after the meeting. He is still as optimistic as ever though he thinks it is not going to be easy to satisfy some of the backbenchers. Those of them who will not get jobs - and he seemed to suggest in particular Paddy O'Hanlon and Ivan Cooper - may be inclined to become the "conscience of the Party", especially on internment, and make it difficult for the SDLP to sell the package to the minority community generally. In regard to his own position, he had, on reflection, decided that the post of Deputy Chief Executive - although he did not say so, it had clearly been offered to him already - would be meaningless if it did not have, in addition, a specific portfolio and he had been assured by the British that his wishes on this point could probably

be met. He did not give me any indication of what four portfolios would be assigned to his Party beyond saying that Devlin would probably get a social ministry. He said he had no doubt that some of the others in his Party who would be offered posts would not be completely satisfied but they would have to learn, now that they were real politicians and not street politicians, the art of compromise.

Seán Donlon

18 November, 1973.