

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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CONFIDENTIAL

Mr McCarty  
Mr Hinely (on return)

Aspects of Northern Ireland Situation

5 November 1976

To see W.  
L.H.K.

I know all  
T. H. 9/11/76  
To see please  
8/11

SDLP 12. 11. 76

1. Co-ordinated political activity by the former Convention members is much less than it has been at any time in recent years. Two of the seventeen, Messrs. News (Armagh) and McCluskey (South Antrim), have privately made it clear that they have dropped out of politics and the twice monthly meetings of the other fifteen seem to be poorly attended and generally disorganised. Individual representatives are taking public positions on current issues without consultation with colleagues and the personality clashes within the party are more frequent and obvious than usual. Despite all of this, the air of gloom and depression which was so obvious a few months ago seems to have lifted somewhat, not least because most of those who were formerly devoting their full attention to politics have now settled back to non-political employment and are, by and large, confining their political activities to a few evenings and odd weekends. Messrs. Feely, Mallon and O'Donoghue have returned to teaching. Paddy Devlin is almost full-time on trade union activities and Hugh Logue has gone back to the New University of Ulster to complete a course for an economics degree. Austin Currie's various consultancy assignments do not seem to be very demanding but he is much more settled than he had been for some considerable time and is talking of standing at the district council elections next May - a local level of political activity in which he had previously shown no interest.

2. The party's sixth annual conference is to take place in Newcastle, Co. Down on 3-5 December and the closing date for the submission of resolutions has now passed. About 150 have been received - but only about half of the registered 100 (approx.) branches submitted resolutions. This is, however, an improvement on previous years and the party's General Secretary, Dan McAreavy, is satisfied that most of the branches which have not submitted resolutions are in fact active but simply lack efficient correspondent secretaries. From my recent contact with the SDLP,



especially in Armagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh and Derry, I am inclined to accept this and indeed one of the features of the SDLP's development in the last year has been the degree to which its branches are active, not just politically, but also in providing a centre for social/political activity in many minority areas. The Derry branches, for instance, have bought a big house which is currently being converted into a club/conference centre and branches in a number of rural areas have become involved in running social clubs - frequently the only relatively safe local amenity in areas where public houses, open as they are to all-comers, have become too risky. This development has strengthened the party's structure and organisation and the sixth conference will undoubtedly reflect the improvement. If the resolutions - which I had an opportunity to flick through briefly but not to examine in detail - are an accurate guide to what the branches are concerned about, local government, employment and security would seem to be the main issues. The local government interest is obviously directly related to the elections scheduled for next May. What is of interest about the resolutions on security, and also reflected in the absence of resolutions asking for the British to withdraw, is that there is no evidence at this stage of support from the branches for an SDLP policy based on a British declaration of intent. One mid-Ulster representative told me that four branches which he had approached for support for a resolution calling for a declaration of intent had turned him down and Paddy Duffy of Dungannon, long an advocate of negotiated independence for Northern Ireland, has found only lukewarm support among his branches for a policy paper on independence which he has prepared as the basis for a discussion at the Conference.

3. It is likely, though not yet certain, that Northern Ireland independence will be discussed in full at this Conference and whatever about the tone of the resolutions from the branches, the possibility cannot be excluded of public demands from some prominent SDLP representatives for a shift away from the policy based on partnership between the communities in Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. These demands are unlikely to appeal widely to the delegates, many of whom would now acknowledge a far greater threat to their safety from local para-military groups than they ever did from the British security forces. The Conference should therefore, in the short term at least, be a moderating influence on party



policy but it should also be mentioned that in all recent contacts with former Convention members, some degree of disillusionment with the traditional policy has come through. Almost all of them have now had their attention drawn to the House of Commons PQ of 28 October about which we had such difficulty with the British and, without always being explicit, it has been made clear that it was our efforts which led to the satisfactory nature of the reply. (The Northern Ireland Office, which has in recent weeks clearly been making efforts to renew their contact with the SDLP, had also privately drawn attention to the reply - without, of course, giving us any credit!) The reply seemed to encourage Fitt, Currie and Devlin but a number of others, notably Michael Canavan (Derry), Paddy Duffy and Seamus Mallon took the view that if that was all the British were able to offer as a statement of policy at this stage, they (the British) might as well get out.

4. The only recent inter-party contact in which the SDLP has been involved was their talks with Craig on 3 November. Currie and Logue represented the SDLP and afterwards described the talks as friendly but useless. They do not regard Craig as being a representative of any significant element of loyalist opinion and they agreed to "talk to him about talks" only because of their friendly feelings for a supporter of the principle of a coalition government which would involve the SDLP. The SDLP position on talks with any party at this stage is that they see no point in entering into such talks until the British Government clarifies its policy as demanded by the SDLP last September.

John Whale's article of 31 October 1976

5. A copy of the article is attached for convenience. John Leahy of the NIO, whom I met in Belfast on 2 November, was at pains to point out that neither his office nor any British Minister involved in Northern Ireland policy - and he claimed to have checked this out - had recently spoken to John Whale. Neither, incidentally, did Whale talk to any of his SDLP contacts or, as far as I can trace, to anyone in Dublin. Some of the SDLP leaders first became aware of the article when they were telephoned by Leahy to say that it was not inspired. As against that, a BBC producer told the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs on 5 November that the NIO were interested in



stimulating a public discussion of the points raised by Whale and an RTE editor claims that the BBC have NIO documents, mainly of an economic nature, outlining a five year programme of British withdrawal leading to Northern Ireland independence. The same source claims that the Whale article was in fact inspired and that the inspiration was from a British official source to Harold Evans, editor of the Sunday Times. Chris Ryder of the Sunday Times, whom I have not always found reliable, told me that he had a major piece on the IRA and housing in Belfast ready for the issue of 31 October but that it was unexpectedly dropped at the last minute to make way for the "Harry Evans piece".

6. Whatever about the origins of the Whale article, it is clear that Northern Ireland independence will become the major topic of political discussion in Northern Ireland over the next few weeks. The New Ireland Movement is bringing out a pamphlet on the subject, BBC are doing a programme on it, David Rowlands of QUB is organising a weekend seminar on the subject at Corrymeela and John Simpson, the QUB economist whose previous paper advocating independence may well be or form the basis for the "NIO documents" referred to by my RTE contact, has apparently updated and will shortly publish a revised version of his paper. This will be the third time since 1972 that independence has become the major local topic for discussion and it will be interesting to see if it gains any more popular support on this occasion than it did before.

#### Peace Movement


7. Very little is going well in local terms for the Peace Movement. Paddy Devlin's attack on its leaders - he is supported in this only by Ivan Cooper and all other prominent SDLP figures have publicly dissociated themselves from his attack - was to a considerable extent a reflection of the private view of many in west Belfast, including a majority of those of the staff of St. Joseph's Training College in Andersonstown with whom I had tea on 3 November. With the money flowing in, especially from abroad, the Peace Movement has opened offices in Belfast and Derry and is shortly to do so in Strabane and Newry. But these offices have in effect become constituency clinics for Catholics, already catered for not only by the political parties but also by the several community groups



● already financially supported by the Northern Ireland authorities and by British foundations. The only groups having serious difficulties raising money to finance their local activities are the political parties and this is naturally a source of considerable irritation, especially with local elections due shortly. The Peace Movement has also managed to attract to its leadership ranks many people whose own past political or community activities have not been a notable success (Peter McLachlan, Tom Conaty and Sadie Patterson, to mention but a few) and, in addition, the personality of Ciaran MacKeown and the deliberate avoidance of an organisational structure or constitution - the "leaders" hold regular "consultative conferences" with anyone who cares to turn up - have combined to strangle the initial enthusiasm of the people from the areas which have most to contribute to the work for peace.

#### Security Situation

8. Though a number of people have recently mentioned renewed problems arising out of Army misbehaviour, I was not given any evidence of this in my travels in Belfast, Armagh and Tyrone on 2-4 November and the more reliable contacts felt that the Army's current activities were more or less what one would expect given the increase in IRA violence going back to August. The main worry in many minority areas, especially outside Belfast, is the increasing use being made of the UDR and RUC Reserve at a time when there is continuing evidence emerging in the courts and elsewhere that these organisations have an unacceptable high number of rotten apples. (The NIO acknowledges that about 20% of the UDR were formerly in the B-Specials.) The impact of the IRA campaign in Belfast is very visible and the careful selection of targets and mounting of operations there has brought the campaign to the point where the NIO estimate damage to property alone at about £2-2½ millions a week in the past three months. Austin Currie noted the beginnings of a shift in the campaign once more into rural areas and instanced attacks on UDR and RUC Reserve men and the burning of twelve buses in Dungannon in the previous week. It would not surprise him to see an attempt to bring the campaign back to the border in a major way over the winter. (I have mentioned this to Department of Justice.)

  
Seán Donlon  
6 November 1976

c.c. PSM  
PSS  
Mr. D. Nally (D/Taoiseach)  
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Anglo-Irish Sections