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KNOW WHERE YOU STAND

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT
ELECTION MANIFESTO

May 1977

SDLP Local Government Elections

KNOW WHERE YOU STAND

MANIFESTO MAY 1977

Introduction

The SDLP is entering District Council elections with Candidates from all over Northern Ireland. They are seeking increased support in almost all of the twenty-six District Council areas. We have accepted the challenge presented by these District elections to offer our candidates and our policies to as wide a section of the electorate as possible.

The 1973 Local Government elections were the first province-wide elections to be contested by the SDLP. We succeeded in electing 83 Councillors out of a total of 524. It was the first time that a Party in our political tradition offered a united team of candidates fighting on the same policies in every corner of Northern Ireland.

Building on that initial success we have increased our share of the vote in the Assembly elections, two General Elections and the Convention elections. With this background of electoral success we are confident that we shall considerably increase our total of 83 Councillors in this election.

Politics rather than violence

Politics, as we all know can be full of frustration. As in other fields of human activity, "direct action" on occasions seems to promise a speedier resolution of problems than does negotiation and conciliation. Our experiences during the last seven years have given the answer to that proposition. The people of Northern Ireland have now endured the longest period of political violence that Ireland has suffered in the twentieth century. Our problems are no nearer solution now than when the violence began-indeed the major political effect of the violence has been to deepen the divisions in our community. We assert, as we have always done, that political methods are the only way forward. The ballot box is the alternative to the gun, conciliation the only alternative to conflict, negotiation the only alternative to confrontation. However slow and laborious, however frustrating on occasion, there is no rational alternative.

Abstentionism

Those who seek to effect change through violence hold the political process in contempt. It follows that they advocate that people should not vote and, indeed, intimidate them from voting. They also urge that those elected should not take their seats.

We may be pardoned for suspecting that it is not principle alone which keeps such people from the electoral process. They well know that if they had put up candidates in any of the elections in recent years the lack of support for violent methods would be made painfully obvious and they would have been humiliatingly defeated. Abstentionism is the weapon of those who are afraid to put their case before the people.

Abstention, in this election, is more likely to be caused by apathy than by support for violence. People's enthusiasm for elections is understandably diminished because of the number of elections in recent years and the apparent lack of political progress.

Nevertheless, non-voting for these reasons will be claimed by the men of violence as support for their campaign. We therefore call on the electorate to show their rejection of violence by voting in this election.

Some Councillors, elected in 1973, refused to take their seats and hurled vituperation at SDLP for attending the Councils. We are glad to note that they have since implicitly acknowledged the correctness of SDLP policy and have taken their seats though they have not taken back any of their words of abuse.

Non-voting also makes it easy for the old Unionist establishment to reassert itself and even accentuate the old familiar discriminatory practices. Let us together have none of it.

Partnership

Local Government elections ought to be about local issues. Unfortunately, in the political vacuum which currently exists in Northern Ireland, it is inevitable that rather wider and more basic issues, better suited to an election for a legislative assembly, will intrude. We feel it necessary, therefore, to state briefly the general principles which underly our approach to the Northern Ireland problem.

We reiterate our policy of partnership within the North and between North and South. All other proposed solutions involve the domination of one tradition over the other, a domination that, in the final analysis, can only be maintained by violence. Rejection of violence has its logical outcome in acceptance of partnership. Rejection of partnership implies the establishment of the domination of one tradition over the other and acceptance, perhaps unconscious, of the possibility of violence to maintain this domination.

Partnership in Local Government

Partnership, if it is to be meaningful, should permeate all levels of government and administration in Northern Ireland. It is, obviously, highly relevant to the local government situation. Partnership, in Local Government, means that both main traditions should participate in the decision making process on Councils and their committees and should be given a fair share of appointments to all those committees of Councils which formulate and execute policy. It follows that SDLP supports the greatest possible participation in Local Government by every citizen. Government must be seen to be responsive to the needs of the individual, irrespective of his political allegiance, class or creed.

Members of Councils should be given the facilities to carry out their functions properly. Meetings should be held in the evenings so that no one may be excluded from consideration as a candidate for a Council simply because of economic reasons. Meetings should be open to the maximum number of the general public and the Press should be provided with facilities to encourage wide coverage.

There is an Irish Dimension to partnership in local Government. Meetings between local authorities adjacent to the border to discuss the problems of the area and to promote practical co-operation on matters of common interest have been greatly encouraging. Another example of cross-border co-operation was the recent exchange visits between Belfast and Dublin Councillors. Such co-operation can only be to mutual advantage and SDLP will continue to promote and expand such activities.

Fair play for all

The current troubles in Northern Ireland initially began out of discrimination and gerrymandering at local government level. Removal of

major functions from District Councils has reduced discrimination and the introduction of proportional representation has reduced the possibility of gerrymander. Yet instances of both still occur, as, for example, in Craigavon. SDLP is pledged to eradicate these abuses and to ensure, whether as a majority or a minority on a Council, fair play for all.

Powers and Functions of District Councils

SDLP recognises that the suspension of Stormont and then of the Assembly removed the coping stone of the Local Government system before it had ever been given a chance to function properly. It has not been given an opportunity to prove itself. What is necessary is that the coping stone be replaced. SDLP policy, therefore, is to create partnership institutions at Central Government level and to operate the present Local Government system.

This Party is implacably opposed to the return of major functions to Local Authorities in the present political situation. There are many reasons for this determination, not the least being our experience of the way in which many authorities abused these powers in the past and based on our observation of their abuse of their present limited powers, are confident that, given the opportunity, they would do so again.

For the same reason SDLP opposes proposals to make Area Boards purely elective institutions. This would simply give powers back to the same politicians who had abused them in a discriminatory fashion in the past.

We recognise the inadequacy of our present Local Government institutions in a direct rule situation. Those who bewail the situation most loudly are those who have done most to bring it about by bringing down the Executive and Assembly and by supporting an unrealistic Convention Report. The solution is to create in Northern Ireland, as quickly as possible, Parliamentary and Governmental institutions which embody the principles of partnership.

A Strong Team

The absence of a local parliament has meant that Councillors are our only elected representatives apart from the Party Leader, Gerry Fitt at Westminster. It has also thrown a great burden of representation on to their shoulders, a burden which they have accepted and in which they are working diligently in fields beyond their true executive function. The increased importance and status of the District Councillor makes it important that we increase the number of our Councillors so that we can improve the quality of our service to the public. For this reason we call for maximum support on May 18th.

There is another reason why it is important that a strong team of SDLP Councillors be returned. SDLP leads the fight against discriminatory practices and, particularly, against the return of functions to

District Councils. These must be resisted at two levels-within the Councils and in Northern Ireland as a whole. Resistance within the Councils is best achieved by an united team of Councillors and at a political level in Northern Ireland as a whole by a political party such as SDLP which can offer a co-ordinated and cohesive strategy and policy. Independents, however personally admirable many of them are, and political splinter groups, cannot offer a co-ordinated strategy on Councils and, certainly not over the whole of Northern Ireland. A vote for such people diffuses and weakens the resistance to the return of functions. We therefore appeal to voters not to waste their votes in this fashion, but to return a strong team of SDLP Councillors.

The Local Issues

The local issues in this election will vary from place to place and will be highlighted and identified by our local District Council candidates in their local manifestoes. The matters upon which local District Councils have influence, either by executive action or by their consultative role is very wide and varied. Nevertheless, the basic policies of the SDLP can be applied to nearly every aspect of life. The SDLP has well defined and articulated policies to cover the whole range of human endeavour. It would be the earnest intention of our Council candidates to seek the implementation of SDLP policy in all its aspects in their work as District Councillors. These policies cover many fields:-

PLANNING

(1) Implementation of an adequate review of area plans where these exist or the provision of area plans where they do not exist. It must be emphasised that this should be carried out by properly qualified and experienced personnel, which is not always at the disposal of the divisional planning offices.

(2) Controlled relaxation of rural planning policy giving planning permission, particularly to those native to the rural district, socially required in the rural district and those having grave personal reasons for wishing to build in the rural area.

(3) Definition of area, clearly indicated, for private residential development.

(4) The provision of adequate infra-structure i.e. water, roads and sewerage, to enable development, public or private, domestic, commercial or industrial, to take place.

HOUSING

(1) Adequate new house building programmes-locally identified. This requires early identification and acquisition of sites and early clearance of planning permission to ensure a continuous forward flow of house output.

(2) Sale, where appropriate, of public housing to tenants-but not at the expense of the overall stock of the publically owned houses which must remain adequate to house public sector demand.

- (3) Provision of fully serviced sites for individual private building, at reasonable cost.
- (4) Greater flexibility in the provision of home loans with particular reference to extending the scope of the Housing Executive loans.
- (5) The provision of adequate open space facility in housing estates.
- (6) Programmes for local environmental protection, preservation of natural recreational resources by the Department of Agriculture, Department of Environment, National Trust etc.

EMPLOYMENT

- (1) Provision of additional local employment, particularly those arising from local enterprise or local resources.
- (2) Training and retraining for employment to cater for local demands and skills.
- (3) Encouragement of co-operative movement in
 - (a) industrial development;
 - (b) housing;
 - (c) community care.
- (4) Where appropriate, substantially increased expenditure on tourist development, with special reference to hotels, transport system and publicity.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

- 1 Preservation of existing hospitals and the expansion of hospital care and humanisation of services.
2. Provision of old peoples' homes.
- 3 Review to improve the quantity and the quality of social services being provided.
4. Increase in provision of public health clinics.
5. Greater provision and care for the handicapped and mentally under-developed.
6. Combat against poverty at all levels.

Education

The SDLP election manifesto of 1973 included a commitment to the introduction of comprehensive secondary school system. The Party's attitude in this matter was dictated, not by any particular political dogma, but by the undesirable educational and social effects of the 11 plus selection

procedure, the inequity of the existing secondary system and the absence of parity of esteem between secondary schools of different types, as envisaged in the 1947 Education Act. Our attitude was supported by the Burgess Committee, appointed to advise the Department of Education with its members chosen solely for their educational interests. The SDLP remains committed to the abolition of selection at 11 plus and to the introduction of a comprehensive secondary school. Because of the necessity of absorbing existing schools into any new system, flexibility will be essential from area to area. We would not, however, favour the existence of 11 to 16 comprehensive schools in the same area as 11 to 18 comprehensive schools. In our detailed submission to the Department of Education we have advocated either 11 to 18 comprehensive schools or 11 to 16 comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges.

Conclusion

The above is a synopsis of our Party's policies. We believe in achieving them by political action. Now is the time for such action.

We go forward in the confident hope that the electorate will value the work of our District Councillors and others over the past four years and will approve our candidates and policies by giving us their resounding support on May 18th.

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