

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2009/135/710
Creation Date(s):	5-6 November 1979
Extent and medium:	10 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.

Secretary

I attach a copy of a report of the SDLP Conference last weekend. As you will see the central conclusion of the Party discussion of the constitutional question was that Unionist intransigence and immobilism was the roadblock in the way of political progress at all levels. There were calls for modification (or removal) of the British "guarantee" to the Unionists to induce them to adopt a more open approach. (This is the aim which, of course, lies behind our own repeated calls to the British Government to declare its interest in the reconciliation of the people of Ireland - to weaken the "guarantee" which bolsters Unionist intransigence.)

The present situation in which the Official Unionist Party under Molyneaux is refusing, even in advance of the publication of the British consultative document, to take part in Atkins's proposed conference shows in a very clear light the strength and the wholly negative nature of Unionist intransigence. In commenting to the press in the U.S.A. and in his conversations with President Carter and other representatives I believe the Taoiseach should consider the advantage of referring to this aspect.

The British authorities as we know are giving considerable prominence internationally to their Northern Ireland "initiative". We know that they are fishing for compliments, e.g. from the U.S.A. and Community partners. The Taoiseach and Carter will certainly be asked to comment on the development after they meet in Washington. I would suggest that, in general, the Taoiseach should say that we note the procedural announcement of 25 October in London and await an opportunity to study the British Government's document setting out the options for the proposed conference. As regards the conference in particular, the Taoiseach might regret the Official Unionist leader's refusal to participate and comment that this attitude is in every way characteristic of the Unionist leadership in recent years. We have been familiar with Unionist intransigence for decades, but the present occasion, because the world is now watching the problem, shows unionist rejection of reconciliation and compromise to a wider audience. In contrast our Government

and the nationalist community of Northern Ireland had since the start of the troubles never ceased to advocate and to follow in practice policies of reconciliation, peace and partnership.

The Taoiseach might express sympathy with the British Government which, as we recognise, had the prime responsibility for trying to solve the problem. London had for too long done nothing but, now that the British had decided to try something, they found themselves in a position where less than 2% of the population of the United Kingdom (the Unionists) were obstructing all efforts at forward movement. ||

The Taoiseach might finally appeal to our fellow countrymen of the Unionist tradition to reconsider the extremist stance of their leader and not to turn away from the path of reconciliation.

I attach a copy of a leading article from the Belfast Telegraph of 5 November which comments in general on the present situation. The last paragraph neatly states the truth and points I believe to the opportunity to make statements along the lines I have proposed.

I recommend comment of this sort because it cuts down the British initiative to size and indicates how unlikely it is to succeed. This may be seen in the U.S.A. as an anti-British statement and an anti-British statement there will do the Taoiseach's image a great deal of good. The British approach of ventilating their initiative in the international sphere will also, possibly, rebound upon them if the development serves only as an opportunity to show up worldwide the negative, unyielding face of unionism. On the other hand the treatment recommended would enable us to reveal our contrasting stance and, indeed, to offer again the hand of friendship and reconciliation to unionists.

Another development which, I would suggest, the Taoiseach and Minister should bear in mind for use during the visit to the States is the exceptionally severe social effects, including an even worse unemployment level, which the British expenditure cuts just

announced will have in Northern Ireland. Without going too far in criticising the British Government it might be commented that the treatment given to one of the poorest regions in Europe and the poorest in the U.K. is not such as to help in solving either the political or the security problem there.

D. M. Neligan

D.M. Neligan

6 November 1979

S.D.L.P. Annual Conference

1. ~~Task Search~~
2. ~~Mr Murray~~
3. ~~W. Waddy~~ #1
4. SI9003

1. I attended the Ninth Annual Conference of the SDLP from 2-4 November, 1979 in Newcastle, Co. Down. About 700 delegates attended the main policy debate on 3 November, and in general the Conference provided considerable evidence of stable activity and vitality on the part of the SDLP. The organisation was smooth and the proceedings themselves effectively chaired by Mrs. Bríd Rodgers who was reelected Party Chairman for a second year. Ten documents submitted to the Conference are on file. The main policy document "Towards a New Ireland - a Policy Review" (released on 17 October and in our possession since 10 October) is attached as Annex I.

2. The Conference was devoid of acrimony or serious division. Media reports highlighted an emergency motion submitted by Party branches in the Mid-Ulster Constituency, and inspired by Paddy Duffy (Annex II) which called inter alia for contacts with "paramilitary organisations who belong to the Irish tradition". The motion was decisively rejected. Reference by its critics to the SDLP's having kept its hands clean from contact with the IRA were warmly applauded. Ivan Cooper, who returned visibly to party activity at this Conference, was loudly endorsed when he commented that murderers of milk roundsmen and women prison officers did not belong to the Irish tradition and were mistakenly so described.

3. The central message of the Conference, as regards the constitutional issue, was that Unionist intransigence blocks the way to political advance. Bríd Rodgers's opening address (Annex III) dwelt on the theme with some eloquence, contrasting the openness of the SDLP to cooperation and partnership in District Councils where the party has dominant influence, such as Derry. In the discussion of local government the practical effects of the Unionist attitude were examined in detail. Speaker after speaker made the point that Unionists had received absolutely no encouragement or inducement to compromise but had rather been rewarded by London for their immobilism (e.g. through the award by the Labour Government in January 1979 of extra seats

to Northern Ireland at Westminster.) The conclusion drawn from this analysis, and incorporated in the main policy document mentioned in paragraph 1 above, was that the present unconditional guarantee of support by Britain to the Unionists must be reexamined.

4. This document, "Towards a New Ireland", was presented by its proposer, John Hume. The party had a duty to point a finger at the obstacles to political progress. This could only be through dialogue, discussion and negotiation, but in that sense there had never been politics in Northern Ireland. Now policies for the North were entirely in the hands of the British political parties and Government, yet the parties had failed even to discuss the problems at their conferences and the Secretary of State, it had been suggested, needed several months to read himself into the subject. This, Hume said, was no basis for British sneers about the inability of the mere Irish to settle their affairs. Except for Sunningdale the British policy of unconditional guarantee to the Unionists had been constant since 1920. They had to ask had this policy worked? It was one thing for Unionists to assert their distinctiveness but not their separateness from their neighbours. This was what had led Unionists to defy British democracy in 1912 and it now needed 20,000 British troops to back up the constitutional guarantee they had received. Unionists were entitled to stand on their own ground but the mainstream Irish tradition was also no petty one. The Republic of Ireland was a strong and progressive State, albeit with imperfections and the Irish race overseas had prospered and distinguished itself. The Unionist refusal to budge left a political gap which was filled by violence.

5. The discussion of the document did not endorse the trenchant criticism of the Irish Government which was expressed from his hospital bed by Séamus Mallon on the eve of the conference. ^{There were some negative notes.} Seán Farren hoped that Dublin was not going simply for a security solution. Paschal O'Hare said Dublin should "either put up or shut up" - a blunt reference to the absence of a detailed negotiating position or offers of internal reform from the Government. Hugh Logue, in an argument directly contradictory

to the preceding one, said that the Irish dimension "was not Dublin's to give away" and would be watered down, if it ever had to be, across the negotiating table to Molnyeaux and Martin Smyth. He and Paddy Duffy both spoke with regret of what they saw as obsession on Dublin's part with economic progress and associated problems, to the detriment of proper consideration of the Northern Ireland problem.

6. In contrast several speakers criticised the document, in general for reasons that we would support. Paddy O'Hanlon said its arguments were popularist and considered that the basic message was simply that anybody who refused to join the SDLP on the road to a united Ireland would be left behind. He found this a strange approach to the Unionists if their partnership were genuinely desired. Withdrawal of the unconditional guarantee to unionism was the way forward as Britain must remove support from the rampant bigotry represented by the vote for Paisley in June. The detailed procedural proposals in the document O'Hanlon rejected as having no more value than a child's letter to Santa Claus. Kieran Downing, a speaker from Derry, applied Mallon's language about "woolly semantics" to the document itself. He was sure that Unionists would associate the references to reunification with Gaelic triumphalism. Did the party respect Unionist fears? Did they seek a fair system in the North? Downing also condemned Sile deValera's recent stance and language. In the continuing discussion of the emergency motion (see paragraph 2) relevant points in the same sense were made by Brian Feeney of North Belfast - SDLP argument must be rational and intellectually superior to that of Unionists. O'Connell and Parnell (not Pearse) must be their models. There was also a contribution from Gemma Loughran in which, looking back to the previous year's resolution about British withdrawal, she said that many in the Party saw the British presence as being that of the soldiery and other British institutions, which they could envisage being withdrawn in certain circumstances. In fact their Unionist neighbours considered themselves to be British, and inevitably reacted with fear and anger to calls for British withdrawal which they saw as involving their own expulsion. Unionists must be led to reconsider their position by their own consent, not by overt or implicit threats to their position.

7. The overall impression left by this discussion was that the policy document - which was overwhelmingly adopted - represented a skillful expression of consensus views. From private conversation with many delegates I would judge that not many would dissent from Gerry Fitt's subsequent remarks to a BBC reporter in which he spoke of the involvement of the Irish Government with the British authorities etc. in constitutional negotiations as an "eventual" development.

8. I defended the Government's position in my contacts by clarifying that, as the Taoiseach had said, it was as a first step and as an immediate priority that a system of devolved administration for Northern Ireland should be established which the majority of people in both sections of the community could support and sustain. We fully recognised that a solution would require the cooperation of both Governments and all parties. In that sense, and in regard to our day to day dealings with the British, the Irish dimension was a constant reality. London openly and in practice recognised our role. We considered that it would not help to get the ideas of Unionists moving away from intransigence to talk at this stage about an institutional Irish dimension. (I mentioned also that the SDLP members of the power-sharing Executive had agreed to drop the Council of Ireland in 1974.) We hoped to encourage the evolution of Unionist thinking also by calling on the British to declare London's interest in a solution based on reconciliation and compromise - this would be a mitigation of the British guarantee. I found that this presentation got a degree of acceptance (perhaps out of politeness) but scepticism was expressed more than once about whether the British would ever make the declaration we desired. I said many British representatives and even politicians said what we wanted in private, a fact of which Unionists were not unaware. In one case, that of Paddy Duffy, argument of the Government's position proved of no avail. The SDLP vote, he said, would simply not come out in support of any institutional arrangements which lacked an Irish dimension. Others, without going so far, said that the SDLP grassroots had been surprised and taken aback by the Government's latest position. Duffy of course stands at one

extreme of the Party. John Hume and others expressed the opinion to me, not for the first time, that Duffy's relatively poor performance in mid-Ulster (compared for instance with those of Mallon and McGrady in other constituencies) is due to his tendency to confrontational nationalism. A "true SDLP candidate" might well do better in mid-Ulster. This does not necessarily invalidate his analysis of how voters would react to an arrangement which they thought to be without an Irish dimension, however.

9. The Conference adopted the customary strong resolutions on Local Government. Urgency was added to this question by the possibility that a return of powers to the District Councils might feature in the upcoming British proposals. A statement by the Spokesman for Local Government, Eddie McGrady, is attached as Annex IV and typifies the Party's uncompromising stance against such a return of powers, an idea which some councillors in SDLP-dominated bodies were, apparently, inclined to trifle with. Paddy O'Hanlon observed that to give more powers to Unionist-dominated Councils would be like "asking Attila the Hun to hold your horse".

10. In regard to police and justice questions the Conference called for a public enquiry into individual allegations of ill-treatment against the RUC. The H-block protest was the subject of a balanced resolution which read as follows:-

Conference, while deploring violence of all types, whether physical or institutionalised, and while deploring the campaign being conducted by the Provisionals in using their own members for propaganda purposes, nevertheless believes that humanitarian considerations are being ignored by the British Government in relation to 'H' Block and calls for the International Red Cross to be invited to visit the prisoners on the blanket and establish the truth of the situation.

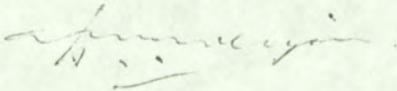
The debate on these matters departed in no way from the predictable.

11. The discussion of the economy was marked by many emotional denunciations of the British Government's expenditure cuts. A study document had drawn attention to the disastrous consequences

for Northern Ireland of the general policy but the announcements two days before the Conference of particular measures, including the imposition or raising of charges for formerly free services unleashed a storm of criticism. What was proposed, said Hugh Logue, was planned unemployment for the North. He considered that the N.I.O. had scored a media victory by preventing disclosure of the consequences for the people. Mr. Giles Shaw was criticised by Logue as one not only committed to following his Government's policy in the matter but as one who took pleasure in it. Dr. Joe Hendron made one of his several interventions in this debate expressing real fears for the nutritional standards and mental health of deprived families in the ghettos. I raised the question with some Party members as to whether the destruction of public services through expenditure cuts, which would obviously have severe effects in Northern Ireland given its general relative poverty and high degree of reliance on jobs in the public sector, including security, might not be seen as a partial British economic withdrawal. Might it not ultimately affect unionist attitudes? The reaction was uncertain. The bad economic times of 1974-'75 had not noticeably modified the views of the unionists.

12. As regards the party's personalities, Gerry Fitt was not in particularly good form. His opening speech which in essence surveyed the course of the last year did not set the delegates on fire, though applause was generous if predictable when he verbally assaulted Mrs. Thatcher, Mr. Mason and Unionist leaders. He deplored violence and social deprivation as the hallmarks of the year, but spoke with emotion of the Pope's visit. His remarks included an appeal to the Republic to count the cost of participation in a new Ireland and to say what it could sacrifice. The Republic would have to be able to guarantee unionists their way of life. Despite his relatively weak performance - quite inferior to Hume's - Mr. Fitt faced no serious challenge to his leadership. Motions criticising some of his statements during the year were apparently swept aside at private business sessions of the Conference. I gained the impression that, with Fitt involved in Westminster and Hume in the European Parliament, and

with Currie still working his passage back to favour, Séamus Mallon had advanced significantly in standing over the year. The expressions of regard made towards him went beyond what would be normal for a sick man stricken at an inopportune moment. Mallon had a guiding hand in the policy document and, as described above, its drafting represents an adroit party consensus. Eddie McGrady and Hugh Logue also seemed to have increased in stature and to nurture ambitions for a conspicuous role in the Party.



D.M. Neligan
Department of Foreign Affairs

5 November, 1979.