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Tenth Annual Conference of the SDLP (7-9 November 1980)

1. I attended the above conference held at Newcastle, Co. Down. There was a large attendance estimated at eight hundred - certainly more people than in 1979.

2. The management of the Conference clearly reflected John Hume's leadership. There was a notable absence of dissent or of dissonant undertones. The arrangement of the agenda was such as to ensure newsworthy developments on each day (on Friday, the emergency motion on the H-block hunger strike; on Saturday, the central policy discussion document - A Strategy for Peace - and the leader's speech; on Sunday, education and youth and regional policy. A copy of the agenda and of each of the main policy documents is attached.

3. The organisation of speeches from the platform displayed the same smooth touch. Emphasis was laid by various leading members of the party on different aspects of each subject. For instance, in regard to the discussion paper mentioned above, Séamus Mallon insistently struck the note that all Ulstermen together had interests to defend in common in seeking a new relationship with other parts of these islands. He also emphasised that the constitutional stance of the Party was open. Federalism had been recommended at various times by people on both sides of the political divide, but it was only one option amongst several. Seán Farren (who drafted the paper and who was elected Chairman of the Party in succession to Mrs. Brid Rogers at the end of the Conference) in the course of a more general exegesis usefully emphasised the role of the two sovereign Governments (the text of his remarks is annexed). There was a retreat from the express concept of a "quadripartite" conference in this debate.

4. In regard to the H-block hunger strike, the Conference adopted as an emergency motion the following text put forward by the executive committee:

Conference deplores the ineptitude of the British Government's handling of the 'H' Block issue; urges that prisoners be

allowed to wear their own clothing in line with progressive practice in other countries; condemns the inhuman conditions which exist in 'H' Block; calls for immediate action to implement a new regime based on respect for individual dignity; appeals to the hunger strikers to allow the matter to be settled through further discussion; reminds all who publicly comment on the issue of its potential for deepening community divisions and calls on them to direct their efforts towards a peaceful resolution of the issue.

5. The debate was deliberately used by John Hume and other leaders to guide party members into a moderate, constructive line on an issue which will of course lead to intense pressures upon them in the coming weeks. There was a notably unanimous feeling in favour of the calls for a new and more humane prison régime coupled with the withholding of support from the hunger strikers themselves. The campaign of the H-block Committee extended as was to have been expected to Newcastle itself during the Conference weekend. Several bus loads of young demonstrators arrived from Belfast and picketed the entrance to the hotel, distributing leaflets and shouting slogans. Penetrating the grounds of the hotel, they stationed themselves on Saturday afternoon directly outside the fire exits of the conference hall and made Mr. Hume's speech inaudible to many of those present through the clamorous use of bullhorns. Mr. Hume later saw a deputation of the demonstrators and, when they asked if he would be willing to meet representatives of the Smash H-Block Committee, said yes. This was later represented by the Committee as a request by Hume for a meeting.

6. The discussions on human rights, health and social welfare and agriculture and fisheries do not call for particular remark. The relevant documents are annexed. These discussions and the debate on the economy and housing later in the day brought into sharp relief the effects of British Government expenditure cuts and the very strong feelings of delegates on this subject. Indeed the exceptionally grave economic situation cast its shadow over all the discussions, including that on constitutional matters. The Party showed as usual to good advantage in these well-informed debates on issues of practical policy and in the well prepared documents

presented. Journalists and an N.I.O. official who was present as a visitor compared the SDLP most favourably in this respect with other Northern Ireland parties and also commented that the attendance was greater than in the case of the other parties (for instance I was told that only 150 delegates showed up at the OUP conference in Omagh some weeks ago). Well may Mr. Hume claim as he did in his speech that the SDLP is "the first and the strongest organised alternative to unionism in the history of Northern Ireland".

7. As regards direct references to the Government and to conditions in our jurisdiction, these were not uniformly favourable. In the debate following the presentation of the discussion paper "A Strategy for Peace" Frank Irvine, an East Belfast delegate, made himself to some extent the advocate of "reasonable unionism" in the only speech to diverge at all from the mainstream argument. Clause 2 of Bunreacht na hÉireann should go, he suggested, and he expressed doubt about the willingness of the political Parties in the South to "exchange two sectarian states for one genuinely pluralist one". In general Irvine's line was that of a paper submitted by East Belfast before the Conference but which, following adoption of the Constituency Representatives' discussion paper, was not considered. A copy of the East Belfast paper, entitled "The Need for Change" is also annexed for information. Several speakers referred to the aim of a pluralist all-Ireland society, but perhaps more significantly this was a matter on which the undersigned received an appreciable number of representations when mingling with the delegates. The issues mentioned were usually those of divorce and family law and the opinions expressed to me reflected perhaps in equal measure attitudes of liberal reform on the one hand and Unionist preoccupations of which my contacts were aware on the other. However given the concordance of approach between the SDLP and the Government (and indeed Southern opinion generally) on the central policy questions affecting the North's future the atmosphere was at all times most amicable.

8. It is necessary to conclude with a reference to John Hume's speech. Although not devoid of defensive elements necessitated by

the apparently concerted attacks directed against the party in recent months not least by Fitt and Devlin - a concertation of criticism in which it is difficult to believe that the NIO had no hand - it constitutes a singularly eloquent and positive justification of SDLP policy. The applause which frequently interrupted Hume exceeded in warmth what might have been expected even at a party conference. It was particularly noticeable that the denunciation of violence received a most emotional endorsement, at the point in the speech where Mr. Hume, developing his prepared script, enquired what contribution the blood of RUC victims could make to a solution of Northern Ireland's problems. John Hume's speech provided tangible proof of what was evident throughout the Conference, that is his strong position as leader and coordinator and his capacity to inspire hard work and unity. I would consider that the surprisingly negative and critical treatment which he has received in some parts of the Dublin media (Barry Cowan on RTE, the leader writer of the Irish Press) show yet again the extent to which Irish media perceptions are susceptible to influence from Britain - in this case an outdated influence as tributes to Hume in e.g. the Guardian of 11 November show. While mainstream unionist reaction to Hume's statement has been predictably negative (e.g. in the Belfast Newsletter) the comments of a moderate Unionist journalist (Barry White) who was at the Conference perhaps have some significance. He acknowledged the value of the speech's central thesis in favour of reconciliation and a new broadbased national arrangement but said that the message to unionists in this context seemed to be that they should negotiate their conditions now from a position of strength rather than wait until they were outbred. He considered this to be a cold and not very reassuring message. A copy of an editorial from the Belfast Telegraph, for which Barry White writes, is attached.

D.M. Neligan.

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13 November 1980