

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2011/39/1801
Creation Date(s):	29 September 1981
Extent and medium:	3 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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S.D.L.P. policy discussion

I met Austin Currie on 28 September and asked him for an account of the informal policy discussion held by SDLP council members at the weekend of 19-20 September.

Mr. Currie indicated that the main points considered and decided upon were policy on participation in the administration of the six counties as part of a federal Ireland and policy towards the Provisional I.R.A.

Six Counties in a federal Ireland

The first point arose in the context of a review of the Party's basic commitment to a federal or confederal form of Irish unity and in relation to the desire to adopt a line which would be favourably seen by Unionists (and no doubt by Alliance and Fitt-Devlin elements as well). The question posed was whether in a Northern Ireland entity within an Irish federation or confederation the SDLP would look for power-sharing or would accept majority rule. After prolonged and, on the whole, good-humoured discussion, Currie said, those present had accepted that majority rule should be the basis in that situation. Twenty five participants were in favour and only five against, of whom Currie had been one. Of course majority rule would be associated with proportional representation and guarantees at federal level about the treatment of minorities.

Currie was frank about his more cautious approach on this question. His experience on the Dungannon District Council encouraged him in this approach. He felt it was questionable to take up a position of principle on policy within an entity of a federation the detailed provisions of whose constitution have not been worked out, e.g. what sort of powers would be devolved. As regards the countervailing weight of minority guarantees, these, since they would be enforced by the federal authorities, could become a cause of tension between the federal power and the six-county entity.

Given the historic background there would be advantage in avoiding such causes of tension to the greatest extent possible, and for that reason he favoured power-sharing within the six counties. Currie confirmed what we had heard about Paddy Duffy and Seamus Mallon supporting the majority view, adding that he thought Duffy had done so in order to avoid being on the same side as Currie.

I enquired what would now happen about this new line. Mr. Currie said that the SDLP would reveal and discuss their approach with Mr. Prior (with whom the leadership is seeking a further meeting) and with the Taoiseach and Government. At the Annual Conference (early November) a recommendation would be put to the membership in favour of this matter. If adopted, the proposal would then be studied and elaborated in a policy document. The intention is that it should not become public until after the political meetings North and South referred to above.

SDLP and IRA

On the matter of renewing the challenge to the PIRA/INLA, Mr. Currie said generally that this would be kept up at every opportunity. In the next few days the SDLP would be vigorously fighting the District Council bye-election in Armagh. He regretted that the IRA had been able to exploit in response the meetings which they had had with SDLP members in recent years. He was in favour of public meetings with any other groups rather than secret ones. He made some scathing remarks about Seamus Mallon's presentation of his involvement in the meetings as "private and in a personal capacity". It reminded him of the situation of a Bishop who might claim to have endangered children in a personal capacity only.

Taoiseach's radio interview of 27 September.

Mr. Currie had made a statement, when approached by the media, in reaction to the Taoiseach's remarks about national reconciliation and the Constitution (text attached).

He followed the line, and felt sure that it would be endorsed by John Hume, that the SDLP had long sought a pluralist Ireland but favoured an all party approach to Constitutional changes. While I was with him Mr. Currie accepted an invitation to participate in "P.M. Ulster" (BBC radio) with Molyneaux and Paisley.

D.M. Neligan

29 September 1981