

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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11th Annual Conference of the S.D.L.P.

13-15 November, 1981.

1. Numbers attending the Conference of the S.D.L.P. this year were down on those for 1980. At the high point of the proceedings, Mr. Hume's speech on Saturday afternoon, an estimated figure of 500 people were present as against 800 last year. The party is systematically working to building up its strength and its finances at the present time and there was much discussion of these aims in the private business sessions at the Conference. There was however, a general feeling that, as John Hume put it in his speech (Annex 1) "1981 has been one of the most difficult years in our history".
2. At the same time, considerable satisfaction was expressed by many delegates with whom I spoke about the outcome of the Summit in London on 6 November particularly because of the fact that some of the ideas implemented in the agreements reached between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister originated in the S.D.L.P. Party delegates were delighted at the reference to this adoption of S.D.L.P. ideas made by the Taoiseach in his statement to the Dáil on 10 November. The point is suitably brought out also in Mr. Hume's statement which in all its references to the London Summit follows an appropriately positive and constructive line.
3. The central policy issues discussed at the Conference related as usual to the Constitution of Northern Ireland and the possibility of political progress. On this occasion an additional section of the timetable was devoted to discussion

of the Taoiseach's "Crusade" for constitutional revision in this State. The principal motion before the Conference on the political future of Northern Ireland read as follows:-

"Conference believing that progress towards a just and lasting settlement to the crisis in Northern Ireland will only be achieved in the context of a new basis to Anglo/Irish relations which accepts Irish unity based on a full recognition of the legitimate rights of the different cultural traditions on this island calls for the following steps to be taken in order to achieve this goal:-

1. The removal of the constitutional guarantee to Unionists whereby all efforts and political progress have been vetoed;
2. The inclusion in the current Anglo/Irish discussion of consideration of the political institutions necessary for a New Ireland North and South."

The wording of this resolution with its call for the removal of the constitutional "guarantee" to Unionists does not accord with our policy. This fact was recognised by the party leadership and Mr. Farren, the party chairman, told me that it had been drafted by the Executive and inserted in the programme before the results of the London Summit were known. The debate on this matter was confused and although sentiments were certainly expressed in regard to the "guarantee" by some speakers which we would find unsuitable, at least the terms of the motion enabled a variety of views to be brought forward and an appearance of party unity on the question was in consequence maintained. The resolution was not adopted unanimously but there only seemed to me to be about a dozen contrary votes.

4. The essential difference between participants in the discussions seemed to me to reside in their various understandings of the concept of consent. The "Guarantee" was criticized for the usual reasons, notably that it constituted a form of veto in the hands of Unionist parties who declined all attempts at making progress. The implications of its complete removal were ignored except by a small minority of speakers. These however, notably Mr. Ivan Cooper, drew attention to the defensive attitude of Unionists and to the demoralising effect upon them of the removal of the Guarantee. His intervention was ill-expressed and was subjected to justifiable criticism because he included remarks about the role of the S.D.L.P. during the Hunger-Strike and especially during the Fermanagh by-election which outraged other delegates by appearing to suggest that the S.D.L.P. had aligned itself to some extent with the IRA at that time. In consequence his remarks about the "Guarantee" got scant attention and his line of argument was only followed by a young speaker from Portadown. Too large a number of mainstream figures in the party gave explicit and specific support to the withdrawal of the British consent formula and it would appear that some thought might be given to "educating" the party towards our way of thinking. However, when the comments on this important matter made by Mr. Hume in his key-note speech are taken into account (pages 6 and 7) together with remarks made in the following debate about our Constitutional review a better picture emerges.

5. In the understanding of the great majority of speakers at the Conference, the notion of Unionist consent is of something that can be ensured post-factum after negotiations which would take place

in circumstances which nobody clearly defined. The expectation seems to be that the Unionists would agree to negotiate in response to appeals to their good sense and self-interest, addressed to them by all the Nationalist parties on the Island and by the British Government. This improbable scenario is linked in what I would identify as the mainstream thinking of the party with the idea that progress must be made very rapidly. Thought does not seem to have been given to the necessity of allowing an opportunity for Unionist attitudes to evolve or for particular steps such as our Constitutional review and our commitment, jointly with the British Government, to foster reconciliation to take effect. It is clear that such an approach towards Unionists would arouse the impatience of very many members of the S.D.L.P. who still harbour expectations that the Northern Ireland problem might be rapidly resolved without recourse to an ordered process designed to bring about a meeting of minds. Even the reference by Mr. Hume to the need for referenda to be held both North and South to endorse a future settlement does not directly challenge and indeed is not inconsistent with the notion of a rapidly concluded arrangement with Unionist representatives whose presence at the negotiating table might well be achieved on a basis other than that of wholly free consent.

6. The following discussion about our constitutional review brought to the fore fears and apprehensions which a large number of delegates had already burdened me and other Dublin visitors with in the corridors. These centre on the delusion that our intention would be to delete Articles 2 and 3 from the Constitution thereby, in the view of those so deluded, removing their rights to Irish citizenship and their claim to belong to the Irish nation. It was evident from my earlier contacts

that people were not going to be persuaded from giving expression to this fear and indeed very many speakers did so. A helpful amendment by the Executive was adopted at the outset of the debate which resulted in the resolution reading as follows:-

"Conference views with concern any change in Bunreacht na hÉireann which would abandon the commitment of the Republic of Ireland to the ultimate unity of the Irish people".

In the course of the debate a parallel was drawn by several participants between Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution, on the one hand and the consent formula in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act, 1973, on the other, in the sense that each constituted a "guarantee", the first to the nationalist and the second to the unionist community. Mrs. Gemma Loughran in a typically perspicacious speech pointed to the illogicality of calling for the removal of one "guarantee" (Resolution no. 82) but demanding the maintenance of the other (Resolution 90). Her point was not answered. The Resolution on the Irish Constitution was adopted with a roughly equal number of contrary votes to that cast against the Resolution on political progress in Northern Ireland (see paragraph 3 above).

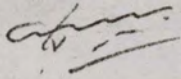
7. As regards other subjects of debate, the Conference discussed policy documents on forestry, and combating poverty (available in the Department of Foreign Affairs). A debate on education was very largely taken up with an emergency motion which read as follows:-

"Conference, while recommending the amalgamation of St. Mary's and St. Joseph's Colleges of Education, in view of the recent statement by the Minister, affirms its opposition to a forced removal of these Colleges to the Stranmillis Site".

This discussion arose out of the Chilvers report recommending the merger of the two Catholic Training Colleges named in the motion above with the State Training College at Stranmillis. Several members of the party leadership expressed embarrassment at the unambiguous expression of confessional views by many party members. It can not be doubted that, confessional or not, this issue touched a sensitive nerve in the community which the S.D.L.P. by and large represents, and that that community is resolutely opposed to the proposal to suppress exclusively Catholic training of primary teachers.

8. Fraternal delegates at this year's S.D.L.P. Conference included the Tánaiste, Mr. Michael O'Leary, T.D., representing the Socialist International and the Labour Party; Minister of State Fergus O'Brien, T.D. and Senator Maurice Manning, representing Fine Gael; Deputy Niall Andrews and Messrs. Des Smyth and Fergal McElgunn, representing Fianna Fáil. The Tánaiste in a brief statement related what had been achieved at the London Summit of 6 November to S.D.L.P. policy over the years. The structure agreed upon between the Irish and British Governments would, he said, provide a framework within which developments could be pursued within the island of Ireland and between Great Britain and Ireland. The reconciliation clause included in the communiqué was of real importance and was something new for a British Government, but coincided with S.D.L.P. philosophy.

9. The news of the assassination of the Rev. Robert Bradford, M.P. reached the Conference about noon on 14 November and delegates observed a minute's silence. There was a notable departure of media representatives including all T.V. camera teams. Mr. Hume prefaced his speech with a tribute to Mr. Bradford and a condemnation of his murder but indicated his view that the Conference must proceed to deal with its agenda (Annex II) notwithstanding. The news had a marked effect on the delegates many of whom expressed fear for the safety of those prominent in the S.D.L.P. leadership. I learnt that Mr. Séamus Mallon in particular had already left his home because of death threats and that he moved out his wife and children in the new situation. The event overshadowed the proceedings and both the debates and the customary social activities were relatively low key.



D.M. Neligan

20 November, 1981.