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Mr. Dempsey

I attended the INC meeting addressed by Clive Soley MP at the Irish Club on 3 December. Less than 50 people attended and perhaps a third were supportive of Sinn Fein to judge by their reaction to questions from obvious members. Publications of Sinn Fein and Troops Out Movement were on sale from a desk at the back of the hall. The next meeting on 15 December will feature Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison in line with the INC policy, as put by Phil Twohig, of inviting speakers from across the political spectrum.

A summary of Mr. Soley's remarks as issued to the press is attached. He began by saying that successive British governments had tried to make partition work but that it had now manifestly failed. If Ireland was to be partitioned today the same border would not be drawn. The inability of British (and to some extent Irish) governments to resolve the problem of Northern Ireland is a damning indictment.

He emphasised the phrase "by peaceful means and on the basis of consent" in Labour policy. Coercion of the unionists into a united Ireland would be a guarantee of disaster. Policy must be openly pursued since unionist and right-wing Conservative paranoia feeds on secret talks and hidden discussions. The fears of unionists are real and many of them are prepared to fight and die for what they believe in.

He had frequently been accused of playing into the hands of the paramilitaries and thus being guilty of contributing to the killings by advocating a united Ireland. He noted that nobody says that advocacy of integration played into the hands of Protestant paramilitaries.

Gery Lawless made a long rambling speech after Mr. Soley. He had recently been elected a Labour Councillor on the London Borough

of Hackney by the largest majority ever achieved by a member. The Irish, he said, were the largest ethnic majority in Britain. They had traditionally voted over 80% Labour and had been treated by the party as in its pocket. They are not safe any more for Labour unless they get what they want, a united Ireland. He criticised the Labour policy document quoting from a statement by the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers which, while acknowledging that it was a major step forward in its advocacy of a united Ireland and its recognition that previous policy had been wrong, was nevertheless flawed by a central contradiction in that it at the same time called for a withdrawal of the guarantee but recognised the need for consent. Lawless said that a Labour government should declare its intention to withdraw in every sense but that withdrawal should be accompanied by a package of social and economic initiatives. Sweden had not demanded the right of veto over Finnish political development on behalf of the "substantial" Swedish majority in Finland. In conclusion he questioned the right of any British person to criticise the Irish Constitution as confessional when Britain requires its Head of State to subscribe to a specific religion and reserves seats in the House of Lords for dignitaries of the same religion. The strength of the Catholic Church in the Republic is not based on law.

Mr. Soley made the following points in response to questions (which unfortunately were rarely posed concisely and were frequently no more than either inconsequential ramblings or committed tirades):-

The Labour policy document on Ireland is not universally accepted within the Party. He believes in it (though he was not involved in drafting it) and is trying hard to show that it is a good policy. Previous governments did no more than react to crises and try to stay just a little bit ahead of them. He acknowledged on a number of occasions that he could not guarantee that it would remain party policy or that, if Labour were re-elected it would be implemented. Whether this feeling derives from an innate diffidence or is the result of contacts with unionists and others who oppose the policy is unclear.

As an ex-probation officer, he opposed political status for NI prisoners. The case for such status is based on the war principle and the requirements of the Geneva Conventions are not there. To acknowledge the IRA and INLA as legitimate belligerents in the sense of the Conventions would be to concede in advance legitimacy to a unionist armed fight against the government of a united Ireland.

Whether or not a united Ireland becomes part of NATO would be for the government of a united Ireland to decide. Britain no longer has the same strategic considerations as in the past.

UN troops for Northern Ireland in place of British troops would probably not be a good idea in practice. They would not know the different communities and this lack of knowledge would facilitate unionist domination.

He would support the ideas of an All-Ireland police force and courts.

Ivan Gibbons (Conservative on Hammersmith Council) asked whether the commitment by the two main parties in the Republic to a referendum on abortion would have a very detrimental effect on NI Protestants. Soley replied that while he did not believe as is often said that the Irish government is not serious about unity. Labour policy could not be made to work unless the government of the Republic also recognises that Protestant fears of unity are real.

He supports the Labour Party Conference resolution that plastic bullets should be banned. A ban, however, could not be implemented overnight since some other method must take their place. Snatch squads tend to be indiscriminate but fringe group meetings at the Conference had suggested other possibilities.

In principle he would favour moving Irish prisoners in British jails to Ireland where there is a case for it. He has made representations in some cases and does not fully understand what

the objections are. Part of the problem is the power of the prison officers trade union.

He is prepared to talk to Sinn Fein and to anyone not overtly engaged in breaking the law particularly if elected. In this, he is not ignoring violence but it is a symptom and not the cause of the problem.

Gearoid O Broin
6 December, 1982

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PRESS RELEASE FROM:

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LABOUR MP FOR HAMMERSMITH NORTH

OPPOSITION SPOKESMAN ON NORTHERN IRELAND

Speaking to the Irish National Council in London this evening, Clive Soley reiterated Labour's commitment to a united Ireland by consent.

He quoted from the policy document agreed by the 1981 Labour Party Conference, which stated that,

"at the heart of this programme is a long and deeply held belief in the Labour Party that Ireland should, by peaceful means and on the basis of consent, be united and the recognition that this will be achieved with socialist policies."

Mr Soley said that insufficient attention had been paid to Labour's plan to win consent. He accepted that it would be impossible to achieve unanimous support for a united Ireland but he believed that it would be possible to demonstrate to the majority that a united Ireland would be in their best interests and offered a realistic way forward.

The guarantee given to the people of Northern Ireland must not be used as a veto by the Unionists to prevent political progress. Any British Government had the right to legislate for all the people and in doing this they could demonstrate that progress towards a united Ireland was possible in a manner that was responsive to the needs of both communities in Northern Ireland.

Mr Soley admitted that to achieve unity would require a great deal of political skill and determination. No-one thought it was going to be easy.

"The agony of the present violence and the erosion of civil rights in Britain, Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland must be stopped for all our sakes."

He made no apology for speaking openly about a united Ireland and refuted criticism that such talk played into the hands of the paramilitaries.

"On the contrary, an open political debate on all the future options undermines support for the paramilitaries."

To those who advocated silence on the subject of unity he said,

"We have kept silent too long," and challenged people to explain what good silence had done the people of Northern Ireland.

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Mr Soley suggested that the insecurity felt by many Unionists was in no small part due to the reluctance of successive British Governments to incorporate them fully into the United Kingdom. The Conservatives, who claimed to be the party of the Union, have always treated Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the United Kingdom.

He condemned the tendency in Britain to regard the Irish as irresponsible and unable to govern themselves. The Irish problem was also a British problem. The solution lay not only in Northern Ireland but also in London and in Dublin.

The tragedy for the people of Northern Ireland was that they only had negative power. That is why London and Dublin must give leadership.

Turning to the implementation of Labour's programme, Mr Soley said that it would be a mistake to draw up a detailed plan to achieve unity but outlined some of the measures a Labour government might consider;

- * a commitment to a united Ireland by consent,
- * extending and developing the committees set up in the 1980 Thatcher/Haughey talks,
- * a commitment by both British and Irish Governments to allow joint citizenship rights,
- * the creation of an All-Ireland Economic Development Council,
- * harmonisation of economic, political and social institutions so as to diminish the relevance of the border,
- * establishing a parliamentary tier to the present Assembly,
- * establishing a British-Irish Council.

No-one, Mr Soley said, could define exactly the structure that might evolve, but a federal system could offer the greatest hope and security for the people of Northern Ireland.

It was essential that the Unionists were given more confidence that their legitimate rights and traditions would be respected in a united Ireland. Many people in Britain felt that the Unionists were being unreasonably intransigent but Mr Soley felt that this stemmed from the inherently unstable and insecure position that they had occupied since 1920.

Mr Soley recognised that he was asking the Unionists not only to change their national identity but also to join with a nation committed to a different religion. Amendments would have to be made to the Republic's Constitution so that the religious aspects would not automatically apply in the North.

Britain had begun to move towards a united Ireland in the 19th century. It was time to complete that process and the Labour movement was ideally placed to achieve this.