

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



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Northern Ireland

11. The by-now annual Conference debate on Northern Ireland centred on two motions (copy attached), the first calling for the abolition of the Diplock courts and other security-related measures and the second urging the party to commit itself to "British troops withdrawal leading to the soonest possible achievement of a 32 county Ireland". The chairman of the Party Committee on Northern Ireland Martin Flannery enlivened what was otherwise an ill-informed and predictably hard-line debate with a contribution in which he both urged Conference to reject the troops out notion and "revealed" that PSF leaders with whom a party delegation had spoken in Belfast had favoured withdrawal only after the paramilitaries on the loyalist side had been disarmed. In a fairly vacuous speech the party spokesman Peter Archer sought to assure delegates that there was no longer a bipartisan policy on the North. He committed the party to banning the use of plastic bullets and action to deal with the "economic shambles"; he pointed out that there was no guarantee that withdrawal would secure the result its proponents desired and that very many people in Northern Ireland did genuinely fear that it would result in a blood bath. He reminded delegates that a joint PLP/NEC commission had been set up to consider the development of party policy and he hoped that a report would be submitted to next year's Conference.

12. In replying to the debate Alec Kitson for the NEC urged Conference to remit Composite 28 on the basis that while the Executive agreed with the condemnation of plastic bullets and strip-search practices at Armagh it did not endorse the call for the outright abolition of the Diplock courts. They did accept however that there was a need for major reform and called for (i) the substitution of 3 judges in place of the present one, (ii) the appointment of lay assessors to sit alongside the judges and (iii) review of the rules of evidence. On composite 29 (withdrawal) he pointed out that Conference had never endorsed this policy which was rejected by all non-terrorist supporting parties both north and south.

He fully accepted that high standards of behaviour must be demanded from the troops on the ground and that there was scope for a gradual phasing down of the security force presence in particular areas. However in the absence of satisfactory arrangements for a local security force acceptable to both communities it was imperative on the Army to remain. When put to a card vote Composite 28 was, against platform advice, adopted by 3.0m. to 2.6m; among those lending support was the powerful TGWU delegation. As on previous occasions the unions voted solidly against the withdrawal motion and it was lost by a large margin.

13. The Conference fringe was characterized this year by a record number of events of Irish interest, although in many cases sponsors and venue were all that changed as a central core of speakers and audience transferred from one location to the next. In addition to well-established groups including the Labour Committee on Ireland (sympathetic to PSF) and the Labour Committee for Peace and Progress (allied to the Workers Party) there were also this year for the first time meetings sponsored by the Fabian Society, which was well-organised and well-supported, and by the Federation of Irish Societies which was very poorly publicised and appeared to attract a tiny audience confined to professional observers and those of pre-determined views. (Copies of hand-outs distributed in connection with some of these meetings are enclosed). It was notable that unlike last year at Brighton the LCI did not this year produce any big-name PSF speakers; in addition to Peter Archer their meeting was addressed by Mrs Emma Groves, who was blinded by a rubber bullet in November 1971, and by Lynda Quigly, recently released from Armagh (where according to Soley she was serving a sentence for possession of an Armelite). In an impressive performance both women gave what purported to be strictly factual accounts of their experiences and limited their demands to these relatively narrow areas.

14. Tony Benn also spoke at this meeting. Taking up a theme heard frequently during the week he saw a close parallel between the battles being waged by the miners and the effort to secure British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. He drew

attention to the draft bill circulated by him last August modelled on the legislation used for the withdrawal from Palestine (copy attached) and indicated his belief that this could be achieved within a 6 year period. He pointed to US and British concern at the defence implications as the main factor hindering progress.

15. The SDLP was represented at the Conference by Denis Haughey and the Irish Labour Party by Justin Keating. The latter said that he had been far more impressed by the Forum Report than he had expected would be the case; he drew attention to its moderate tone and to the fact, pace the Fianna Fail leader, that it offered a range of options. Focussing on the increasing convergence of the economies north and south, he urged the pooling of all available funds from Britain, the Republic, Irish communities overseas and the EEC to offer an inducement for the kind of political change in the North which was in any event a precondition of economic advance. As he has done at other party conferences over the past few years, Haughey made an excellent impression in speaking in support of an early and substantial British response to the Forum (script attached). The integrationist Campaign for Labour Representation were again in evidence although there was a general feeling among those concerned with Irish issues that the group was making no appreciable progress. One of their number, Neil Cusack, was particularly active in intervening at meetings organized by other groups.

16. Of perhaps greater significance was the information conveyed privately by the party's deputy spokesman Clive Soley that he was seriously considering standing down from the position in the next Parliamentary session. He said that after 3 years in the job he had carried the topic as far forward as he could from the Opposition front-bench. He was reasonably pleased with the approach of the principal spokesman Peter Archer, and assuming as he did that Archer would be reappointed felt free to bow out. His own preference as replacement would be Alf Dubs who is a junior Home Affairs spokesman but also a member of the Independent (Kilbrandon) Enquiry. If he were not available - and Dubs indicated to the undersigned a

preference to remain at his present post - Soley suggested Derek Fatchett who is of course a member of this week's visiting PLP delegation. Characterized in one profile as "semi-hard left" Fatchett is something of a protege of Soley's and spoke, in generally acceptable terms, at last year's back-bench committee meeting in Brighton. Soley said that he was broadly happy with Fatchett's policy stance although he did still toy with the idea of setting a date by which the British should withdraw. It is also of course quite possible that even with the Soley's backing Fatchett, who entered the House only at the last general election, might be passed over by the party leadership. As these remarks were made in confidence the subject should be broached with Fatchett in only the most circumspect manner.

P. Hennessy

8 October, 1984