



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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SDLP ANNUAL CONFERENCE
COOKSTOWN, 26-28 NOVEMBER 1993

1. The SDLP held their annual Conference in Cookstown from 26-28 November. While the attendance was somewhat down on previous years, party morale was high and the mood was upbeat. A succession of well-orchestrated speeches underscored the party's solidarity with John Hume in his dialogue with Gerry Adams and its support for the two Governments' efforts to create a framework for peace. The latter efforts were perceived to flow necessarily from Hume's intervention. There was no criticism at any point of the Irish Government's position on the Hume/Adams initiative.
2. The Minister for Enterprise and Employment attended on behalf of the Tanaiste, the Labour Party and the Socialist International. The Minister for Defence and MoS Pat "The Cope" Gallagher represented the Fianna Fail Party. Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats were represented at a junior level. As usual, Kevin McNamara and two colleagues represented the British Labour Party.
3. The Taoiseach's message of support was very favourably received when it was read out immediately after John Hume's keynote address.
4. In a brief intervention, Minister Quinn saluted John Hume's efforts as a peace-maker (ranking him with other distinguished socialists such as Palme and Brandt).

The achievement of peace would require courage and imagination, particularly from the British Government. The Government to which both he and the Minister for Defence belonged fully recognized the contribution John Hume had made to the search for peace and would do everything possible to reinforce the efforts he had made to achieve it.

5. The Conference was to some extent overshadowed by the news (which preoccupied delegates and media alike) that Sunday's Observer would be publishing documentary evidence of British Government contacts with the IRA. There was some disappointment among party members at the effect of this development on media coverage of the conference.

6. Opening the administration of justice debate on Friday evening, Seamus Mallon argued that the nub of the policing problem in Northern Ireland lay in a situation where nationalists felt deterred from joining a police force whose function was to protect a constitutional position unpalatable to them. Major changes in the nature of policing would have to be made if the nationalist community were to accept the police. Not a single policeman lived in over half the land mass of Northern Ireland. Those who policed West Belfast, for example, lived far from there - with obvious adverse effects for community policing.

The British and Irish Governments must address this issue in a proactive way. It would not automatically resolve itself even in the wake of a broader solution.

Declan O' Loan (a Councillor from Ballymena) took issue with Mallon, citing the RUC's efforts at reform and arguing for greater support for the RUC. In reply,

Mallon reiterated the failures of policing structures to accommodate the nationalist ethos and concerns. He also called on SDLP members to make increased use of the mechanisms of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to press complaints against the security forces in cases of harassment and other abuses.

7. In his keynote address on Saturday afternoon, John Hume said that it was the duty of every party to try to end the violence in Northern Ireland by direct dialogue. Some statements made by Unionist politicians, however, raised doubts about whether they wanted the violence to end.

He recalled that Unionists had twice this century (in 1912 and 1974) withdrawn their pledge of allegiance to the British Crown by threatening violence. He also recalled that the Provisional IRA had been born out of the violence which Unionists had turned on the civil rights movement in 1969. All of this suggested a degree of hypocrisy on the part of Unionist leaders who criticised him for talking to Gerry Adams.

Nationalists also had responsibilities, however. The IRA had arisen not just from past British and unionist attitudes but also from the attitudes of nationalist Ireland, in particular the martyrdom complex created by 1916.

On his talks with Adams, Hume said that the flexibility shown by Sinn Fein in that dialogue had convinced him that they were serious about lasting peace and a total cessation of violence. Leaving aside his total disagreement with their methods, his case was that, while their reasons were historically correct, these reasons were now "out of date and no longer valid in today's

Europe".

The SDLP argued that, of the three key relationships to be addressed, the North/South one was central. Until that relationship was settled to the satisfaction of the people of the North as well as the South, "nothing will work".

Hume suggested that it should not be too difficult for the British Government to make clear that the reasons offered by the IRA for their campaign no longer existed. "Mr Adams and I have proposed how this should be done". He recalled the terms of the various joint statements which he had issued with Gerry Adams. The major challenge was to the British Government. It was not one, in his view, which should pose any difficulty for them.

Unionists, Hume continued, were entitled to insist that any new relationships within Ireland must have the agreement of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. They were, however, the one party which had never accepted the principle of consent. They had always insisted on a veto on everyone else's consent.

The British Government should commit themselves to "actively promoting with the Irish Government agreement among the divided people of Ireland". He suggested that such agreement was the best way for Unionists to ensure the protection of their heritage and rights for the future and that this was made easier by the increasing interdependence to be found in today's "post-nationalist Europe".

In conclusion, Hume said that John Major held the key to opening the doors, "the key of peace that will lead to all of this". It would require no great effort from him

to turn that key and open the door to a new future based on agreement and respect for diversity.

8. In private conversation afterwards, Hume commented that the principles which had emerged from his talks with Adams could be easily identified in his speech if the media gave it a careful reading.
9. In the subsequent political affairs debate, speaker after speaker warmly endorsed the Hume/Adams initiative and paid fulsome tributes to the SDLP leader's contribution to the current peace efforts. The torch had been lit by Hume and passed to the two Governments, as Brid Rodgers put it. There was a general recognition (albeit with differing degrees of enthusiasm) that attitudes within the Republican movement were changing and that there was now a growing readiness to recognize the reality of Unionism and the importance of the consent principle.
10. In a speech which combined enthusiastic personal support for Hume with discreet reminders of his own reservations about the initiative, Eddie McGrady referred to the toll which Hume's efforts for peace had taken on him, mentally and physically, in recent months. He noted that Hume had taken this courageous initiative on his own (in order "not to involve the party"). He asked why Sinn Fein and the Provisionals could not declare today that they were ending the violence. The reassurance that they would have a place at the conference table in exchange for that should give them a sufficient guarantee. People in this part of Ireland had a right to peace. Sinn Fein's sincerity would be judged by their response to the efforts being made by the two Governments, "as arranged by our party leader".

11. Joe Hendron was strongly supportive of Hume. While promising to retain West Belfast at the next election, he pointed out that what counted at the end of the day was "peace, not seats". Along with other speakers, he denounced Unionist allegations of a "pan-nationalist conspiracy" and the consequences this was having for ordinary party members.

12. Seamus Mallon promised full support for the efforts of the two Governments to secure peace. (In this respect, he recalled that it had been the SDLP who had fought for years to ensure a "central and dynamic role" for the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland). If the Governments succeed, "let their names go into the history books". Mallon warned, however, of the despair which failure would bring, a despair which would be as tangible as the current hopes for peace. The British Government must act quickly and courageously.

Mallon underlined the SDLP's responsibility towards the nationalist community (the legitimacy of nationalism would have to be established in political structures with a potential for change) and towards the Unionist community (efforts must be made to dispel their uncertainty). He did not, however, fully accept that Unionists required reassurance, bearing in mind the repeated pledges of support by the Taoiseach for the principle of consent and the five principles (sic) enunciated by the Tanaiste recently.

Anglo-Irish Section

7 December 1993