



**An Chartlann Náisiúnta**  
**National Archives**

**Reference Code:** 2021/48/162

**Creator(s):** Department of Foreign Affairs

**Accession Conditions:** Open

**Copyright:** National Archives, Ireland.  
May only be reproduced with  
the written permission of the  
Director of the National  
Archives.

Confidential

SDLP ANNUAL CONFERENCE

COOKSTOWN, 18-20 NOVEMBER 1994

1. The SDLP held their annual conference in Cookstown from 18-20 November. The conference was well-attended and party morale was predictably high in the wake of the two ceasefires. John Hume's personal contribution to the peace process was widely applauded (as was his success in the European Parliament elections last June).
2. In substantive terms, however, the conference broke little new ground, with the debates on security, political developments and socio-economic issues following fairly familiar lines. John Hume's keynote speech, furthermore, was not among his best performances.
3. Due to the political developments in Dublin, representation from the Southern parties was sparse. Labour were not represented but a message of support was sent by Bernie Malone MEP. Fianna Fail and the Progressive Democrats were represented by Councillors from border counties. Fine Gael were represented by Deputies Austin Currie and Paul Bradford.
4. The British Labour Party were represented by Mo Mowlam, the new shadow spokesperson on Northern Ireland. Ms Mowlam also addressed the conference on behalf of the Socialist International, making clear that the Labour Party's "aspiration to unity by consent" had not changed and would not change. In private conversation, she was more inclined to highlight the social and economic aspects of her brief.
5. A special presentation was made by Seamus Mallon on behalf of the SDLP Executive to Kevin McNamara, who responded in eloquent and moving terms.
6. Other guests included Piet Dankert and two other MEPs; Paul Quinn of the Washington-based Committee for a New Ireland; and Tom Hughes, chief of staff to Senator Claiborne Pell.
7. A message of support from the Taoiseach was very favourably received when it was read out by Mark Durkan, the SDLP Chairman, immediately after John Hume's keynote

*Handwritten notes:*  
C. 102  
1/1/94  
2/1/94  
3/1/94  
4/1/94  
5/1/94  
6/1/94  
7/1/94  
8/1/94  
9/1/94  
10/1/94  
11/1/94  
12/1/94  
21

address.

8. Inevitably, the focus of discussion in the corridors was the political crisis in Dublin and concern at its possible implications for the peace process and the conclusion of the framework document. We availed of a series of conversations with delegates to provide reassurance in this regard, drawing attention to the acceptance by all parties in the Dail that the peace process was above party politics and would be accorded top priority in whatever Government emerged.
9. The debate on the administration of justice was marked by Seamus Mallon's strong criticism of the recent statement by the Chief Constable on policing policy. He deprecated Annesley's insistence on maintaining a unified force, contrary to proposals which Mallon recently put forward for a regional-based policing service. He characterised the Chief Constable's approach as minimalist and took issue with his claim that the present debate on policing was "premature" and that future discussions in this area should be "led" by the Government. He warned against the view that tinkering with the present system would be an adequate response and called on the party's councillors to uphold party policy of non-participation in local Police Liaison Committees.

Mallon argued that the policing problem would only be resolved in the context of an overall settlement of which policing was an integral part. It was essential to move to a situation where young people joining the police were perceived as helping to serve their community, rather than defending a particular constitutional position. Only radical change would create a situation in which people from mainstream nationalist areas felt able to identify fully with the police. That was not the case at present.

As an example of recurring difficulties, he pointed to the recent report by the Council of Europe Committee on the Prevention of Torture and regretted the refusal of the British Government to provide it with certain documentation as requested. He also condemned efforts by paramilitary elements to hijack the policing issue and he made clear that their efforts would be resisted.

While there was general support for Mallon's position, it was evident from the debate that there are some in the party who favour a more open approach to the RUC. There was agreement that more needed to be done to explain the party's position. A working group under Mallon's chairmanship was mandated to report on the issue to next year's Conference.

10. John Hume's keynote address on Saturday afternoon was something of a disappointment.

Given that this year's conference was taking place in the afterglow of the two ceasefires, and that one resolution after another acclaimed the party leader's personal contribution to these, Hume conspicuously failed to rise to the occasion. His speech was essentially a pedestrian rehearsal of his standard themes and metaphors. He may have lost some of his audience, indeed, at a number of points (e.g., an excursus on the challenges of EU enlargement). Applause at the end was dutiful rather than enthusiastic.

Hume began by welcoming PM Major's signature of the Joint Declaration (on foot of his own advice) and saying that the SDLP now awaited "the framework for an agreement involving dialogue with all parties", which they hoped would begin very soon (to loud applause from the floor).

Placing on record his deep appreciation for the work of the Taoiseach and his Government in relation to the peace process, he said that the SDLP assumed that all parties in the Dail were totally committed to the process and that it would work closely with whatever Government emerged to continue the process. It went without saying that peace and justice in the North transcended party politics in the South.

Hume praised party members for their solidarity throughout the peace process and singled out the contributions of Seamus Mallon ("for example, when I had to go to the United States"), Joe Hendron (who had political difficulties to contend with in his constituency because of the process) and Eddie McGrady.

He pointed out that the SDLP was the first party in the island to have the word "consent" in its constitution. But, as Seamus Mallon had said recently, the principle of consent applied to "both sections of our divided people".

Welcoming the British Government's commitment (in the Joint Declaration) to doing all in its power to promote agreement among the Irish people, Hume said he did not understand the British reluctance "to be persuaders". One would imagine that the British Government, as the responsible authority, would offer all their powers of persuasion to encourage the Irish people to reach agreement.

The theme of the interdependence of peoples in the modern European context led to praise for the speed of the EU's response to the peace process (thanks to "our socialist

colleague, Jacques Delors"). Drawing attention to the SDLP's "positive, well-thought-out and strategic" input to the Task Force set up to prepare the EU aid package, Hume mentioned his proposals for a Fund for Peace in Ireland and a Social Inclusion Programme and said he had high hopes that these ideas would be adopted by the Commission.

In a passage which drew marked applause, he emphasized that the British Government must redirect savings from security expenditure (up to &500 million annually) towards the needs of marginalized and deprived communities in NI.

He also welcomed the announcement of increased U.S. assistance through the IFI and recalled the "solid and positive links" he had built with the U.S. over the past twenty years.

Dealing with the implications of EU enlargement, he suggested that Austria (which he had visited recently at Chancellor Vranitzky's invitation and from which he had borne back &2 million worth of new orders) might prove a model for overcoming divisions.

11. The subsequent political affairs debate was based on a series of motions which warmly congratulated John Hume on his contribution to the peace process (and in several instances proposed him for the Nobel Peace Prize).

The following points of interest arose in this debate.

12. Eddie McGrady suggested that no political progress would be possible until the framework document had been published. He urged the two Governments, "but especially the British", to take advantage of the peace and to finalize this document without further delay.
13. Seamus Mallon echoed this note of impatience. Recalling that in the Joint Declaration the two Governments had acknowledged that the "most urgent and important issue" facing the people of Ireland was to "remove the causes of conflict, to overcome the legacy of history and to heal the divisions which have resulted", he asked the two Governments to honour that commitment and to translate the Declaration into "political reality". Only when the Declaration was tested would we know its true worth.

Prefacing his remarks with a tribute to John Hume (on whom the "emotional drain" due to the peace process had been enormous), Mallon also paid tribute to the "real peace people", the ordinary members of the SDLP. He spoke vividly of the sense he had had at the funeral of Frank Kerr, the Newry postal worker, that people had



"tasted peace and never wanted to let it go again".

Among SDLP members, there was a common resolve not to accept the status of a subordinate and abused minority - a status which had been imposed on NI nationalists by the combined weight of the British Government and the Unionist majority. For as long as the NI framework existed (and it would not disappear overnight), and given the inbuilt "tribal weighting" in the Unionists' favour in the creation of Northern Ireland, the challenge was how to give equality to nationalists. What was known as "parity of esteem" could be described in simpler terms as "the right to belong in our own land" and on a basis of full political equality. Only that would sustain the peace.

Acceptance of the consent principle did not require NI nationalists to agree with the present status of Northern Ireland. If the "Unionist veto" meant that equality for nationalists was to be doled out through what Unionists agreed, that would not be acceptable. Dismissing a recent claim by Willie Ross MP that there had been too many "concessions" to nationalists, he declared that the SDLP would come to negotiations as equals and not on the basis of concessions.

Despite what the Unionists believed, the British Government had the right to decide with the Irish Government, a sovereign Government, on the arrangements for Northern Ireland. If consent was to be a positive concept, it would be forthcoming from nationalists only on the basis that the old "Unionist veto" was gone.

Mallon suggested that the success of the Forum would be judged by "the speed with which we get out of it" (i.e., with which the fundamental problems were addressed). His personal prediction was that the Forum would prove to be "one of the most important bodies this island has ever seen". It would not, however, be a negotiating Forum. Nor would it be a pan-nationalist Forum; he recalled in this respect the iniquities of pan-Unionism during the period from 1921 to 1972.

14. Alex Attwood drew attention to two guests who were attending the Conference as observers (at Attwood's instigation, it appeared): Eddie Kinnear of the Progressive Unionist Party (who is understood to have served time for Loyalist paramilitary offences) and Peter Auld (?), a former Republican prisoner.

Attwood went on to urge the British Government, in the light of its Declaration commitments, to break new ground in the framework document. They must sponsor and establish wide-ranging cross-border bodies with executive

and consultative powers. These were important in terms of practical North/South cooperation but were essential in terms of nationalists' identity and allegiance.

15. In a powerful intervention, Denis Haughey described it as a tragedy that the original civil rights agenda of the late sixties had become submerged in the violent campaign of the IRA. Thankfully, in an atmosphere of peace, the party could now revert to the real agenda, the simple questions of social and economic justice which the civil rights movement had asked. There had been a monumental imbalance in the rights accorded in Northern Ireland to the various communities. If answers were not found to these questions, violence would sooner or later engulf Northern Ireland again (as it had done in every decade so far).

"Parity of esteem" must mean the right of nationalists to participate in power in Northern Ireland. It must also mean the right to share in the life of the nation to which they belonged. The Irish State, furthermore, had the right to be involved with NI nationalists in working out the latter's destiny "within this territory". NI nationalists accepted the right of Unionists to be British. "We are Irish citizens living in our own country; we will not be treated as an ethnic minority in our own island; and our rights will not be determined in terms of what Unionists want".

Haughey went on to suggest that NI nationalists had "largely outgrown" the State of Northern Ireland ("it can't contain us anymore"). He underlined at the same time the SDLP's readiness to look at all ideas for future forms of government.

Anglo-Irish Section  
23 November 1994