

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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30th Annual Conference of the SDLP, Newcastle, 17/18 November 2000

1. The SDLP held its thirtieth Annual Conference in Newcastle, Co. Down at the weekend. The Department was represented by Sec. Ó Ceallaigh and a number of officers from HQ. Joint Sec. Belfast also attended.

2. Although the banners on stage suggested that the Conference's main themes were "Building the Peace - Making a Difference" and "Changing the Face of the Future", in fact most delegates were preoccupied with the question of whether or not the party should nominate members to the Policing Board.

3. In conversation, there was a widespread and obvious lack of trust in the intentions of the Secretary of State and an anxiety that the party will be damaged politically should it make nominations while Sinn Féin declined to do so. There is no doubt that policing is a matter of the highest importance to the party's grassroots and the large vote achieved by Alex Attwood in his election as Party Chair may have reflected approval of the strong line he has been taking on the issue. However, there was also a strong sense that, despite their reservations, the SDLP would like to be able to participate in the project if improvements in the package make it at all possible for them to do so.

4. The other main theme was renewal. The party's main objectives over thirty years were realised through the Agreement and it is now struggling somewhat to define its contemporary rather than historical relevance. Being the "responsible" party of Government, as many speakers including Mark Durkan characterised it, is not a role that engenders glamourous appeal. Nonetheless, members generally were in positive mood and, like last year, there was a decent sprinkling of younger delegates (although fewer appeared to speak in debates). The party is now putting in place its new organisational structure as endorsed at a special conference in June.

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5. In a break with past practice, there was no political affairs debate.

Justice and Policing Debate

6. The opening debate on justice and policing issues was dominated by the question of what position the SDLP should now adopt on policing. Although the motion passed left the question open, speakers advocated that the party continue to take a strong line until it is satisfied with the entire package.

7. In a well received and powerfully delivered intervention, Minister for Agriculture, Bríd Rodgers, quoted Clifford Shearing's description of the Patten Report as having been "gutted". She said that "the Bill as constituted does not, I repeat, does not hold out any prospect of the much hoped and much needed new beginning". Although she concluded that "it is never too late to do the right thing", she wondered "how can those of us who have lived through the murders of people like Robert Hamill, Rosemary Nelson and Pat Finucane be expected to accept a policing bill which hands back the power to block an independent inquiry to the very people who have so far refused to establish one".

8. Alex Attwood pointed to areas where the party continued to seek change. They wanted certainty on the questions of flags and emblems; the "fragmentation" of Special Branch - "that force within the force"; certainty about proposals for North/South co-operation; as well as an end to emergency legislation. Attwood told Conference that the party wanted "proper policing and we want it now".

9. John Fee, MLA for Newry and Armagh, said that he would sell a new policing service on the doorsteps of his constituency, but only if it "will work for my community". Tommy Gallagher, MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, said that policing arrangements that did not have genuine accountability and impartiality built in would not work. Kevin Carlin of the party's youth branch

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said that "the police should belong to unionism no longer".

Speech by Deputy First Minister, Séamus Mallon

10. Séamus Mallon received a very warm reception from delegates but looked tired and delivered his speech in a very low key way.

11. He called for "real dialogue" between parties and warned against limping along "in a world of exit strategies, of suspension tactics, of blame allocation, of electoral preparations, of legal challenges". The DUP was not alone in taking a "semi-detached" position in the Executive, "eager for power and position but unwilling to share responsibility". The burden of taking "the wider view" falls to the SDLP. He called on pro-Agreement unionists to "make your voices heard" warning that "we will all fall back into stalemate, if devolution and local responsibility have to be abandoned". He told republicans that "surely, by now you realise that it is time to let go - finally, once and for all - of any association with violence as a means of advancing a political position". Paraphrasing AE Russell he argued that "there is no dishonour in raising your struggle from the political to the intellectual plane".

12. On the present "crisis", Mallon proposed that the re-engagement with the de Chastelain Commission promised at Hillsborough "should take place now". It should be "meaningful and sustained. It should not be a bargaining chip". For their part, the UUP "should make a commitment to stop disrupting the insitutions". Pointing to the fact that if re-egagement does take place that many fear that UUC meetings in January and March will be used to "ratchet up demands", he warned the two Governments to "set their faces against any more unilateral tampering with the institutions" which are owned, not by one party, "but by the people of Ireland, North and South".

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13. Mallon also used his speech to highlight the achievements of the past year - the performance of the SDLP Ministerial team, the Programme for Government and budget, the successful progress in North/South activity.

Leadership Address

14. The main event on Saturday was John Hume's leadership address. It was preceded by a 13 minute video containing testimonials to Hume and to the party from luminaries including the Taoiseach, President Clinton, the Tánaiste, Mo Mowlam, Neil Kinnock, Séamus Heaney and, in a humourous but affectionate piece that went down well with the audience, Bono. To a sound-track of "I'll take you there" the video also included footage from the early civil rights days and from more recent events of significance. It was notable that the video did not include a message from any current British Government Northern Ireland Minister.

15. The speech itself was long - at about 53 minutes - and re-echoed many of the familiar SDLP themes down the years. Quoting Robert Kennedy, "give me a place to stand and I will move the world", Hume cited the party's achievements of the past 30 years and the bringing to fruition of its analysis in the Agreement. He paid warm tribute to the work of Séamus Mallon and of the other SDLP Ministers who are "not only making a tremendous success of their own portforlios, but they are making a vital contribution to the overall coherence of the Executive".

16. Hume said that he deeply regretted the UUC motion and subsequent action by David Trimble - "at the very least completely contrary to the spirit of the Agreement" - and said that it was "wrong to try to prevent legally-appointed Ministers from discharging one of their basic functions". Now that Mr Trimble had made his views clear "he should now be prepared to relax his position". Expressing his belief that the IRA is committed to the peace process, he said that

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they "ought now to take a further step" on arms, entering into meaningful discussions with de Chastelain.

17. On policing, he described a service as envisaged in Patten and in the Agreement as a "prize of immense importance" that "should be deeply reassuring to unionists and nationalists alike". He paid tributed to the work of Alex Attwood, in particular, in ensuring that the legislation and Implementation Plan are in line with Patten .

Other Debates

18. Other debates were used, in particular, to showcase the ministerial team, all of whom commented on the novelty of addressing Conference as Ministers.

19. In his address, Mark Durkan announced a review into the make-up of senior levels of the civil service in the North, to look at both sectarian and gender imbalances. He warned against the review of local government turning into a "boundary war" or a "sterile debate" on the bundle of issues for which local authorities are to have responsibility. Rather, he suggested that lessons should be learned, especially from the Partnership Boards established under the EU PEACE Programme. On the broader political front, Durkan observed that the SDLP was "getting on with the job", condemning the "pedantic, semantic silly antics" of other parties".

20. In the agriculture debate, Bríd Rodgers pointed to her achievements in the past year and stressed, in particular, the importance of the North/South dimension. Seán Farren said that he would shortly announce a cross-departmental working party on employability which he will chair himself. On the question of student funding, he said that he had listened carefully to views, but wished to introduce a "note of caution and realism" given the competing demands on resources within

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the Executive" (in fact, when he subsequently resisted the recommendation of the Assembly's Higher Education Committee that student fees be phased out, he became the first Executive Minister to be defeated on the floor of the Assembly).

21. Conference also debated Education, Culture and Arts, Health, Social Development, the Economy, the Environment and European and International Affairs. In the well-attended Human Rights debate Prof. Colin Harvey of Leeds University spoke about the current Bill of Rights project (he will be drafting the SDLP's submission) and Alex Attwood anticipated that there might be resistance to giving full legislative effect to the Bill of Rights when the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission brings its recommendations forward. There was also a lively debate on the subject of racism (ethnic minority delegates were a small, but noticable, presence at Conference) during which there were several references to problems in the South.

Helen Blake

21 November 2000

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