

The SDLP manifesto was launched at a press conference at the Europa Hotel on 24 April 1979 by Gerry Fitt and other party leaders.

An eight page document, the manifesto was significant in its concentrated attack on the Secretary of State and the Government's policy in all direct rule fields, in its criticism of Unionist intransigence and the Loyalist guarantee, and in its continued emphasis on the Irish dimension at the expense of a solution within Northern Ireland. The manifesto reaffirmed the party's opposition to the return of majority rule, to the continuation of direct rule and support for renewed negotiations on agreed structures of government for the whole of Ireland and for the ultimate disengagement of the British and the return of sovereignty to the people of the island of Ireland.

The main points of the manifesto are:

(a) its attack on the British attitude -

"The voters should be aware that the primary aim of British policy in Northern Ireland is to break the SDLP. Roy Mason has left no-one in any doubt that the British government wish to move towards the restoration of unionist control, in order to extricate themselves from Northern Ireland. The strength of the SDLP has been the only major obstacle to that strategy, and therefore we must be broken. The Northern Ireland Office has found some surprising allies, who are willing to cooperate with them in this enterprise".

"The present means of government, through the Ministers of the Northern Ireland Office, has not been successful. They are not responsible to the local electorate and they are unresponsive to the particular needs of Northern Ireland. Under the aegis of Roy Mason they have come to be seen as representing British and Unionist interests only, and are perceptibly hostile to the interests and aspirations of the minority. Under the Direct Rule administration the minority in Northern Ireland once again feel swamped in a state with which they do not identify, and which they perceive as hostile to them. This is a dangerous situation".

(b) its attack on direct rule for the supposed failure of its economic, social and security policies, and particularly its political policies -

"In almost every area where government has responsibility we are worse off now than we were in 1974. The most obvious failure has been in the political field. When Labour came to office in 1974, representatives of the two traditions in Northern Ireland were working together in government. Now there is no dialogue whatsoever between the two communities at a political level".

(c) its attack on the political vacuum following the fall of the 1974 power-sharing Executive and the failure of

the Convention and its accusation that NI has become a political football at Westminster -

"The Government's policy in all of these fields has been partly due to the difficult parliamentary situation....In order merely to survive, it sought to drive a series of shabby deals with minority parties, most notoriously with the Northern Ireland loyalists. The result has been that the Northern Ireland question has become a political football between the two parties at Westminster; policy has been determined by political considerations which have nothing to do with Northern Ireland".

- (d) its attack on the Government's security policies and for its supposed belief in a military solution -

"Since the collapse of the Convention, the British approach to the Northern Ireland problem has been a military one. With the arrival of Roy Mason as Secretary of State, police and army were given a free hand to pursue a tough security policy. The SDLP has always maintained that tough security measures would not solve a problem which is essentially political".

- (e) its attack on the negative guarantee and the partition settlement -

"As a first step in this direction the British Government must end the one-sided guarantee given to the Unionists of Northern Ireland, which makes fish of one section of our community and flesh of the other. This guarantee has been paraded in the past as a piece of democratic morality. It is nothing of the kind. It commits the British Government to supporting a partition settlement in Ireland which was conceived and executed for the good of one small section of this country's population and was heavily weighted in their favour".

- (f) its emphasis of the reconciliation of the peoples in Ireland and its reaffirmation of the 1978 Conference motion on the inevitability and desirability of British disengagement and calling for a quadripartite conference -

"For the SDLP the question is not whether Britain should disengage from Ireland, but when and in what circumstances. It will be a major objective of this party, immediately after the election, to enlist support for the quadripartite conference and then to begin the process of planned disengagement".

"It is surely not unreasonable, at this stage, to insist that the British must abandon their present policy and commit themselves to seeking reconciliation between the peoples of this island. The real Irish problem is the division which exists among the people. It can only be solved when this division is healed".

"The fundamental aim of the SDLP is to create in Ireland agreed structures of government, which will

enable the people of both parts of Ireland to co-operate together in pursuit of common interests, while retaining the power to protect and safeguard their culture, identity and particular interests.

The manifesto was particularly significant in the fact that, unlike its policy document "Facing Reality" which was adopted at its party conference in 1977 and unlike several of the principal speeches at the 1978 party conference, there was absolutely no mention of the possibility of agreeing to partnership devolved government within Northern Ireland. The emphasis is no longer on a quadripartite conference to agree "a form of government for the North, within the long-term strategy" of eventual Irish reunification which was the theme of Facing Reality, but more on a quadripartite conference to discuss the relationship of NI to the South. It is also significant that there is no reference to the principle of unity by consent; the dominant theme is unionist intransigence and the British guarantee of it and the need to break down this intransigence with a commitment to weakening the division between the two cultures in Ireland. The SDLP would seem to be not far off the Fianna Fail call for a British declaration of interest in Irish unity. In particular, a new element is the bitter assertion that Government policy is aimed at destroying the SDLP in order to permit the handover of power to a unionist majority in a British pull-out.

In the socio-economic field, the manifesto sought to highlight the problems of unemployment and family poverty; the run-down of local hospitals, the failure to implement the rural planning policies of the Cockcroft report and to pursue the introduction of comprehensive education, and the lack of sensitivity of the NIHE to local opinion.