

PAB/5394/RE

① Sir E. Bell

② POL.

cc: PS/Ministers (I&amp;B) (M)

\*PS/PUS (I&amp;B) (M)

\*PS/Sir E Bell ✓

Mr Bourn

Mr Brennan (M)

Mr Angel (M)

\*Mr Merifield o/a

Mr Gilliland

Miss Davies

Mr Palmer

Mr Buxton

Mr Coulson

\*Mr Boys Smith (M)

\*Mr Abbott (M)

\*Miss MacGlashan

(\* With copy of manifesto.)

PS/Secretary of State (I&B)(M)SDLP MANIFESTO

1. The SDLP published their election manifesto this morning: I attach a copy. The original comes in an orange, white and green folder with the slogan "Stand Firm".
2. Of the four pages, three and a half are devoted to a hard-line nationalist exposition of why the Government's plans are unacceptable. The other half-page, headed "economic situation", merely says that the Government has made a mess of the economy and the Assembly won't help.
3. The SDLP's aim is to demonstrate that their "rejection of these terms" has widespread support within the community; but "we remain ready as always, strengthened by our renewed mandate, to negotiate on terms that are based on a realistic analysis of the problems that face us".
4. The main SDLP arguments are:
  - (a) the rules under which the Assembly is being set up preclude success and will add to instability. In particular, any votes after devolution will be taken on a simple majority basis. At every "general election" to the Assembly there will be a period of instability, or worse. And what does cross-community support mean, especially when the unionists have made clear their opposition to powersharing with the SDLP?
  - (b) The SDLP has consistently tried to be positive - in 1973, 1975 and 1979. Unionist intransigence has prevented all progress. Enough is enough.
  - (c) Though the White Paper correctly identifies the heart of the

problem, the Assembly proposals ignore it.

- (d) The Government has reneged on powersharing and the Irish dimension.

5. The manifesto goes on to define the immediate objective of the SDLP as a quick end to the Assembly. A solution should then be sought in the Anglo-Irish framework. "Towards that end it is the intention of the SDLP following the Election to propose to the Irish Government the setting up of a Council for a New Ireland made up of members of the Dail and those mandated in this election. The Council should have a limited life and have the specific task of examining the obstacles to the creation of a New Ireland and producing for the first time on behalf of all the elected democratic parties in the country who believe in a New Ireland, an agreed blueprint so that a debate on real alternatives can begin within the Anglo Irish framework. The SDLP would hope to play its full part in such a body."

#### Comment

6. The SDLP have made no secret from the start of their dismay at the Government's plans. They believe they represent a weakening of the positions of former Governments, and find it hard to maximise their own electoral position vis à vis the other nationalist parties on such a basis. Given the compromise decision to fight the election and abstain from the Assembly, their inevitable answer has been to fight on a platform of hard opposition to the Government's plans, and nothing else.

7. Nevertheless, the manifesto shows evidence of the cracks in the SDLP. The "moderates" have managed to preserve the position that the party is ready to negotiate with the Government on new terms - the language Mr Hume has been using to keep the door ajar. The "green" wing have insisted on a strong Irish dimension in the form of a joint body comprising members of the Dail and nationalist members of the Assembly: one aim of this is doubtless so to enrage unionists that the chances of their working the Assembly, and of consenting to any part for the SDLP, will be further reduced. The proposal echoes the ideas originally floated some years ago by Seamus Mallon, and lately revived by the IIP, for a Parliament comprising members of the Dail and a Northern Assembly. However, the nature of the body proposed in the SDLP manifesto is care-

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fully circumscribed. It is to have a limited life and a specific task which, since it will involve criticising the warts on the Republic's face, will not be entirely welcome to Mr Haughey.

8. Mr Hume probably hopes that he has got an effective electoral platform which keeps the party together and balances an element of flexibility towards the Assembly against a carefully limited commitment to the all-Ireland road. But the overall effect of the document will be to make it much harder for the SDLP to enter the Assembly without some fairly major moves towards the SDLP position. On tactical grounds Mr Hume may welcome this too.



D E S BLATHERWICK  
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