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- cc: PS/Lord Gowrie (B and L) - M
 PS/PUS (B and L) - M
 (1) Sir E Bell
 Mr Brennan (L) (2) PAL - M
 Mr Bourn
 Mr Merifield
 Mr Angel (L) - M
 Mr Gilliland
 Miss Davies
 Mr Palmer
 Mr Abbott (L) - M
 Mr Boys-Smith (L) - M
 Mr Edis
 Mr Tatham (British Embassy, Dublin)

PS/Secretary of State (B and L) - M

SDLP ANNUAL CONFERENCE, 28-30 JANUARY 1983

1. I attach a note by Mr Hewitt on the SDLP Conference which he attended. For those who would like to read Mr Hume's speech in full, it is printed in today's Irish Times.

2. The main results of the conference seem to me to be:-

- (a) SDLP members feel deeply pessimistic and frustrated; but, largely as a result of Mr Hume's rallying speech, they have emerged from the Conference in more of a fighting mood (with Sinn Fein and the British Government as chief targets). Their decision to contest all 17 Westminster constituencies is welcome evidence of a positive frame of mind. Whether it will last is another matter.
- (b) As expected, the SDLP have stridently reaffirmed their rejection of the Assembly and their determination to explore all-Ireland solutions through the Council for a New Ireland. Though differences of emphasis remain inside the party, all are committed to this line.

Blatherwick

D E S BLATHERWICK
 Political Affairs Division
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NOTE OF THE 12TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE SDLP

1. The 12th Annual Conference of the SDLP was held at the ^{Forum} Europa Hotel over the weekend of 28, 29 and 30 January 1983. The major decisions taken by the conference and other points of interest are summarised below.

Address by Party Leader

2. The centre-piece of the SDLP conference was the address by the party leader, John Hume on Saturday 29 January. Mr Hume's speech was designed to do three things: to alert delegates to the threat posed to the SDLP by Sinn Fein and to urge them to make a determined effort to maximise SDLP support at the forthcoming general election; to assert his belief that, due to unionist intransigence and the failure of Government to insist on power-sharing, the Assembly offered no hope of a solution to Northern Ireland's political problem; and to commit his party to exploring alternative solutions in an all-Ireland context.
3. Throughout his speech, Mr Hume expressed the continuing commitment of his party to peaceful politics as an alternative to the violent methods advocated by Sinn Fein. He issued a direct challenge to Sinn Fein by declaring that the SDLP would contest "every single" constituency at the next election although by so doing he was, in effect, pre-empting a decision which was not formally taken by the conference until the following day. Responding to recent newspaper reports that the party had lost touch with grassroots opinion (there is an article in the current edition of Fortnight, for example, which describes the size of the Sinn Fein vote at the Assembly elections as evidence that Mr Hume has lost touch and contracted a "European strain of the House of Commons disease" which led to the downfall of his predecessor as party leader) Mr Hume urged delegates to begin constituency work immediately after the conference and to make a special effort to recruit young people into the party. These remarks were warmly received and reflect a very real concern on the part of delegates to the conference that the SDLP would have to fight tooth and nail to retain their position as the major nationalist party.
4. Mr Hume was particularly critical of Government policy in Northern Ireland. He accused the Government of "conscious and malevolent neglect"

and claimed that the Prime Minister "doesn't give a damn" for Northern Ireland. Dismissing the Assembly as "the most irresponsible show on earth" he made it clear that without guaranteed powersharing his party would have nothing to do with it. Instead, the SDLP would pursue an all-Ireland solution through his proposed Council for a New Ireland. He appealed to the three main parties in the Republic to join the SDLP in examining the practicalities of creating a new Ireland based upon the "essential unity and diversity" within the island and told the conference that he was encouraged by the initial responses he had received. Mr Hume's speech lasted about 30 minutes and, at the end, he was given a standing ovation.

Fraternal Delegates.

5. Immediately after the leader's address, party chairman Sean Farren read out the usual fraternal greetings, mainly from various European socialist parties. More significant, of course, were the messages sent to the conference from Dublin. Dr Fitzgerald promised the SDLP that his government would "carefully examine" the proposal for a Council For a New Ireland ^{and} would make early contact with the party; for Fianna Fail, Mr Haughey pledged his party's full support for the SDLP's stance on the Irish dimension. Given the difficulties which the Council presents for both Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, Mr Hume could not realistically have expected much more explicit support and it was probably something of a surprise when the visiting Labour Party representative, Ruairi Quinn, addressed the conference and told delegates that his party welcomed the proposed Council. Later in the evening, I had the opportunity of talking briefly to Mr Quinn. He explained that, in his remarks to the conference, he had not been speaking on behalf of the coalition but merely on behalf of his own party which would undoubtedly support the Council. It was in their long-term interests to see the establishment of an all-Ireland pluralist society in which sectarian politics would be extinguished once and for all. It would not be easy for Fine Gael or Fianna Fail to participate but he was optimistic that a way would be found to get the Council off the ground. In the meantime he hoped the British Government would listen to the SDLP and take account of its views; if the SDLP were ignored it might not be able to survive as a political party in which case the Government would find itself having to do business with Sinn Fein.

Debate on the Government of Northern Ireland

6. The major debate of the weekend concerned proposals for the Government of Northern Ireland. After a procedural wrangle, the constituency representatives (Assembly members) managed to ensure that it was their motion, out of a list of 16, which was considered first. Since there was only an hour set aside for the debate it seemed unlikely that there would be time to consider any of the other motions. The constituency representatives' motion basically confirmed the policy laid down by Mr Hume and read as follows:-

"The SDLP reaffirms its commitment to seeking a solution to the political crisis through negotiations in the Anglo/Irish framework."

The motion was proposed by Seamus Mallon and seconded by Paschal O'Hare. According to Mr Mallon, the Assembly represented an attempt to get the SDLP to prop up unionism and he rejected it absolutely. He was warmly applauded by delegates when he announced his view that no solution to Northern Ireland's problems was possible in a Northern Ireland context. According to Mr O'Hare, the Assembly was an insult to nationalists and only the Council For a New Ireland offered any prospect of political progress. It was left to Austin Currie to sound the only note of caution when he reminded the conference of the practical difficulties of asking the parties in the Republic to "put their money where their mouths are". He insisted that the concept of partnership in devolved government was not dead, indeed it remained the SDLP's central policy; and he looked forward to the day when he might return to Stormont as a member of a power-sharing administration. Mr Currie is an increasingly isolated figure within the SDLP but his views are not totally unrepresentative. A number of delegates were prepared to admit privately that they would have been very happy to participate in the Assembly if power-sharing had been there as of right rather than "by grace and favour of unionists". But the Government had failed to listen to them and had done nothing to confront unionist complacency and intransigence. Since participation in government was no longer a realistic possibility, they had no option but to tread the all-Ireland path. Not all of them were as enthusiastic as Seamus Mallon but, for the time being at least, the Council For a New Ireland was their only hope of political involvement. If the Government did not like it, they

had only themselves to blame.

7. With only minutes remaining, Paddy Duffy who had led SDLP opposition to contesting the Assembly elections persuaded the party chairman to allow debate on one further motion tabled in this section. This motion read as follows:-

"Conference deplores the shabby attempts by Jim Prior to involve the SDLP in the Assembly and reiterates its determination not to take part in this meaningless charade."

It quickly became obvious that Mr Duffy had forced this debate in order to put forward his own view that the constituency representatives should resign their Assembly seats. In reply, Paddy O'Donoghue argued that there could be no question of mass resignation since the Assembly members had a clear duty to represent, and act on behalf of, their constituents. Resignation would simply drive more people into the arms of Sinn Fein. The motion itself was passed but there was no further talk of resigning seats. Although a refusal to take part in the Assembly was implicit in everything Mr Hume had said, the impression was left that one or two party members would have preferred it if this particular motion had not been adopted as party policy.

Other Business

8. One or two other decisions taken by the conference are worth recording:-

(a) Electoral Law

The conference overwhelmingly adopted two separate motions condemning Mr Mallon's disqualification from the Assembly and calling for a revision of the relevant legislation. Delegates also passed a composite motion on electoral malpractice which demands, inter alia, the introduction of regulations requiring the clear identification of persons claiming a ballot paper before they are allowed to vote. This motion is further evidence of the concern felt by the SDLP about the size of the Sinn Fein vote at the Assembly elections.

(b) Civil Rights

The first motion debated by the conference called on the Secretary of State to abolish the Fair Employment Agency and take more positive action against religious discrimination. Proposed by Brian Feeny, a Belfast City Councillor, the motion aroused some sympathy amongst delegates but it was quickly appreciated that, if passed, the motion would be greeted with enormous pleasure by those unionist politicians who would like to see the end of the FEA for rather different reasons. Paddy O'Hanlon, Eddie McGrady and Paschal O'Hare all urged delegates to reject the motion and, in the end, it was unanimously defeated.

(c) Party organisation

In private session, the conference decided to contest all 17 constituencies at the next general election. The importance of this motion is that it commits the party to standing against Sinn Fein in Fermanagh, West Belfast and Mid Ulster and also shows the determination of the party to maximise its overall vote. There was some opposition to the motion, not least from delegates representing constituencies like East Belfast and East Antrim where the SDLP's electoral prospects are bleak, but largely due to the intervention of John Hume it was carried with a comfortable majority.

Summary

9. According to Mr Hume, the SDLP has emerged from its conference with "a clear direction and a clear policy". Delegates have firmly rejected any possibility of participating in the Assembly and have committed themselves to exploring solutions in an all-Ireland context. They have backed Mr Hume's proposed Council For a New Ireland and, although they appreciate the difficulties, they are reasonably confident that Fine Gael and Fianna Fail will help them get the Council off the ground. The party is deeply concerned about the electoral threat posed by Sinn Fein but they have reasserted their belief in peaceful politics. On Sunday evening, Mr Hume sent party members, literally and metaphorically, "out into the snow" determined to organise themselves for the forthcoming election. How long their enthusiasm will last remains to be seen. Below the surface, there is a mood of pessimism. They are convinced that the Government is indifferent to their plight and

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responsible for the position in which they now find themselves. Despite their leader's rhetoric, many of them believe that the party may not be able to survive the coming months and will gradually lose support to Sinn Fein. For the time being, the party is reasonably united but, unless some real progress can be made with the proposed Council For a New Ireland, the cracks which were visible at the time of the Assembly elections seem certain to reappear.

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