

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

cc: PS/Secretary of State (L&B) -M
 PS/Ministers (L&B) -M
 PS/PUS (L&B) -M
PS/Mr Bloomfield -M 11/11 2.11.3/5
 Mr Brennan -M
 Mr Stephens
 Mr Chesterton -M
 Mr Gilliland
 Mr Spence
 Mr Merifield
 Mr Elliott
 Miss Elliott -M
 Mr G Hewitt
 Mr S Hewitt
 Mr Bell -M
 Mr Ehrman -M
 Dr Mawhinney -M



SDLP ATTITUDE

Mr Ehrman and I called today on Mr Eamon Hanna, Secretary of the SDLP. Our hour-long conversation contained a number of points of interest.

The report in today's Irish Times that the Party was embarking on a substantial reorganisation in order to make the most effective use of the Anglo-Irish Conference is clearly correct. The party's new structures are to be organised on sectoral lines and thus will bear some resemblance to a 'shadow' administration. Mr Hanna made it clear that the SDLP were determined to be hard-nosed in their reaction to the Anglo-Irish agreement. They had deliberately avoided shouts of triumph, but nevertheless needed quickly to demonstrate to their supporters that there were tangible benefits to be obtained.

Only after some debate was Mr Hanna prepared to agree that, in due course, the SDLP ought to do or say something which might help to indicate to Unionists that the agreement was entirely one-sided. He felt that the current Unionist reaction was predictable and clearly containable - and that it was for the Government to do any containing that was necessary. Although he agreed that the by-election campaign would be a period of great uncertainty and potential violence he did not believe that in the aftermath Unionist leaders would be able to mobilise popular support as they had in 1974. Mr Hanna nevertheless conceded that at some stage - and he was very unclear about when - the Party would have to demonstrate its willingness to discuss devolution in a constructive fashion, and to be more forthcoming

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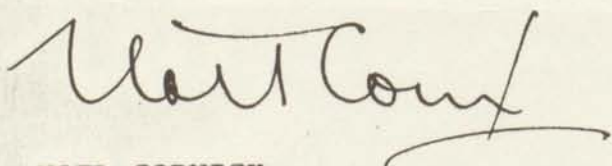
in its public attitude to the RUC.

The Party's reorganisation and post-agreement strategy is likely to be set out in a statement which Mr Hanna thought Mr Hume would make later this week. This statement seems to supersede a letter which at one time it was thought was to issue from the Party leadership to all members.

On the by-elections Mr Hanna felt his party had a real chance in Newry and Armagh and an outside chance in South Down, where success depended on turning out the rural SDLP voters. He also felt that 50% of those who had voted for Sinn Fein in the 1983 General Election were "soft voters" whose allegiance was winnable by the SDLP.

Comment

Although Mr Hanna is not privy to all the deliberations of the SDLP's leadership quartet of Hume, Mallon, McGrady and Hendron, he nevertheless demonstrates that the Party has still failed to appreciate the strength in ² of the Unionist reaction to the agreement. They still feel that it is more important for them to ward off the Sinn Fein challenge by swift and decisive action to take advantage of the agreement, than to make any sort of gesture which might be interpreted as being conciliatory to the Unionists. There is clearly a feeling that once the by-elections are over Unionist opposition to the agreement will gradually peter out and the Conference be allowed to work unimpeded. Such a view is some cause for concern, particularly if, as is likely, any renewed commitment from the SDLP to devolution is likely to insist on power-sharing as a prerequisite for discussion. It is clear that a degree of realism has somehow to be injected into SDLP thinking.



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