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PAB/6645/SM/RN

FROM: S A MARSH, PAB
DATE: 16 NOVEMBER 1990

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) -B
PS/Minister of State (B&L) - B
PS/Dr Mawhinney (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B
Mr Ledlie - B
Mr Pilling - B
Mr Alston - B
Mr Hamilton MB 19/11
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Cooke - B
Mr D J R Hill - B
Mr McNeill
Mr Petch - B
Mr Fergusson - Dublin - B

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19 NOV 1990
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CONVERSATION WITH SDLP VICE-CHAIRMAN

With the forthcoming SDLP Conference in mind, I had lunch on 13 November with Tom Kelly, a management consultant from Newry who is one of the SDLP Vice-Chairmen. This note sets down the main points of interest.

The SDLP itself

2. Kelly complained about the centralisation of power within the party. Effective control rested with John Hume, supported by a group of unelected party spokesmen. The situation would be worse after next week when Mark Durkan, John Hume's assistant, became party chairman. Although the SDLP's structure appeared democratic on paper, the reverse was the case. Open discussion on important issues was not encouraged, and for a long period the leader had not bothered to attend meetings of the party executive. Kelly said that he had hoped the election to Parliament of Seamus Mallon and Eddie McGrady would have provided a broader-based leadership. But this had proved not to be the case. McGrady and Mallon operated within their own territorial areas but had little influence on Hume.

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1. Sir Kenneth
2. Dr. Hamilton

J. Sir Kennedy
A. Dr. Hamilton

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The Political Process

3. Kelly commented that Hume was simply not interested in making progress within Northern Ireland; he was more concerned about relationships within the island as a whole. Perhaps rather cynically, he went on to say that an additional reason for this lack of enthusiasm might be that Hume felt Northern Ireland was now rather too small a stage for him. He also said that he thought Hume would oppose anything which involved a new NI Assembly lest elections strengthened the position of others in the SDLP who might prove a challenge to his authority. This negative attitude was not universally held in the party; McGrady in particular had tried hard, but failed, to get the leadership to accept the case for devolution. And there were plenty among the party activists who wished to take a more positive line, but there was no mechanism within the party for them properly to register their views.

4. When asked what implications this had for us, Kelly felt that we should be taking steps (for example by tabling definite proposals) to stimulate debate within the SDLP. He also said that HMG should be more ruthless about calling in favours; Seamus Mallon, for example, could be told that Government support for the regeneration of Newry (for which Mallon was gaining immense kudos in the area) would be conditional on his coming out in favour of the current political process.

Sinn Fein

5. Kelly was full of praise for the Secretary of State's speech on 7 November. He said that it had been clear and statesmanlike, and would undoubtedly put the Provisionals on the spot. It represented the farthest a Secretary of State could go. He also advocated undermining Sinn Fein by including them in consultation on projects which they would find it impossible realistically to criticise, for example those involving the creation of jobs or the bettering of facilities. In this way HMG would be stealing their thunder and removing from them the economic and social "protest" vote.

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Other matters

6. We briefly touched on West Belfast. Kelly repeated the view that Hendron was the wrong candidate for the constituency. The money from the Rowntree Trust had been received, but it had proved to be something of a mixed blessing since there were strings attached. A condition of the grant was the imposition on the party of a political consultant (one Andy Ellis) who by nature of his style would almost certainly get people's backs up, both within the SDLP and in the constituency at large.

7. Kelly also said that there would be little real debate at the Conference, and that John Hume had taken steps to damp down any serious political discussion. They had had difficulty in securing nominations for the post of party treasurer. The most contentious issue was likely to be the raising of the annual membership from £3.00 to £5.00!

Comment

8. Kelly, as an SDLP Vice-Chairman, is in a good position to know the workings of the party structure. But he remains something of an outsider, being unpopular and rather self-opiniated. What he says should therefore be taken as broadly indicative, but with a pinch of salt. Nonetheless, if this and other indications are anything to go by, the Conference this weekend is unlikely to produce anything particularly imaginative.

[Signed]

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