

cc EQ  
Press

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FROM: TED HALLETT  
FCO  
11 November 1996

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) -B  
PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) -B  
PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) -B  
PS/Baroness Denton (DANI, DED&L) -B  
PS/Mr Moss (DOE, DHSS&L) -B  
PS/PUS (B&L) -B  
PS/Sir David Fell -B  
Mr Thomas -B  
Mr Bell -B  
Mr Watkins -B  
Mr Stephens -B  
Mr Maccabe -B  
Mr Masefield -B  
Mr Hill (B&L) -B  
Mr Lavery -B  
Mr McKervill -B  
Mr Whysall -B  
Ms Mapstone -B  
Ms Bharucha -B  
Mr Lamont, RID, FCO -B  
Mr Holmes, No 10 -B  
Mr Budd, Cabinet Office -B  
HMA Dublin -B

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NOTE FOR THE RECORD

SDLP PARTY CONFERENCE, COOKSTOWN, 8-10 NOVEMBER 1996

SUMMARY

1. The SDLP Conference took place in Cookstown on 8-10 November 1996; Mr McKervill and I attended. The main points of interest were the Party leader's speech, and the debates on "political affairs" and "justice". Recurring themes were the need for inclusive political dialogue, the responsibility for achieving this lying with the IRA, to restore their ceasefire, and the British Government, not to raise additional hurdles for Sinn Fein's admission, and concern at the sectarian bitterness unleashed by Drumcree. Last year's public airing of internal divisions over the question of electoral pacts with Sinn Fein was avoided by taking the subject in private session on the Sunday, which referred the matter back to the Executive to take whatever action it considered appropriate in the circumstances

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at the time. There appeared to be general acceptance that there could be no question of electoral pacts in the absence of a ceasefire. In the political affairs debate, it was notable that many speakers directed their fire at Sinn Fein, rather than the British Government.

# DETAIL

## Party Leader's Speech

2. Mr Hume's speech covered familiar ground, but was livelier in content and more convincingly delivered than last year's. Hume began with a long exposition of the SDLP's role in the peace process, concentrating on his own dialogue with Gerry Adams. Hume claimed that he had presented Adams with a first draft of what became the Downing Street Declaration as early as October 1991. Mr Hume characterised the drafting of the Joint Declaration as the first stage in the peace process. The second stage, - inclusive talks - had not yet materialised:

"Tragically and unfortunately the second stage of the peace process, the all-party talks, did not take place as soon as we expected. Indeed after 18 months they had not commenced and the IRA ceasefire broke down leading to the loss of more innocent human lives. Historians will judge the reasons for the delay by the British Government in starting the all-party talks but it is my own strong conviction that had they started soon after the ceasefire that we would have lasting peace by now. However, there is no point in developing argument on that subject. Let history judge it but let all of us with their responsibility, do all in our power to have the ceasefire restored and have the current Talks take place in a totally peaceful atmosphere between all parties, including Sinn Fein, involved. I believe that the Prime Minister, John Major, wants to see that happen, that he wants to achieve lasting peace in our country and that his Government can achieve it by



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reiterating in the clearest possible terms the nature, objectives and time-frame of the Talks together with confidence building measures that can improve the atmosphere at the Talks themselves."

3. The media saw this as the key section of the speech. Hume confirmed in private conversation (reported separately) that he placed responsibility on the British Government to take the opportunity, which he is certain is on offer, to establish the conditions for a restoration of the ceasefire and thus enable Sinn Fein to join the Talks.

4. On the Talks, Mr Hume rejected Unionist criticism that the SDLP was holding up progress in order to get Sinn Fein in. It was the Unionists who had tried "to get rid of the Independent Chairmen", obstructed agreement on reasonable rules of procedure and sought to exclude other parties. Their "fixation with decommissioning" had prevented more rapid progress. The inclusion of Sinn Fein, "in the context of a total cessation of violence", was a valid objective. He rejected the view of those in the nationalist community who were suggesting that the Talks were a waste of time. The tensions and frustration which had arisen were "inherent in any inclusive all-party process no matter how much it is redesigned or reconstructed". It was now necessary, however, "to use time-frames to help to concentrate minds and create some incentive for meaningful advance", but without making the process hostage to the calendar.

5. The other main themes of the speech were the familiar praise for the European Union and the United States Government for their contributions to the peace process. He also mentioned the BSE crisis, calling on the British Government to take the necessary action to remove the ban on beef exports from Northern Ireland.

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Justice

6. The justice session was dominated by Drumcree, and was based on a motion calling on the Conference to endorse the SDLP's submission to the North Commission (circulated separately). The central proposal in the document was the establishment of an independent "Parades Commission" to decide the conditions under which marches should take place. All speakers placed the blame for Drumcree on the British authorities and "irresponsible" Unionist political leaders. Trimble's behaviour at Drumcree was unfavourably contrasted with Hume's mediation efforts in Derry.

7. Joe Byrne accused the police of a failure to tackle illegal Unionist blockades. Alex Attwood called for an urgent investigation of the alleged revolt within the RUC at Drumcree. Mark Durkan commended the SDLP proposal as a basis for determining clear lines of responsibility for deciding on marches and parades. It was necessary, he said, to generate a "culture of mutual respect" and self-restraint. These had been notably absent at Drumcree. Seamus Mallon contrasted the peace marches which followed the ceasefires with the behaviour at Drumcree. The main difference between the two situations was that "peace" had been taken away. Drumcree was not really about marching, it was about the Unionist community successfully challenging state authority. He wondered what had turned middle-class Unionists to "insurrection", confessing that he did not know the answer. It was necessary to tackle the problem of policing through the political process, as part of the overall political solution. What was needed was a police service which the whole community could support. Brid Rogers concluded the debate by urging the adoption of the SDLP's paper as a serious attempt to address the marching problem.

Political Affairs

8. Drumcree was also a recurring theme in the political affairs debate but, while the British Government was not spared criticism



for its "abdication of responsibility" there, it was notable that, on the political process as a whole, many speakers concentrated their fire on Sinn Fein. Brid Rogers outlined the events at Drumcree, from a Nationalist perspective. The Orange Order had tried to assert their right to march through Nationalist areas without consent. They had defied the security forces, refused dialogue with the residents, and chosen confrontation, with the support of their political leadership. They had won a short-term victory, but at the cost of discrediting their leadership. Drumcree was a defining moment for the people of Northern Ireland. It had stimulated an outbreak of sectarianism, reflected in boycotts and attacks on churches. The British Government had failed to anticipate the problems at Drumcree and had then capitulated to the large-scale disruption which ensued.

9. Turning to the peace process, she argued that there was now an unprecedented opportunity for meaningful negotiations, leading to a lasting peace, but this was being put at risk by the British Government's delaying tactics. It was incumbent on all to achieve inclusive negotiations. The first step was a restoration of the ceasefire. It was then necessary for the British Government and the Unionists to accept that there could be no solution without Sinn Fein.

10. Seamus Mallon (in what may have been a coded signal to his Party leader) emphasised the differences between Sinn Fein and the SDLP. The SDLP based its whole approach on the principle of non-violence, and refused to be part of a "defenderist" culture based on the narrow defence of "turf". He rejected Sinn Fein's idea of a pan Nationalist front to confront Unionism, and their assertion that there was a political vacuum. A valid political process was already in existence. Nine parties and two Governments were at the Talks. It was for Sinn Fein to show the political courage necessary to facilitate their entry into the Talks, but rather than face up to the need to negotiate with Unionism, they found it easier to stay out and criticise. It was a myth for Sinn Fein to believe that the political landscape would change with their entry into



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negotiations. The basic fundamentals would remain. It would still be necessary for Nationalism to negotiate an accommodation with Trimble, Paisley and McCartney.

11. Joe Hendron also devoted most of his remarks to criticising Sinn Fein. He urged the IRA to restore their ceasefire. He too rejected the notion of a pan-Nationalist front against Unionism and contrasted the approach of the SDLP and Sinn Fein. The SDLP had different origins, objectives and methods. They believed in putting people before territory and respecting human life and civil rights. They believed in "one man, one vote, not one man and 20 medical cards". The SDLP promoted inward investment while the IRA murdered people and destroyed jobs.

12. Sean Farren argued that the political process did not depend on Sinn Fein and could make progress without them. Progress had been slow, but a valid process was in existence. Sinn Fein should not hold out in anticipation of changes in policy after the British and Irish General Elections. The basic fundamentals would remain the same. There was no justification for delaying a ceasefire. It was clear that Frameworks provided the shape of an eventual agreement.

13. Alex Attwood, in a strong attack on the Republican movement, argued that we were witnessing the outworking of the tension between a majority in the movement who wanted to take the path of peace and a minority who wanted to continue the war. It was clear, however, that the Republican community as a whole, wanted peace and regarded the war as over. The elements of a peace process were in place and nothing could be gained by continuing the violence.

Other Issues

14. In the Agriculture debate, there was a strong call from Eddie McGrady for the British Government to take the necessary action in the EU to have the ban on Northern Ireland beef exports removed. BSE, he said, was an "English", not a "United Kingdom" problem.

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15. On education, Michael Ancram was a target for criticism over his re-organisation plans for the Educational and Library Boards, while DOE came under criticism for the inactivity of the Planning Agency in executing new Area Plans, and for not upgrading roads in the South East and North West.

Comment

16. Following the acrimonious public row at last year's Conference over the issue of an electoral pact with Sinn Fein, it was clear that the party wanted this year to present as united a front as possible. The electoral pacts issue was therefore discussed in private session on the Sunday morning.

17. Despite media hype the issue was never going to have the same resonances as last year. The timing, but more important, the context was wrong. In absence of an IRA ceasefire the issue was to some extent, academic. It was clear that delegates were determined not to demonstrate the divisions of a year ago and, consequently, were intent on voting for the issue to be passed back to the party Executive for decision in the circumstances at the time. If there were a ceasefire, no matter how deeply felt the desire to oust Willie McCrea as MP for mid-Ulster, the majority would not wish that to happen at the expense of any of the four sitting MPs.

18. Generally, the party delegates did not have to look far for common cause. There was general agreement that HMG had mishandled the 18 month ceasefire and, that they and the RUC had given in to mob rule at Drumcree. One delegate - admittedly an eccentric - even suggested that the protestors at Drumcree and at the road blocks should have been 'put down' by the Army. The perception of Government inaction on parades between the summer of 1995 and 1996 was also widely criticised.

19. It was notable, however, that most criticism on the political situation as a whole was reserved for Sinn Fein and the IRA's

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decision to return to terrorism. Sinn Fein/IRA were blamed for any downturn in the economy and investment and for preventing inclusive all-party talks. It was the breakdown of the ceasefire which Seamus Mallon saw as a decisive factor behind Unionist defiance of the rule of law at Drumcree. There was no justification for violence. It had to stop. Until it did, the SDLP would continue representing nationalists at Castle Buildings and resented the implication that, without Sinn Fein at the table, the Talks process was flawed. There was no political vacuum.

20. One might wonder how this trenchant criticism squares with Hume's continued courtship with Adams. Hume's position as leader is secure. All delegates to whom we spoke were happy to trust his judgement - at least for the moment - as to how far he should go towards Sinn Fein in order to bring about peace. At the same time party members, particularly at councillor level, are worried that giving Sinn Fein credibility will have a detrimental effect on the SDLP's prospects in the Local Government elections next year, which, in Northern Ireland terms, are perhaps more politically significant than the General Election.

21. While there is, therefore, a degree of concern about the possible effects of Hume's dialogue with Sinn Fein on the SDLP's electoral strength, there is no serious open criticism of him and the Party remains willing to follow his leadership.

(Signed)

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