
THIS ELECTION

THE CHOICE FACING THE VOTERS

In this election the voters are faced with a wide range of alternatives. They may vote for candidates who favour, or are prepared to accept, a return to a majority rule parliament in Northern Ireland. They may vote for candidates who favour integration, or the present form of colonial 'direct rule'. They may vote for candidates who believe in an independent Northern Ireland. They may vote for candidates who believe that, if the British withdraw, the problem is solved. Or, they may vote SDLP.

THE SDLP WAY

The SDLP is the only party which is simultaneously (a) opposed to the return of majority rule; (b) opposed to the continuation of direct rule; (c) in favour of renewed negotiations on agreed structures of government for the whole of Ireland; (d) in favour of the ultimate disengagement of the British and the return of sovereignty to the people of this island. Since the foundation of this party we have campaigned for the **REFORM** of the institutions of majority rule government in Northern Ireland, **RECONCILIATION** between the two sections of our community and between north and south, leading to **REUNIFICATION** through the setting up of agreed institutions of government for the whole of Ireland. We announced this programme in the first elections we fought in 1973; our policy has not changed, because the problem has not changed.

THE BRITISH ATTITUDE

The voters should be aware that the primary aim of British policy in Northern Ireland is to break the SDLP. Roy Mason has left no-one in any doubt that the British government wish to move towards the restoration of unionist control, in order to extricate themselves from Northern Ireland. The strength of the SDLP has been the only major obstacle to that strategy, and therefore we must be broken. The Northern Ireland Office has found some surprising allies, who are willing to cooperate with them in this enterprise. We urge the voters to ensure that they are not successful, by returning a strong team of SDLP members to Parliament.

THE WESTMINSTER PLATFORM

In present circumstances the Westminster Parliament controls Northern Ireland under the system of 'direct rule.' It is the policy of this party to bring that situation to an end and restore sovereignty to the people of this country. In the meantime, however, decisions are being taken at Westminster which have a direct effect upon all our lives. That is why it is vital to the SDLP to strengthen its voice there. Voters ought to consider why it is the common aim of the British government, and our opponents in Northern Ireland, to deprive the SDLP of a strong voice in Westminster. The answer is not hard to find. Over the past few years a number of issues have been highlighted by the leader of this party which our opponents would rather have suppressed. Examples are the extra seats for Northern Ireland at Westminster, proportional representation in the European Elections, the Bennett Report, and other evidence of police misconduct, the Poleglass development, and the De Lorean venture. How much more effectively could such issues be dealt with if the Party Leader had support?

THE INTERNATIONAL PLATFORM

The election of SDLP members to the London Parliament has an importance above and beyond the Westminster stage. Westminster MP's can gain entry onto the International stage. Over the past few years prominent members of the SDLP have spread knowledge and understanding of the Northern Ireland problem throughout the world. The result has been the mounting of quite considerable international pressure on the British Government to accept its responsibilities. Obviously, the Northern Ireland Office and the Unionists would like to prevent this process. It is up to the voters to see that they are not successful. It is up to the voters to strengthen the SDLP's hand in spreading information about Northern Ireland on the International stage.

THE FAILURE OF DIRECT RULE

BRITISH PROPAGANDA

The British Government has attempted to convince public opinion, in Britain, Europe and America, that direct rule is acceptable to most of the people of Northern Ireland, and that it has been remarkably successful in solving our problems. We are told repeatedly that the situation here is returning to normal, with the gunmen on the run, violence on the wane and prosperity on the way back. The lack of political progress is attributed to the obstinacy of Northern Ireland politicians. Direct Rule is depicted in terms of almost unbroken success.

THE FACTS

The truth is, of course, quite different. After five years of direct rule, Northern Ireland is now suffering:

The highest unemployment level in the history of this state;

The lowest average wage in the UK;

The highest prices in the UK;

The greatest dependence on social security benefits in the UK;

The rapid decline of employment in manufacturing;

The rapid decline of agricultural employment;

The lowest growth rate of any region in Europe;

The depopulation of country areas by the planners;

The run-down of medical and other services outside the cities;

Uncertainty about the future of secondary education;

A chaotic transfer procedure at 11+;

An acute housing shortage in many areas, particularly W. Belfast;

The resurgence of paramilitary violence;

Brutality in the interrogation centres;

Chaos in the prisons;

A campaign of intimidation of civilians by the security forces, especially in minority areas, under emergency laws which infringe civil liberties;

The increasing alienation of the minority;

The complete absence of any political initiative.

In these circumstances it is fair to ask what Britain's contribution has been to the good government of Northern Ireland. Indeed, could any system of government have been more incompetent? Could any so called "Socialist" administration have achieved less?

POLITICAL FAILURE

It is surely crystal-clear by now that only a structure of government based among the people of Ireland can solve the problem of Ireland. The imposition of British policy upon Northern Ireland during this present period of direct rule has been inappropriate to the needs of Northern Ireland.

In almost every area where government has responsibility we are worse off now than we were in 1974. The most obvious failure has been in the political field. When Labour came to office in 1974 representatives of the two traditions in Northern Ireland were working together in government. Now there is no dialogue whatsoever between the two communities at a political level.

ECONOMIC FAILURE

In the five years of direct rule since 1974, the already fragile economy of Northern Ireland has been brought to the verge of collapse. Unemployment which was at its lowest ever level of 26,278 when the power sharing executive was in office (May 1974), has now soared to 64,245 - the highest out-of-work total in the history of this state. Furthermore, no attempt has been made to deal with what the Quigley Report described as "the major structural problem of a declining manufacturing base". The numbers in manufacturing and mining have fallen by 20 per cent since the period of the power-sharing executive.

In agricultural employment the picture is similar. The Quigley Report feared that "it could be estimated, on the basis of past trends, and in the absence of any special measures, employment in agricultural industries will fall by some 16,000 over the period 1975-82". No special measures have been forthcoming from the government, despite all the warnings from Quigley and from the SDLP. Today the position is far worse than even Quigley feared.

The decline in employment in traditional industries is not being compensated for by the creation of new jobs. In fact we have an almost zero growth rate, in spite of the fact that our grants and inducements to foreign investment are amongst the highest in the world. This is

happening at a time when the Republic's growth rate is the highest in Europe, and even Britain, with all its problems, has a growth rate three times that of Northern Ireland.

FAMILY POVERTY

If we look behind the unemployment figures we see the true extent of deprivation in Northern Ireland. A major report in 1978 showed that 30.4% of all families here live on incomes which are below the official poverty level. An even higher percentage of children (38.2%) fit into this deprived category. The figures, in both cases, are much higher for West Belfast and the Western Counties than they are for the rest of Northern Ireland. Single-parent families, in particular, have been atrociously neglected by the government. Sixty per cent of them live below the poverty line, and their plight is further exacerbated by anomalies in social services regulations and in housing legislation. The Direct Rule Administration has done practically nothing to combat the epidemic of poverty.

THE HEALTH SERVICE

In keeping with their policy of centralisation, the Northern Ireland Office has begun the run-down of most hospitals in provincial towns and the removal of all specialised service to the cities. If present policy is continued the large areas of Northern Ireland will be left without easy access to many modern medical facilities.

RURAL PLANNING

The policy of the 'Direct Rule' administration is to centralise people also. The present rigid planning policy forces country people to live in towns and is leading to the depopulation of the countryside. This may be an appropriate policy for an industrial society like Britain, but it is entirely inappropriate to a society like Northern Ireland which is largely rural in character. The Cockcroft Report upheld the view of the SDLP on this issue; its main provisions have not been implemented.

EDUCATION

After five years of direct rule by a Labour Government the whole future of secondary education is in doubt. No progress worth mentioning has been made towards a comprehensive education system at secondary level. This government had enough time to set us on a firm course to achieve equal opportunity for all our children. It has failed, and if the Conservatives take office now, comprehensive education in Northern Ireland may be postponed indefinitely. To compound this failure, the Minister leaves us with a chaotic transfer procedure at 11+. This is the most dismal record of failure one could imagine, and must stand as a clear indictment of the Minister concerned, and of the Northern Ireland Office.

HOUSING

The SDLP is extremely critical of the Housing Executive and the political direction under which it has operated since May 1974. Too often the public face of the Executive has been the unacceptable face of bureaucracy. There has been too much insensitivity to tenants opinion and it has been inconsistent in its objectives. The British Ministers in charge of housing have pursued a policy of parity with Britain without taking sufficiently into consideration the completely different circumstances here. In particular the policy of increasing rents to the level of those in Britain is causing undue hardship to a large number of tenants.

Nevertheless, despite its imperfections, the concept of a centralised housing agency is fully supported by the SDLP and the Housing Executive is certainly preferable to the Housing Authorities which preceded it.

The SDLP has serious reservations about the terms of the Executive's policy for selling houses to tenants. We favour encouragement of private housing but not at the expense of the Public Housing Sector. Our fear is that under this policy the best houses in the best estates will be sold and that second rate houses in problem areas will be left for those unable to buy their own houses.

However the party favours the sale of "Family Houses" - houses occupied by the same family for about 15 years or more and which will continue to be occupied by them. These houses are not effectively in the public housing pool and should be sold to the tenants at a price which takes into consideration the rent paid over the years. The private housing sector can better be encouraged by other means, particularly by direct financial inducement to first home owners and by a change in the interpretation of the recent departmental statement on Rural Planning.

SECURITY

The one sphere in which Roy Mason claimed success above all others was security. Every Monday morning, for some years now, we have listened to the litany of convictions, arrests, finds of arms and explosives. There were repeated claims that the gunmen were beaten and that we were returning to normality. The Secretary of State has been saved by the bell of this election from the ignominious collapse of his security policy. In recent months there has been a resurgence of bombings and shootings. November and December 1978 had the highest total of explosions for any months in the past five years. The extremely tough security policy which the secretary of state has pursued has not rid us of violence. It has, in fact exploded in his face. The testimony of two respected policy surgeons, two members of the Police Authority, a large number of solicitors, barristers and general practitioners, Amnesty International and a wide range of public representatives, bear witness to the fact that suspects are being brutally ill-treated in custody. Even the government-appointed Bennett Inquiry, which was practically bound and gagged before it started, felt obliged to comment that suspects were being abused. This is a shameful blot on the record of the British Labour

Party, especially since the present Labour Government gave an undertaking that the brutal interrogation methods, for which Britain was found guilty by the European Court would not be repeated.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

The present means of government, through the Ministers of the Northern Ireland Office, has not been

successful. They are not responsible to the local electorate and they are unresponsive to the particular needs of Northern Ireland. Under the aegis of Roy Mason they have come to be seen as representing British and Unionist interests only, and are perceptibly hostile to the interests and aspirations of the minority. Under the Direct Rule administration the minority in Northern Ireland once again feel swamped in a state with which they do not identify, and which they perceive as hostile to them. This is a dangerous situation.

THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE

THE TASK TO BE TACKLED

This country's problems can only be solved by the creation of institutions of government which enable us to look after our own affairs. In the short term, however, it is the Westminster parliament which takes the decisions, and we must address ourselves to the task of persuading them to take the right decisions. The situation in Northern Ireland is so grave that an improvement can only be effected by radical policies. The elected representatives of this party will demand a crash programme to combat poverty, halt the rise in unemployment, create new jobs and improve living standards.

SDLP POLICY

Over the past two years the SDLP has set out in detail, in a series of policy documents, its proposals for dealing with the economic, social and political problems of our society. In "Economic Analysis and Strategy" we outline our proposals for dealing with the weaknesses in our economy. In "Poverty in Northern Ireland" we analyse the causes of poverty and put forward a detailed programme for dealing with it. In "Agriculture: A Time of Opportunity" we have examined the agricultural sector of our economy, and set out the steps which need to be taken to save it from decline. In "Housing: the priorities", "Education: an opportunity for excellence", "Facing Reality", and many other policy statements we have described in great detail our proposals in each of these fields.

CRISIS MEASURES

However, we are facing an immediate crisis in Northern Ireland, and crisis measures must be taken. SDLP members in Westminster will demand:

direct state involvement in the creation of new industry;

measures to lower prices and raise wages to UK levels;

expansion of agriculturally based industries;

equalisation of the green pound (at the southern rate) for all of Ireland;

the channelling of extra resources into the fight against poverty in Northern Ireland;

the implementation of the Cockcroft report;

the maintenance of present medical service in provincial towns;

the drawing up of a programme for the rapid introduction of comprehensive education at secondary level;

the replacement of the present interim transfer procedure by a more equitable one;

the extension of the Poleglass scheme, and similar schemes in other areas of acute housing shortage; the repeal of the Emergency Provisions Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act;

an end to the ill-treatment of suspects;

a humane solution to the prison crisis;

the re-opening of talks about the future of Northern Ireland;

These, however, are short term measures. What is needed is the return of governmental power from Westminster to local institutions of government. The real problem to reach agreement between the two traditions in Ireland, on the shape of those institutions.

THE WASTED YEARS

THE FALL OF THE EXECUTIVE

The past five years have been utterly wasted from the point of view of finding such an agreement. When the present Labour Government took office in 1974, parties representing both traditions in Northern Ireland were working together in government for the first time ever. It was the most hopeful development in the history of the Northern Ireland state. Yet, from the beginning, the Labour Government took up a defeatist stance, and at the first sign of a challenge to the powersharing Executive they ran away from the problem. They have been running away from the problem ever since.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

In the Spring of 1975 the Government proposed to set up a Constitutional Convention so that the Northern Ireland politicians could solve the problem themselves. The Government refused to take any part in the proceedings of the Convention; they refused even to set down the parameters within which agreement could be sought. We predicted that in such circumstances the Convention was bound to fail. Nevertheless, we fought the Convention elections, took our seats, and worked as hard as we could to find a basis for negotiation with the parties of the Unionist tradition. It was to no avail. The Unionist coalition, as we predicted they would, block-voted their proposals through the Convention without regard to the minority parties, and the Convention was dissolved. It had been an exercise in avoiding responsibility, on the part of the British Government. Its only purpose was to gain time. It did lasting damage to the search for a solution because it appeared to show that a political solution was impossible.

REPRESSION

Since the collapse of the Convention, the British approach to the Northern Ireland problem has been a military one. With the arrival of Roy Mason as Secretary of State, police and army were given a free hand to pursue a tough security policy. The SDLP has always maintained that tough security measures would not solve a problem which is essentially political. We have, indeed, always pointed out that repression by the security forces is

morally wrong, anti-democratic and politically counter-productive. Recent revelations of police misconduct have borne out our point of view.

THE POLITICAL VACUUM

The Government's policy in all of these fields has been partly due to the difficult parliamentary situation. We have watched for some time now, a situation where the Government was so paralysed by weakness that it could take no positive action in any field. In order merely to survive, it sought to arrive a series of shabby deals with minority parties, most notoriously with the Northern Ireland loyalists. The result has been that the Northern Ireland question has become a political football between the two parties at Westminster; policy has been determined by political considerations which have nothing to do with Northern Ireland. The measures which have been taken, such as the granting of extra seats, have tended to reinforce Unionist intransigence, and have reduced the credibility of the political process in the eyes of the minority.

THE PROBLEM

CONFLICT OF IDENTITY

From the very beginning the SDLP has analysed the problem of Northern Ireland as a conflict of National Identities. One section of our community identifies itself as British and feels that it has a wide range of cultural, economic and religious interests which can only be protected if it alone has control of Northern Ireland within the overall British context. The other section of our community identifies itself as Irish. It feels that it is deprived of any say in the running of its affairs, and that its cultural and national identity is threatened and its civil and social rights disregarded in a British state.

THE FAILURE OF PAST POLITICAL ATTITUDES

In the past, political attitudes in Northern Ireland have sought victory for one side over the other. The pursuit of total victory by each side has led to decades of political strife, communal violence, and repression. It has not led us any nearer a solution to the Northern Ireland problem, because total victory of one side over the other is an illusion, and a dangerous illusion. Neither side is going to go away, give up its identity or accept that its interests and aspirations can be disregarded. In the end, we have no choice but to live together. We can only live together in peace, if each side pursues reconciliation rather than victory. We can only achieve reconciliation by the creation of institutions which respect and protect the identity and interests of the two sections of the Irish people and enable both to play a full part in government.

This is surely a responsible and honourable policy which deserves the support of all parties to this conflict. In particular, it deserves the support of the British Government which has had, for the last fifty years, ultimate responsibility for Northern Ireland.

THE FAILURE OF BRITISH POLICY

British policy, as expressed by both Labour and Conservative Governments, has been quite different. British policy has been based on a simple unconditional guarantee, given to the Unionists of Northern Ireland, that they will remain part of the United Kingdom as long as a majority in Northern Ireland wish it. There has been no

corresponding guarantee given to those of Irish identity in Northern Ireland, and indeed, until 1972, successive Westminster governments turned a blind eye to a system of discrimination in Northern Ireland which is now too well documented to be denied.

THE FAILURE OF THE PARTITION SETTLEMENT

It is not unreasonable to suggest that this policy has not given Northern Ireland peace, order and good government. Riots, murders, paramilitary violence, communal conflict, internment and repression in every decade of the state's existence is sufficient proof of that. The partition settlement of 1921 has failed to give peace and order to Ireland as a whole. The Southern part of this country has suffered severely from the spilling over of inter-communal strife in Northern Ireland. The security problem arising from that strife has affected both North and South. The actions and attitudes of Southern people and Southern Governments have a direct bearing upon Northern Ireland. It is inevitable that this should be so when over one-third of the people of the North look to Dublin as their capital and the centre of their national identity. The Republic is involved in the problem. It must be involved in the solution.

THE SOLUTION

QUADRIPARTITE TALKS

It is hoped that the political vacuum of these last few years will be broken by this election. If a Government is elected with a working majority it will be in a position to undo some of the damage. The most outstanding need is for a political initiative to resume the dialogue about the future of Northern Ireland. That dialogue must involve the Sovereign Governments in Westminster and Dublin, as well as the representatives of the two traditions in Northern Ireland. It is only by such means that governmental structures can be created which will enable the two sections of the population of this island to work together and live in peace.

ENDING THE UNIONIST GUARANTEE

As a first step in this direction the British Government must end the one-sided guarantee given to the Unionists of Northern Ireland, which makes fish of one section of our community and flesh of the other. This guarantee has been paraded in the past as a piece of democratic morality. It is nothing of the kind. It commits the British Government to supporting a partition settlement in Ireland which was conceived and executed for the good of one small section of this country's population and was heavily weighted in their favour.

UNIONIST GUARANTEE AN OBSTACLE TO PROGRESS

Britain's guarantee to the Unionists has confirmed the latter in their obstinate refusal to share control of government in Northern Ireland. Indeed, there is no need for them to make any concessions while the British Government guarantees their position. It is the sheer one-sidedness of this situation which has caused the repeated break-down of order in Northern Ireland. The violence of the last ten years has led to the military involvement of the British Government in an attempt to shore up an arrangement which is inherently unstable because it is unjust. The British people and the British Government must come to terms with that fact. The SDLP has faced up to the reality of this situation, and we expressed that reality in Motion 70, passed at our last annual conference:-

"Conference believes that British disengagement from Ireland is both inevitable and desirable; that it ought to take place as part of an

overall political solution which would provide guarantees for both traditions in the North and minimise the possible dangers in the political, security and financial fields, and that the British government should, immediately after the general election, call a quadripartite conference of the two sovereign governments in London and Dublin, and representatives of the two traditions in the North, with a view to finding a permanent solution to the Irish problem."

For the SDLP the question is not **whether** Britain should disengage from Ireland, but **when** and **in what circumstances**. It will be a major objective of this party, immediately after the election, to enlist support for the quadripartite conference and then to begin the process of planned disengagement.

RECONCILIATION

It is surely not unreasonable to suggest that British policy in Ireland has failed to give this country peace, stability or good government. It is surely not unreasonable, at this stage, to insist that the British must abandon their present policy and commit themselves to seeking reconciliation between the peoples of this island. The real Irish problem is the division which exists among the people. It can only be solved when this division is healed and the two sections of our people are brought together in agreement.

AN AGREED IRELAND

The fundamental aim of the SDLP is to create in Ireland agreed structures of government, which will enable the people of both parts of Ireland to co-operate together in pursuit of common interests, while retaining the power to protect and safeguard their culture, identity and particular interests. In recent months there has been considerable discussion of the various forms of federalism which would offer a formula on which agreement might be built. This is a healthy and constructive process and it is most encouraging to note that much of the initiative has come from individuals and parties in the Republic. We recognise that federalism offers a number of alternatives which are well worth exploring in the search for structures upon which a new Irish settlement can be built. We ask the voters to strengthen their voice in demanding such a settlement by returning a strong team of SDLP members to parliament.

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