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New Nationalism? The S.D.L.P. and the creation of a socialist and labour party in Northern Ireland, 1969–75

I

'Since our foundation, the S.D.L.P. has been proudly nationalist and is 100 per cent for a United Ireland.'[1] This description, from the website of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.), advances a claim which might be thought not to sit easy with the party's founding ideals which claimed it as a 'radical socialist party' and insisted that, while a united Ireland was one of the party's main aims, it would prioritise the socio-economic above the constitutional question.[2] This article will argue that while the S.D.L.P. was widely recognised as a major advance in nationalist politics in Northern Ireland when it was formed in August 1970,[3] it had lost its avant-garde approach to the constitutional question and become a more organised form of the old Nationalist Party by 1975. Although initially the S.D.L.P. combined socialist rhetoric with a discourse that linked social justice with the reunification of the island – its ideal was a 'completely new constitution for the whole of Ireland, a constitution which will provide the framework for the emergence of a just, egalitarian and secular society'[4] – there existed an uneasy tension between nationalist and socialist aims within the party, with the former taking precedence by the time of the power-sharing Executive of 1974. These tensions had a geographical dimension. Traditionally, Northern nationalism, in the form of the Nationalist Party, claimed most of its support in the rural west of Northern Ireland, while labourism was largely a Belfast phenomenon.[5] While the S.D.L.P. tried to transcend these divisions, and publicly did so by appointing Belfast M.P. Gerry Fitt as the party leader, privately the party was still hounded by these divisions, which were particularly evident in the party attitudes on policing, power-sharing and the Irish dimension. When Fitt left the party in 1979, the party did not have a Belfast

[1] 'A short history of the SDLP', http://www.sdlp.ie/index.php/about_sdlp/our_history/ (April, 2012).

[2] Description of the S.D.L.P. papers (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072). See also: *Irish News*, 20 Aug. 1970.

[3] In the months before the S.D.L.P. was set up, both the British and Irish governments were keen for a united nationalist voice to emerge from the North: Barry White, *John Hume: statesman of the Troubles* (Belfast, 1984), p. 97. The Irish government's wish to see a new party along these lines emerge is discussed below.

[4] Draft document, 'Towards a New Ireland', S.D.L.P. policy sub-committee, 1971–2, (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/1/30/1).).

[5] See www.ark.ac.uk/elections for a summary and break-down of election results in Northern Ireland from 1920.

leader again until Alasdair McDonnell was elected in November 2011. Derry representatives dominated the leadership[6] until the election of Margaret Ritchie in February 2010. In 2012 approximately one-third of the party seats were located in Belfast or in east of the Bann areas: the party had an M.P. in Belfast South from a total of three M.P.s and three M.L.A.s in Belfast and Antrim from a total of fourteen.[7]

Arguably, within the parameters of the huge and ever-expanding literature on Northern Irish history, politics and culture,[8] most research tends to focus on the nature of political violence in the region and, consequently, on the ethnic antagonism between Protestants and Catholics.[9] This has influenced accounts of Northern nationalism such as that put forward by political scientists Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry.[10] Yet while theoretical models are particularly useful in identifying structures of relationships and the dynamics of change over long periods, 'the historical process in all its specificity constantly depasses [sic] the boundaries of theoretical reflection and crucial issues can be elided'.[11] Cillian McGrattan has argued that a reluctance to problematise or contextualise ethnic claims means that ethnic conflict theorists may effectively contribute to the reproduction of dominant narratives. He argues instead for the importance of focusing on issues of timing and historical sequencing, source criticism and empirical evidence.[12] The history of the S.D.L.P. has, to date, centred on John Hume, obscuring the debate between socialism and nationalism that was played out within the S.D.L.P. in its formative years.[13] As Thomas Hennessey persuasively argues, now for the first time the 'archives have been opened and

[6] The party only had two leaders after Fitt until February 2010. John Hume replaced Fitt as leader in 1979 and remained in the position until 2001 when he was replaced by Mark Durkan (also Derry-based).

[7] At time of writing in April 2012: www.sdlp.ie provides details of S.D.L.P. elected representatives.

[8] 'It is quite possible that, in proportion to its size, Northern Ireland is the most heavily researched area on earth': John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1990), p. xviii.

[9] Aaron Edwards, *A history of the Northern Ireland Labour Party: democratic socialism and sectarianism* (Manchester, 2009), p. 1.

[10] Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry, *The politics of antagonism: understanding Northern Ireland* (2nd edn, London, 1996). O'Leary and McGarry distinguish their 'analytical history' from conventional history and structure their historical account in terms of the categories of nation-building.

[11] Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The dynamics of conflict in Northern Ireland: power, conflict and emancipation* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 3.

[12] Cillian McGrattan, 'Explaining Northern Ireland? The limitations of the ethnic conflict model' in *National Identities*, xii, no. 2, (June 2010), pp 181–97. The historical revisionism of the civil rights movement, for example, has started to deconstruct the dominant narratives and myths that surround the movement. See Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68: civil rights, global revolt and the origins of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2007). Cf. Thomas Hennessey's analysis of internment, where he argues that while internment may have been a political failure, it was a military success: Hennessey, *The evolution of the Troubles, 1970–72* (Dublin, 2007), p. 217.

[13] Five books have been published on the S.D.L.P. (not including biographies and autobiographies). With the exception of Ian McAllister, *The Northern Ireland Social Democratic and Labour Party: political opposition in a divided society* (London, 1977),

we have the opportunity to ... correlate the decisions of high politics with events on the ground'.[14]

II

It was never inevitable that the civil rights movement of 1967–8 would develop into the civil conflict of 1969 and the limited civil war of the seventies.[15] The fact that it did highlights the importance of many social changes occurring in the North in the 1950s and 1960s. The post-war improvement in living standards meant that the arrival of the 'consumer society', while not displacing traditional fixations with partition, drained them of some of their emotional centrality. The Cameron report, commissioned to examine the disturbances in Northern Ireland in 1968 and 1969, identified the importance of a 'much larger Catholic middle class ... which is less ready to acquiesce in the situation of assumed (or established) inferiority and discrimination that was the case in the past'.[16]

In order to re-evaluate and re-examine the emergence and formation of the S.D.L.P. and to determine what role it, and party members, played in the revision of Irish nationalist ideology, it is important to place the party in its historical context and appreciate the changes in nationalist thinking, notably in Northern Ireland, which predated and helped to shape the S.D.L.P.'s inaugural statement of policies in August 1970. The stated aim was 'to organise and maintain in Northern Ireland a socialist party' and to 'promote the cause of Irish unity based on the consent of a majority of people in Northern Ireland'.[17] This represented a significant shift in attitudes among the minority since the foundation of the Northern Ireland state, but it was also the culmination of a change that had been underway for at least a decade by August 1970.

For almost fifty years the Nationalist Party was regarded as the main representative of the minority community in Northern Ireland.[18] Existing studies depict the Nationalist Party as a political grouping, made up of disparate individuals, which sought to provide constitutional opposition in circumstances where it had no prospect of securing power, no prospect of forcing any movement

they all centre on the role of John Hume: Gerard Murray, *John Hume and the S.D.L.P.: impact and survival in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1998); Gerard Murray and Jonathan Tonge, *The S.D.L.P. and Sinn Féin: from alienation to participation* (Dublin, 2005); Peter McLoughlin, *John Hume and the revision of Irish nationalism* (Manchester, 2010); Sean Farren, *The S.D.L.P.: the struggle for agreement in Northern Ireland, 1970–2000* (Dublin, 2010).

[14] Thomas Hennessey, *Northern Ireland: the origins of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2005), p. ix.

[15] Pat Walsh, *From civil rights to national war: Northern Ireland Catholic politics, 1964–1974* (Belfast, 1989), p. 7.

[16] *Disturbances in Northern Ireland* [Cameron Report], Cmnd 532 [NI], 1969, chapter 1, paragraph 11.

[17] McAllister, *Northern Ireland Social Democratic and Labour Party*, pp 39–40.

[18] Brendan Lynn, *Holding the ground: the Nationalist Party in Northern Ireland, 1945–1972* (Aldershot, 1997); Eamon Phoenix, *Northern nationalism: nationalist politics, partition and the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, 1890–1940* (Belfast, 1994); Enda Staunton, *The nationalists of Northern Ireland, 1918–1973* (Dublin, 2001).

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on the constitutional question, or of compelling the authorities at Stormont to introduce a reform package capable of satisfying the alleged grievances of Northern Catholics. Marc Mulholland argues that political nationalism during this period had little political strength and was largely ineffective. The important Catholic constituencies in Belfast had long since been captured by various representatives of a fragmented labour nationalism, pushing mainstream Nationalism to the rural hinterland.[19] The Nationalist Party in Northern Ireland did not have what could be termed a conventional organisational structure, with party branches and annual conferences with discussions and votes on policy. It was locally organised and had a strong clerical influence. Its M.P.s did not attend the Northern Ireland Parliament until 1927 and only participated subsequently because of pressure from Catholic church authorities, who sought improved funding conditions for their schools. The Nationalist Party parliamentarians were reduced to acting as 'ombudsmen' for their constituents and they paid little attention to the 'legislative process'. Their only successful piece of legislation was the Wild Birds Act of 1931.[20]

This began to change in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The replacement of Lord Brookeborough as prime minister of Northern Ireland by Terence O'Neill in 1963, the succession of Seán Lemass to the office of taoiseach in 1959 in Dublin and the return to power in Britain in 1964 of a Labour government contributed to a belief that attitudinal changes on the North were taking place.[21] The reformulation of nationalist policies began in 1959, with the founding of a small nationalist group, National Unity, committed to the notion of an Irish reunification conditional upon consent, and to the need for a united nationalist opposition in Northern Ireland.[22] Its stated objectives included the removal of the misunderstandings which divided the people of Northern Ireland, the establishment of closer relations with the South, the encouragement of an exchange of ideas among the younger generation and the promotion of Irish culture, including the study of the Irish language.[23] Yet, significantly, when a member of National Unity, Dr James Scott, wrote to Fianna Fáil T.D. George Colley on 16 July 1964 asking for financial assistance for the National Unity journal, *New Nation*, the matter was referred to Lemass, who in turn sought the advice of minister for external affairs, Frank Aiken. Aiken stated that he was 'convinced following a study of the issues of this Journal to date that it would be

[19] Marc Mulholland, *Northern Ireland at the crossroads: Ulster Unionism in the O'Neill years, 1960–9* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 133.

[20] Murray and Tonge, *Sinn Féin and the S.D.L.P.*, p. 4.

[21] An issue of *Round Table* in September 1966 noted: '[there is]… a wind of change … blowing across the Irish scene. Old feuds are dying out, old politicians are retiring, old resentments and loyalties are fading away. Younger leaders are taking over, and new issues taking shape … Poverty, not partition, is now the problem to be solved, prosperity, not separation from Britain, the goal to be won … age and changing circumstances have now at last caught up with the politicians and they must now face retirement or reality.' 'Ireland: A wind of change', *The Round Table: the Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 55, no. 219 (1965), p. 294.

[22] In September 1962 its membership was estimated at just over one hundred persons in various parts of the North. It was headed by a group of nationalist intellectuals, the most prominent of whom was Michael McKeown.

[23] 'Note on national unity', 9 Apr. 1963 (N.A.I., DFA/305/14/325).

inadvisable to give it financial assistance', though without elaborating further.[24] Dublin seems to have been disinclined to seize a possible opportunity to direct Northern politics away from the constitutional issue and towards participation within the state, which, together with the progress in north–south relations, may have addressed some of the nationalist grievances. National Unity was a pressure group, not a competitive political party, and it had a limited impact on the Nationalist Party, which was proving slow to change its ways. In 1964, at a meeting at Maghery, County Armagh, members of National Unity confronted members of the Nationalist Party which they condemned in very strong terms. The Nationalist Party responded by urging a need for unity and as a compromise a new umbrella organisation to explore ways of cooperation between all nationally-minded groups – the National Political Front – was formed; the Nationalist Party adopted a statement of policy with thirty-nine points.[25] By 1965 the National Political Front had developed into the National Democratic Party (N.D.P.), explicitly aiming to renew nationalism, while the Nationalist Party had begun to hold annual conferences.[26] The emergence of a pressure group which, for the first time, emphasised the consent principle, is indicative of a sense of increasing dissatisfaction with the Nationalist Party among some of the minority in Northern Ireland.

Also indicative of a revision of Northern nationalist perspectives were John Hume's 1964 articles in the *Irish Times*, published under the title 'The Northern Catholic'.[27] Hume described what he saw as the problems within Northern nationalism, and argued that the Nationalist Party should recognise the changing social conditions and attitudes of the 1960s and realise that the constitutional question no longer took precedence for the younger generation in politics.

> The crux of the matter for the younger generation is the continued existence, particularly among the Catholic community of great social problems of housing, unemployment and emigration. It is a struggle for priority in their minds between such problems and the ideal for a United Ireland … It may be that the present generation of younger Catholics in the North are more materialistic than their fathers but there is little doubt that their thinking is principally geared towards the solution of social and economic problems.[28]

Hume's thinking would influence the direction of future nationalist philosophy. The social and economic context of the 1960s, including higher levels of welfare provision and opportunities for employment, led to a 'deep questioning of traditional Nationalist attitudes'.[29] As various nationalist groups pursued initiatives to change how Northern Catholics viewed the Northern Ireland state,

[24] Note from Proinseas Mac Aogain (Frank Aiken) to the taoiseach, 18 July 1964 (N.A.I., DFA/305/14/325).

[25] Michael McKeown, *The greening of a nationalist* (Dublin, 1986), chapter 3.

[26] Initially merely a pressure group within nationalism, the N.D.P. went on to become a political party in its own right. It fought the 1967 local government elections, and had twenty-eight candidates elected.

[27] Hume wrote two connected articles for the *Irish Times* on 18 and 19 May 1964 under this title.

[28] *Irish Times*, 18 May 1964. It could be argued that the I.R.A. had made a similar point in 1962 in a statement ending their Operation Harvest Campaign. They recognised that the 'public's mind has been deliberately turned from the ultimate aim of the Irish people – the liberty and freedom of Ireland', *Irish Times*, 27 Feb. 1962.

[29] *Irish Times*, 18 May 1964.

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giving priority to internal reform in Northern Ireland over the constitutional question, the civil rights movement, launched in 1967, placed the Northern Ireland problem firmly on the agenda of successive British governments.[30]

By 1969 the civil rights movement had wrung a series of reforms from a reluctant Unionist government through its strategy of public and mass protests opposing discrimination in Northern Ireland. Unionists were unsure how to deal with a movement which pressed for reform instead of national unity and the Unionist Party split between more liberal elements which wished to implement reforms, and right-wing elements which saw the civil rights movement as a republican conspiracy to overthrow the Northern Ireland state. The civil rights movement provided an opportunity for the Nationalist Party to shake off the 'Green Tories' image it had in some quarters. Brendan Lynn has argued that although Eddie McAteer (the Nationalist Party leader) wanted to modernise the Nationalist Party, his tenure as leader was marked by caution over party reorganisation and a sceptical attitude to the civil rights movement.[31] Indecision on this issue cast away the Nationalists' last chance to reassert their dominant role as the leaders of the minority.

The threat the civil rights movement posed to the Nationalist Party was twofold. Firstly, the movement articulated Catholic grievances politically but without attachment to a political party and hence made constitutional, electoral channels irrelevant. The minority now had another outlet in which to achieve change in Northern Ireland. Secondly, the movement attracted moderate Catholics and undermined their loyalty to the Nationalist Party by fostering disillusionment towards established political parties. For that reason, the 1969 general election was important in two respects. On the one hand, it formalised the split within Unionism. On the other hand, it was a catalyst for the demise of the old Nationalist Party and the emergence of a number of newly-elected nationalist M.P.s who wished to transform nationalism. Three Independents, Paddy O'Hanlon, Ivan Cooper and John Hume, replaced members of the Nationalist Party and found likely allies in Stormont in fellow civil rights activists Gerry Fitt (Republican Labour), Paddy Devlin (Labour) and Austin Currie (Nationalist).

It has been argued that between 1964 and 1974, Catholic politics in the North might have become something other than Nationalist.[32] The language of civil rights and of social and economic concerns suggests a potential for a realignment in Northern Ireland politics, perhaps towards a Left–Right alignment. The Northern Ireland Labour Party (N.I.L.P.) seemed poised to benefit from changes in minority political attitudes. Aaron Edwards suggests that Catholics were determined to secure a 'fair share' of social, economic and political rights existing elsewhere in Britain and had been sympathetic to the N.I.L.P. in the inter-war period. This support tended to be motivated by questions of social justice, as well as an avid disdain for the existing system and, to a lesser extent, by an anti-partitionist outlook that could not be satisfied by a moribund Nationalist Party.[33] Edwards argues that the N.I.L.P.'s attempt to woo

[30] Bob Purdie, *Politics in the streets* (Belfast, 1990); Hennessey, *Origins of the Troubles*.

[31] Lynn, *Holding the ground*, p. 242.

[32] Walsh, *From civil rights to national war*, p. 8.

[33] Edwards, *History of the Northern Ireland Labour Party*, p. 3.

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supporters from the minority community was aided by the electoral rejection of ethnic nationalism in Belfast. However, when the N.I.L.P. took a position on the constitutional question in 1949, they lost a sizeable amount of Catholic support. The Republican Labour Party was founded in the aftermath of this decision. 'Green' Nationalists had been banished from the electoral representation of Belfast in 1945 because of an ignition in class-based sentiment, and when members of the Nationalist Party were returned in the late 1960s they failed to make an impact on the Catholic working class. Rather it was 'red' republican socialists, like Harry Diamond and Gerry Fitt, who were rewarded with most Catholic working-class support.[34]

The N.I.L.P. enjoyed a renewed surge in support in the late 1950s and early 1960s, among Protestant working-class voters. In the 1958 Stormont election, it won four seats in Belfast constituencies,[35] its highest number ever. But after Fitt's election to Westminster in 1966, relations between Republican Labour and the N.I.L.P. deteriorated. Indeed, when it came to the 1969 election, or to the civil rights movement, the N.I.L.P. was too slow to challenge the sectarianism that prevailed among the Belfast working-class. Although individual members of the N.I.L.P., such as Paddy Devlin, supported the civil rights movement, the party did not give its official backing until May 1969. Even at that point there was much debate within the party on such a resolution. For the N.I.L.P., civil rights was as dangerous an issue as the constitutional question had been in 1949. As an editorial in the *Irish News* commented '[a]s workers for a socialist system designed to sweep away inequalities and injustices inherent in the capitalist system it was surely incongruous for it to stand officially aside from a movement seeking to do away with some very definite inequalities in our society.'[36] On this reading, the civil rights movement had taken over most of the policies of the party and one N.I.L.P. member commented that the N.I.L.P. had become 'so moderate and so middle-of-the-road that events had left it behind so that in the general election there had been very little difference between pro-O'Neill and Labour party policies'.[37]

III

It is difficult to over-emphasise the influence of the civil rights movement on Northern Ireland politics. As the demonstrations provoked increasing counter-violence and polarisation between the two communities, the leaders of the movement, particularly those elected in the 1969 election, began to look to Stormont as the appropriate place to present the political demands of the nationalist community. While the civil rights movement allowed the constitutional question to be discreetly side-lined in favour of achieving improvements for the Catholic minority within the system, the constitutional

[34] Ibid, p. 52.

[35] Austen Morgan, *Labour and partition: the Belfast working class 1905–23* (London, 1991), p. 324.

[36] *Irish News*, 26 May 1969.

[37] Ibid.

question still remained on the nationalist agenda. Éamonn Gallagher[38] noted in 1969 that he believed that the minority in the North remained nationalist and attached to the objective of a united Ireland and that for them the civil rights movement was a means to this political end.[39] Austin Currie confirmed this view in a speech addressing a meeting of the Law Society of University College, Dublin on 22 January 1970 when he said: 'The spirit of Nationality has never been higher in the North as it has been since the eruption of last August. At the beginning of the Civil Rights campaign with its emphasis on "British rights for British subjects" some people had been concerned lest the desire for national unity would be diminished. They need not have worried – the fire burns brighter and stronger than ever.'[40] In the changed political circumstances of 1969, and the early 1970s, with the destruction of the Unionist monolith, the constitutional question would once again gain prominence over the socio-economic priorities of the civil rights movement.

When the S.D.L.P. was formally established on 21 August 1970, it was a result of the culmination of a decade of change and instability within the minority population. In many ways the formation of the S.D.L.P. was as much the consequence of a particular set of circumstances as of agreement among its members on basic aims. Precedents for many of the objectives it held to be important had been established by other parties and groups. For example, the idea that reunification could only come about by the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland came from National Unity. The belief in organised politics was a legacy of the National Democratic Party's efforts to reform the Nationalist Party, while the commitment to radical socio-economic policies was at least partly a consequence of the influence of the Republican Labour Party[41] and the N.I.L.P.

Rumpf and Hepburn argue that one of the clearest characteristics of anti-partitionist politics between 1945 and 1969 was the total rift between Belfast and the rest of the province. Relations between the city anti-partitionists and their rural associates had never been very good except when Joe Devlin's (Irish Parliamentary Party) Ancient Order of Hibernians had been able to paper over the cracks.[42] Some semblance of unity was restored to a fragmented anti-partitionist Labour in Belfast by Gerry Fitt, who won a city council seat in 1958. With Fitt's non-sectarian rhetoric and his emphasis on social issues, very much in the style adopted by Joe Devlin in his later years, he was able to appeal

[38] Éamonn Gallagher was a senior official in the Department of External Affairs. From 1969 to 1976, he played a key role in formulating the response of the Dublin government to the outbreak of disorder in Northern Ireland, and in the evolution of Irish policy towards a political solution. He had a keen interest in the civil rights movement and such had been the neglect by Dublin that he was the only person in his department with first-hand, up-to-date knowledge of the events and personalities involved when violence erupted in 1969. In 1993 he returned to the problems of Northern Ireland as a member of the Opsahl commission.

[39] Report by Éamonn Gallagher on meetings with individuals in Northern Ireland, particularly Derry, 10 September 1969 (N.A.I., DT 2000/6/600).

[40] *Irish News*, 23 Jan. 1970.

[41] McAllister, *Northern Ireland Social Democratic and Labour Party*, p. 34.

[42] Erhard Rumpf and A. C. Hepburn, *Nationalism and socialism in twentieth-century Ireland* (Liverpool, 1977), p. 188.

effectively to the new Labour government at Westminster (1964), securing him some recognition in Labour circles when he was elected to Westminster in 1966. In his maiden speech in Westminster in 1966 Fitt stated that he

> believe[d] that during my term as the representative of West Belfast in this House I will be able to appeal to every reasonable member in this Chamber, and, through them, to every reasonable member of the British public ... I insist that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. The people there are British subjects and are entitled to the same rights and privileges as are possessed by any other persons living in these islands.[43]

Fitt played a crucial role in the founding of the S.D.L.P., so much so that Gerard Murray has argued that the party could not have been formed without him. Representing a blend of socialism and nationalism that the S.D.L.P. aspired to achieve, he also brought the party sufficiently into the limelight to allow it to more effectively advance its policies and justify its existence. The presence of Fitt, and of Paddy Devlin, not only gave credibility to the S.D.L.P. as a labour and socialist party, but contributed to a uniting of anti-Unionists in the east and west of Northern Ireland not seen since the time of Joe Devlin.[44]

Yet Fitt may already have been sceptical about the different 'ideological strands' he and his associates were trying to weave together. When Fitt's biographer, Michael Murphy, later asked him if the optimism and professionalism the S.D.L.P. exhibited at its inaugural press conference hid personal and ideological differences that did not auger well for the future, according to Fitt, the answer was yes.[45] It has been suggested that Fitt's concerns delayed the formation of the party.[46] He later noted:

> … the whole concept was giving me sleepless nights. As the most politically experienced of the group, I had deep reservations about the different ideological strands we were trying to weave together. There was never much sympathy for the Nationalist party in Belfast, its strength was in the rural, conservative areas, particularly along the border. The people there had little in common with the working-class of Belfast for whom the question of a united Ireland had little or no urgency. By contrast Derry, which should have been a stronghold for socialist, labour policies, was a nationalist city, a political contradiction … I feared too that there would be personality, as well as political, differences.[47]

Henry Patterson has noted that tensions existed within the party from the outset, with Fitt's predominant orientation towards Westminster-inspired reform of the North, and Paddy Devlin's concept of socialism 'in a British framework as opposed to a European context'[48] at odds with Hume's increasingly close connections with the southern state.[49] But to what extent was the S.D.L.P. a socialist and labour orientated party? The socio-economic aspect of the civil rights

[43] Gerry Fitt, maiden speech, *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, dccxxvii, 438-41.

[44] Murray, *John Hume and the S.D.L.P.*, p. 87.

[45] Michael Murphy, *Gerry Fitt: political chameleon* (Cork, 2007), p. 50.

[46] Austin Currie argues that Fitt always relied heavily on the intuition of his wife Ann, and she had taken a dislike to John Hume: Currie, *All hell will break loose* (Dublin, 2004), pp154–5.

[47] Gerry Fitt, quoted in Chris Ryder, *Fighting Fitt* (Belfast, 2006), pp 167–8.

[48] Murray, *John Hume and the S.D.L.P.*, p. 87.

[49] Henry Patterson, *Ireland since 1939: the persistence of conflict* (Dublin, 2006), p. 235.

movement would *have* to be adopted by the S.D.L.P. if it was to make any sort of impact on the nationalist community in the changed times and circumstances of the late sixties and early seventies. In later years, the S.D.L.P. would contend that the founding and constant theme of the party's policy was 'A New North – A New Ireland'.[50] While this theme primarily refers to the spirit in which the party approached the constitutional issue, the party maintained that it would be an empty theme if it referred only to constitutional matters and ignored the grave social and economic issues that affected the people of Northern Ireland and which gave rise to the civil rights movement in the first instance.[51] At the press conference on 21 August 1970, Gerry Fitt stated that the aims of the party were:

> ... To secure a just and adequate distribution of wealth; to uphold and support the democratic rights and principles of organised labour; to promote the spread of financial, consumer, industrial and agricultural co-operatives; to work for the provision of [a] minimum living wage for all workers and to support the principle of equal pay for equal work; to secure equal rights for all citizens, irrespective of race, creed or political outlook; to support the reintroduction of Proportional Representation as the fairest and most equitable means of representation and the one most suited to the needs of the people in these Six Counties; to promote and encourage the development of all aspects of our culture; to ensure public ownership of all our fishing rights of all inland waters; to formulate radical policies for the agricultural, social and economic development of rural areas; to work for the establishment of state industries, particularly in areas of high unemployment ...[52]

A demand for public ownership of Irish banks, shipyards, insurance companies, and credit corporations was an attempt to deflect the jibes of the far left at the 'so-called socialism' of the less radical members of the party. The party's policy preamble included every aim one could wish for in a democratic, nationalist, party, most predictably 'to promote co-operation, friendship and understanding between North and South with a view to be the eventual re-unification of Ireland through the consent of the majority of the people in the North and in the South'.[53] The most significant feature of this last statement of intent, however, was the emphasis on *consent*, and the fact that it was the *last* intention mentioned, in contrast to traditional nationalist priorities. Murphy suggests that the relationship between Fitt's nationalism and socialism, while a constant feature of his political discourse, was an adaptable blend presented to achieve maximum political advantage by appearing to have something for everyone.[54] Fitt's statement of policy could be construed as a masterpiece, being all things to all men while at the same time being unquestionably nationalist, though put in the mildest of language. Alternatively, Michael Farrell described the stated aims as 'a rag-bag of inoffensive political clichés from six Opposition MPs who were now asking to be called a party'.[55]

[50] S.D.L.P. manifesto for 1973 Assembly elections, *A new North, a new Ireland* (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/3/1/39).

[51] 'Social and economic policy making in the S.D.L.P.', 1980 (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/1/26/4). This was an internal document for party members, possibly for the use in statements.

[52] *Irish News*, 22 Aug. 1970.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Murphy, *Gerry Fitt*, p. 50.

[55] *Irish Times*, 21 Aug.1970.

In the February 1969 election, Hume had sought a mandate for '... [t]he formation of a new movement ... that must provide what has been seriously lacking at Stormont – a strong energetic Opposition to Conservatism, proposing radical social and economic policies'.[56] However, it seems that from early 1971 onwards, the party did not pursue these radical social and economic policies. In February 1970 Hume had explained to Éamonn Gallagher that the new formation would include the word 'Labour' in deference to Fitt and Devlin but asked him to assure taoiseach Jack Lynch that there would be no connection between the new party and the British, Irish or Northern Irish Labour Parties.[57] Indeed, the word 'socialist' was not used in the party's statement of aims, whilst the failure to seek support from the Northern Ireland Labour Party could also be seen to question the extent to which the party could claim it was socialist and labour-orientated. Sean Farren's emphasis on Hume as a committed Europhile, deeply impressed by post-Second World War efforts at reconciliation through the development of the European Economic Community (E.E.C.), the institutions of which he believed were examples of what could be achieved democratically to overcome the legacy of conflict in Ireland, sees him present Hume as envisaging a party in the European social democratic tradition, rather than following the class-based approach of the British Labour Party.[58] Hume had been cultivating his own contacts with the Department of External Affairs in Dublin from September 1969 onwards.[59] In response to the crisis in August 1969 in Derry, the tánaiste, Erskine Childers, drew up two memos to review policy regarding the unity of Ireland. In the second of these papers he argued that if partition could only be ended by political action and not by force then anti-Unionist groups had to be separately or collectively exhorted to work on a long-term basis for an approach to unity. If a new Nationalist party emerged 'so much the better'.[60] When the S.D.L.P. was formed in August 1970, Paddy Kennedy of the Republican Labour Party alleged that the British Labour Party was involved in the financing of the new party.[61] In fact, much of the financial support that the S.D.L.P. initially received in its formative years came from the Dublin government and from groups in Dublin that viewed its emergence as beneficial to southern politics.[62] The S.D.L.P. members were also reimbursed for travelling expenses and overnight stays when visiting the taoiseach throughout the

[56] *Irish News*, 7 Feb.1969.

[57] Currie, *All hell will break loose*, pp 157–8.

[58] Farren, *The S.D.L.P.*, p. 25.

[59] Hume secretly met with Éamonn Gallagher of the Department of External Affairs on at least two occasions, once on 21 September 1969, when Hume outlined talks he was having with Cooper and Currie about a united opposition (note from Gallagher (22 Sept. 1969) re visit to Northern Ireland, 20–21 Sept. 1969 (N.A.I., DT 2000/6/660)) and again on 15 February 1970, when Hume told Gallagher of the progress made on the united front (Currie, *All hell will break loose*, pp 157–8).

[60] 'Notes on the present Northern situation', 26 Aug. 1969 and 'Anti-partition policy', 2 Sept. 1969 (N.A.I., DT 2000/6/659).

[61] Workers Association, *The S.D.L.P.: what a Catholic party needs to do*, Apr. 1975 (Linen Hall Library, Northern Ireland Political Collection).

[62] As seen in the S.D.L.P. party papers (P.R.O.N.I.) The S.D.L.P. enjoyed the support of Dr John Kelly in U.C.D. who regularly held fundraising events for the party at which Hume spoke (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072).

1970s.[63] It was clear that Dublin was eager to ensure that the S.D.L.P. would remain politically relevant to Northern nationalists, and more importantly, an alternative to the Provisional I.R.A.[64] Not only that, but information regarding the North and Northern nationalists also seemed to come almost exclusively from John Hume.[65] Writing to T. K Whitaker in December 1971, G. B. Newe (the only Catholic ever to serve in a pre-power-sharing Stormont cabinet) outlined his apprehension that 'the information reaching the top man in Dublin is, to put it mildly, unreliable, and he may, as a consequence, be placing himself at some political risk'.[66] Newe was almost certainly talking about Hume in this instance. As Conor Cruise O'Brien caustically remarked in his memoirs: 'In those terms, it has long been mandatory – and remains so – to say "me too" to whatever John Hume says.'[67]

IV

In 1980 the S.D.L.P. claimed that, from the outset, it had made a vigorous and sustained attempt both to develop and propagate a range of socio-economic policies based on democratic socialist principles interpreted within the Northern Ireland context.[68] Yet there is a dearth of policy documents dealing with social and economic issues among party papers.[69] Any references to socio-economic policies in this period are short and non-specific, although policies on the constitutional question were detailed. At the party's second annual conference in November 1972, Gerry Fitt stated, '[w]e are a socialist party. We don't have to describe ourselves as a radical socialist party because if you are socialist you don't need any other adjective to describe yourself or your party', yet claimed that there was a major task facing the party in this regard.[70]

Despite Fitt's claims about the socialist credentials of the party and his own presentation as a socialist politician who represented Protestants as well as Catholics, as leader of the S.D.L.P. he was unable to attract the Protestant community. In the following years, the S.D.L.P. would continue to return to their traditional nationalist and Catholic support base in times of difficulty, with unfortunate consequences for the Belfast members. This division was seen early on when the S.D.L.P. withdrew from Stormont in July 1971 over the shooting dead of Seamus Cusack and Desmond Beattie by the British army in Derry in suspicious circumstances, and the failure of the British government to establish

[63] Northern Ireland expenses of Opposition M.P.s and senators (N.A.I., DFA/2003/16/525). For example, Austin Currie received £70.56 in February 1972 for four meetings he attended in Dublin (23 August 1971, 3 September 1971, 10 September 1971 and 11 February 1972).

[64] Most notably, the Dublin government funded the S.D.L.P.'s 'Alternative Assembly' when they left Stormont in July 1971 (N.A.I., DFA/2002/19/394).

[65] Most of the meetings taking place at this time were with John Hume.

[66] Newe to Whitaker, 16 December 1971 (P.R.O.N.I, D/3687/1/36/1).

[67] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Memoir: my life and themes* (Dublin, 1998), p. 38.

[68] 'Social and economic policy making in the S.D.L.P.', (1980) (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/1/26/4).

[69] Internal party papers of the S.D.L.P., (P.R.O.N.I., D/3072).

[70] *Irish Times*, 27 Nov.1973.

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an independent public inquiry. The decision to withdraw was not a unanimous one. Paddy Devlin remembered that both he and Fitt did not support Hume's stance; in fact, they were 'livid with anger'.[71] He commented that just at a time when there were signs that they might be getting somewhere:

> ... the old nationalist knee-jerk of abstention was brought into play. Gerry Fitt and I made it clear from the outset that becoming abstentionists was going to leave the way clear for the Provos; indeed, we believed the party had fallen for a Provo trap.[72]

The party's civil disobedience campaign from August 1971 onwards, the Alternative Assembly for the Northern Ireland People[73] and the rent and rates strike all served to alienate potential Protestant and liberal unionist support. The subtle nuances of change in the language the S.D.L.P. used reflected this move to a more ethnically-aligned party. In the eight months between July 1971 and March 1972 the S.D.L.P. shifted its position from one of seeking reform in Northern Ireland to abolishing Stormont. In fact, Hume went further when he relayed to Éamonn Gallagher that the agreed objective of the S.D.L.P. in November 1971 was to bring about Irish unity.[74] Gallagher reported, following a visit to Northern Ireland on 29 October 1971, that there seemed to be 'a growing, but not precisely stated, feeling that the question of Irish unity is now a live issue and that no solution can be found that does not take it into account'.[75] On the whole, Gallagher had detected a gradual shift in S.D.L.P. policy towards toppling Stormont as a preliminary to anything else. This change may well have been a result of increased pressure from the I.R.A., which was particularly strong in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. At the same time, behind the scenes the first hairline crack became visible in the unity of the party and the issue of internment would exacerbate it.

Towards a New Ireland, the party's first published policy document, written in anticipation of the Darlington conference in September 1972 highlights the extent to which the party had moved away from the socialist and labour element in its name and the lack of an agenda likely to win Protestant support. While the document was strong on structural frameworks to bring about a united Ireland sometime in the future, it was weak on social and economic policies. Indeed, sections of the document dealing with social and economic issues were left blank during the discussion period, while the constitutional aspect dominated drafting debates.[76] The final document made it apparent that the S.D.L.P. possessed a traditional nationalist interpretation of the Northern Ireland problem. The party blamed partition for the problems of Northern Ireland and saw reunification as

[71] Paddy Devlin, *Straight left: an autobiography* (Belfast, 1993), p. 155.

[72] Ibid.

[73] The Alternative Assembly was set up when the party walked out of Stormont after the British government refused to initiate an independent inquiry into the shooting dead of Cusack and Beattie.

[74] Gallagher note, 15 Nov. 1971 (N.A.I., DT 2002/8/484).

[75] Gallagher note, 3 Nov. 1971 (N.A.I., DT, 2002/8/483). Gallagher met with Fitt, Devlin, Currie, Hume, Oliver Napier of the Alliance Party and James Doherty of the Nationalist Party.

[76] S.D.L.P. policy sub-committee, 1971–2, draft 'S.D.L.P. Towards a New Ireland' (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/1/30/1). Most of the recorded discussions relating to the policy document centred on how best to bring about Irish unity, and not how to implement social and economic policies in Northern Ireland.

inevitable.[77] What it proposed was an interim measure until reunification could be achieved by peaceful means, in terms of condominium proposals, advocating joint sovereignty by Britain and Ireland over Northern Ireland with the expectation that it would lead to a united Ireland. The language was new; the party talked of an 'agreed Ireland', but the aim was the same – a united Ireland. The S.D.L.P. had no policy or strategy on how to attract Protestant unionist votes. In the 1973 local and Assembly elections the party did not significantly try to cultivate Protestant votes. While the S.D.L.P. placed one advertisement in the unionist newspaper, the *Belfast News Letter*, party canvassing was not directed at Protestants.

Within the party itself, there was concern about the apparent 'drift' of the party leadership. At the end of August 1973, S.D.L.P. Assembly member Paddy Duffy[78] wrote to Devlin expressing his disappointment that the S.D.L.P. had not made more progress in the Assembly, particularly the failing to make headway on two fronts – on the internment issue and army harassment, and on preparing a constructive social and economic programme for the future. It seemed that for the previous nine or ten months, the party had become more concerned with the constitutional question than with the 'sufferings of the ordinary people'.[79] Fitt later noted his regret at the way the party 'had been taken over by teachers and lawyers' which made him feel 'out of step'[80] during the 1973 Assembly elections. What made him feel uncomfortable, he said, was 'the predominance of people with a mainly nationalist outlook. There was little labour or socialist involvement'.[81] Paddy Devlin made a similar point in his memoirs:

> Party membership had increased steadily throughout 1972 but for some reason a disproportionate number of them were educationalists, mainly teachers. They vastly outnumbered the next largest group who were businessmen. Few of those who joined up had political experience. They appeared out of the blue as though a hidden hand had moved them to join, to secure nomination and to be eventually elected. I could not help thinking that many of those who appeared were inspired by Catholic groupings, such as the Knights of Columbanus … We had a lot to do to instil Labour values into our new recruits. It was to be a hard job. Some of the teachers were particularly strident, and most of the members were far too instinctively nationalist for my taste.[82]

The Sunningdale Agreement (December 1973)[83] and the experience of government with the power-sharing Executive (January–May 1974) brought any suppressed problems of the S.D.L.P. to the fore and highlighted the very real differences between the uneasy mix of labour and nationalism that the six founding members had tried to contain. Unity had been painfully won and

[77] 'Draft working document on proposals relating to the present situation in Northern Ireland', Dec., 1971 (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/1/30/1).

[78] Paddy Duffy was a solicitor from County Tyrone.

[79] Duffy to Devlin, 28 Aug. 1973, S.D.L.P. Assembly Party papers, 1973–4, (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/1/34/3).

[80] Gerry Fitt, quoted in Ryder, *Fighting Fitt*, p. 218.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Devlin, *Straight left*, pp 189–90.

[83] The Sunningdale Agreement was a tripartite agreement between Westminster, Dublin, and members of the Unionist Party, the S.D.L.P. and the Alliance Party, and included provisions for a power-sharing Executive and a Council of Ireland, as well as some form of police reform.

divisions were becoming noticeable within the party. These differences were most evident in the Sunningdale negotiations where Fitt wished to make progress on the power-sharing aspect, even at the expense of the Irish dimension, whereas Hume prioritised the Irish dimension and reform in policing. Devlin, on the other hand, emphasised the need for the ending of internment before normal politics could ensue.[84] The dissatisfaction with the moves by the British government to end internment grew progressively stronger within the party and on 18 April 1974, a group of S.D.L.P. members met in Belfast to form an ad hoc committee which would act as a pressure group *within* the party to seek the immediate implementation of S.D.L.P. policy on internment. The group was known as the 'Motion No. 1 Committee' which was a reference to the composite motion which was passed unanimously at the third annual conference at the beginning of December 1973.[85]

During the short-lived power-sharing government of 1974, the S.D.L.P. had an opportunity to highlight the labour strand of their identity. On 24 January 1974, the statement of social and economic aims agreed during the inter-party talks in October 1973 was published in a document entitled *Steps Towards a Better Tomorrow*. As soon as the new Executive took up office, it set about the task of converting these broad policy objectives into comprehensive proposals for the future development of Northern Ireland. The S.D.L.P. stated that:

> For the first time in the history of Northern Ireland a socialist programme has been built into government. For the first time members of our Party will be in charge of Commerce, Employment, Housing, Physical Planning, Local Government, Health, Social Services, Community Relations, Economic Planning and Departmental Co-ordination. Is this not progress towards a better life?[86]

Hume's biographer, Barry White, contends, however, that highly speculative targets were produced for the jobs and houses that would be provided, based on massive public spending, and there was contention from the conservative Unionist M.P., Roy Bradford, who was reluctant to endorse government intervention in industry.[87] However, the programme highlighted the socio-economic emphasis of the S.D.L.P., and that in itself was important. When the party had some hope of power, it could afford to tone down some of its nationalist rhetoric and make progress on the socialist and labour front. Drawing up policies on the various problems affecting Northern life and debating them half-heartedly at a party conference was not the same as seeing them implemented as part of a government programme. The problem was that between July 1971 and November 1973, and post-May 1974, the S.D.L.P. was powerless to implement any socio-economic policies, or indeed any policies.[88]

In the aftermath of the failed Executive, a debate on the very essence of the S.D.L.P. ensued. The fourth annual conference of 1975 is perhaps the best

[84] For the intricacies of the Sunningdale negotations see Ryder, *Fighting Fitt*; Currie, *All hell will break loose*; White, *John Hume*; Devlin, *Straight left*.

[85] *Irish Press*, 19 Apr. 1974.

[86] Report on the third annual conference, 2 Dec.1973 (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/5/3/1-12).

[87] White, *John Hume*, p. 143.

[88] Bríd Rodgers commented that the social and economic policies of the S.D.L.P. were largely ignored outside the party, particularly in the early violent years of the 1970s. Interview with the author, 7 Apr. 2009.

example of the extent to which the S.D.L.P. had jettisoned its social and labour ideals in favour of traditional nationalism and the quest for the unity of Ireland. Sean Donlon, from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, noted the ever-changing composition of the party. It was very different from the party that was established in 1970. At the time Donlon pointed out that

> the 1975 S.D.L.P .... is now a solidly middle class, white collar party. The executive has at least six teachers, an engineer, a solicitor, a pharmacist and an accountant. In a rough analysis of the 34 S.D.L.P. office holders (19 Assemblymen and 15 non-Assembly members of the Executive), I estimate that at least 20 received second and/or third level education under the free education scheme ... The sections of the minority community not evident in the S.D.L.P. at the moment are the working class, particularly of Belfast, and the farming community.[89]

In 1976, a Northern Ireland Office report commented that 'rarely if ever since the S.D.L.P.'s foundation ... has ideological disharmony within the party been so apparent'.[90] Garret FitzGerald believed that the S.D.L.P. was on the brink of reverting to the uncompromising nationalism of the minority pre-1968 and had almost lost hope of ever achieving anything by constitutional politics.[91] The diminishing likelihood of an agreed power-sharing executive after May 1974 led to the development of two separate groups within the S.D.L.P. The first concentrated on a reassessment of the constitutional options. The second tried to shift the focus of debate from the constitutional to socio-economic issues. It took until 1977, seven years after it was formed, before the party drew up any rigorous socialist and labour policies. The party stated at its annual conference in 1977 that '[o]n the socio-economic front as a Party, founded on social democratic principles, we have striven and will continue to strive for a more equal distribution of wealth; we have opposed and will continue to oppose injustice and deprivation; we stand for an acceptance by the State of its responsibility for those who are unable to care for themselves.'[92] Its concern was reflected in the many socio-economic policy documents published by the party for the conference, for example, 'Housing – the way ahead'; 'Poverty in Northern Ireland'; 'Economic analysis and strategy'; 'Education – the need to reform'; 'An opportunity for excellence– Proposals for secondary reorganisation'; 'Women in society'; 'Community relations in the new North'; and 'Agriculture in Northern Ireland'.[93] These documents were the first sustained effort by the party to address the socio-economic element of its identity.

[89] Report by Donlon on S.D.L.P. fourth annual conference, 17–19 Jan. 1975 (N.A.I., DT 2005/151/691).

[90] Northern Ireland Office report on S.D.L.P. conference, 17 Dec. 1976 (T.N.A., FCO 87/553).

[91] Note on conversation with Garret FitzGerald, Dec. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1907) quoted in Farren, *The S.D.L.P.*, p. 132.

[92] S.D.L.P., *Facing reality* (1977) policy document adopted at seventh annual conference, 4–6 Nov. 1977 (P.R.O.N.I., D/3072/5/7/1-10).

[93] Report on the seventh annual conference, 4–6 Nov. 1977, Newcastle, Co. Down (P.R.O.N.I, D/3072/5/7/1-10).

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V

The achievements of the S.D.L.P. were considerable, particularly in providing a much-needed alternative to violence in Northern Ireland throughout the 1970s. The polarising of the two religious communities in Northern Ireland from August 1969 onwards coupled with British army action and the S.D.L.P.'s abstentionist policy from July 1971 heralded a more direct preoccupation with the constitutional question by the minority community between 1970 and 1975. However, there was an opportunity, however brief, that nationalist politics in Northern Ireland could have taken a different direction. With the increasing domination of John Hume within the party post-1974, this moment was lost and the socio-economic element was side-lined for a more traditional nationalist approach. Paddy Devlin was expelled from the party in 1977 for claiming that it had lost its socialist credentials. Fitt left in 1979, claiming that the party had become too dominated by a nationalist outlook and concentrated more and more on an Irish dimension, as opposed to power-sharing. The departure of Fitt and Devlin, while not causing major damage to the party, secured the party's predominantly Catholic character. The socialist and labour emphasis of Belfast was gone. Ivan Cooper resigned from the party in the late 1980s, citing increasingly parochial policies.[94] The constitutional focus and increasingly nationalist tone in the S.D.L.P. ensured the 'L' of the party's title became, in Edna Longley's phrase, 'a dead letter'.[95] This paper has suggested that it is arguable that it was ever there in the first place.

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[94] Murray, *John Hume and the S.D.L.P.*, p. 94.

[95] Edna Longley, *The living stream: literature and revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1994), p. 119. See also Connal Parr, 'Managing his aspirations: the Labour and Republican politics of Paddy Devlin' in *Irish Political Studies*, xxvii, no. 1 (Feb. 2012), pp 111–38.

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