

OLD CERTAINTIES: NEW REALITIES

Twenty years. 1970. Czechoslovakia was readjusting to life after the invasion by the Soviet Union. Petrol was seven and six a gallon. Labour was actually in Government and the Belfast Telegraph cost only six pence. Nuclear power was the safe, clean energy alternative and Major James Chichester Clark was the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. Skyjackings, the oil crisis and Sunningdale were yet to come, and there were still twenty shillings in a pound.

In East Belfast a press conference was held to launch the well-intentioned, but clearly impossible notion that Protestants and Catholics could work together in the same political party.

Those people founded a party based on four principles they deemed to be fundamental not only to politics but to any realistic hope of progress. Those principles are: equality and tolerance in all matters; a non doctrinaire approach to the economy, fair and firm administration of the law and a recognition that a majority of the people wish to govern themselves together within the United Kingdom.

Those principles have not changed, but the times have changed. The issues have, if anything become more marked. Politics in Britain and across the world have altered out of all recognition and we, who accepted the difficult realities of politics in this community twenty

years ago, must be ready to accept new realities and work with them to bring hope to Northern Ireland.

The political geography outside Northern Ireland seems to be proof that people can make a new world. Of course it is not universally welcome. There are those who would prefer the old certainties of the Cold War to the unfamiliar landscape of an evolving Europe. When East was East, and West was West you knew who the good guys were, and where to point the guns. But now the opportunity has arisen to put the guns away and find a healthy and productive way of sharing our common European home. Ironically, some of those who called most loudly for the tearing down of the Berlin Wall have become strangely uncertain how to react now that it is gone. Two months ago I stood in East Berlin beside that wall and saw the impossible come true.

So today as we again welcome friends from throughout these islands, and Western Europe, we welcome for the very first time at any Party Conference in Northern Ireland, friends from Eastern Europe, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Perhaps East Belfast is not so far from East Berlin. We too must remake our world. But with so many of the old certainties, the old landmarks disappearing in other places what are the implications for Northern Ireland?

Let us first return to our roots, to the four fundamental principles on which this party was founded. What did they mean on that day in April 1970? What do they mean to us after a generation of political experience? and what will they mean to our children in twenty years

time? I would like to explore each of our founding principles, the context out of which they grew, their currency in 1990 and how we apply them in the last decade of this century.

Our primary objective is- "to heal the bitter divisions in our community by ensuring equality of social, economic and educational opportunities; the elimination of prejudice and injustice by a fair and liberal appreciation of the beliefs and fears of others; and an honest and full participation from all sides of the community in our political governmental and public life."

There has been progress in this area. The Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights; integrated education is becoming a real option for some parents and children; and discrimination in housing, once one of the most concrete examples of prejudice in this community, is now a thing of the past. Perhaps most important is the progress which was made by the Fair Employment Agency in changing workplace attitudes and practices, now being carried on by a new, better resourced Fair Employment Commission.

We can look to this principle with pride at the contribution which our party has made to changing attitudes. But the change is painfully slow and we have not, in my view, reached a point where we can be at all complacent, or even satisfied.

Catholics are still far more likely to find themselves unemployed than Protestants. Integrated schools have only very recently begun to receive the kind of Government support to which they are entitled. And we are a long way from convincing anyone that human rights, not least the right to life itself, are protected and respected throughout this community.

The enactment of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is a priority. It should be based on the European Convention of Human Rights, and justiciable through our courts. Our citizens need to know that they can depend on the law to protect them from arbitrary abuse from the state or their fellow citizens. It is becoming increasingly clear that a Bill of Rights is necessary throughout the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. But if reactionary forces in other parts of these islands refuse reasonable protections for their own people, we must press the case for Northern Ireland.

We sometimes forget that our experience within Alliance, where crossing the divide is a way of life, is not shared throughout the community. Many people, and their politicians, still do not understand those from the other tradition. They see the future in terms of victory and defeat, not shared enrichment. We have begun to change the attitudes of the people of Northern Ireland. But there is not one of us here who truly believes that bigotry and prejudice are a thing of the past.

Our second principle deals with the economy. "Alliance refuses to be shackled by the economic dogma of centralised socialism or economic conservatism. We will never accept any such socio-economic allegiance."

During the 1960's, the Ministry of Commerce was one of the most successful departments in the Northern Ireland Government. The economy was expanding at an unprecedented rate, there was business confidence, and within the United Kingdom as a whole, there was a consensus on the kind of mixed economy that Britain should sustain. It was not uncommon to hear people say, "It doesn't much matter whether you vote Labour or Conservative there's very little difference between them." Today, the differences are staggering. No one would dream of saying that these two economic philosophies were similar, let alone the same. Both have signally failed to deliver.

The fundamental reason centralised socialism is collapsing in Eastern Europe is its inability to meet the reasonable desires of the people.

Perhaps the most striking contrast is the difference between East and West Germany. Both started from a base of devastation after the total war of 1939-1945. In 1989 when the border was breached, the East German economy bled through the hole in the wall. BMW's and Mercedes drove down Unter den Linden alongside the Trabi's and Moskviches, and the painful reality dawned with unbearable completeness. The last fifty years in the East had been a bitter sham. The suppression of

individuality for the sake of the society as a whole had brought neither prosperity nor social benefit.

Equally dismal is the failure of free market capitalism to meet the needs of the vulnerable. This is becoming only too tragically evident across the country. At the Liberal Democrat Conference in Brighton last year, some senior journalists responded with disbelief when I said that if the headlong slide into Thatcherite materialism and selfishness was not stopped there would be violence in Britain. I predicted that the divisions Conservatism was creating between employed and unemployed, between Northerner and Southerner, healthy and sick, rich and poor, black and white, would bring to the streets the kind of riots and physical violence which we began to experience in a divided Northern Ireland twenty years ago.

This past week Britain has experienced that violence in the prisons and over the poll tax, on the streets of London. We have seen in England what used to be familiar sights here in Northern Ireland. Prison governors trying to negotiate with men who have nothing to lose and exhausted bleeding policemen in protective gear lashing out at young rioters. In a single weekend, two vastly different groups turned to violence. They represent a generation of people who have no feeling of responsibility, ^{no} no sense of identification with society. Their actions cannot be justified, but nor can the truth be avoided.

Any society, East or West, which treats its people with the kind of arrogance demonstrated by this Government during the implementation of

the poll tax risks instability. The poll tax is iniquitous and inefficient. It rewards the rich and condemns the poor. Its defenders are the gainers which just goes to show how few gainers there are under this tax!

The Conservative Government is witnessing the inevitable consequences of their reckless creation of an alienated underclass who have turned to violence, but we will all pay the price.

What happens when market forces become the touchstone in the caring professions.? Take an example from the reorganization of Primary Care Health Services which also took effect this week. General Practitioners are advised that to qualify for any payment for cervical cancer smear tests, they must screen 50% of all women in the relevant age bracket. It does not matter if the women are already being screened at the local hospital nor which women are vulnerable. It does not matter if despite all his best efforts the women fail to come along.

If he is working in a middle class area we know from experience that most women will attend. But in a deprived, inner city area, where the women are far more vulnerable, and less likely to seek advice, there is a real financial disincentive. The doctor knows he will never reach the targets. He must then decide either to pay out of his own pocket and do all the extra work of screening these women, or not bother. The sick get sicker, and the better off, get better care.

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There has never been a time when it was more necessary to emphasise a practical economic philosophy which is sensitive to the needs of people.

Since 1970, we have all become much more aware of the damage which we have been doing to our environment. As evidence of our concern we turned over a major portion of our conference to a series of debates on the complex matter of maintaining the sensitive environmental balance. But the doctrines of socialist economics and the conservative free market cannot recognise the centrality of the environment to all our economic considerations. They are both too preoccupied with their own vested interests. The needs of workers, consumers and the environment are far too complex to allow the solutions to be doctrine led.

Let me take the example of Northern Ireland Electricity. The government says that it pursues privatization because competition increases efficiency and gives the consumer greater choice. The minister has made clear that he fully intends to privatize our electricity service. However, this cannot achieve greater competition and efficiency, since it merely changes a public monopoly into a private one. It cannot increase customer choice, because the consumer cannot obtain his electricity supply from anywhere else.

The monopoly issue could be resolved by reestablishing the north-south interconnector. This would appeal to the free market approach of the Conservative Government and the policy of the Labour party to economically unite the island.

But it is not that simple. Without complaint from the government or indeed from our three MEP's, we have accepted a sulphur emission reduction of 60% while the Republic's Electricity Supply Board has negotiated the right to increase its level of sulphur pollution by 25%. This will enable the production of much cheaper, but dirtier, electricity than in Northern Ireland where higher environmental standards will increase the cost to the consumer. This cost differential is made worse by the government's decision to make itself look environmentally sensitive by using the hugely expensive flue gas desulphurisation process at Kilroot Phase II, rather than simply burning low sulphur oil.

If the interconnector was now reestablished we could perhaps achieve an initial lower cost for the consumer, but our own service could not hope to compete, leading to a loss of jobs and a developing dependence on the Republic of Ireland for our electricity supply. The net result would be a run down in the cleaner, but more expensive NI Service, and we will end up receiving not only the Republic's electricity but paying them for the privilege of their pollution as well.

Twenty years have proved that our espousal of a non-doctrinaire socio-economic policy was realistic and far-sighted. We cannot achieve any of our goals economic or environmental, in isolation. But the world is not only finely balanced in terms of our eco-system; our financial well being is increasingly inter dependent. The United Kingdom cannot afford in any sense to pretend that it can live unto itself. We are part of an international community, economically, environmentally and

financially. It is long past time when the United Kingdom should join the European Monetary System.

The administration of justice is never out of the news in Northern Ireland and amidst all the confusion our third principle on the rule of law stands clear.

"Without universal respect for the rule of law and the authorities appointed to enforce it, there can be no measureable progress. We must secure the rapid achievement of such respect and the fair and impartial enforcement of the law."

Twenty years ago British standards of justice seemed to hold the key. It was believed that if one could ensure the administration of justice in Northern Ireland lived up to the standards that prevailed in the rest of the UK, respect would be guaranteed. If the RUC could be reformed and the B-Specials replaced with a regiment of the British Army, the old partisan suspicions could be ameliorated.

But twenty years on, cases such as the Guildford Four and the Maguire Family raise profound questions about the safety of convictions, not just in Northern Ireland but particularly in Britain. Lord Denning's 'awful vista' has become a frightening reality.

Alliance has always been unequivocal in its support for the law and for the security forces and today we remember with sorrow and with gratitude those who have given their lives to protect us during two decades of a terrorist campaign. Every day security forces are faced with daunting decisions and any false move could spell death for themselves and disaster for the community.

Sadly, despite all the improvements in the operation and reputation of the RUC and the best efforts and enormous sacrifices of the security forces and their families, many of the old suspicions remain. This is especially true of the UDR where the criminal activities of a few undermine support for the whole regiment.

The elusive prize of widespread acceptance and respect is yet to be achieved. The nagging question is how could it be possible that the British system of justice has not only failed to defeat the terrorists who continue to murder innocent people with apparent impunity, but even to protect the innocent from wrongful conviction in the courts.

There is a fundamental conflict between civil liberties and the fight against terrorism, but Alliance does not believe the answer lies in more draconian legislation. Our proposal for the timed videotaping of interrogation of suspects is a good example. This technology is easily available, and would protect the prisoner from harassment, and the police officer from baseless accusations. If a genuine admission is forthcoming it is not easily withdrawn, but confessions under duress would be exposed.

Similar safeguards in the judicial system are also necessary to meet public concern about the reliability of some convictions. The Court of Appeal has proved an unsatisfactory instrument. We call for an Independent Body with inquisitorial powers to which disputed cases can be referred, not for merely legal review but for full investigation.

The situation in the Republic of Ireland gives us no answer to the problem. Their regular complaints about the activities of the security forces, the administration of justice, and the prison system in the United Kingdom, carry little weight when at the same time it appears impossible to secure extradition, not ^{just} of suspects for trial but of convicted terrorists who have not served out their sentence. Our sense of outrage over the innocent who suffer is equalled only by the bitter frustration we feel over the guilty who run free. All that we ask is that sovereign democratic nations who are members of the same European Community see that the real enemy is the criminal and the terrorist not the legislative differences of a neighbouring state. If your laws

→ do not permit your courts to extradite then you must change your laws.

Respect for the law is not a once and for all achievement on either side of the border. It requires constant attention to the delicate balance between personal security and personal freedom. Those who feel a responsibility to the whole community can make a unique contribution to this process.

Freedom and equality, tolerance and prosperity, environmental protection and just laws can only persist in the context of stable political structures. That is why those who founded the Alliance party gave particular attention to the disputed constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Like all the other realities I have mentioned, this question cannot be ignored and cannot be wished away. The party has always taken an unambiguous position.

"We support the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom. We know that this belief is shared by the overwhelming majority of our people and that provocative debate about it has been the primary cause of all our most fundamental troubles."

Confirmation of the significance and wisdom of the second sentence in this principle came recently in a very different situation. As we watched the quickening pace of German unification we saw Chancellor Kohl attempt to reopen the question of the German-Polish border and in particular the position of those Germans who remain within the Polish boundaries agreed after the last world war. This issue stoked the fires of German nationalism and threatened the security of central Europe. In a powerful expression of maturity and vision the German Liberal leader, Hans Dietrich Genscher, used his position as coalition partner to force Chancellor Kohl to recognise that a stable Europe cannot be built by reopening old wounds. He understood that nothing could be gained by becoming embroiled in territorial disputes; rather the hope for the future is to move towards a 'post nationalist' Europe.

There is a clear message for us. The solutions offered by nationalism whether British or Irish, should be consigned to the past. We must look beyond the issue of boundaries to the problem of how to protect the rights and culture of minority communities. Redrawing borders, in most cases, simply creates a different minority. In Northern Ireland there is a nationalist minority, but the creation of a United Ireland solves their problem only at the expense of creating a larger minority of unionists in this new framework.

Nothing is solved, nor can it be, unless we stop arguing about boundaries and borders and start to explore what kind of structure would best enable us to build sound relations with each other.

The other lesson we can learn from the rest of Europe is that people power is not itself enough to produce real change. If it were, Hungary would have changed in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and China in 1989. Without at least tacit support from the politicians actually in positions of power, people can be crushed.

The difference in the ^{successful} revolutions of 1989 is that there are leaders in power who have the courage to be imaginative and forward thinking. Mikhail Gorbachev is not the people's hero in the same way as Vaclav Havel or Lech Walesa but without his strength protecting those movements, the people could not last.

We need that kind of leadership. The British and Irish Governments must make the decisions that enable Northern Irish constitutional parties to have a chance of proceeding down the road of reconciliation.

The Republic of Ireland must accept the verdict of history. This island is divided. The territorial claim contained in Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution must be changed. The uncertainty and lack of trust it creates is as destructive in this small island as the fears created by Chancellor Kohl for the whole of Europe when he tried to reopen the Polish question.

Our views on Articles 2 and 3 have not changed over the years, and the recent ruling of the Supreme Court in the Republic of Ireland only justifies that opinion and creates an urgency for constitutional reform. The true legal position is not an 'aspiration' as some would have had us believe, but a constitutional imperative set out by a sovereign state.

Similarly, the British Government must end the uncertainty about its strategy, follow a single path, and have the guts to hold to it when the going gets inevitably rough.

Since the fall of the power-sharing executive the British Government has taken two directly conflicting approaches. During the 1970's their view seemed to be that Northern Ireland's political parties must find an agreed form of government for themselves. This laissez-faire approach failed at the Constitutional Convention in 1975, and the Atkins Conference in 1980. They then adopted a second, more proactive

role. Discussions were opened with Dublin, with a view to forcing the pace, and establishing structures which were not dependent on the cooperation or agreement of the Northern Ireland parties. This resulted in the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985.

This Agreement has been described as a framework for progress. If I saw someone building a scaffolding for a house and passed by the scaffolding every day and saw no building going up but only noisy arguments about the plans and purpose of the building, after five years I think I would be entitled to ask whether the work was getting anywhere?

Five years on from the signing of the Agreement, the people of Northern Ireland are asking the Government, what plan are you following?

The moment of truth has arrived. The new Secretary of State, Mr Brooke has had his discussions with the Party Leaders, and he either believes the parties will work out a solution amongst themselves or he does not.

If it is the Government's view that progress will come through the unanimous agreement of the parties here, then it must now remove the obstacles and facilitate negotiation. Last year I urged the Government to consider the most recent and relatively minimal demands the Unionists have put forward. Though I have emphasised that this approach should be taken only if the Government is convinced that there is a realistic prospect of agreement from such negotiations.

For my own part, unless there is a significant change of heart I see no likelihood of inter-party agreement in the foreseeable future. The SDLP continues to stand staring into the horizon waiting for the day when the Unionists will realise that their future lies with the rest of the people of this island. It is their analysis that no structure can be established until the human relationships involved have been resolved to the mutual satisfaction of all. But this is not the only valid analysis indeed it is not even a sound analysis. All we know of human relations tells us that good relationships do not develop in a vacuum. Without a structure, all that emerges is chaos, misunderstanding and confusion. Their expectation that the Unionists can, with any self confidence, approach the negotiating table is unrealistic.

The grand old men of Unionism are crouching round the embers of a burnt out ascendancy trying to warm themselves, thinking and talking only of the past.

Moreover, we must remind those who tell us that the great new hope is the organisation of the Conservative party in Northern Ireland, that the Conservative and Unionist party is the party of James Craig and Lord Brookeborough. They had sixty years to get it right in Northern Ireland and have been in Government for the last eleven years. This is no new hope. It is a regressive splinter of the unionist anachronism.

Reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that at the end of the present series of discussions the Government must finally take responsibility for setting out a clear structure of Government for

Northern Ireland, based on the consultations that have taken place to date. I must warn the two governments. If the British partners will not move on devolution and the Irish will not move on extradition, the A.I.A. has become a cynical masquerade for the benefit of the international community.

Here we are, back in East Belfast, reaffirming our commitment to the four principles on which our party was founded twenty years ago. Those principles confronted the unwelcome realities of a society characterised by division, oppression, and violence. From the start they were a source of ridicule for some, and a cause of offence to others. Many people predicted Alliance would not last; many others hoped Alliance would not last. But, if I may borrow a phrase from Sir Aubrey Lewis, "Alliance is a tough old bird. It tends to outlive its political obituarists."

The principles that Alliance set out to defend and promote in 1970 have not changed, nor will they. Alliance was formed to challenge the times. I am happy to say that many of the founding members are here with us today. They refused to believe that politics had to be adversarial. We are still about bringing people together, recognising the reality of the problems before them and making practical headway into the future. Of course when we began we hoped and prayed that peace would come soon but our commitment was not to quick success, but tangible progress. And if that takes five more years, or ten more years, or if we return to a hotel in East Belfast in another twenty years to celebrate and reaffirm our principles they will still be true and they will still be relevant.

For Hungary it was more than thirty years, for Czechoslovakia it was almost a quarter of a century, but they worked and waited and wrought changes from a government that is far more repressive than anything we have ever experienced. We celebrate your courage, and returning to your respective countries we want you to know that as we have watched you rekindle a spark that some feared dead, we have been rejuvenated for the task that faces us. It can be done. It has been done. You have done it!

Like you we must not flinch from the duties that brought us together. The people of Northern Ireland need to have a force that will not compromise its integrity, will not stop challenging the powers that govern this place with the truth, however unpalatable. It is not our job to make the lives of politicians in other parties any easier, and certainly those who wreak havoc on this community will never find comfort from us.

We are the conscience of Northern Ireland politics. They may not like our views, they may not always heed our views, but we have respect, self respect.

We are the one certainty. We are the landmark. In our changing political life, Alliance is the touchstone, the shining beacon, constantly questioning the comfortable illusions of yesterday, confronting the painful realities of today, and pointing to the exciting opportunities of tomorrow.