



Dr John Alderdice

Devolution of substantial powers put by Alliance



The smallest party in the talks, the Alliance has the clearest view of what it wants out of the talks. **Brennock**, Northern Editor, reports on the party's views with significant cross-community support in Northern Ireland

AS the constitutional talks about a possible new British-Irish agreement approach, there is considerable confusion over what the two main unionist parties and the SDLP are going to say. Will the SDLP support devolution; will it state clearly what its support in terms of new structures, what type of devolution will the unionist parties support; will they agree to power-sharing, if it is called something else?

None of these things is known to observers. Indeed some believe that, with six days to go before the start of the talks, they are not fully known to those within the parties either.

The Alliance Party, however, has worked out and published its views on all these matters. While saying that it will be flexible during talks it has, for Northern Ireland, an exceptionally detailed and straightforward analysis of the situation, and proposed settlement.

Indeed, the party is so consistent in its attitude that people

tend to ignore it altogether when speculating about the talks. The differences between the unionists and the SDLP, not to mention the Irish Government, will undoubtedly present many obstacles to a solution in the coming weeks. Nobody expects Alliance to present any problems at all.

Put simply (the party itself puts it simply), Alliance supports the devolution of substantial legislative and executive powers to Northern Ireland. Such powers would be exercised by local structures including an assembly. They have even decided how many seats there should be — 85 elected out of 17 constituencies. The party's detailed policy is set out in a document "Governing with Consent", published in 1988.

There would be a phased transfer of powers from Westminster. Areas of government such as agriculture, health and social services would be transferred immediately to the new administration in the North. "Reserved matters" such as security would be trans-

ferred as confidence in the devolved administration grew. Finally defence, electoral law, judicial appointment and other sensitive subjects would remain under the control of Westminster as "excepted matters".

Within the assembly there would be a series of backbench committees to scrutinise various areas of policy. The composition of these, of course, and the allocations of positions as chairmen and vice-chairmen, would be proportional to the strengths of the parties. As for the power-sharing executive at the centre of Alliance's model, this would be chosen by the Northern Secretary, and would have to be widely representative of the community, reflecting the balance of political parties in the assembly and including no one supporting the use of violence for political ends. It would have to be acceptable to the assembly.

If all the above sounds familiar, that is because it is. Alliance participated in the 1973-74 Sun-

ningdale negotiations and the power-sharing executive that followed it. What they propose now, 17 years on, is a variation on that theme. One important variation relates to the institutionalised "Irish dimension" — the Council of Ireland — proposed back in 1974. Instead of that, and instead of the Anglo-Irish Conference that exists now, Alliance proposes a tripartite body representing the new administration in Belfast and the British and Irish Governments.

The Alliance model, power-sharing devolution, is close to what is assumed to be the preferred British Government scenario for the future. The party cultivates the image of being reasonable and compromising — it has to if it is to maintain the delicate religious balance among its voters.

The only party with a significant cross-community mix among its voters, its membership is close to the religious divide in society, with some 60 per cent of its

membership from the Protestant community and the remainder from the Catholic community.

In religious terms, both Catholic and Protestant Alliance supporters are generally on the liberal wings of their respective churches. As one senior party member puts it, the Catholics would oppose its hierarchy on condoms, divorce and integrated education; the Protestants would oppose its more conservative clergy on matters including Sunday observance and integrated education. The party leader, Dr John Alderdice, agrees that the description of him as a liberal Presbyterian is a fair one.

The party's vote hovers between eight and 10 per cent, with roughly an equal proportion of Catholic and Protestant supporters. But if the religious breakdown of its supporters and activists comes close to reflecting the balance in society, Alliance's class base is more skewed towards the middle-class. Party activists claim to have an elec-

toral appeal to all social classes, but among the activists there is clearly a middle-class tendency.

In a society with just 20 paid elected political jobs available, it can help in becoming a political activist if one is comfortably off, concedes a senior Alliance figure. This is not to say that all Alliance activists are rich, but it certainly helps.

Those on the party's delegation at the talks will have to take leave of absence from full-time jobs, if they are to play a full role in discussing the political future of Northern Ireland. Each of the other parties will have at least three paid politicians, MPs or MEPs, on their delegations.

The party is not a place for mercenaries. When the Alliance Party finally walked out of what became known as the "Prior Assembly", named after the Northern Secretary of State under whom it was established, they were led by Mr John Cushnahan.

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who had five children and no other source of income, party activists are proud to say.

Having participated in the Sunningdale experiment, which large elements of unionism boycotted, Alliance took part in Jim Prior's assembly, which the SDLP boycotted. It was clear early on that the assembly was going nowhere towards the avowed aim of bringing "rolling devolution" to Northern Ireland. In 1986, after four years, Alliance walked out, blaming nationalist abstention and unionist intransigence for the failure of the concept. The assembly was abolished shortly afterwards.

Devolution for Northern Ireland, as supported by the Alliance Party, places the North firmly within the United Kingdom, albeit with an Irish Government input through the tripartite body that it proposes. Although opposed to any ceding of sovereignty to the Republic, the party nevertheless is second only to the SDLP in the level of

its contacts with political parties in the Republic.

All parties, except Labour which sent its apologies, were represented at the Alliance conference last weekend. Individuals within the party have developed good relations with individuals in Fine Gael, and particularly in the Progressive Democrats, with whom Alliance is linked in the liberal group in the European Parliament. To many in the Republic, Alliance represents the very acceptable face of unionism — it prefers to be described as anti-sectarian rather than non-sectarian.

Once again, the party finds itself facing into a round of talks, advocating power-sharing devolution with an Anglo-Irish dimension, willing to consider variations on its proposals, and knowing that if all-party agreement is not reached, it will not be the fault of the Alliance Party.

Tomorrow: Frank Millar looks at the unionist parties.

ALLIANCE