

ITEM 5 - UNICAMERAL OR BICAMERAL SYSTEM

The Alliance Party believes that a decision on whether to have a Bicameral or Unicameral local Parliament is of great importance to its proposal that a partnership administration in the province is the only way forward which holds out any hope of success and consequently relief of the suffering of the people of Northern Ireland.

Virtually because all proposals currently put forward for Government of the province have a strong role for committees elected proportionally from the Assembly sharing the responsibilities of the various Government Departments now controlled by the Northern Ireland Office Ministers. If this system therefore is to work effectively the Assembly must be of a size sufficient to man these committees yet not be so large that the Administration is expensive and cumbersome to operate. The members of the committees also would have to be equal in status ie elected under the same franchise and directly responsible by ballot to the people.

Stormont when set up under the 1920 Government of Ireland Act was Bicameral having a common chamber of 52 members elected by proportional representation and a Senate totalling 26 members the majority of whom were elected by the lower chamber and 2 being ex officio. The total complement of the Parliament being 78 members. Since Stormont was prorogued in 1972 the two representative assemblies that were created by His Majesty's Government have retained that number of elected members despite themselves being single chamber institutions.

In the Stormont Parliament System the Senate functioned as a forum for debates, a constitutional safeguard, a means of drafting legislation and a check against common chamber legislation although this power was barely used. The system was consistent therefore with the Westminster Parliament on which it was modelled.

It was also however as so accurately stated by the UUC in Paragraph 47 of the Convention Report extravagant in manpower and time and not suited to the growing complexity and urgency of Government.

That urgency is now more acute in absence of any chamber and it is for the members of this conference to press for one system or another. It could be argued that a second chamber could have a useful function. As in other places a second chamber can be used to provide a forum for important groups and authorities in the society who do not normally stand for public office or engage in party politics. Representatives of the Churches, Industry, Trade Unions and Consumer bodies could provide a very valuable contribution of advice to any elected assembly and more so in an organised forum.

However a formal second chamber in a New Assembly for Northern Ireland could only be bought at the price of fewer elected representatives in the commons chamber of such an assembly and the Alliance Party believes that would be a very high price to pay. To increase membership of a local Parliament to meet the problem would mean that the community would be grossly over-represented by a cumbersome body difficult to organise and expensive to run.

In the above paragraphs I have outlined the Alliance Party opinion on the role of a second chamber its limitations and the problems associated with such a course of action by the conference.

The Alliance Party would discount any action that a second chamber could have any other function than that already stated. The Alliance Party believes that all of the powers devolved to a new local parliament must be in the control of the members directly elected and it is the responsibility of those members in partnership and mutual respect for each others view to see that those powers are used fairly. To distribute any of the power devolved outside the elected body could be in some part a negation of the trust of the electorate and a duplication of the Authority already resident in the Sovereign Government. Neither would a second chamber function effectively as a safeguard for minorities or as a means of sharing power with minorities.

The Alliance Party believes that all appointments and offices of a new Assembly should be by election based on proportionality. Any mechanism to ensure that any minority is represented in positions of authority which is based on appointments rather than election either from the Assembly or from a second chamber would be rejected by the Alliance Party. We believe that all parties to the Assembly should have equal access to positions of power based on the relative strengths of their mandate from the people. To advocate such a role for a second chamber would also be a partial destruction of the Rights of the electorate and also undermine the role of the elected body.

A single elected chamber is the only way to ensure that there are sufficient elected representatives to undertake the government of the province and the only way to ensure that elected representatives are faced with their responsibilities.

The Alliance Party submission is therefore that the Assembly should be Unicameral and should have sufficient numbers of members that is between 85 and 102 both to adequately represent the people of the province in a partnership administration and also to ensure that transfer to the new boundaries anticipated in the report of the boundary commission can be undertaken with the minimum of difficulty.

John Cousins