

THE ALLIANCE ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

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There has never been a time when all the parties here present were around one table, and since the last set of substantive talks in 1992 only the leaderships of Alliance and the SDLP remain as the veterans of such negotiations. Since then our efforts have been bent more towards the establishment of All-Party Talks, than the exchange of views which is the content of such Talks. If we are to reach agreement over the next few months, then time is very short, and must not be wasted. But if we are to understand each other, we must, before moving rapidly to the structural issues, share our different analyses of the problem.

Alliance was born, in the aftermath of the outbreak of the present 'troubles', out of a commitment to build a fair and just society, and the starting point for an understanding of our analysis may be found in the statement of fundamental principles upon which the party was founded in April 1970.

These identify Alliance as a liberal party, committed to pluralism, tolerance, participatory democracy, respect for human rights, non-doctrinaire economic policies, and the necessity of an impartial but firm application of the rule of law.

The principles also identify the constitutional dispute as being at the root of all our most fundamental difficulties in creating a pluralist Northern Ireland, and affirm the view that it is for the people of Northern Ireland to determine their own future.

It was natural therefore that when the Joint Declaration was published by the British and Irish Governments on 15 December 1994, Alliance gave an immediate and fully supportive response. That declaration, in its rejection of violence as a legitimate political instrument, its affirmation of the imperative of respect for human rights, and its watershed commitment to the requirement of separate consent from the people of Ireland, North and South, is regarded by Alliance as an international expression of some of our most cherished views. We believe that these are also some of the central elements of the constitutional settlement which we are met to negotiate.

In presenting our analysis of the problem we would start by noting the very ancient nature of our feud. It is no new thing for the North to be the scene of struggle. Centuries before the Reformation brought its religious divisions, and long before England was England, and began its struggle for control of the islands, the legendary Cuchulainn was defending Ulster against Queen Maeve. In more reliable history we are informed that when Congal of Ulster was fighting with Domnal of Meath as far back as 637 AD, his support came from his friends in Scotland. This suggests that there has never been a simple unity of the people of Ireland, that the Northern people have long had a sense of separateness, and often felt closer to those who lived across the channel in Scotland, than they did to those in the South-West of the island. This is not strange for we usually build relationships with those who we meet most easily and frequently, and the stretch of water between Antrim and Galloway, has throughout history been as much a channel of communication, as a boundary. For this, and many other historical reasons, the people of the North, with their many different origins,

religious views, political affiliations, and cultural attachments, have always been seen as forming a community, though without entirely consistent geographical boundaries.

Superimposed on the natural development of this and other communities, there has been the historic struggle for control of land in this archipelago of islands. The people of England, for many centuries sought to extend their control to include all the islands. This was expressed politically in the Unionist, or British Nationalist view that all the people on these islands should form one nation state. It found its expression in the United Kingdom, though a full political integration, the aim of unionism, was never achieved. This British Nationalist view, and particularly the attempts to enforce it, often in most unjust and cruel ways, provoked a natural reaction, the development of a strong Irish Nationalism. This rebelled against British Nationalism by expressing the view that it was not the people of the islands, but the people of Ireland, that should form a nation state. A whole mythology was created to support this view, and the real historic divisions of origin, religious affiliation, political conviction, and cultural diversity, were submerged in the struggle to create a separate Irish Republic, characterised by Gaelic culture, and Roman Catholic practice. These struggles are not unique. The fight for control of land, even between siblings, is a common feature of life, no less in rural Ireland than elsewhere and those who devote themselves to striving for control of land or property often acquire them at the cost of good relationships. Excessive pressure on one side, usually produces an equal and opposite reaction, and such rivals often find themselves forced into taking up a particular position, simply in contrast to their opponent.

Thirdly, the drive to create a nation state is a strong one. It is an attempt to include within certain borders as many of 'my people' as possible, while keeping 'the others' outside. This may arise whether or not there is an apparently natural geographical boundary, as in an island like ours. The up-side of such an ambition is the group cohesion it creates. The down-side of such nationalism is the powerful tendency to homogenize society and disregard the welfare of dissidents, and contribution of minority groups.

It is our view that the struggle between British and Irish Nationalisms for control, has tended to polarize our people, and to diminish the opportunity to recognize that many of us in this island do not wish to identify ourselves exclusively or even primarily, with a British, Protestant, monarchical ethos, nor with a Gaelic, Roman Catholic, republican ethos. We come from many different roots, with diverse faiths, conflicting political creeds and rich cultural variety. The political task which lies ahead is for us to create structures which facilitate the expression and exchange of this rich diversity. To institutionalize the divisions in our community would be failure. We must recognize them, and then seek to overcome them.

This by definition requires something much less tidy than the exclusivist propositions designed to give expression to Irish Unity, or a simple United Kingdom, or even the apparently more progressive jointery which sees a solution in terms of parity of esteem for only these two views.

We have earlier mentioned the principles of the Joint Declaration of 1993, and in our view these provide an excellent basis for progress. When combined with the widely

accepted, three sets of relationships, upon which in recent years, talks have been based, a useful map emerges.

Firstly, it is for the people of Northern Ireland to find a way of living together, and deciding their own constitutional future. That we in Northern Ireland are divided on this is clear, so some other principles must be outlined to assist us in reaching agreement. Violence must not be regarded as a legitimate political instrument, and it is an enormous help in the search for a settlement that the use of terrorism has been set aside by both sides. It is also of central importance that the rights of every individual must be respected and the contributions of all minorities must be welcomed, facilitated and valued.

Whilst the people of Northern Ireland are more than likely to decide, for economic, social, historical and other reasons to remain for the foreseeable future within the United Kingdom, the significance of our shared island home cannot continue to be minimized. The economic, environmental and social imperatives of cooperation can only be ignored at great cost to all of us. Structures within Northern Ireland should have institutional opportunities to work alongside the political arrangements in the Republic of Ireland. These institutions should express the realities of our relationships, rather than a forced political agenda, so some may have more responsibilities than others, some may extend to the whole island, and others to this part or that. In all we should be striving to help relationships grow, rather than force our people into fulfilling the requirements of a political creed.

Thirdly, the British and Irish Governments must deepen their mutual respect through constitutional recognition. It would be counter-productive if the Irish Government sees it as important only to address the sensitivities of Nationalists in the North, and the British Government is only really concerned about Northern Unionists. Both Governments must be sensitive to the anxieties and aspirations of all sections of the people of Northern Ireland, and divorce themselves from any temptation to use partisanship as a card to be played in their own domestic politics, now or in the future.

Finally, we must all be prepared to pay a price for peace. An honourable compromise will require each giving up elements of political control. London, Dublin, and our divided people must understand that there will not be mutual satisfaction, without significant sacrifice, but surely after all this time, we have begun to realize, the cost of failure, and to appreciate that the prize of peace, is worth the price of peace.

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