

## ALLIANCE PARTY STATEMENT TO STRAND THREE PRELIMINARY MEETING

My colleagues and I would first wish to thank the representatives of the two governments for the invitation to be present at this meeting and to make a statement setting out some of our views on the issues likely to arise in Strand Three of these negotiations.

There has been some discussion amongst commentators of the historic nature of this meeting, and indeed it is a welcome fact that representation, at one meeting, of such a breadth of political opinion is probably unprecedented, as is the historic opportunity it offers to address the divisive issues which have so plagued relations in these islands, and especially in Ireland. However, if we catch a glimpse of the exciting opportunity that stands before us, we must also not lose sight of the dangers that lie in our way.

Such a time brings great fear. Each of us comes to this meeting with deep anxiety. We know that the price of failure in this process will be measured in blood shed, lives lost, and hope crushed for years to come. But there are also other fears, which may run even deeper. Some of us represent people who have a profound and historic fear of each other. Fears which are well grounded, for forebearers of ours on all sides ran roughshod over the rights, and often the right to life itself, of the others. We should not shy away from this truth, for within us we come here carrying the anxiety that we risk selling the people we represent into the hands of their traditional enemies. We must recognize this in ourselves, and we must appreciate that it is also present in the others. This fear of betraying the past must not however blind us to the danger of betraying our children by handing on to them the legacy of hatred and division we have inherited. If we are not to lose this opportunity, and it could pass so quickly, there will need to be great courage. This is a job for real leaders. There are signs, unmistakable signs, that the ordinary people are hungry for an agreement. Not everyone is prepared to pay the price, but price there is, and it is we who have to negotiate that price. It involves leaving some historical and political baggage behind. It involves compromise. It requires putting agreement above victory, and it will not be easy.

In Alliance we have found that bringing Protestants and Catholics together in Northern Ireland has had its difficult times. The introduction of internment, the Hunger Strike, the Anglo-Irish Agreement - these were some of the intensely polarized and bitter periods of our experience, and out of living together as Protestants and Catholics through experiences like these we offer some comments for this process.

This meeting must take us back in our minds to 1973 when, after talks at Stormont Castle representatives of the Unionist Party, Alliance and the SDLP, met at Sunningdale with the British and Irish Governments to seek a way forward. They failed, and it has taken almost twenty years to get back to this point again.

Why did they fail?

Firstly a major strand of loyalist political life was not present at the talks. This mistake was repeated in 1985 in an extraordinary and even more widespread exclusion from the negotiations which led to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Alliance found this a most difficult experience. We were angry at the exclusion, and at the flawed content of the Agreement. But because the Agreement stated that it gave support to devolution, an opportunity to return power to the people of Northern Ireland, and a promise of real progress on security, we gave it a qualified acceptance. To date it has failed to achieve its stated aims, and we are back to the table. This time is different. The temptation to exclude has been resisted. The full spectrum of constitutional political life is welcomed here. That will mean that it will take more than just a few days to reach agreement, but it will also mean that any agreement reached will have a much greater chance of success.

To succeed where previous talks have failed we must honestly confront the issues, and I will briefly point up those areas from which the two governments must not shy away if we are to succeed in the three stranded process as a whole. In doing so I will return again to 1973.

On December 27 of that year, my predecessor Oliver Napier wrote an open letter to the people of the Republic of Ireland. In it he appealed to them to address two issues, which are fundamental responsibilities of government - security and the constitution. He pleaded for thorough-going security co-operation, a resolution of the problems of extradition, and effectiveness in combatting cross-border terrorism. I need hardly remind those of you who have been closely involved in these matters, that this plea is still tragically relevant after twenty years, but I would be failing in my duty if I did not emphasize the urgency and centrality of governmental responsibility in security. He also called for a respect for the new cross-community institutions of government in Northern Ireland and said, "We now expect you to take urgent steps to bring in a new constitution which is consistent with your Government's solemn declaration of recognition", and he warned that this was the thread by which a settlement hung. That warning went unheeded, and within weeks the political underpinning of the new institutions began to fall away. That mistake must not be made again. Mutual respect requires mutual recognition, and the constitutional claim in Articles 2 & 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland cannot coexist with mutual recognition and respect.

There are two further issues to which I would draw attention. We are committed to a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, and we are optimistic that all the Northern Ireland parties will be able to reach a full agreement in this area, but we appeal to both Governments, as signatories to the European Convention on Human Rights, to consider the establishment of a common Human Rights framework for these islands. It would not be easy for you, and we are certainly not prepared to have your difficulties delay the implementation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland but were such a broader framework to be established it would help remove the suspicion and actual abuses which have arisen in all three jurisdictions.

Finally, if we have made progress in the last twenty years it has surely been in the recognition that there is a Tri-partite dimension to this complex problem. It is signified by the constitution of this meeting, and by the three stranded construction of the

negotiations. It should be fulfilled by a settlement characterised by Tri-partite institutions. At a governmental level an Anglo-Irish forum should have a place for representatives of the people of Northern Ireland to be consulted. After all, it meets to discuss our affairs. At a parliamentary level, the inter-parliamentary body already in existence should be expanded to involve the members of any new Assembly. On social and economic matters, our common membership of the European Community points to new frameworks of co-operation through which we can all be enriched. It may be tempting to feel that the people of Northern Ireland are a prickly sort, and difficult to have around, but do not deceive yourselves. There will be no solution in Northern Ireland, and no maturity of relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland without us.

I finish with words similar to those used by my predecessor in 1973:

"If you do nothing over the next few months, and this opportunity is lost, history will judge you, and its judgement will be harsh and unforgiving. If however you show good faith, courage and a sense of urgency you can transform relations in these islands in a few short years."