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# The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

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## THE ALLIANCE PARTY AND THE CAMPAIGN FOR EQUAL CITIZENSHIP

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### TO JOINT MEETING OF EXECUTIVE AND STRATEGY COMMITTEES

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### ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FOR EQUAL CITIZENSHIP (CEC)

1.1 The CEC has outlined its beliefs and principles as follows:-

"The CEC believes that there is little chance of resolving the problems of Northern Ireland until all its people - Protestant and Catholic - enjoy the same political rights as the people of the rest of the United Kingdom - especially the right to vote for or against their own Government at Westminster. We advocate the following four principles:-

- The right to join and vote for or against the main national political parties.
- Northern Ireland Legislation to be fully debated at Westminster. No orders in Council.
- No peculiar constitutional arrangements without a referendum.
- Administration of Local Government functions to be democratically accountable to the local community".

1.2 A common development of the CEC theme can be summarised as -

- "It is a campaign for obtaining equality of rights".
- These rights were lost in 1921, when Northern Ireland was created to keep us at arms length and in an unstable form, which would ultimately disintegrate with the formalation of a United Ireland.
- This thinking persists in Britain and the USA who share a longterm aim of a United Ireland within NATO.
- We have been left in a sectarian state shorn of all sorts of rights. Only when these rights have been regained is there any chance of ending sectarianism, terrorism etc.

1.3 Although most of us equate the CEC with "integration" of Northern Ireland within the U.K. the CEC at times avoids this direct implication since "this term [integration] can be used emotively in a way which prevents both communities from fully appreciating the concept [equal citizenship]". They have even argued on occasions that committed devolutionists should join their campaign to regain "lost rights". Whilst few see this as realistic much of the CEC publicity, if not their direct appeal, is centred around the "loss of rights" issue. For some purposes it is useful to discuss this separately from integration.

### WHAT IS THE APPEAL OF THE CEC?

2.1 The CEC enjoys considerable media credibility and a fair degree of public sympathy. It may puzzle many of us that this should be so, but we must seek to understand why. Some of the reasons are -

- a) It has an appearance of being "new" or different.
- b) Publicity has been handled vigorously and imaginatively, McCartney is a good public performer.
- c) It has come at a time of particularly negative Unionist leadership.
- d) It is Anti Anglo Irish Agreement.
- e) There has always been an integrationist lobby. Opinion Polls consistently show 80-95% "acceptance" of integration amongst Protestants and 39-55% "acceptance" amongst Roman Catholics.
- f) The "loss of rights" argument appeals to many Unionists frustrated by the successes of an earlier Civil Rights Movement.
- g) There is enough talk of non sectarianism to give an impression of being a relatively liberal movement.
- h) It avoids too much discussion of the difficult realities - the divisions between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and the terrorist organisations, would both melt away.

2.2 Thus the target for CEC support will be to a large degree Unionists, Protestant, middle-class and maybe even educated, notwithstanding that some of its acknowledged support is socialist and social democrat. But they are appealing to people, who must be amongst those we would hope to win over. I believe that they represent a considerable danger to us in seats with a large middle-class Unionist vote. Do not believe that because they are anti-devolution, they could not field 3 or 4 protest candidates in elections for a devolved Assembly and take 2 or 3 seats from us. In the recent elections Alliance gained at the expense of Unionists in many seats, but, significantly, not in North Down. I wonder how a CEC Candidate would have fared in South Belfast.

#### HANDLING THE CEC ARGUMENTS

3.1 I have used the term "handle" deliberately because in our response, while some of their arguments must be refuted outright, on one or two points of fact we may agree with what they say. On still other issues we can refute their arguments given a proper platform, but we may be wary of initiating the debate in a brief interview or press statements. In considering our response, although not necessarily in presenting our case, it is useful to examine the "loss of rights" issue separately from the more straight forward integration question.

3.2 "Loss of rights". These can be considered under the heading of the 4 CEC principles.

a) Joining/Voting for mainland parties. - Of course it is "strange" that we do not have mainland parties to vote for in this part of the U.K. There are precedents in Europe for regional parties operating in areas where national parties do not organise (Bavaria). It is not our mission, however, to justify the existence of sectarian parties in Northern Ireland. But given the tradition of division in our community it is not difficult to justify the need for the Alliance Party. There is here a particular problem requiring a particular remedy. The Alliance Party not only gives a living example of Protestants and Catholics working together but also by bringing forward imaginative and manifestly just proposals, can provide the catalyst for others to do the same. The divisions in Northern Ireland have to be tackled directly and worked through. They cannot merely be bypassed by introducing a different frame of reference modelled upon what people in England tend to disagree about. Nevertheless we cannot object to mainland parties organising here, and that precise issue is not the one on which we would wish to fight the CEC.

What is ludicrous for the CEC to suggest is that we are an oppressed people stripped of rights, democracy and the ability to influence Government. It is up to individual parties and voters to put up candidates and vote as they choose. We have a fair allocation of 17 seats, and certainly Unionist and SDLP voters are handsomely represented compared to the millions of SDP/Liberal Alliance voters in Britain with their 22 seats. Should this whole issue of mainland parties organising raise significant support in Northern Ireland, we could usefully argue that an even more important way of securing fair representation would be the introduction of proportional representation for Westminster Elections.

I believe that the most important aspect of this whole question is our relationship with the SDP/Liberals. The CEC claims that although we may unite Protestant and Catholic in one party we cannot accommodate Catholic conservative and Protestant socialist. Fifteen years ago we would have rejected that. Can we, in the light of our developing relationship with the SDP/Liberals, say so today? A maturation of the relationship into a triple Alliance committed to devolution for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales would be a way of stealing ground from the CEC. Even setting aside the current SDP/Liberal difficulties, are we sure we want such a relationship. Would it make it more difficult for committed socialists and conservatives to join us in our crusade against sectarianism. Might it even make them join the CEC?

b) Northern Ireland legislation at Westminster. - The CEC are perfectly correct that Northern Ireland is at a disadvantage because firstly legislation is passed as Orders in Council rather than Bills, which can be properly

Secondly, we do not have committees of the sort which scrutinise legislation for Scotland and Wales. Do we by pressing for Bills and for a scrutinising Committee play into the hands of the integration lobby and weaken the case for devolution? I think not, because we can pinch an issue from the CEC and there is very little danger of our demand being met.

c) Referendums for major changes. - Quite apart from the general arguments against referendums in a Parliamentary democracy, the CEC request for a referendum, presumably within Northern Ireland, on any major constitutional change, is an obvious inconsistency in an organisation demanding equality throughout the U.K. Of course this can become a circular argument, as the CEC justify a Northern Ireland referendum on the grounds that we have already been separated, mistreated, etc., etc. Arguing against referendums is never particularly easy or popular. We can if pressed to do so.

d) Democratically accountable local government. - Here the CEC refers to the Area Boards and the Housing Executive. Area Boards have few elected representatives and answer only to the appropriate Northern Ireland Department (run in the absence of a Devolved Government by an English Minister of State). We would have to view with extreme caution any moves to "democratise" Area Boards other than by making them accountable to a devolved powersharing administration. Likewise the Housing Executive. In some quarters a negative stance by the Alliance Party may be misunderstood. If we are on record for "more democracy" in the form of Bills rather than Orders in Council and a scrutiny committee for Northern Ireland legislation, then it may be easier to be relatively negative on issues c) and d).

### 3.3 INTEGRATION

The arguments against have been detailed elsewhere, but can be summarised most simply under 3 headings.

a) Integration ignores the reality of the divisions in Northern Ireland, and the fact that some fundamentally Northern Irish approach must form part of the solution. Put more bluntly integration is a purely Unionist solution and offers nothing to those who wish for an "Irish Dimension". If we criticise integration in terms of being "too Unionist" we can be perceived as being against the Union.

b) Integration is not on offer. No Westminster administration that we can foresee will concede integration.

There are certainly no pressures from within U.K. parties to organise here.

c) Integration will not solve the problem of how to administer "higher functions" of local government. A higher tier of local government to take on these functions has been suggested by Official Unionists, some of whom have incorrectly interpreted this as consistent with Macrory's original proposals for local government. We would not wish to see these potentially divisive "higher" functions returning to the contentious arena of local government. They would best become part of the responsibility of a devolved powersharing administration.

#### PUTTING OUR VIEWS ACROSS

4.1 While it is impossible to plan day to day tactics in advance for tackling the CEC, I believe some broad themes can be agreed. In the first place we must be prepared to enter into debate with the CEC. They cannot be ignored (nor of course should they become an obsession). Secondly, of the anti CEC arguments, which I have identified, some will be easier than others to convey to the public during for example a brief interview. It is easier arguing against integration than against "loss of rights". In arguing against integration we have to be perceived as being for a local approach to problems rather than against the Union. Thirdly, we must attempt to put across the positive Alliance message rather than a purely negative anti CEC view. It may be difficult for us to comprehend but there are many people in Northern Ireland who do not realise that the Alliance Party policy is powersharing devolution. Thus the methods for combatting the CEC cannot be separated from the methods of promulgating our own policy.

4.2 These methods can be considered under 4 headings -

a) The intellectual debate. - Is it an accurate impression that Alliance features less prominently in the intellectual political debate than formerly? Perhaps this is simply because we are no longer new. Maybe, and I am no exception, we have come to despise the armchair politicians and theorists. This is a mistake. We must cultivate thinkers, academics and opinion formers. They may not necessarily join us, but we may be able to leave our mark. If they become better informed about us, and above all convinced of our credibility, we can expect more sympathetic consideration from them.

There are a number of avenues for arguing out a detailed case against the CEC. As a matter of urgency it should be done in the Alliance newspaper. There may be doubters in our own membership.

Could we instigate an article in "Fortnight" by a sympathetic academic? Would the "Newsletter" or "Irish News" take an anti CEC analysis from an "ordinary" Alliance member. (in response to that published by Laurence Kennedy several months back).

b) The political dogfight. - We must be prepared to engage the CEC in debate. We have the spokesmen and the leader of the calibre who can do this.

c) The letters columns - The flow of CEC letters apparently never ends. We may think that many of them are rubbish. But they convey an impression of an actual organisation, with members prepared to take the trouble of writing to the press. For the sake of our credibility it is most important that we be ready to respond. There is the danger of becoming involved in some fruitless exchanges. But even if there is a minimum of Alliance mentioned we must respond. If devolution is criticised we should usually respond. From time to time we may wish to point out the absurdity of many of the "loss of rights" and "loss of democracy" letters.

d) Production of Autumn Campaign - Perhaps the best way to finish off the CEC is for them to be washed away in a flood tide for devolution. The autumn promises to be a period of greater political fluidity than for quite sometime. We must not wait to be asked our view. We must put it across with vigour. We need -

( i) A Press Conference, with detailed papers on "the case for devolution" and "why the CEC cannot solve the problems".

(ii) A Leaflet Campaign - "Why the Alliance Party wants a devolved powersharing Government".

Acknowledgments: Some of you may recognise in this paper your own views, whether expressed to me directly, or extracted from previous statement or comments. I will not acknowledge your contributions individually, and therefore will not implicate you in any controversial opinions, which I have expressed.

Anti-McCartney arguments & Anti-CEC arguments.  
are "separate."