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Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

Alliance Party submission on the nature of the problem and the principles underlying a resolution.

*The nature of the problem.*

The Alliance Party was founded in 1970, in the aftermath of the outbreak of the present 'troubles', with the primary objective of healing the divisions in Northern Ireland by bringing about a fair and just society. The party took as its starting point the principles of support for the union so long as a majority in Northern Ireland so wished, support for the impartial application of the rule of law, and rejection of economic dogma. We are a liberal party; we value pluralism, tolerance, democracy, participation and respect for human rights. In the Irish context we reject any attempt to label us as simply unionists or nationalists, and as such we place ourselves in the broad liberal, radical and dissenting tradition which we regard as the vital third tradition in this island.

The other two traditions are of course unionism and nationalism. They themselves are diverse traditions. They include people with very different perspectives and priorities. Unionism includes those who feel a real sense of affinity with the monarchy and with the rest of the UK and those who simply look to England as an ally. Nationalism embraces the long standing cleavage between republicans and constitutional nationalists, and it includes those who see a united Ireland as essential and those who look primarily for justice and fair play within the North. Both traditions include rural and urban elements and religious and secular aspects. And as we have already indicated there are many in the North, as in rest of the island, whose affinities are in the labour movement, in liberalism, in more independent religious perspectives, who reject any attempt to label them as one thing or the other.



This background is important, for in our analysis the root cause of the political problems we are here to address has been the failure to adequately recognise and embrace the diversity of society and opinion in this island and the parallel failure to devise, agree, and implement institutions of government giving adequate recognition to that diversity and capable of achieving widespread support.

Diversity ought to be a normal and healthy aspect of any society. It is certainly a feature of Irish society. But diversity becomes division when people see that their perspectives, their needs, their religious or political views or their feelings of communal identity, are being ignored or threatened by those in authority. Too much of the history of modern Ireland has been the history of failures to come to terms with the diversity of people and perspectives which makes up the island, this Ireland, within which we live.

Britain's role in the 19th century and before, can be summarised as a persistent failure to pay sufficient attention to the feelings and needs of all but a small section of the population. That failure had a profound effect in shaping and hardening those feelings.

The last 100 years have seen the emergence of of unionism and nationalism as major forces in Irish political life. One of the most remarkable aspects of both traditions has been their failure to devise or even to attempt to devise strategies for dealing with one another. Their actual response to each other has almost always been one of simple denial. The other tradition, even the other part of the island, have often been treated as if they simply aren't even there.

The nationalist debate from Parnell to partition is remarkable for the lack of any serious discussion of what to do about the North East. Since partition nationalists in the south have passed though major development such as the Constitution of 1937, neutrality during the Second World War and leaving of the Commonwealth and creation of the Republic with little thought for the North and little if any consideration for the impact that



these developments might have on improving relationships with the unionist tradition.

It is hardly necessary in this forum to dwell on the equivalent failings of the unionist tradition over the same period. For both the modest step of the meeting between Sean Lemass and Captain O'Neill only serve to underline the paucity of contact or understanding between Southern nationalism and Northern unionism.

In the course of this history of failure to acknowledge our diversity there are also examples of failed attempts to deal with our differences. The Government of Ireland Act was one. It offered Southern nationalists the possibility of substantial self government within a framework which provided for positive North South cooperation and for the possibility of progress towards a united and self governing island. It was not however enough to satisfy most of southern nationalists. The Treaty which followed it went further in giving the South real independence, while recognising the right of the North to opt out. It was a realistic recognition of the realities and possibilities of the time and might have provided a firm foundation for better relationships, but in the circumstances prevailing it was unable to command sufficiently widespread support in the South. Opposition to the Treaty led to the civil war in the south and eventually to the 1937 constitution.

More recently the Anglo Irish agreement was seen by many as a positive development. But it was an agreement between the two governments in London and Dublin, and while their cooperation and the principles agreed between them were welcome the Agreement did nothing to further agreement or compromise between unionists and nationalists in the North. The exclusion of unionists from the process leading up to the agreement prompted alienation and suspicion amongst them. The subsequent failure to implement those aspects of the Agreement relating to devolution has left the people of Northern Ireland with only the most limited democratic involvement in the making of decisions affecting their future and their everyday lives, and thus with only limited engagement with the institutions of government and with an abiding fear of betrayal by back stairs deals.



However, in the last couple of years significant developments have indicated a new realism and a new willingness to deal honestly with our diversity. The engagement of both unionist parties in talks with the Dublin government in 1992 and the courageous decision of the Ulster Unionists to attend talks here in Dublin Castle showed a quite new willingness on the part of unionists to deal with the South. The joint stand taken by the two governments in the Downing Street declaration has created a framework for dialogue and progress based on the clear recognition by both governments of the vital importance of the principle of consent. The subsequent announcements of ceasefires by the IRA and by the loyalist paramilitary groups indicate at least a willingness to explore new possibilities. It is in the context of the Declaration and the ceasefires that we are all here, in a gathering which is already far broader and more diverse than any before or any which could have been imagined until recently.



*Principles underlying a resolution.*

IN the context of our present discussions we note the following principles and realities, without seeking to go into details at this stage:

We must take responsibility for our own problems. It is no use blaming Britain. The conflict is within Ireland and particularly within Northern Ireland, between sections of the people who have shared this island for hundreds of years. It is our problem and we must solve it by agreeing openly and honestly on ways in which we can live together and share the island peacefully.

We must deal with practicalities and realities, not with theories. We must learn to acknowledge and live with our differences rather than spend our time looking for words with which to avoid them.

There must be a categorical rejection of violence and the threat of violence. All violence has achieved in the last twenty five years has been enormous suffering and the deepening of divisions. No solution or way forward can be based on violence or the threat of violence. The continued existence of vast stocks of illegal weapons maintains the potential for renewed violence and poses the greatest threat to this process and the prospects for a peaceful future.

There must be recognition of the suffering that has been caused and experienced over the last twenty five years. We will get nowhere if we do not acknowledge the pain and fear which is the legacy of the violence we have experienced and which is the difficult foundation on which we must now build.

There must be agreement that the consent principle as set out in the Downing Street Declaration, that is that there can be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland, is the only possible basis for progress. That principle should be given constitutional expression North and South.



The people of Northern Ireland should agree on institutions reflecting the diversity of society in the North and ensuring respect for all traditions.

The two parts of the island should agree on institutions to ensure effective and constructive co-operation on areas of mutual interest. Such institutions should be directly accountable to democratic bodies North and South.

The same high standards for the protection of individual and minority rights should be upheld across the island. Consideration should be given to a common human rights framework, embracing North and South and preferably the UK.

Finally, in a very real sense our first and last principle is that we must all recognise and accept the varieties of Irishness which co-exist, often reluctantly, on this island. We are entitled to call ourselves Irish, nationalist and unionist alike, and not least those of us who are neither, without apology or qualification. This forum will have achieved something important if it recognised that nationalism and unionism are simply political positions, and that Irishness is not a thing of political or cultural symbolism and goes far beyond unionism and nationalism. It is the right of all of us who live in this island, regardless of our politics or religion.