

*-Toni Franks*

9 April 1996,

Rt Hon Michael Ancram QC DL MP,  
Minister for Political Development,  
Northern Ireland Office,  
Stormont Castle,  
BELFAST BT4 3ST.

Thank you for your letter dated 1 April 1996, enclosing a consultation paper in respect of the 'Designation of parties for the forthcoming election in Northern Ireland.'

As you will know from our previous discussions on this matter, Alliance has been opposed to List Systems because of various unwelcome restrictions which they introduce into the political system. The effective exclusion of independents, and the requirement for the registration of political parties, are only some of the reasons for our view. It is clear that many of our concerns have now been realized. We therefore respond to the above paper, in the spirit of constructive input, but with all our previously expressed reservations about the proposed system, intact.

List Systems have been found, in other countries where they are used, to require the registration of political parties. This is necessary, not only to prevent flippant interventions, but more importantly to prevent malicious confusion of the voters, through the invention of contrived party titles by political opponents. The recent DUP proposal to field three separate parties in this election points up the need to address the question in this context.

We have already referred in earlier discussions and correspondence to methods of registration of political parties. Properly carried out these require a process of establishing support - usually through petitions by significant numbers of entitled voters. (As an example, if the current Danish system were used in Northern Ireland for this proposed election, petitions of about 7,500 voters would be required to legitimize a party.) Regrettably, because of the very tight time scale, properly required by the commitment to proceed to All-Party Talks on 10 June, it is impossible to set in place the appropriate mechanisms for such a process.

It does seem that the only other legally robust instrument is inclusion of a list of relevant parties in the legislation. This is most regrettable, and the need for it may not be fully appreciated by voters, who are rightly used to a more transparent system.

We do not object to the particular list which has been set out, and we accept the description of our party, and the indication that the Secretary of State will, as per usual, consult with myself on behalf of Alliance.

In summary then, we are, as you know, unhappy about the overall system, and unhappy too, that the adoption of a list system has brought us to this proposition, but since we see little option, now that government has embarked on this track, we will reluctantly accept the proposals, in order to facilitate an early move to Elections to All-Party Talks.

Dr John Alderdice  
PARTY LEADER