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Notes for John's address to Council on October 17

1) Part of Alliance's role at the talks will be to try and facilitate the maximum degree of consensus among the major Parties present. In previous talks Alliance at times enabled the process to move forward by raising issues which for one reason or another were difficult for other Parties. The public quite rightly expects Alliance at times "to knock heads together" and there will be occasions where we can act as a bridge between other Parties.

2) However this process will be different from 1991/1992 and there will be other players trying to perform the above role.

The key role for Alliance in this process is to represent in a very clear and direct manner the approximately 10% of the population who do not vote for Nationalist or Unionist Parties. There has been an increasingly simplistic assessment of the problem as being between "the two communities". John could say that he knows many Protestants (not least himself) who have never in their lives wished to don an orange sash and march down any road in Northern Ireland! Equally there are many Catholics who have never identified with traditional Nationalism, whether the IRA are in a cease-fire or not.

Many people in Northern Ireland are non-sectarian and they want their vote to be heard through Alliance.

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In the last census 11.5% of the population refused to declare membership of any religious grouping and more than 1 in 10 marriages in Northern Ireland are mixed. Alliance have a duty to represent these people.

3) It is obviously very welcome that the violence is over. However violence was a symptom rather than the cause of our problems. In the 1960's there was peace, but we still had a very sick society.

The underlying sickness in our society is evidenced by factors such as -

- a) the possibility of the peace line in Belfast being extended even further
- b) the CRC report on two neighbouring villages in a border county area this year which indicated how people from different religious backgrounds are living entirely separate lives, and,
- c) The CRC/Playboard Report describing sectarianism in 5 year olds in playgroups.

We have a society in which our children are educated separately, the majority of our young people play sports only with their co-religionists, housing is becoming increasingly divided along sectarian lines and for many people social and cultural activities very largely take place with the people only of their own religion.

Part of the role of Alliance is to tackle these manifestations of sectarianism and divisions in our Society. Alliance as the only Party which draws together people from different religious backgrounds (as opposed to talking about being non-sectarian) is the only Party which can be trusted to deal with these issues in a pro-active manner.

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At every opportunity Alliance should be copying (along the lines of one of Humo's mantras!). The Alliance Party is dedicated to ending the divisions in our society which have led to so much bitterness and violence.

4) At the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin many of the Parties explicitly recognised the existence of "a third tradition" of people who do not wish to be narrowly categorised into one of two religious/ethnic tribes. We shall be working hard to ensure that any documents and measures coming out of the Stormont talks explicitly re-affirm the perspective of those who are non-sectarian.

5) There will be a significant emphasis at the talks upon "parity of esteem". Alliance will have every opportunity to ensure that the focus shifts from equal rights for "two communities" towards fundamental and universal human rights which apply to every individual.

With regard to policing for example we shall be arguing against any suggestion of regional police forces. We want one police force which operates accountably to a set of very demanding standards based upon respect for all individuals in all situations.

We could also emphasise that parent should have the right, if they wish, for their children to be educated either with children of all backgrounds, or children of their own denomination.

In view of increasing division of housing Alliance could well be asking the Housing Executive to look at all possible ways of facilitating mixed housing projects.

We could emphasise the importance of ensuring that freedoms and rights apply to all citizens, along with the recognition that along with these freedoms and rights go

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responsibilities. There must be objective fairness, in as far as possible, in keeping with the best international standards, rather than horse-dealing between Nationalists and Unionists.

We should also be emphasising that public expressions of Nationalism and Unionism may not necessarily be forms of "culture". We shall be keen to address some of the deeper issues rather than just taking a very superficial view based upon symbols.

Alliance could be demanding at the talks that all Government Departments and Agencies are required in a proactive way to ensure:-

- a) that any activities in which they are involved do not actively divide the community further, and,
- b) that they proactively pursue ways of bringing the people together.

We should of course emphasise that the private sector should be doing the same as indeed should each individual citizen.

- 6) John could finish up by saying that nobody should be in any doubt about the commitment of the Alliance Party to fight for the creation of a society in which people are united around a common set of values, a society which accepts and indeed welcomes diversity, a society above all in which people can feel that they share it together.