

# The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland Alliance

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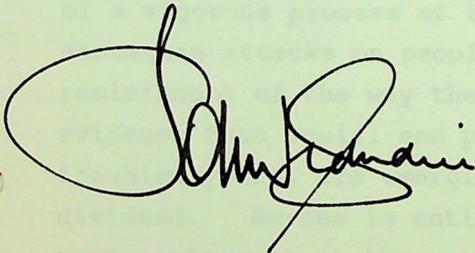
FROM: John Alderdice

Dear Richard,

Here is an article, as requested, on my views of the situation at present, and how we might move forward. It is slightly more than the 250 words requested, but I have found it difficult to edit it back much further without losing some of the key features.

I trust that it is the kind of thing that you were looking for. If there is any problem, you can get me at home (Tel: 01232-793097 Fax: 01232-796689) up until lunchtime.

Kindest Regards,



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## THE CEASEFIRES ONE YEAR ON

a view from the Alliance Party Leader, Dr John Alderdice

If the peace process is in crisis now, then it has been in crisis from the start. Early arguments over the semantics of its 'permanence' or 'completeness', were just indications of the difficulties to be faced all along the way.

Nationalist politicians regard pressure on de-commissioning of weapons as premature, but moves on prisoners and all-party talks, as unduly delayed. The unionist parties see British Government talks with Sinn Fein as precipitous, in advance of the de-commissioning of weapons. All sides see the political developments of the last year as both too rapid and also, not quick enough. For ordinary people, relief that the terrorist campaigns have ended, is tempered by anxiety about the underlying threat of a resumption, especially in the absence of a vigorous process of talks. Street confrontations and sectarian attacks on people and property, are worryingly reminiscent of the way the troubles began, and there is evidence that social and psychological difficulties from the troubles years, are emerging as a form of negative peace dividend. No-one is entirely at ease, and those who felt most excitement at the watershed of the ceasefires, will easily feel depressed by the current stand-off. However, in reality, the prospects are by no means gloomy. The settlement of an ancient feud is never achieved without a prolonged, sometimes tortuous, process. The bitter divisions in our community will not easily give way to a new and tolerant society, but we should not underestimate the considerable progress that has been made in the last year.

It would be unhelpful to call round-table talks just now. Without progress on de-commissioning, the unionists will not participate. Nationalist frustration may be understandable,

but cornering the unionists is not the way to reach a settlement, any more than cornering nationalists would be. In my own meetings with all the other parties during the past year, no-one refused to talk. This gives me well-founded hope. Both unionists and nationalists can make moves to increase trust, and assist the process, and the two governments must inject new life into the network of discussions which involves all the parties, through an energetic programme of bilateral meetings. These can move on to a new level of significance, by addressing key issues such as the principle of consent and the future of Northern Ireland, and North-South relations.

At the same time, my proposal to Mr Major in September last year, for a task force on de-commissioning should now be actioned, and the two governments should accept international participation in such a project. This parallel treatment of the political and arms issues is the best way of dealing with the current hurdle.

No matter how successfully we overcome obstacles, there will be continual crises until we reach a settlement, and perhaps even beyond. These should challenge our imagination and acumen, not our commitment to the process. There is no need to betray the future, because of our fears of the past, or the problems of the present.