

# Alliance

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

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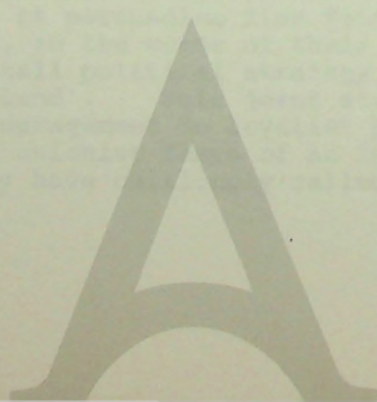
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## MAY 19 - A REFERENDUM ON TALKS

When the people of Northern Ireland go to the polls in the Local Government Elections on May 19, the issues will be complex. The powers of the Councils (the only democratic fora in Northern Ireland) are remarkably limited, but because the elections come at a critical hiatus in the Inter-Party Talks Process, the electors, and the professional observers, will have more in mind than quality of the local community services, and the councillors who administer them.

The Inter-Party Talks begun in 1992 under Peter Brooke ran into the sand after only a few months. Unionists were deeply anxious that, with the British Government's neutral stance on the Union, and the Irish Government's apparent eagerness for a United Ireland, any negotiations must result in a 'sell-out'. They swamped the talks with endless procedural wrangles about venue, agenda and chairman, and the process was adjourned. But, in the run-up to the 1993 Westminster Election, a frustrated unionist community told their politicians to get back to the table or pay the price.

This second round achieved more. Detailed proposals were presented and examined by the participant parties. Unionists met for the first time with Dublin Ministers, and both had to start facing the uncomfortable reality that there were other Irish people who had very different, but strongly held visions of the island.

Curiously, at this point in the process, so long awaited by nationalists, and Alliance, and so long feared by unionists, it was the unionists who gained most in confidence. Ian Paisley's party opted out of the proceedings rather than go to Dublin, but the much larger Ulster Unionist Party played a full role, gaining considerably in stature in their own section of the community. The SDLP in contrast became increasingly anxious that the Dublin Government, keen to get a settlement, might sell nationalists short. The SDLP immobility which resulted from this fear, led to the second adjournment. This was followed by an election in the Irish Republic which returned a Labour/Fianna Fail Coalition with the Labour Leader, Dick Spring, at Foreign Affairs. His progressive credentials exacerbated SDLP anxieties, and, perhaps for reassurance, the SDLP Leader John Hume chose this pre-election, pre-talks period to re-start meetings with Gerry Adams the Leader of Sinn Fein. These meetings were aimed, not at persuading Sinn Fein to give up support for the IRA, but, in the words of their joint statement, at 'developing an overall political strategy to establish justice and peace in Ireland'. This joint strategy approach unfortunately gives encouragement to loyalist paramilitaries who have been feeding off unionist fears of an imminent British betrayal to what they have chillingly called the 'pan-nationalist front'.

The Northern Ireland Secretary, Sir Patrick Mayhew meanwhile was applying his analytical legal mind to the current blockage. After a couple of speeches which created more problems than they solved, he announced that the British Government, which until now had been merely facilitative, would put forward its own propositions for discussion in the Inter-Party Talks. He is clearly committed to making progress in Northern Ireland, but, given his recent rather loose comments in the German magazine Die Zeit, one wonders if he finds the orderly business of a lawyers' court less frustrating and unpredictable than the complex, shifting, emotional clashes of a community in strife.

When Sir Patrick looks to results of the count on May 20, what does he hope to see? If Ulster Unionists, Alliance and SDLP return in increased numbers, and leave the DUP and Sinn Fein counting the cost of a more extreme stance, then the people will be seen to have voted for an honourable compromise, and the prospects for Round 3 of the talks will be much improved.

One suspects that on this occasion, the people of Warrington, the financiers in London, and many others with little concern about the parks, cemeteries and other responsibilities of Northern Ireland District Councils, may have a more than passing interest in the fortunes of the election hopefuls on May 19.