

PARTY LEADER'S SPEECH, APNI CONFERENCE 1988.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

For some years I lived within walking distance of the village of Moira, now renowned throughout Europe for its floral beauty. So it was with some attachment to the place that I noted that 1987 passed by without any reference to the 1350th anniversary of the Battle of Moyra, described by Sir Samuel Ferguson as the 'the greatest battle ever fought within the bounds of Ireland', no mean acclaim in this blood-soaked patch of earth. More than two hundred years before the English had become a nation under Alfred of Wessex, and nine hundred years before the Reformation introduced the religious division into our history, the men of Ulster were well used to fighting with the rest of the island and calling in their kindred in Scotland to help them in the struggle. Such facts of history give the lie to the romantic myth that but for the interference of imperialist Englishmen the peace-loving people of this island would be united in idyllic harmony. The ancient disputes have become encrusted, added to and aggravated by layers of religion, politics and social and economic division but, the disagreeable truth is that we are perfectly capable of giving ourselves over to fighting the bit out, entirely on our own, and all the evidence of history is, that this leads, not to any solution, but to destruction and to grief, and to the storing up of old scores to be settled by the next generation.

Somewhere along the line in every generation people become sickened by the violence and there are heartfelt calls for peace. Sometimes these are expressed in demonstrations and marches. But as Kenneth Kaunda, President of Zambia, said writing of those who seek to bridge the gaps between warring factions, 'When the marching stops where do they go from there? No matter how disillusioned they may be with governments and politicians, they will find that politics is the only effective way of getting certain things done. Politics will out, and if the good man in politics quits the field, he leaves the more cynical of the breed to do as they like.'

The political life of Northern Ireland has been marked, not only in the past year but in the past twenty years, by a tendency within our community for many of our most capable, reflective and articulate people to avoid involvement in politics. Members of the business, academic and professional communities have turned away into their own lives and careers. Politics has become impoverished, and one even hears people say with some apparent pride that they never listen to the local news, they do not vote, and they have nothing whatever to do with politics. What an inversion of values has occurred when the welfare and conduct of our whole community has become so despised, and the self-interest and social amusement of the individual has come to be regarded as almost the only respectable way of spending ones time.

Our party was been founded in 1970, to give within the body politic of Northern Ireland a focus for those committed to the establishment of a society based on freedom, fairness and shared community. It has always

been a fundamental principle of this party that we support the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom not only because we recognise that the bonds of kinship, culture and shared history have moulded that common identity, but also because we believe it to be in the best interests of our people, and most especially because it is manifestly the wish of the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland. And now, while senior unionists and others may dally with ideas of independence, saying that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is too high a price to pay for membership, we reaffirm our commitment to our membership of the United Kingdom. It is not of course a simple unitary state. It is a bringing together of different nations who each have their own contributions and traditions of language, culture, legal systems, religious ideas and much else. It is unfortunate that this rich diversity is not better accommodated by a more devolved parliamentary framework. I welcome the commitment of the Social and Liberal Democrats to this principle, emphasised by the setting up of autonomous parties in Scotland, Wales and the regions and linked together in federation. In Northern Ireland where allegiances are more complex and conflicting I believe there is no real possibility for rapprochement or a common identity without a devolved government with real powers and responsibilities in which local politicians can find ways of working together for the benefit of the whole community.

There has been much excitement and speculation over the past few weeks about the possibility of movement out of the stagnation of recent years, and I welcome even the slightest sign of hope. But we must be realistic. The old gaps between the parties are still very wide, and

it will take more than a few carefully coded indications, of the possibility of dialogue, at some future date, to usher in a real change in the political climate. I have committed myself and this party to doing all that we can, to repair the political lines of communication, without which there cannot even be a serious search for agreement. This has led during the past six months to meetings with the Political Leaders of almost all the major constitutional parties in the British Isles, with the Leaders of the four main Churches in Ireland, and with many others.

I fully expect that there will be further meetings, but it is a source of disappointment to me that Mr Molyneaux and Mr Paisley have not found themselves able to meet with me as yet. I remain prepared to meet with them, not least to hear from them the proposals which they have recently laid before the Secretary of State. I do not expect that we will immediately see eye to eye, but if we can at least meet face to face, we can begin to work towards finding an accommodation in a more informed and less confrontative spirit. Who can believe that such an understanding would not make a useful contribution towards the much longer and more difficult task of ending what has been described as the ancient feud.

It has frequently been said that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is a block to any forward movement. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Agreement is a clear sign of on-going movement. The question is whether or not people wish and will be permitted to be involved in helping to determine the direction and outcome of that movement, or

whether they will be satisfied with screaming impotently from the sidelines. There is an Agreement and there will continue to be an Agreement that much is clear, but in my view, too much time and thought has been given to the Agreement itself. Much more serious for pro-union people is the fact that the Agreement is a symptom of a change in attitudes by many people in Great Britain. Few if any have taken the consistent, constructive and cooperative interest in us and our affairs that David Steel and David Alton have taken. For many in the other parties there is simply an exasperation and frustration with us, which is leading to a turning away from the problem, and this has nowhere been better exemplified than in the recent review in The Economist. The strategies adopted by many unionists over the past twenty years have led to the loss of the Stormont Parliament, the ending of devolved government, the creation of Sinn Fein as a political entity, and the imposition of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Is it not time to take stock? In the autumn of this year the parties to the Anglo-Irish Agreement will be embarking on a Review Process. I have called, and I call again for all involved to approach this as a time of opportunity. The Agreement took place with one-sided consultation, which was worse than no consultation at all. This grave error must not be repeated, and there may indeed be some unionists whose experiences of recent years may make them feel that they should not simply make their representations to the British Government.

In any case, I believe that a formal process of consultations and a flexible and constructive review could open the door to new possibilities for working together. However it cannot be doubted that

if the same old strategies continue to be followed, the next step will be a further erosion in the unionist position. In a profound and earnest concern not to betray the past, one must be careful not to fall into the trap of betraying future generations, by bequeathing to them a political, social and economic desert.

There are those despairing souls who believe that no accommodation is possible. 'The people and their politicians are too stupid, too small minded, and too devoid of ideas,' they say. They underestimate the Ulster spirit. Two hundred years ago in the coffee houses, and meeting places of this great city, the air was alive with debate about political change. The American Constitution had just been written, heavily influenced by Ulster emigres. There was excitement and a belief that if the people were given freedom and responsibility, great things were possible. Perhaps it is in realization of this that the words 'totality of relationships' have gained currency in recent times, and here on this platform we are profoundly happy to have begun, within the family of liberal democratic parties, the creation of a microcosm of that totality of relationships. Possibly for the first time in Northern Ireland, we have, sharing a political platform, the leaders of political parties from throughout these islands. It is no accident that this has been made possible by our membership of the European Community, and I look with some anticipation to 1992 when the economic significance of our internal borders will begin to wither away.

The political significance of the borders will remain however and I therefore welcome the courageous proposals by the Progressive Democrats

for a new constitution for the Republic of Ireland in which, amongst many other worthy things, they propose the removal of the obnoxious territorial claim over Northern Ireland and the replacement of that claim by an aspiration to Irish unity. I am delighted also to welcome senior representation from Fine Gael. We have had long and cordial relationships together, indeed from the very beginning of our party. It gives me great pleasure too to welcome representatives from Fianna Fail. It is our strong desire to build good relationships across the border with our nearest neighbours. We share this island, and with it an interest in its natural resources, the protection and development of its environment, and the economic potential of agriculture, tourism, energy and industry. We also share a mutual concern about violence and international terrorism, a concern which we share with our European partners. So great is this concern that through the Liberal Group in the European Parliament, whose representatives, we most heartily welcome today, we hope to take part in a European Parliament Seminar in Belfast on the Suppression of Terrorism later in the summer. I also hope that the common manifesto which we are together drafting for next years Elections to the European Parliament will pledge all our parties to work for thorough-going cooperation between all our nations in combatting this international scourge.

Tragically, violence has been endemic in Irish political life for generations. ATQ Stewart has pointed out that the adoption of names such as Whiteboys, Oakboys, the Boys of Wexford, and the Peep o' Day Boys, is a precursor of the present day tendency to refer almost indulgently to terrorists on both sides as 'our boys'. Banditry and

terrorism are no new thing in this island, and I am sceptical of recent claims that Ireland can be rid of all military and violent activity by discussion or negotiation with the men of violence. As sceptical indeed as I am of the notion that this same result can be simply achieved by military repression. This is not to say that there may not be some within these organizations who have begun to realize the futility of violence and who wish to pursue democratic politics. If they do, then they must take their courage in their hands and reject violence completely. But to believe that even if Gerry Adams wished, and that is a very considerable assumption indeed, that he could persuade all his colleagues in the Provisional IRA to give up the ways of violence permanently and with a guarantee that none would return to violence at some point in the future if they did like the outcome of negotiations, is surely stretching credulity beyond breaking point, not to mention the fact that it says nothing about ridding the island of loyalist violence, and the deeply entrenched and highly lucrative gangsterism and racketeering on both sides.

Whilst some of those who have criticised these talks have undermined the integrity of their position by their own associations with paramilitaries of a different hue, there must surely be a recognition that for these talks to go on indefinitely without result and whilst the atrocities continue is adding daily to the difficulties of creating a climate for dialogue amongst the constitutional politicians. There is a further warning from the recent political history of unionism. When those who are moderately inclined, dally with groups who have no conscience about the use of violence, it becomes more difficult for them

to maintain their own position and they become caught up in a web from which it becomes increasingly difficult to escape. They are sucked down where they may not want to go. At the end of the day of course as I have said before it is a matter for those who are involved to decide what they must do, but they cannot be unaware of the dangers for themselves and for others of the path that they are treading. It would be better by far I believe to continue to meet with ourselves and to move soon to meetings with the unionists. The real division in this community is not between loyalist and nationalist but between constitutional politicians and the men of violence.

It is for this reason that we have always held to the view that without universal respect for the law of the land, and for the authorities appointed to enforce it, there can be no measureable progress. There must be little doubt that the Royal Ulster Constabulary, has over the past few years demonstrated that it is prepared to enforce the law throughout the community. The men and women of the force have, like other members of the security forces, suffered dreadfully for this. That there are individuals who act wrongly there can be no doubt. We have never been slow to criticize when we have seen this, and we believe that these instances with all other complaints should be investigated quickly by a fully impartial body and dealt with firmly and rigorously. The forces of law and order must be subject to the law, but such instances cannot be used to justify a failure to give support to the legally appointed authorities. No police force in the world is beyond all reproach, but the choice must be made. Who is to act to protect the citizen, the legitimate police or the paramilitaries.

One cannot aspire to be part of the legislature and more especially a partner in the executive without giving full support to those who enforce the law on behalf of all of us. We must be prepared to share the responsibility for enforcing the law if we are to have the right to make claims to be part of the executive of the government.

Furthermore any politician who willfully breaks the law and seeks imprisonment for the sake of publicity brings the whole process into disrepute, sets a bad example to young people in the community, and prejudices his claim to be an upholder of the law.

Before leaving the question of law and order I must express my deep concern at present security situation. Not only has the last few months been blotted by the major and horrendous events at Enniskillen, Milltown, Andersonstown and elsewhere, but there have also been, particularly in the past few weeks, sinister signs of increasing sectarian tension. Attacks on the security forces and on protestants in border areas have been matched by sectarian murders and attacks on Catholics and their property, particularly in largely protestant enclaves. Only full-hearted cooperation by the whole community with the security forces, a clear and energetic presence by the government, and a seizing of the political opportunities of the moment by the political leaders can help to deny to the men of violence the circumstances in which they can freely operate.

Our commitment to the establishment of devolved government involving at the highest level people drawn from both sides of the community, and a fair and firm enforcement of the rule of law for the protection of all

of us are however, means to an end. We have not embarked on this great purpose for anything less than the establishment of a free, fair, just ~~and~~ prosperous ^{and caring} society in Northern Ireland.

Garret Fitzgerald said in his 1982 Dimbleby lecture on Irish Identities, 'Man is best elevated by being challenged to live up to his stated principles, and the principles of civil and religious liberty are worth taking seriously.' This same challenge which has inspired libertarians in every century is at the heart of the Alliance message.

If it is to be a free society, children must be able to grow up knowing and understanding that other children in Northern Ireland may see things differently but be no less their friends for that. Educational apartheid has made its contribution to our tragically divided community, and I salute those who have worked heart and soul to establish integrated schools, some of them threatening to appear in the most unlikely of places. The marvellous community relations work in schools in the West of the province and the emergence of CRIS and other groups in the East are signs that we are by no means alone in our vision of a new generation growing up with a real chance to open their minds and benefit from all of the rich tapestry of Ulster's life.

If we want to build a fair and just society, a society characterised by equality of opportunity, in education and employment, equality of citizenship and human dignity, equality of esteem for different religious and political traditions, and equality of treatment under the law, then we must not only press for legislation to protect ^{all} minorities

from the worst excesses of bigotry, we must personally commit ourselves to work for the changed attitudes which will purge our community of the cancer of prejudice.

In working for a prosperous society we have always taken the view that we should not allow our social and economic policies to be shackled to any socialist or conservative dogma, but it would be entirely out of keeping with our stance as a party if the shifting sands of pragmatism were to be the only guide to our political programme. Elimination of prejudice, industrial partnership, initiative and participation, and specific government investment programmes, these are our themes.

The achievement of equality of citizenship and esteem for all necessitates equality of opportunity. In employment there remains a disturbing disparity between the employment patterns of Catholics and Protestants. We welcome the fact that the government has taken this matter seriously and has in hand a number of legislative and administrative changes designed to impress on employers the necessity for fairness. Unfortunately the critically debilitated state of our Northern Ireland economy threatens to damage the prospects for all our people, ensuring only a more equitable distribution of unemployment. The ensuing struggle for the few jobs remaining could exacerbate intercommunal rivalries. It is therefore vital that there are more jobs to round.

Individual enterprise and shrewd business acumen were for many years the hallmarks of the Ulster business man. The emphasis in rebuilding the

economy should be in the stimulus to local initiatives, and help, particularly in the area of marketing, for small enterprises. The encouragement of cooperatives, profit-sharing schemes and rights for employees to participate in the running of their own companies, all contribute towards an increased sense of partnership and commitment within industry.

However, the chronic political instability, the withdrawal of multi-nationals during periods of rationalisation and recession, the apparently relentless retraction of our heavy manufacturing industry, and the dearth, until the recent lignite finds, of indigenous mineral or fuel deposits, ensure that it is not enough to leave the well-being of our people to the tender mercies of impersonal market forces. If being part of the United Kingdom is to mean anything in economic and social terms it must surely mean maintaining jobs and some buoyancy in the economy through government investment in the fabric of our community. The Housing Executive's repair and new-build programmes, and the continuation of Health and Transport and Infrastructure development too, must not be prejudiced by cut-backs for they have the combined value of contributing both to the economic and social well-being of our provincial life.

The people of our beloved province show every time there is a flag day or a call to support a good cause that they value a caring society. It is an indication of that, as well as of the deprivation and ill-health in the community, that we have always spent more on our Health & Social Services than other parts of the United Kingdom, except for Scotland.

That is the way we want it to be, that is a measure of the values we hold dear, and when the people of Northern Ireland took to the streets a couple of weeks ago it was to say that they wanted their government to show that concern for the sick, the handicapped and those unable to look after themselves, by maintaining and developing our health and social services, not cutting benefits, closing hospitals, and contracting everything out to the lowest bidder.

This is our purpose.
To build a free, fair, just, prosperous and caring society ^{governing itself} within the UK.

These are our principles, and on these principles we have based our policies. Policies upon which we fought the last Westminster Election and reached a 10% high water mark of support that we had fallen short of since the 1970's. We fought in that election on the same political platform as our colleagues in what was the SDP/Liberal Alliance. We were saddened at the untoward events which followed that election, but we are not just fairweather friends, and we wish you well as you set out in a newer sounder boat to face the political storms that are ahead. You too are working to heal the yawning divisions which are reopening in British society, between those who are gainfully employed and those who cannot find the dignity of work, between rich and poor, between the black, coloured and white, between the powerful and prosperous Home Counties and those in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the English regions who feel themselves cut off and alienated from the centralization of money and influence in the South East. We are with you in your struggle, we are moving forward fighting the same fight, together.

Stretching

hands across the Border which has seen so much tragedy and despair, we feel a bond of friendship developing ^{with the Progressive Democrats} / as you join ^{the} Federation and seek to inspire the values of pluralism and liberal democracy, in ^{this} part of the island. We salute you, for we are moving forward ^{into Europe} together, ^{so}

Doesn't it make you proud to know that in Western

~~Stretching out to~~ every part of Europe where we have sister parties; ~~doesn't it make you proud to know~~ ^{nearby} that throughout the world there are brave men and women raising high the ^{same} standard of liberty and justice in places where it is a challenge, ~~and that~~ in spirit we are moving forward with them too.

forward

And as we move ^{forward} together, in this our eighteenth year, we can have a sense of pride in reaffirming our commitment to the principles of Alliance. They are high ideals, worthy ambitions. Of course the way is difficult and the path is arduous and long, but we ^{are} not here to be ornaments of the party, we are here to be instruments of peace and progress. What more noble cause to excite the imagination. And ^{most} ^{inspiring} ~~what~~ ^{to know that we are not alone for we} ~~is that~~ of all, we ^{are} ~~are~~ moving forward, all of us, in partnership, in Alliance, together.