

**Discussion Paper on Party Organisation
presented by Howard Johnston
to Joint Meeting of Executive and Strategy Committees
22nd-23rd August 1987**

There are **six** matters for discussion and **one** to report:

1. Constituency Based or District Based organisation?

The Party is currently organised on the basis of Local Government Boundaries. Outside Belfast there are (or should be) 25 Associations, one for each of the 25 Local Government Districts. Within Belfast there are 4 Associations covering the 9 District Electoral Areas. **Should we reorganise to form 17 Associations, one for each of the 17 Westminster Constituencies?** When this matter was last considered in 1984, we were too close to the May 1985 Local Government Elections to have a major re-organisation. The changes were therefore limited to a reduction in the number of Associations in Belfast from 8 to 4.

Among the advantages of such a reorganisation are:

- (a) Fighting Assembly, Westminster and European elections would be simpler;
- (b) All areas of the Province would be covered by an active Association;
- (c) The relationship between future Assembly Members and Associations would be simpler.
- (d) The total number of Associations would be smaller.

Among the disadvantages are:

- (e) Fighting Local Government Elections would be more difficult;
- (f) Some Associations would cover vast areas;
- (g) The relationship between our most numerous elected representatives (Councillors) and Associations would become more difficult. For example Castlereagh Councillors would need links with the new North Down, Strangford, Lagan Valley and East Belfast Associations.

There are two other issues which should be taken into account:

- (h) **Do Associations with Branches work more effectively than those without Branches?** This is relevant because a move to larger Associations might well need to be accompanied by the establishment of Branches within some of them.
- (i) **When could the new organisation be introduced?** There are two reasons for moving fast, if we are going to make the change: (i) we have a window of opportunity, (ii) there are plans to computerise Party records and this should be done with likely future developments in mind. However, to get the changes discussed and implemented in time for 1988 will be difficult. On the other hand, if we delay to 1989 then the first thing the new Associations might have to do is fight the May 1989 Local Government Elections. Perhaps a change in 1990 would be best. That's the 20th Anniversary of our foundation (and the 300th Anniversary of another event).

Finally, this is an issue where the views of those outside Belfast are of greatest importance. Belfast is already organised approximately on Westminster Constituencies.

2. A general slogan for Party Organisation

Both at HQ and in the Associations and Branches the problem is the same: **there are too few people to do too much work.** Thank goodness we have people who are prepared to do many different jobs. But, we must try to get through to our members that it cannot continue.

I suggest that we adopt the slogan "**Help Share the Load**" and try to encourage more people to take on one job so that (i) some folk who have held the same post for several years can have a rest and (ii) some folk can do fewer jobs and do them better.

Getting more people involved will not be easy. Two factors which may help are (i) talk widely about the problem putting the emphasis on the fact that a lot of members are not pulling their weight and (ii) do everything possible to keep morale high so that people feel that investing their time is likely to be worthwhile. Essentially it is a matter of talking to individuals and getting them to a point where either (i) they feel embarrassed by their inactivity or (ii) they feel flattered that you asked them to help. **What is needed is a concerted "head hunting" effort** and we all need to play a part in it.


3. Support for Elected Representatives : Appointment of Agents

The relationship between Elected Representatives and other Party Members is extremely important. In areas where there are no elected representatives that role has to be played by those who aspire to getting elected.

On the one hand, there is a need for Associations to support their elected representatives by taking a keen interest in what they are doing and by giving practical help in the chores of providing a service to constituents. Some areas do this well, others do not. Such activity has the side-effect that ordinary members get some experience of constituency work.

On the other hand, there is a need for Councillors and Assembly Members to support Association activities and get to know as many people as possible. They should actively encourage the involvement of members in constituency work. In many jobs it pays to find and train your successor!

An Alliance Agent for **every** Ward should be our target. The short term goal is the identification of enough Agents and hence potential candidates for the May 1989 Local Government Elections.

 **What steps can we take to encourage more involvement in constituency work by Party Members? Where is it being done well? Can we set up some form of training for those who are interested?**

4. Association / HQ communication : Executive Links

Good communication is essential to good organisation. If people know **what** they are supposed to be doing, **when** they are supposed to do it and **why** it needs to be done they will generally do a better job. Likewise planners and decision makers need good feed-back on how things are going.

Although sending bits of paper is essential from time to time, it needs to be backed up by personal contacts. Anyway, there are some things which are best not written down!

In this Party one of the main methods of providing direct and regular communication between Associations and HQ is the Executive Link system.

How successful has the system been? What could be done to improve it?

5. Political Meetings

Fifteen years ago each of our Associations probably had about 7 or 8 political meetings a year. Under Rule 60 of the Constitution & Rules "Each affiliated Constituency Association, group or organisation must hold a general meeting of all its members at least four times in every year". How many of them do so? Surely our general level of activity would improve if we could encourage more political meetings. In addition to those organised by Associations and Branches, perhaps some should be organised by policy groups or by HQ.

As most of the potential speakers from within the Party are here, this is a good place to discuss the problem.

What can we do to encourage more political meetings? Should we prepare a list of names of people who are prepared to speak and the topics they prefer to speak on and circulate them? Should we encourage more meetings addressed by speakers from outside the Party? What else can we do?

6. Publicity, especially letter writing

Anyone who has attended Executive Meetings over the last few months will know that John Cushnahan would like to see us making more use of the letters columns. Few can disagree with him.

Apart from the obvious action of encouraging those present to write letters and asking you to encourage others to do the same, **are there any methods we might employ to ensure that more letters are written?**

A group which meets at HQ to be briefed on potential topics has been suggested. Sending similar briefing material to those outside the Greater Belfast area might also be possible. Whatever is tried would need someone to supervise and direct it.

What else can we do to ensure that the general level of publicity is increased? Apart from statements from our leaders, elected representatives and spokesmen on topical issues, the issue of some sort of comment from every political meeting should be normal practice. Also the trivial matter of reporting on an AGM and the officers elected will get every Association and Branch named in the papers at least once a year!

What we really need is for at least a part-time **Press Officer** to support the staff at HQ. Can such a person be found?

7. Computer at Party HQ

A small computer system will shortly be available for use at Party HQ. It is hoped that this will contribute to a general improvement in our organisational efficiency.

The system will be used mainly by HQ Staff but it should also be possible to provide others with access to it in the evenings. Those wishing to use it will require some training.

The main uses initially will be for word processing, keeping membership records, keeping minutes of meetings, setting up a database of political references and helping with the design of literature. It may later be used to assist with financial records and as a substitute for the Telex machine.