



The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

DISCUSSION PAPER ON U.D.A.

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TO JOINT MEETING OF EXECUTIVE AND STRATEGY COMMITTEES

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At our 1987 Annual Conference we passed a motion which welcomed the U.D.A.'s document "Common Sense" and in welcoming its proposals called upon all Constitutional Parties to discuss them. The debate at that time centred around the contents of the "Common Sense" document. To a large extent it ignored the possible ramifications of our relations with the U.D.A. which would necessarily result from supporting such a document. It is therefore my intention within the scope of this discussion paper to disregard the actual contents of the U.D.A. pamphlet. Instead I will advance those considerations which ought to weigh with us in any conciliatory gestures made towards the U.D.A.

As a Party we have always sought to encourage, to welcome and to support all attempts made in good faith to end the political stalemate. We have done so irrespective of the political convictions of those making such attempts. The first question then which it is incumbent upon us to ask is whether the "Common Sense" document is in good faith. Is it genuine?

The U.D.A.'s function has always been to defend "Ulster" and its Protestant people against any perceived attempt to create a United Ireland. In the past such a defence has involved the murder of Catholics and the deployment of physical force on a massive scale to destroy political initiatives as in 1974. Furthermore, the U.D.A. has in the past leant towards Independence rather than Devolution as an answer to the Northern Irish problem, indeed the proposals advanced by the U.D.A. prior to the "Common Sense" document advocated the Independence option. To assess the genuineness of the U.D.A.'s present stand given their public support of Powersharing as set out in "Common Sense" we must ask how far away the U.D.A. has moved from its origins. In short, a measure of the U.D.A.'s sincerity bearing in mind its paramilitary nature, must lie in the extent to which the organisation has thrown off and cleansed itself of violence as an instrument of policy.

Any body of people can call for peace or produce a document which seeks to expound an equitable solution to the Catholic/Protestant conflict here. But such a solution must be viewed with utter scepticism when the body sponsoring it continues to engage in or support the use of political force as a valid political tactic.

This point is illustrated by analogy with Sinn Fein's decision at the last election to stand on a platform advocating "Justice, Peace, Freedom". Words which, from Sinn Fein lips, can inspire only cynicism. If the U.D.A. seek to be taken seriously in respect of their power sharing proposals then they must withdraw, and be clearly seen to withdraw from practices which by their nature legitimise violence against Catholics and against British Government policy initiatives in Northern Ireland. Has the U.D.A. reached such a point?

It seems to me that the U.D.A. have not shifted sufficiently from their origins to allow us to consider their proposals as advanced in "Common Sense" at face value. The credentials of the U.D.A. are still founded upon their ability to deploy physical force, and indeed force of arms against whoever or whatever stands to thwart the Protestant ethos of Northern Ireland. Despite the "Common Sense" document which calls all constitutional Parties about the Powersharing table, the U.D.A. have not insistently demanded that Unionist Politicians concede to powersharing and immediately open up talks with the S.D.L.P. Yet such an insistence ought to have flowed as a natural consequence of the U.D.A.'s statement on the current situation as defined in "Common Sense". Neither is it necessarily true that the U.D.A. has become more moderate than Paisley and the D.U.P., simply because they refused to back Paisley when he tried to encourage widespread disruption in the Province after the Anglo Irish Agreement. In recent times the U.D.A. have come to the realisation that Unionist Politicians use them as a threat to gain political leverage with the British Government. The Paisley argument runs that unless the Government talks to him they will be dealing with the gunmen instead. It is a moot-point that at the end of the day what has dictated U.D.A. reaction in the wake of the Anglo Irish Agreement has not so much been a new-found moderateness as a refusal to be continually used as cannon fodder.

If we concede that the U.D.A. remains an essential paramilitary organisation, then what we lend to them in giving unqualified and uncritical support to their "Common Sense" document, is legitimacy. By our actions we cloak with respectability that which is still not respectable, and still not acceptable to the great mass of ordinary Catholics and Protestants. In treating the "Common Sense" document as if it had come from a constitutional political party we fail to appear even-handed when this is set against our out and out rejection of proposals forwarded by Sinn Fein.

We must also keep before us the fact that all concessions made to paramilitaries in the past, be they Catholic or Protestant, have only resulted in their determination to heap yet more pressure upon those making the concessions.

The British Government's abortive attempts to negotiate with the I.R.A. in the 1970's should serve as a poignant enough lesson to those of us who think that one can, with the appropriate encouragement, change the complexion of the paramilitary mind.

On reflection the decision taken at the 1987 Annual Conference which was so unqualifiedly supportive of "Common Sense" puts us in an invidious position viz a viz the U.D.A. Given Alliance's restricted media coverage, it is not viable to suppose that the Party can, while endorsing the U.D.A.'s document "Common Sense" get it across to the public that we are not in fact endorsing the U.D.A.

Prima facia it seems we must reject "Common Sense" until such times as the U.D.A. are prepared to demonstrate good faith by withdrawing from the sphere of paramilitary activity. Certainly we should engage in public debate with them. However, such encounters should not be used to congratulate them on their latest initiative, but to demand of them that they abandon physical force as a prerequisite to our support of the "Common Sense" proposals.

