



The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

A POSSIBLE RESPONSE OF THE ALLIANCE PARTY TO STATEMENTS FROM CHURCH LEADERS

A Discussion Paper submitted by Addie Morrow

TO JOINT MEETING OF EXECUTIVE AND STRATEGY COMMITTEES

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Someone once accused Conor Cruise O'Brien of drawing a red herring across the political debate on Northern Ireland when he spoke about the religious differences and his reply with which I completely agree, was "if religion in Northern Ireland is a red herring then it is one the size of a whale".

It is a fact that the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland is drawn from those people who have aspirations towards a United Ireland while the Protestant Churches are largely made up of those who want to preserve the link with the United Kingdom. That is a statement which requires qualification and I am sure there are differing views in the Alliance Party as to the reasons this came about. However it is not the purpose of this paper to open that discussion.

Many people believe that the "Church" and when I use that word I include all those who profess Christianity should stay out of the political arena because it has nothing to do with them and none of their business. I do not subscribe to that view of the Church which seems to hinge on the belief that there is a division between sacred and secular, indeed I believe that, far from staying out of the debate, it is incumbent on Church Leaders to comment on the various issues which make up the agenda of any political party. Every party has its own philosophy for the future and is trying to use its influence to change the rules of society to bring in to being the best conditions for those who subscribe to that ideal so it seems nonsensical to believe that the Church should not be concerned about such charges and either welcome or reject them. Of course particular denominations should not be aligned to one political Party but unfortunately we live in a very imperfect society and the Church being far from perfect itself has contributed in no small way to the divisions in our Province by Catholic Nationalism and Protestant Unionism. Each branch of the Church claim that they and they alone have all the truth and that they are the one true Church. It must seem to many who sit in the pews on Sundays that they need to change their religious denomination if they change their political loyalty.

There are few Church Leaders who have emerged over the years who do recognise their contribution to the problem and have spoken out with great courage but the large majority cling to their own tribe and are even more entrenched in their attitudes than those who do not belong to any Church. There is little doubt in my mind that those who hold more political views are drawn from that section of the community who have only very loose connections with the Church.

These are the people in the party who get very angry with the blunt one-sided statements which emanate from self-righteous clerics which seem to hinder rather than help the word of reconciliation and I fully understand and identify with them in their desire to retaliate publicly.

Nevertheless I believe that such action would prove counter-productive and even to welcome statements that we find helpful could be the kiss of death on those who are trying to influence the Church from within.

It is true that the Church has not the influence or authority it enjoyed a generation ago but it still holds a special place in the hearts and minds of the people we seek to influence so we should be very wary before we take on people who claim that they have "God" on their side and who have captive audiences every Sunday and have no opportunity to challenge what is being put forward as absolute fact.

I believe that if the problems of Northern Ireland are to be solved it will be "in spite of" rather than "because of" the influence of the Churches but I am convinced that we as a Party should steer clear of publicly criticising or applauding Church Leaders if we are to succeed in getting sectarianism out of the politics of Northern Ireland.

