



The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

Over the past two years the main thrust of Alliance Party Policy has been to secure qualified backing to the Anglo Irish Agreement unless and until a better alternative can be negotiated. The bottom line for Alliance is any such negotiations would have been power-sharing devolution.

Given the current political situation it is an appropriate time to re-appraise current policy and determine the direction in which the Party should go in the light of prevailing political realities. Fundamental to such an reappraisal is an assessment of the prospects for devolution and the operation of the Anglo Irish Agreement.

PROSPECTS FOR DEVOLUTION

At the moment Unionist Leaders are talking to the Government and there are talks taking place at an individual level between Unionists and S.D.L.F. members. In order to come to any conclusions about the likely outcome of these "talks about talks" it is necessary to examine the relationship among the other main players in the process - the two Governments.

"DEVOLUTION AND THE ANGLO IRISH AGREEMENT"

Paper submitted by John Cushnahan, Party Leader

To Joint Executive and Strategy Committees Meeting

22nd and 23rd August 1987

U.U.P.
Malpas was forced to address the devolution question of the criteria laid down by Her Majesty's Government and discussion within the U.U.P. The U.U.P. are the only Unionist party who are currently outside the Official Unionists. They hold 10 seats in the Assembly and are frozen out. A devolved Assembly would mean a more even division between U.U.P. and O.U.P. and gains by Alliance at the expense of the O.U.P. The maintenance of the status quo would be the attractive option for Malpas and the Westminster U.P.S. Securing improvements in the way in which Northern Ireland business and legislation is handled at Westminster is where they are more likely to concentrate their real energies.

S.P.F.
Although Paisley is a devolutionist he is totally opposed to power-sharing. There is little hope that his current stance will change. Even in the unlikely event of Paisley recognizing that power-sharing is the only credible alternative to the Act he would be unable to deliver the Free Presbyterian Church which is infinitely more important to him than the S.P.F.

His stance in current negotiations is hardly conducive to creating the conditions for talks. By insisting that the Agreement be suspended and Merviel disassociated as a precondition for the initiation of inter-party talks he has effectively closed the door on meaningful dialogue. It seems to me that Paisley is merely setting the scene for bowing off talks with the Government and in such a way that he will be able to blame them for the breakdown.

S.D.L.F.
Before the Agreement the S.D.L.F. were on the run from Sinn Fein and now was the Party's only legitimate elected representative. It is a different picture now. The party's three most important figures have all secured Westminster seats; the Sinn Fein vote is being eroded and they are able to claim credit for successes emanating from the Agreement (including issues such as the proposed demolition of Unity and Divis Flats even though this is not true). Their current success is also cemented by the flow of American Funds.

I N T R O D U C T I O N :

For the past two years the main thrust of Alliance Party Policy has been to give qualified backing to the Anglo Irish Agreement unless and until a better alternative can be negotiated. The bottom line for Alliance in any such negotiations would have been powersharing devolution.

Given the current political situation it is an appropriate time to re-appraise current policy and determine the direction in which the Party should go in the light of prevailing political realities. Fundamental to such an reappraisal is an assessment of the prospects for devolution and the operation of the Anglo Irish Agreement.

P R O S P E C T S F O R D E V O L U T I O N

At the moment Unionist Leaders are talking to the Government and there are talks taking place at an individual level between Unionists and S.D.L.P. members. In order to come to any conclusions about the likely outcome of these "talks about talks" it is essential to examine the motivation for devolution among the other main players viz., O.U.P., D.U.P., the S.D.L.P. and the two Governments.

O.U.P.

Molyneaux is an instinctive integrationist. Anyhow, if the Official Unionists were forced to address the devolution question on the criteria laid down by Her Majesty's Government it would cause widespread division and dissension within the party. Furthermore, without devolution Westminster M.P.s are the only fulltime elected representatives. This currently benefits the Official Unionists. They hold 10 seats to the D.U.P.'s 3 and we are frozen out. A devolved Assembly would significantly alter this balance both in terms of a more even division between D.U.P. and O.U.P. and gains by Alliance at the expense of the O.U.P. The maintenance of the status quo would be the attractive option for Molyneaux and the Westminster M.P.s. Securing improvements in the way in which Northern Ireland business and legislation is handled at Westminster is where they are more likely to concentrate their real energies.

D.U.P.

Although Paisley is a devolutionist he is totally opposed to powersharing. There is little hope that his current stance will change. Even in the unlikely event of Paisley recognising that powersharing is the only credible alternative to the Accord he would be unable to deliver the Free Presbyterian Church which is infinitely more important to him than the D.U.P.

His stance in current negotiations is hardly conducive to creating the conditions for talks. By insisting that the Agreement be suspended and Maryfield dismantled as preconditions for the initiation of inter-party talks he has effectively closed the door on meaningful dialogue. It seems to me that Paisley is merely setting the scene for breaking off talks with the Government and in such a way that he will be able to blame them for the breakdown.

S.D.L.P.

Before the Agreement the S.D.L.P. were on the run from Sinn Fein and Hume was the Party's only fulltime elected representative. It is a different picture now. The party's three most important figures have all secured Westminster Seats; the Sinn Fein vote is being eroded and they are able to claim credit for successes emanating from the Agreement (including issues such as the proposed demolition of Unity and Divis Flats even though this is not true). Their current success is also cemented by the flow of American Funds.

Why should Hume risk the proverbial bird in the hand for the sake of two proverbial birds in the Unionist bush which is littered with pitfalls.

O.U.P./D.U.P./S.D.L.P. Dissidents

In all three parties there are "young turks" who prefer devolution to the status quo and although we can exploit this, it is hard to conceive how they will be able to change things in the foreseeable future. In the S.D.L.P. those with ambitions are people of little significance and in no position to challenge the combined trio of Hume, Mallon and McGrady. It would seem that McCusker and Millar are effectively being isolated within the O.U.P. (with the help of the Newsletter). And in the D.U.P. Robinson will not challenge Paisley unless he was on an absolute winner. The architects of the Task Force Report and the Report itself have been neutered.

Furthermore the current round of talks will be conducted through leaders alone.

THE TWO GOVERNMENTS

The British Government have been the biggest winners in the Anglo Irish Agreement Strategy. Their primary reason for initiating the exercise in the first place was for international reasons and in this area the Agreement has been an enormous success for them. Their often irritating relationship with Dublin has now been replaced with a more cordial one. It is difficult to see them risking the clear benefits of the Agreement for an initiative on devolution in which the odds are heavily stacked in favour of failure.

Ironically under the Accord Dublin, in theory, has the worst of all worlds. It has responsibility without power. Despite this, it is perceived to be exercising great influence (in so far as Her Majesty's Government was going to make changes anyway even if there was no Agreement). The real benefit to Charlie is - because it appears that the Irish Government are responsible for changes brought about in Northern Ireland it means that he needs to devote little attention to the "National question". This leaves him more free to cope with the main problem in the Republic viz., the economy and this is the issue that will matter when he next goes to the country.

Therefore there is little to be gained for either Governments in altering the present arrangements.

C O N C L U S I O N S :

For the reasons outlined above, it is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects for devolution over the next twelve months. There is however an important role for the party to play. Despite the inherent reluctance of the other parties to go down the devolution road, there is a widespread feeling throughout the community for devolved government. This we can tap and exploit.

I believe that there is a strategy we can employ to give expression to this desire. However, I would see such a strategy having more to do with PR than long-term political thinking. I also propose to outline some of my own views as to how the party should come to terms with current political realities.

I will speak to both of these strategies at the meeting rather than commit them to paper for obvious reasons.

