

## THE FUTURE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

(A speech to be delivered by Alliance Leader, Dr John Alderdice to a conference of The Bow Group, at Exeter College, Oxford, 26-27 March 1994)

For most of my life, Northern Ireland has been torn apart by violence and political instability. Many people now despair of a solution. My purpose in entering politics was to help unite my community, defeat terrorism, and build a just and prosperous society.

Not everyone believes that Northern Ireland is a community. Some maintain that geography alone determines a community. Nationalists believe that the islandness of Ireland has ordained that all who live on it shall form one community, whether they wish it or not. Pre-partition Unionism similarly held that all who lived in these islands should form one British people. I believe that reality is more complex. Communities are determined by a sense of identity and allegiance, which grows over a period of time, and is based on established ties and relationships. It seems to me that the crucial feature of political geography for the understanding of the Northern Ireland problem is not merely the islandness of Ireland, but also the fact that the north-east of the island is so close to Scotland. Not only in the distant past, but even today the ease of communication between the North-East of Ireland and Scotland, is much greater than with England or indeed with the southernmost parts of the island. Over many centuries the people of North-East Ireland developed

a sense of separateness from the rest of the people of Ireland, and a strong affinity with the people of Scotland. But it must also be said, that whatever our differences, and despite our many origins, (Picts, Vikings, Celts, Angles, Saxons, French, Dutch,...) we are now in Northern Ireland completely intermingled and tied more to each other than to anyone else. We are more like each other, than like the English of the South-East, or the Irish of the South-West.

As a community, like any other community, I believe that we have the right to decide our own future, and be fully involved in our own governance. It is an expression of the historic loyalties and relationships with those in Britain, that I and my party support the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom. That position, shared by the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland, is a clear and honourable one. Alliance also maintains that we must recognize, value and build upon our relationships with the people of the rest of the island, with whom we also share so much.

Not everyone shares this perspective. There are other views of allegiance, and tragically these differences have been pushed to the point of violent division. Violence is now so endemic that it can be defeated only by uniting the community against the terrorists. To achieve this unity we must create common institutions of government in which all can participate and with which all can identify. I would hold to the view that there are two requirements of such community loyalty.

#### **A UNITED NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Firstly, equality of citizenship and human dignity.**

Discrimination and injustice must be replaced by a fair and liberal appreciation of the beliefs and fears of all the different members of the community. There must be equality of social, economic and educational opportunity, and the highest standards of participatory democracy. The system of justice and policing must command and receive the respect and loyalty of all sections of the community, for without the rule of law there can be no peace or stability. Only then can we expect complete participation and loyalty at all levels of public life by people drawn from both sides of our present religious divide.

**Secondly we must recognize the differing relationships of Northern Ireland people to those who live outside of our province.**

The territorial claim in Articles 2 & 3 of the Constitution of the Republic will have to be ended, but in return a direct, standing, government to government relationship should be established, perhaps augmented by joint commissions on areas of shared interest (e.g. agriculture, energy, tourism etc.) This would be of obvious economic value, but it is also part of the vital recognition of nationalist ties with the rest of the people of the island.

The 'totality of relations' in these islands could be recognized by the replacement of the present bilateral Anglo-Irish Conference with a tripartite council, in which the people of Northern Ireland would be directly represented by their own Regional Government. Almost nobody at the meetings of the present Anglo-Irish Conference comes from Northern Ireland. It would undoubtedly be uncomfortable to have us there, but perhaps if we were issues would genuinely begin to be resolved.

The completion of the Single European Market, and the movement to closer European Union is leaving the debate about sovereignty and statehood behind. The time is now right to grasp the opportunities offered by this broader framework. Our ancient feud could be superseded by the economic challenge and necessity of representing our people more directly, as a Region, within the wider European Community.

#### THE DANGER OF DRIFT

At the beginning of 1993, I warned, in stark terms, that without political progress, there would be a serious escalation of violence, especially from loyalist paramilitaries. It should come as no surprise, that in the political vacuum which was allowed to develop after the end of the Talks, the rate of murder and destruction soared.

Some say there is no link between political progress and violence, since no political agreement will stop the terrorists. They fail to realize that terrorists only flourish when they have community support. On the nationalist side of the community, a quarter of a century of terrorism, and the electoral standing of Sinn Fein, give evidence of a disturbing level of acceptance of violence. One leading nationalist put it to me this way. "During the day they hate the Provos, but at night-time, with anxieties about loyalist paramilitaries, and indeed the security forces, some nationalists are not so completely sure that they want rid of the IRA." This grudging acceptance was not diminished by the talks between Mr Hume and Mr Adams about a joint political strategy between the SDLP and Sinn Fein, indeed I believe that those talks worsened the atmosphere in the community, and diminished the possibilities for Inter-Party Talks.

The SDLP cannot themselves win nationalists away from violence. Only unionists can do this. Only when unionists can make nationalists feel fully respected as part of the government and the very fabric of Northern Ireland life, will this begin to change.

Recent years have seen a matching development in the loyalist part of community. It began with anger about the PIRA campaign, but this has been succeeded by an almost total disenchantment with the British Government because of its conduct of affairs since the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and especially in the recent abortive Talks Process. Now an increasing number of unionist-minded people are saying "I don't agree with loyalist paramilitaries and extremists, but...." In this word 'but' they too are expressing an alienation and disenchantment, which mirrors and matches that of nationalists, but which lacks the sense of hope, which most nationalists express, that things will change for the better. This attitude amongst many unionists is the seed-bed in which loyalist paramilitaries are growing with alarming speed.

Unionist leaders can do little to halt this slide. Only when the SDLP sees its priority as reaching an accommodation with unionists, rather than with Sinn Fein, will there be real hope.

Only a political way forward can give hope to our community, and win ordinary people on both sides away from a grudging, but increasing acceptance of paramilitarism.

#### HOW CAN PROGRESS BE MADE?

How might political progress be made? I have been saying for some years that the Government strategy of hoping that the Northern Ireland parties would come up with a unanimously agreed programme, was unrealistic. I have appealed

repeatedly for Secretaries of State to set down on paper, how the British Government believes Northern Ireland should conduct its internal affairs and its relations with the rest of the UK, and with the Republic of Ireland. For years this has been refused. Even during the Inter-Party and Inter-Governmental Talks no British Government position was given, only discussion papers. This was in my view an error of judgement, and contributed to the failure of the Talks.

Similarly, despite constant expressions of interest from the Irish Government in the possibility of North-South institutions, no proposals have been forthcoming from them about the form such structures would have, and this excites unrealistic hope in nationalists, and I believe unjustified anxieties in unionists, without facilitating constructive discussion with anybody.

The Downing Street Declaration of December 1993, was an excellent step forward. Here the two Governments did take the initiative together, as I had pleaded with them to do. They established a set of principles upon which all future progress would be made. The British Government said what everyone already knew to be true - the Britain has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland. That Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom only because of the wishes of the people who live there. The Irish Government on behalf of the people of the Republic of Ireland accepted the right of the people of Northern Ireland to determine their own future. Henceforth the issue should not be a dispute about British sovereignty over Northern Ireland, or Irish sovereignty over Northern Ireland, but of the sovereignty of the people of Northern Ireland - their right to determine their own future.

What was the result of taking this joint initiative? Support was forthcoming not just from Britain, and Ireland, Europe and

America, but the acceptance of the Unionist Party, and strongly positive support from the Alliance Party and the SDLP, representing together some 70% of the people, right across the divide. Surely this would then be the focus of attention - how to build on this unprecedented cross-community support. But no! Both governments allowed Sinn Fein to take centre stage. After a while, and entirely predictably Ian Paisley also prances back from the margins, and the whole excellent process begins to unravel. Unless the two governments seize back the initiative we will slip again into the sort of vacuum that gave us Shankill and Greysteel in 1993, and this time another Downing Street Declaration will not suffice for an encore.

I have some difficulty in believing that in the absence of a form of government at Westminster, we would quickly find the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, and others, reaching a unanimous agreement about how Britain should be government. Scotland is also a constitutional case in point, and this in the absence of the polarization caused by twenty five years of terrorism. Is it realistic, or even responsible to expect the parties in Northern Ireland to be achieve what you could not?

I have pleaded in the past for the governments to take the initiative, and when they did in 1993, they were rewarded with singular support. Surely it is reasonable to ask in the light of this, that the two governments should now move to put on paper what structures they propose to establish, to use these for consultations with all who are prepared to be involved, and then put them in place, to give our young people a democratic alternative to violence as a political instrument.

If there is to be peace, there must be give and take. There must be an honourable compromise. Unionists must be

prepared to accept a special relationship with the Republic of Ireland, and a form of devolved government incorporating the sharing of power. In return they must get a guarantee of loyalty to the new institutions and full cooperation in defeating terrorism. Nationalists must be prepared to accept that there may be no old-style United Ireland, and that they must give loyalty to the new institutions. In return they must be sure of first class citizenship, the protection of minority rights, an opportunity to be involved in the exercise of power, democratically, at the highest levels, and a guarantee of cooperation with the rest of the island.

There is also a contribution to be made to peace by those who live outside Northern Ireland. Centralists in Whitehall must accept changes in their traditional ways of governing and financing us, the Republic of Ireland must drop its constitutional claim, and establish a new relationship of respect, and Europe may have to shoulder some responsibilities too.

But it is the two governments who must provide the engine for progress. In Northern Ireland we cannot stand still, either we will move forward together, or we will slide apart and down into a spiral of chronic violence and despair.

There is price for peace, but it is a price that should be paid. The people of Northern Ireland are demanding with an increasingly strident voice that the representatives of Unionism, Nationalism, the British Government, the Irish Government and the European Community, make the compromises and commitments that will bring us the peace my generation has never known.