

ALLIANCE PARTY CONFERENCE 1995

Extract From Opening Address by the President of the Alliance Party, Jim Hendon, to the 25th Annual Conference of the Party

" Fellow members of the Alliance Party, I bid you a very warm welcome to our 25 th Annual Conference. On this very day, on 21st April 1970, the Party was founded. Congratulations on your birthday ! Congratulations for having been part of the peace process for quarter of a century !

Over the past 25 years, we have had a share of the vote ranging between ten and fourteen percent. If we had a paramilitary wing over that period which had engaged in systematic killing, maiming and the creation of mayhem, and if that paramilitary wing had called a ceasefire, then our leader would have been feted on the European and international stages as a hero. The creation of paramilitary wings, the killing and maiming of people and the creation and exacerbation of existing community divisions is not the way of the true peacemaker. We have from the beginning chosen the way of democracy and peace. The core principle within the principles upon which this Party was founded is to heal the bitter divisions in our community. That is the language which twenty five years later is used in the Framework Document. In our core principle we committed ourselves to healing the bitter divisions in our community by ensuring :

- (1) Equality of citizenship and of human dignity;
- (2) The rooting out of discrimination and injustice;
- (3) The elimination of prejudice by a just and liberal appreciation of the beliefs and fears of different members of the community;
- (4) Equality of social, economic and educational opportunities;
- (5) Highest standards of democracy at both Parliamentary and Local Government level;
- (6) Complete and effective participation in our political governmental and public life by people drawn from both sides of our religious divide;

Our core principle today remains as valid and our commitment to it remains as strong as it was on the 21st April 1970.

At the time of our foundation some political pundits claimed that at most we would last six months. They did not, however, take account of the total dedication and commitment of our members and supporters to our principles and to what has recently become known as "the Peace Process". Those political pundits did not take into account the positive contributions which the Party was to make over a quarter of a century in

our efforts to break down and heal the divisions in our community. We made positive and constructive contributions in the Darlington Conference of 1972, the Assembly of 1973, the power-sharing Executive of 1974, the Constitutional Convention of 1975-76, the 'Rolling Devolution' Assembly of 1982-86, the 'Talks about Talks' of 1987-88 and the 'Three Strand' talks of 1992 which are reflected in the Joint Downing Street Declaration of 1993 and the Framework Documents of 22nd February 1995. Those early political pundits did not take into account the quality of our leadership which over a quarter of a century has been second to none and at times has been simply outstanding.

It cannot be questioned that the I.R.A. ceasefire of the 31st August 1994 and the ceasefire declared by the Combined Loyalist Command on the 13th October 1994 have added a whole new dimension to the process of achieving a permanent breakdown and healing of the divisions in our Community. Those ceasefires, coupled with the recent publication by the United Kingdom and Irish Governments of the two Framework Documents mark out the greatest challenge to date to this Party and to all the people of Northern Ireland to achieve that which has never been achieved and sustained in centuries of division - a political agreement which will accommodate and recognise the two main Unionist and Nationalist traditions in our Community. It is not possible nor is it

necessary to try to square the so called circle of two competing British and Irish national aspirations. It is, however, entirely possible and essential for the people of each tradition to generously reach out and agree institutions of Government which can and will accommodate both traditions so that they can live together in harmony and in respect for one another in a lasting peace.

The Framework Documents are detailed and complicated. Like most detailed and complicated documents they can be interpreted in a number of ways, often dependent upon the *frame of mind* of the reader. They can be interpreted as 'green' Documents - they can also be interpreted as recognising that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom will not change except by the consent of the majority of the people here. The Framework Documents recognise that cardinal principle of consent which repeats the statutory guarantee of consent of the majority contained in Section 1 of the 1973 Northern Ireland Constitution Act.

Both the United Kingdom and Irish Governments have clearly stated on the occasion of the launch of the Framework Documents that they are intended to be a 'Framework for Discussion' and that if agreement cannot be reached within the parameters described in the Documents then alternatives suggested by the Parties will be considered.

The two Governments have spent some two years preparing the documents. A lot of work has gone into their preparation. On that ground alone they should not simply be dismissed out of hand. They should be placed on the negotiation table and discussed along with the documents and proposals of the individual Parties.

The time has come for the people of Northern Ireland and it's politicians to consider carefully what both Governments have said in the Framework Documents and to listen carefully to one another's proposals. A long hard road of negotiation lies ahead. The people of Northern Ireland and their politicians owe it to the many thousands of dead and injured, they owe it to themselves and they owe it to our future generations to ensure that institutions of government which will recognise, respect and cherish both traditions and which none need fear, will be agreed. The generosity of spirit which is inherent in all our people of both traditions can ensure that such an agreement is reached. As a Party we will take up the challenge and we will strive to our utmost to achieve such agreement. We rededicate ourselves to the core principles of the Party and to our primary objective of healing the bitter divisions in our community.

H M Government is right to insist upon the decommissioning of arms by paramilitaries. But there are a number of ways in which arms can be decommissioned and the traditional method in Ireland, like the ancient

burial of the hatchet is to allow them to rust and corrode in the ground. The matter of the method of decommissioning of arms is one of many issues which require to be agreed in the course of political talks. H.M. Government must find a way sooner rather than later to bring Sinn Féin into talks at Ministerial level and ultimately into the full talks process.

There are those who will say that the last 25 years of violence in Northern Ireland were the "lost years" and they will hark back wistfully to the "good times" of the pre 1970 years. The years of violence were indeed "lost years". There was an enormity of loss - the needless, senseless, wholly unjustifiable loss of precious human lives, the loss of limbs, the mindless destruction of property and the permanent scarring of many lives, young and old.

But the 47 years from 1923 to 1970 were also "lost" years. They were the years of lost opportunities. There was the lost opportunity of the Unionists, in seemingly perpetual governmental power, to reach out and seek to accommodate the Nationalist minority and to allow them to share power in what was devolved government. There was the lost opportunity of the Nationalists to reach out to the Unionists and show a readiness and willingness to respect the Unionist tradition and culture in exchange for a corresponding respect for the Nationalist tradition and culture.

In those 47 years there were whole sections of our Community who never met, never mind socialised with persons of a different religion or culture. Protestants and Catholics were educated separately and all too often went from the cradle to the grave without honestly being able to say that their close friends comprised a mix of Protestants and Catholics. Protestant and Catholic cultures were encouraged to develop strictly separately from each other.

I do not wish to return to that type of society and I do not wish my children and future generations to return to that type of society. It was in all too many respects a superficial and sham society which camouflaged simmering resentment, contempt and sullenness beneath it's surface. It was of course a tribal society.

It has to be said that there were a number of good things which were shared by all sections of the community over the "lost" years and which endure to this day. Our people lived their lives, and died at the end of their natural span, sharing together, in life and in death, the soil of this Northern part of the island of Ireland. Despite our differences, while sadly some were not proud to be Irish, all were proud to be Northern Irish, all share a dry sense of humour, basic Christian values and a determination to work and prosper.

In this year 1995 let us all, Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and

Nationalist, join together in a crusade for a new and open society in Northern Ireland. A society in which we talk to one another and listen to one another's fears and hopes. Let it be a crusade for a new society in which tribal divisions will be erased for ever and political institutions will be agreed to accommodate both main political traditions. As a community we have come a long, long way together - we have in the "lost" years shared tragedy, destruction and death, sorrows and joys. We are nearing the top of the mountain and with sustained goodwill and effort we can achieve the golden valley beyond. As Martin Luther King said in the concluding remarks of his most famous speech --

" I want you to know tonight
That we as a people
Will get to the promised land"

ENDS