

Let the People Have Their Say

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Introduction *& Approach*

Since shortly after the cease-fires last year, when it became clear that it was the intention of the leaderships of both loyalist and republican movements that these cessations should be more than a temporary tactical phenomenon, Alliance has been in direct talks with Sinn Fein, the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party. Alliance has also continued to meet with the other parties with whom we had been in Talks in 1991/92.

We look forward to the possibility of All-Party Talks, but our discussions have convinced us of two things. Firstly, when the All-Party Talks do come they will be extremely difficult - so difficult that there is no guarantee at all that All-Party Agreement can be achieved. A mechanism for what the South Africans called 'sufficient consensus' may therefore be required.

Secondly, both unionist and nationalist parties are holding to mutually exclusive positions in the process, which block talks, deepen frustration, and could delay the commencement of All-Party Talks beyond the next Westminster election. This is not a helpful situation, and it is in everyone's interest to find a way forward to those talks.

A further concern for us has been the fact that all discussions about progress have centred on politicians alone. While the political parties must play a central role, we believe that if the process is to have the best chance of producing an outcome acceptable to the people in a referendum, and owned by the community at large, the people should have more of a say at this point. Our experiences of involvement in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, where groups from North and South have made submissions, and indeed attended hearings, has encouraged us to look towards a All-Party Talks arrangement which could facilitate such input from the community at large. Many people who care much about our community have become distanced from political parties. They have nevertheless helped keep our community together during the bad times, and they have a contribution to make to building the future. After so many years of lawlessness and a serious democratic deficit, we must do all possible to deepen and strengthen political democracy in Northern Ireland.

The Twin-Track Approach

While the peace process is currently facing difficulties and uncertainty, it is clear that progress beyond the current impasse is likely to involve a twin-track approach.

The first track involves dealing with the problems created by the illegally held arms. We strongly support the proposal to establish an International Commission to address this problem. To be successful, the Commission must be able to open up channels of communication with those who actually control the arms. It can then produce advice as to how this complex and contentious matter can be resolved. Attempts to confuse the issue, by dragging in the military hardware of legitimate governments, or suggesting that the problem is merely one of trust or political *bona fides*, should be resisted.

The second track involves the attempt to make political progress. Our experience tells us that if this is conducted as it has been in the past, it is likely to fail again. We have, in recent years, had the frustrating experience of endless 'talks about talks'. We have tried to bring the parties together in delegations appointed by their leaders. This is currently happening at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation where three of Northern Ireland's main parties are participating. Agreement there on the principal issues is elusive. In 1992, four of the main parties spent many months locked in talks, to little avail. Now of course All-Party Talks would involve at least five parties, if not more, making the likelihood of all-round agreement even more difficult to achieve.

In the absence of an election we are likely to find that party delegations of similar size, will be back and forth in bilateral and other talks for a long time, before All-Party Talks occur. It will also be difficult to give any democratic weighting to the positions of parties and therefore any party will be able to veto progress on any aspect of the Talks.

It has the makings of deep frustration for all concerned.

An Election to All-Party Talks

We propose an approach to this second track, which we believe offers a better chance of moving things forward, and involves the people in the discussions about the future for all of us. We use the term convention to imply a negotiating, formative type body, as distinct from a parliamentary type Assembly, but we have no attachment to a specific name.

The proposed convention would be elected by Proportional Representation on the basis familiar from previous elections (5 members elected by STV from each Westminster constituency, 90 in all). It would be elected for a fixed term of say 12 or 18 months, with no more than a limited possibility of extension, by agreement, and if further time appeared likely to lead to a successful conclusion. Conversely, it could be wound up early if it became clear that it was simply being used as a means of obstruction.

The convention would preferably be chaired by an independent figure, (as was the case in the Talks in 1992). A form of observer status should be created to allow a role for other significant interests, including smaller parties which failed to secure election.

The convention would not meet at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. A venue without associations should be chosen. An non-parliamentary layout for the seating of convention members should be used.

Such an election, would give everyone elected a post-ceasefire democratic mandate. We are in a new situation. Who is to say what is the judgement of the people, or who should represent them and in what strength, now that a form of peace has come? We cannot know unless we consult the people.

Responsibilities and Remit

Such a convention would not have executive, administrative or legislative functions. It would thus not be in any sense misunderstood as a governing body or any manner of return to a 'Stormont type' system. Its purpose and remit would be to seek the maximum agreement on a political settlement which addressed all the different sets of relationships already agreed and set out in the previous Inter-Party and Inter-Governmental Talks in 1991/2. Any report or conclusion emerging from the convention would require at least 70% support within the convention. Proposals emerging from the convention with sufficiently widespread support should then be put to the people by referendum.

The convention should be specifically required to address the North/South dimension, to meet and consult with relevant parties and bodies, North and South, and to include proposals on North/South issues in any report or conclusions submitted.

The convention should also set up committees to look into and seek agreement on specific matters such as policing, the economy, internal government, relations with Westminster, North/South relations etc., and might be consulted by government on relevant matters.

Much of its formal plenary business might be televised to enable the community as a whole to see what is being done and said in their name and to involve the people as a whole in the discussion about all our futures. The convention should also receive submissions and conduct hearings with delegations from community, business, religious and other bodies, to help broaden the discussion and engage the wider public in the peace process. The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation has shown the benefits of this approach.

Future Outcomes

The convention might arrive at one of three potential outcomes:


1. There might be no significant agreement amongst the parties. In that case the two governments would clearly have to proceed as they saw fit, taking account of the failure to achieve consensus amongst the Northern Ireland parties.
2. There might be agreement between the parties on substantial areas or on the best next steps. In that case the two governments would have to build on such agreement as existed and to take account of the wishes of the participating parties on ways of moving forward.
3. There might be widespread agreement on a set of proposals. Such proposals would need to have the consent of the British Government and of the Irish Government where appropriate. They should then be put to the people, as part of a comprehensive package, for approval by referendums, North and South.

Conclusion

The essential advantage of these proposals is that they would draw Northern Ireland into a new situation, where parties would be in dialogue with each other and with the broader community which they represent. They would also face the North/South issue. An election to a convention as outlined, provides a means whereby unionists and nationalists can enter All-Party Talks without a climb-down on either side. This would provide a clear and definitive starting point, based firmly in democracy, for substantive talks and negotiations towards a genuinely shared and lasting agreement.

It may indeed be the only way that All-Party Talks can be achieved in advance of the next Westminster Election, which could be as far away as May 1997.

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