

POTENTIALLY GLOOMY PROSPECTS

Alliance Leader, Dr John Alderdice, gave a sombre introduction to the New Year, when he told party colleagues that he regarded 1993 as a potentially gloomy year.

"I fully expect Alliance to make significant gains in the Local Government elections in May, and that is certainly something to which we can look forward with a good deal of confidence." said Dr Alderdice "For the province as a whole however, I see the prospects as distinctly chilly. The reason for this is not merely the breakdown of the political talks, and the consequent worsening of the security situation. The reasons for my concern are the underlying causes.

ALIENATION ALL ROUND

For many years Alliance warned unionists that if they did not move quickly and decisively to right the wrongs they had inflicted, and resolve the alienation of the nationalist community, they would drive nationalists into the arms of the IRA, and British politicians would begin to seek for a way of detaching themselves from Northern Ireland. They refused to believe it, and from the recent behaviour of the Lord Mayor of Belfast, it would seem that many still have not learnt. What we warned of, has now happened. I am now convinced that whilst Sir Patrick Mayhew may not see himself as operating on precisely the same time-scale as his colleague Chris Patton, the Governor of Hong Kong, his repeated statements about the British Government's position can only be understood as saying that he sees the duration of the present constitutional arrangement is medium-term, not long-term.

LAST CHANCE

When my predecessor Sir Oliver Napier warned that the 1982 Assembly might well be Northern Ireland's last chance, there were some who scoffed. Unless there is a very major change of direction the scoffers may well come to see those words as prophetic. One cannot doubt that when John Hume says that the British Government is neutral on the union of Northern Ireland with Britain he is speaking the truth, and many loyalists know it. But the increased turning of loyalists to anti-catholic violence, which mirrors what happened in the nationalist community twenty years or more ago, is also affected by the approach of the Government of the Republic of Ireland. The 'generosity' which was promised to all who would come to Dublin, simply did not materialize, and it is difficult to argue that talks on that front would lead to an acceptable settlement. If the British Government and the new Government in the Republic, do not see the urgency and danger of the situation review their positions, and seize the initiative quickly, fairly and decisively, then we may be nearer to the abyss than anyone could wish to believe.