

Alliance

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

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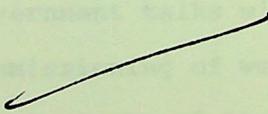
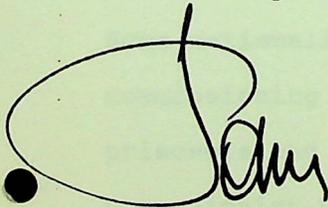
FROM: John Alderdice

Dear Anne,

Here is an article, as requested, on my views of the situation at present, and how we might move forward. It is slightly more than the 250 words requested, but I have found it difficult to edit it back much further without losing some of the key features.

I trust that it is the kind of thing that you were looking for. If there is any problem, you can get me at home (Tel: 01232-793097 Fax: 01232-796689) this evening.

Kindest Regards,



THE IRA CEASEFIRE, ONE YEAR ON

a view from the Alliance Party Leader, Dr John Alderdice

One year on, some of those who felt most excitement at the IRA ceasefire, will feel depressed by the current stand-off. However, if you think the peace process is in crisis now, then it has been in crisis from the start. Early arguments over the semantics of its 'permanence' or 'completeness', were just indications of the difficulties to be faced all along the way. In reality, the prospects are by no means gloomy. The settlement of an ancient feud is never achieved without a prolonged, sometimes tortuous, process, and we should not underestimate the progress that has been made.

Some nationalist politicians regard pressure on decommissioning of IRA weapons as premature, but see moves on prisoners and all-party talks, as unduly delayed. Meanwhile the unionist parties are angry about current British Government talks with Sinn Fein in advance of the decommissioning of weapons. All sides see the political developments of the last year as both too rapid and also paradoxically, not quick enough. For ordinary people, relief that both republican and loyalist terrorist campaigns have ended, is tempered by anxiety about the underlying threat of a resumption. Street confrontations and sectarian attacks on people and property, are worryingly reminiscent of the way the troubles began, and there is evidence that social and

psychological difficulties from the troubles years, are emerging as a form of negative peace dividend. No-one is entirely at ease.

There have been calls from nationalist leaders for round-table talks. The frustration which has led to these calls is very understandable, but without progress on de-commissioning the paramilitary arsenal, the unionists will not participate in a round-table conference. Cornering the unionists is not the way to reach a settlement, any more than cornering nationalists would be. In my own meetings with all the other parties during the past year, no-one refused to talk. This gives me real hope. Both unionists and nationalists can make moves to increase trust, and assist the process. On the nationalist side, the fact that hundreds of British soldiers have now been withdrawn from Northern Ireland, effectively de-commissions those weapons. Surely the IRA could meet the British Government 'toe to toe' on this and move towards some action on the weapons. This would undoubtedly lead to more British soldiers being able to be withdrawn from service in Northern Ireland. On the unionist side much could be done to make Orange marches less offensive, to facilitate Irish culture, and a much more positive approach could be taken to the ceasefires, and the peace process itself. This would increase nationalist trust in the process. The British and Irish Governments must also work together to inject new life into the network of discussions which involves

all the parties, through a much more energetic programme of bilateral meetings. These can move on to an new level of significance, by addressing key issues such as the principle of consent and the future of Northern Ireland, and North-South relations.

At the same time, my proposal to British Prime Minister, Mr Major at a meeting in Downing Street in September last year, for a task force on de-commissioning terrorist weapons from both sides, should now be actioned, and the two governments should accept international participation in such a project. This parallel treatment of the political and arms issues is the best way of dealing with the current hurdle.

No matter how successfully we overcome obstacles, there will be continual crises until we reach a settlement, and perhaps even beyond. These should challenge our imagination and acumen, not our commitment to the process. There is no need to betray the future, because of our fears of the past, or the problems of the present.