

Alliance

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

Headquarters

88 University Street
Belfast BT7 1HE
Northern Ireland

Telephone (0232) 324274
Facsimile (0232) 333147

“ P R E S S R E L E A S E ”

FOR THE ATTENTION OF MERVYN PAULEY
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT, THE NEWSLETTER

TWO PAGES FOLLOWING FROM JOHN ALDERDICE



WHY THERE SHOULD BE TALKS

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 over which the Government has presided since the end of the Talks, the rate of murder and destruction is now reaching critical proportions.

Some say there is no link between talks 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 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 is not diminished by the current talks about a joint political strategy between the SDLP and Sinn Fein, indeed I believe that these talks have worsened the atmosphere in the community.

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, 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 might political progress be made? I have been saying for some years that the Government strategy of hoping that the parties here would come up with a unanimously agreed programme, was unrealistic. I have appealed repeatedly for the Secretary of State to set down on paper, how the 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 was refused. Even in the Talks no Government position was given, only discussion papers. This was a serious error of judgement, and contributed to the failure of the Talks. Earlier this year Sir Patrick Mayhew promised that he would produce such a paper. It was then postponed until after the Local Government Election, and now, almost four months later it is still not available.

This refusal to give leadership, and direction, in a situation which is spiralling out of control, especially when accompanied by the perception of Northern Ireland Office Ministers who are out of touch with the reality of life here, is potentially catastrophic.

If the Prime Minister himself does not wake up to the gravity of what is happening here, some of his colleagues' recent comments about the Balkans could have a much more immediate relevance.

Dr John Alderdice
LEADER, ALLIANCE PARTY

3 September 1993