

JOINT AUTHORITY - A DISASTER IN WAITING

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In the late 1960's a mass movement developed here which aimed to create a new and fair society in Northern Ireland. It found expression in many organizations. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, the New Ulster Movement, and other groups, were committed to reforms of housing, justice, political structures, and of society as a whole. Tragically these promising ventures and the 1974 Power-sharing Executive which was borne from them, were overtaken by violence and the terrorist campaigns of physical force republicanism and the loyalist paramilitaries. The presence of violence makes thoughtful analysis, and constructive debate almost impossible, and it is a tribute to all the people of Northern Ireland, that their courage and steadfastness has kept them from being panicked into outright civil war. Despite this, the anger and fear which stepped along in the wake of the funeral corteges, has often obscured our common humanity, and made life difficult for those of us who want to build Northern Ireland as a community where all its children feel welcomed, valued, and at home in their own place.

This weekend has seen the first Annual Conference in the twenty-five year history of the Alliance Party, to take place in the absence of an active terrorist campaign. Last year when I told the delegates of my belief that the end of this decade would see us consigning the nightmare of the lost years to the history books, many commentators believed me, too sanguine. This year, despite the ceasefires, I still hold to my time-scale, for we are now embarked on the deeply difficult process of reaching an honourable settlement to which all can give consent. This will require a prodigious effort, and a preparedness by all of us, to make sacrifices. There can be

no certainty that the political representatives to whom this task of leadership falls, are equal to the challenge, and on the other side of a further failure lies a very real catastrophe. I am not speaking of the spectre of a return to violence, for while this is always a possibility, I do not believe it to be on the agenda of the leadership of either loyalism or republicanism. The greatest danger lies in political drift.

Failure to reach agreement in the past has moved the focus away from the people of Northern Ireland, and on to the British and Irish Governments. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, signalled this direction, and when the Inter-Party Talks broke down in 1992, the two governments rightly shouldered the task of providing focus and direction for further Talks, acting within their respective areas of responsibility. This work produced the Joint Declaration of 1993, and the Framework Documents of 1995. It is very clear however that unless the current Framework Process is seized as an opportunity to negotiate a better outcome than the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, we are likely to drift into the political suspended animation of de facto joint authority. This would be a disaster for all Northern Irish people. Not only would we have no real say in our own affairs, but political development would be permanently stunted, the economic vitality of Northern Ireland damaged beyond repair, and the right to make our own decisions about our constitutional future, ignored, whether we wish to remain in the United Kingdom or be part of a United Ireland. As in the tongue-in-cheek judgement of Solomon when he recommended that the child in dispute between two women should be cut in two and each given half, the welfare, dignity and integrity of our people would forever be sacrificed to the possessiveness of unionism and nationalism, and neither they nor we would be left with anything worthwhile.

Some are suggesting that a return to the politics of the streets is the solution, but that has most unpromising precedents. Others are championing an updated version of Ulster Says No. This is the road to nowhere. Instead men and women of goodwill must take courage and find the way to lead our people into a process of talks, that make a return to violence unthinkable, create a participatory democracy catering for our best social and economic interests, and for the first time ever, make government here accountable to all the people.

The parameters of the solution are clear. The integrity of Northern Ireland, and the consent of her people must be accepted. Equality of treatment, the elimination of discrimination and prejudice, and the involvement of all sections of our community at all levels of government, are requirements, not options. Social and economic reconstruction must be based on what is best for the people of Northern Ireland, not on political dogma. In particular, cross-border economic cooperation should not be prejudiced either by unionist isolationism, nor by a nationalist political agenda. Finally we must secure and maintain respect for the rule of law, and the authorities appointed to enforce it, in all our jurisdictions. Without justice for all there is no security for anyone.

These are the principles upon which the Alliance Party was established twenty-five years ago, this very weekend. The cessation of violence now gives us a real chance to work effectively for their implementation.

On 8 May 1969, the editorial in the Belfast Newsletter predicted a quarter of a century of 'tension, hatred and violence..... unless ...the best brains ...here, in Britain, and not excluding the south of Ireland' could work 'jointly and with determination.... The truth, as ever' it went on to

proclaim 'is to be found in a middle road, and already it is there for those who care to look.' The last twenty-five years was a nightmare, but hardly a surprise. The future options are just as clear.