

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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## THE NORTHERN IRELAND PROBLEM - THE ALLIANCE APPROACH

### 1. The Problem

Among many politicians and political commentators there is over-emphasis upon the framework within which the Northern Ireland problem should be fitted - whether within the United Kingdom, a United Ireland, an Independent Ulster or some variation upon these basic options.

Alliance argues that the situation within Northern Ireland itself is the nub of the problem and the solution must emerge in Northern Ireland by the will of the Ulster people. We believe that this can best be done within the existing United Kingdom context. The joint decision of all in these islands to join the E.E.C. must bring about a continuing rapprochement between Britain and Ireland with a gradual softening of pro and anti "border" attitudes. In the meantime, no United Kingdom government can simply extract itself from a situation of major conflict a few miles from the shores of Great Britain. This is clearly recognised by all parties at Westminster.

The Northern Ireland problem is not a conflict of religious doctrine. as such, but over a very long period strong allegiances of virtually tribal character have grown up, welding together Protestants who have little in common apart from their nominal religious adherence and over-emphasising their differences from Roman Catholics - and vice-versa.

The "dual minority" feeling has helped to increase fears and undermine self-confidence (Catholics are a minority in Northern Ireland, but Protestants are a minority in the island as a whole).

This in turn has tended to make each "side" more aggressively "Protestant" or "Catholic" in their denominational adherence and practice than their co-religionists in most other countries. This has inevitably reflected itself in political allegiances.

A tradition of bitter violence has also embedded itself in fringe groups on both sides who thrive upon the divisions and make them even more firmly entrenched. There are many other contributory factors in a very complex situation but the crux is the tribal community division. No course of action which ignores this will lead towards a solution.

### 2. The Answer

In our view, the only real answer to this historical problem is the development of a strong non-tribal bloc which can work at all levels within the community breaking down artificial divisions and eroding mistrust. There have always been individuals who have totally refused to be caught up in tribal feeling but they have been relatively few and they have lacked organisation and purpose. There are now many organisations and groupings working at various levels in the local community to bring about changes in attitude. The Alliance Party regards the political level as of fundamental

importance. Politics in Northern Ireland have consistently been used to divide people. We believe politics can be used to unite people. This includes a Province-wide programme of local action on social and economic issues mainly spearheaded by our 66 District Councillors, as well as the contribution made by the party's leadership at central political level.

A problem which has taken centuries to create, will not disappear overnight, but in the six years since the Alliance Party was formed, more and more people are responding to a leadership which stands just as firmly and unequivocally on the non-tribal centre ground as the most rock-hewn of tribal politicians stand on theirs.

### 3. The short-term

Alliance did everything possible to bring both "sides" together through its eight representatives in the recent Constitutional Convention and is still doing all in its power to co-operate with other parties to create acceptable institutions of devolved government. We are confident that such institutions could demonstrate growing partnership across traditional divisions and could be firmly defended against both violent extremes. However, the difficulties of drawing together representatives elected on separate tribal mandates must not be under-estimated. No matter how "moderate" or reasonable those elected under a Unionist label or S.D.L.P. label may be, their vote has been won on the basis of an appeal to one traditional "side" only. All too often their mandate includes commitments which is impossible to deliver and they are trapped. This is one of the rocks upon which both "Sunningdale" and the Convention perished.

### 4. The long-term

In the long-term, only the strengthening and eventual triumph of a political force drawing elected members and electoral support from both sides of the traditional divide will provide lasting political stability. That is the aim of the Alliance organisation and despite all the obvious setbacks, we have sound evidence that it will prove possible. A Party which can secure the election of its Catholic leader, Oliver Napier, to the second of six seats in the overwhelmingly Protestant East Belfast Constituency and the election of its Protestant Deputy Leader, Bob Cooper, to the fourth of six seats in the mainly Catholic West Belfast Constituency must be making real progress.

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