



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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PROGRESSIVE UNIONIST PARTY

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

An alternative to foreign involvement
in the internal affairs of a region
of the United Kingdom.

Issued as final proposals

September 1985

Foreword.

The British Parliament has agreed and continues to maintain that there can be no advancement in the area of devolving powers to a Northern Ireland structure without 'widespread Acceptance' throughout the community in Northern Ireland. It is also important to point out that Parliament has also decreed that this region is and will remain part of the United Kingdom so long as our people wish to remain within that constitutional position.

It is clear therefore that with a sizeable section of the community insisting that the philosophy of 'power-sharing' must be the outlet for 'widespread acceptance' and with an even greater number of people insisting that 'power-sharing' is totally unacceptable...then the chances of political stability on those Parliamentary terms within the present Assembly is most unlikely.

Clearly there will have to be radical change.

This document puts forward the policy of the Progressive Unionist Party as a genuine attempt to provide acceptable political structures that would enable representatives of all the community to contribute in a responsible way towards the enhancing of wider local government and all the inherent political stability that it offers.

Of course there are ruthless and personally ambitious men who do not hold the interests of the community as a whole at heart. They will have to search their consciences now and decide whether they would consider these proposals or reject them and perpetuate by words or deeds the unending violence.

1.

The Union.

To many Unionists the Union is the paramount issue that dominates their political thinking and ideology. It is the only issue that is presented as a panacea for the overthrow of all things evil. It is the single issue that overcomes all else to the point that all else is neglected.

To Progressive Unionists the Union is also of paramount importance but there are also other issues which we are committed to pursue seriously and resolve within it on behalf of the common people throughout all the community.

Whilst recognising that within our community there are two legitimate aspirations the most pressing and immediate aspirations have been almost totally neglected. Freedom from fear and violence, social deprivation in all areas; negations of basic human rights and many other issues have not received the public emotional attention that they so richly deserve.

The result has been catastrophic.

Now we have to move away from the negative entrenched positions; accept that the answers lie within the province among ourselves. Accept that the problems are created to a great extent throughout the whole community and resolve to end them.

The Westminster political parties have all accepted that any settlement to our local problems must, in the main, be resolved here in Northern Ireland by the people. With the exception of cross-border security, the Westminster parties and indeed Governments internationally give tacit acceptance to our submission that there really is no need for any grandiose Anglo/Irish pacts or agreements because security is possibly the only cross-border issue not covered by loose agreements. (e.g. A.I.E.C.).

2.

The re-structuring of the Northern Ireland Assembly into a broader local government.

It is a fact that if Local Government functions are restricted to limited discussions and not a great deal more, then much valuable time will inevitably be spent on issues totally outside the remit of local government institutions.

However; the Progressive Unionist Party recognises that irrespective of the recurring 'mad-house' atmosphere created within these local institutions, it must be said that they provide the one area of debate wherein all parties

are prepared to play a part. Obviously this area must be developed and expanded throughout the community to enable elected representatives to pursue a wider range of local and Regional government issues in a Greater Regional Council. We have long advocated that the Northern Ireland Assembly should be broadened both in representation and areas for debate and resolution. This would mean a total restructuring of the present Assembly.

The re-structured Assembly should take the form of a much broader tier of local government embracing wider areas such as Agriculture; Tourism; Fisheries; Energy, Environment, etc. Plainly the more contentious issues of Housing; Education and Security would not be included until there was 'wide acceptance' within the new structure.

Basically we are proposing a wider local government structure to debate issues pertinent to this region. The main objective must be to obtain agreement; from all political parties if possible; on movement towards more general acceptability of sharing responsibility within a broadened structure of local government.

Introducing a Committee System of regional government.

· 1978 we issued proposals for the introduction of a system devolved regional government that we believed would satisfy all legitimate aspirations that were beneficial to the people of Northern Ireland. Our intention was that the formation of a democratic devolved administration could be of great value in the area of covering regional issues not normally covered by local government administrations.

We said at that time that we believed that the majority of people in Northern Ireland wish to see the emergence of a new political order. The old political system is no longer relevant to the needs of a progressive region of the United Kingdom in the 1980's.

Proposed structure of a regional government

The Northern Ireland Electorate would elect by proportional representation 153 persons to serve in an upper tier of regional government. There should be a Leader of the administration elected in much the same way as the election of the Lord Mayor of Belfast to quote but one example. There should be a deputy Leader elected who must represent a minority party or group within the administration. There should be a Speaker appointed. The remaining 150 members of the administration would now form committees to deal with some devolved areas. There could be ten committees of fifteen persons or fifteen committees of ten persons elected. In order to encourage all minority parties and groups to participate it is suggested that the absence of a cabinet style Government could provide for a Central Committee which could co-opt non-elected representatives from minority political parties (without voting rights).

A Central Committee would focus the opinions of political parties both large and small and would perform a most important role in discussing and assessing the likely success or failure of any matters being put before the full Administration. However, at the end of the day..all issues would have to be put before the full assembly for approval
(Committee numbers are open for discussion).

4.

The principle of proportionality in deciding Chairmanship positions.

The distribution of chairmanship positions should be done through the 'usual channels' with the principle of proportionality among the Constitutional parties in mind

Committee Powers

Each Committee should be empowered, subject to suitable safeguards, to scrutinise the work of its Department by sending for persons including Northern Ireland Office Officers or Ministers and examining papers. They should also be able to conduct public hearings.

Committees must be involved in extended local government matters by conducting an examination of resolutions or any other business prior to a second reading in addition to handling the usual committee stages of any business. They should also have a reasonable allocation of House time for the debate of their own proposals and any other matters that a Committee may wish to bring before the House.

The Central Committee

There should be a Central Committee consisting of all the Chairmen and Deputy Chairmen of all the Committees. This Central Committee should be chaired by the Leader of any Constitutional minority party, with the usual committee voting rights.

All business which has completed its House stages would be laid before the Central Committee at least an established and agreed number of days before a final reading. The Central Committee will have the power to refer business back to the House or to refer the business to the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords if the Central Committee considered that it was discriminatory or unconstitutional, or they may delay for an agreed defined period any resolutions other than money bills or emergency measures.

(The precise details of these new and sweeping powers and the mechanics of their operation will require careful all-party consideration.

5.

Financial arrangements.

The financial arrangements for the Regional Administration should be such as to give Northern Ireland both its fair share of United Kingdom resources and a certain degree of flexibility with regard to revenue and expenditure.

A Bill Of Rights.

The constitution of Northern Ireland should embody a Bill of rights along the lines of the European Convention on Human Rights which would include guarantees against discrimination. In order to allay majority fears of constitutional discussion and in order to ensure a working of the system in minority and majority interests there should be a broad committee of eight Judges. Two from the United Kingdom, two from the Republic of Ireland, two from Northern Ireland and two from the European Courts to oversee any Bill of Rights.

There should be a local office in Belfast where Rights issues could be discussed with some urgency with a view to local conciliation in much the same way that the Labour Relations Agency is able to conciliate in a reasonable time on matters of importance in the commercial and industrial areas. Human Rights issues; in particular those surrounding Courts and Court procedures; could be handled with a greater urgency and in doing so prevent local conflict on serious issues.

Economic Co-Operation with a European Member State.

Cross-border or North/South co-operation.

The Progressive Unionist recognises the existence of the Republic of Ireland as a neighbouring country with some common interests. There are important issues to be discussed affecting Tourism, Agriculture, Fisheries, Energy etc.

For sixty years the onus for negotiations with the Republic have fallen in the main upon faceless Civil Servants and privileged Stormont Ministers in the past. A most unsatisfactory arrangement.

It is most important that the general public in Northern Ireland are made aware and made aware right now that this is a most important issue. They must also understand that there are two somewhat different areas to approach. Areas that should not be confused.

(a) Anglo/Irish matters for discussion.

and

(b) North / South matters for discussion.

One of the problems recently and indeed one of the major bones of contention right up to the present day is the fact that one is often confused with the other.

e.g. The Anglo-Irish Economic Co-operation Committee (AIEC) is often referred to as a suitable Committee for North/South discussion. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The 1985 conference of the Progressive Unionist Party recognised this point when it resolved that North/South matters of joint interest should be discussed by elected representatives from Northern Ireland and representatives from the Republic of Ireland. The 1981 Joint Studies Report on Anglo-Irish talks dealt with Economic Co-operation as follows...

"...agreed that the machinery of Anglo-Irish Co-operation (AIEC) had proved effective within it's terms of reference in fostering the development of economic and technical matters of mutual interest. If a new inter-governmental institution were established as envisaged in their work on

.....institutional structures; the steering group on AIEC (and it's subordinate groups) or a comparable official body might appropriately be placed under the aegis of that new institution".

The Joint studies report goes on to outline the subjects considered which include Energy(electricity interconnection) Kinsale gas; Irish sea Pollution and measures to overcome the problem: broadcasting of television and radio programmes, animal and plant health, Lough Foyle development, Carlingford Lough projects and nearby off-shore areas, Industrial development, trade promotion, Industrial training, Tourism, developing the border areas, science and technology(University links).

Many other subjects are covered in the Anglo-Irish Joint studies Report....all of which could be handled on a direct basis between representatives from Northern Ireland coming together with representatives from the Republic of Ireland.

It is important however that constitutional issues are not allowed to rupture any meaningful dialogue and to this end we have proposed that there should be a properly constituted North/South Committee to discuss these matters free from the Constitutional arguing that has dogged all previous attempts at cross-border co-operation. The Committee formed would consist of Northern Ireland representatives (backed up by Civil Servants) and a similar number of elected representatives from the Republic. There would be a veto operating and used by each delegate in order to overcome any Constitutional discussion. That is the ultimate safeguard. However it is important that the regional issues discussed are negotiated by locally elected representatives.

Already we are witnessing close co-operation by North /South bodies in many differing areas...Sport, Churches, Banking, Judiciary, Telecommunications, and British/Irish Co-operation in Europe; to quote only a few.

It is therefore important that the Issue of North/South co-operation is put on an open; no-secret and firm basis and must not be interpreted falsely as a Council of Ireland.

8.

Prisoners.

There should be a commitment by all political parties in Northern Ireland and between the Westminster Parties that any settlement to the present unrest through political dialogue should be accompanied by a serious commitment to open discussions on the whole question of persons convicted of politically motivated offences.

Conclusion

These legitimate constructive proposals are presented by the Progressive Unionist Party in an attempt to draw support from all political parties and groups who genuinely desire an end to the present round of political violence in Northern Ireland. They are proposals that could be used by any political party that purports to represent the interests of the common people whatever their race or religion.

We have concentrated on the sharing of responsibility rather than the sharing of Power. Power should not be available to any political structure designed to meet the needs of a region of the United Kingdom.

The task of everyone in this region is to bring a halt to the violence and a determination to ensure that power politics is not allowed ever again to breed communal violence.

Information.

The Progressive Unionist Party is the only Socialist Unionist Party in N. Ireland. It is a Party committed to restoring consensus politics to this region. Copies of this document and copies of the constitution of the Party are available from: The Secretary, Progressive Unionist Party, 200a, Shankill Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland.