

Alliance Party

Confidence Building Measures Sub-committee

**SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND
CULTURAL ISSUES**

Social Issues

- 1) The paradox after three years of reduced violence is that as a community we are if anything more polarised than we have ever been before. The Peaceline in Belfast remains an ugly feature of the landscape; Community Relations reports show how people's day to day lives are remarkable for their degree of segregation; low grade (and frequently unreported) violence and sectarianism are endemic; only 2% of children go to mixed schools; much sporting ctivity and many people's social lives are 'single community' based; more people than ever live in religiously segregated areas; and the language of public debate refers ever more often to 'the two communities', as if Catholics and Protestants form two hermetically sealed opposing groups.
- 2) It is conceivable that we could have a continuing respite from major paramilitary violence, side by side with a society which gradually becomes more clearly and rigidly divided. We are in danger of encouraging a de facto apartheid in our community. The long term hazards of this are hard to over-emphasise. **Alliance regards it as essential for the two Governments to state explicitly that the most important 'confidence building measures' of all are those which reduce the bitter suspicions and divisions which have sustained the conflict in Ireland for generations.**
- 3) In the 1991 Census 11.0% of the population chose to decline membership of any particular church. More than one marriage in ten in Northern Ireland is now a mixed marriage. There are many Catholics who do not regard themselves as Nationalists and many Protestants who do not regard themselves as Unionists. Alliance believes that both Governments have a duty to recognise explicitly the right of the people of N.Ireland not to be defined in terms of sectarian groupings. We would ask them both to stop referring persistently to 'the two communities'.
- 4) Alliance believes that all Government policies should be assessed with regard to their impact upon the sectarian/political division. An appraisal of policy for the potential for 'separation or sharing' could operate along the lines of 'Policy Appraisal for Fair Treatment' (PAFT).
- 5) Resources coming into the 'Peace and Reconciliation' programme should be targeted more carefully at projects which actually involve reconciliation and have a genuine cross-community element.
- 6) **Alliance deplores the continuing failure of the British government to support those parents who wish their children to be educated together.** The recent decision not to fund several integrated schools which have significant pupil numbers gives the clear impression that the Government's proclaimed commitment to bringing the community together is rhetorical rather than real.
- 7) Alliance warmly welcomes the commitment by the British Government to introduce the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law. **We call upon the Government of the Republic to implement matching legislation in its own jurisdiction.**

Economic Issues

8) Alliance, as a liberal party, is committed to the creation of a free and democratic society in which the rights of individuals are balanced by the responsibility of ensuring social and economic justice for all citizens. The evidence worldwide is that when economic inequalities increase there are serious consequences, not just in terms of loss of social cohesion and potential for serious unrest, but also of increased physical and psychological illness and mortality.

9) Given our history in Ireland of division and mistrust it is of particular importance that we deal directly with real and perceived economic inequalities, because they have the potential to make even more difficult the task of reconciliation.

10) If we could reach a situation in which every person felt that they had the opportunity to work and to receive appropriate support if they were unable to find employment then much of the alienation felt by too many people would be significantly reduced. This could only have a positive effect upon the conflict in Northern Ireland.

11) However we must be realistic and accept that no country anywhere has achieved the desirable goal of economic fairness for all of its people. This includes wealthy countries such as the United States, the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain or any of the Western European states. If the British Government is to be criticised for allowing economic inequalities to increase then the same strictures can be directed towards every other Government in Europe.

12) **The root cause of the conflict in N.Ireland is political, not economic.** Even if for example the (rather unrealistic) goal of full employment was reached, in the absence of a comprehensive political settlement we would remain a bitterly divided society with the potential for renewed violence.

13) The purpose of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive policy document or an Alliance 'wishlist' on the economy. Our economic policy is readily available. The main issues that we would wish to highlight include:

a) The problem of long term unemployment, which in many cases stretches down through generations of the same family. This is a major issue which requires active and imaginative interventions.

b) The 'poverty trap'. There needs to be a radical review to deal with this complex problem.

c) Education. Our system of selection at 11 labels 60-70% of our children as failures. This is not only socially divisive but also economically inefficient in a world which increasingly requires employees to be educated to their maximum potential.

d) Meeting continuing training needs in schools, further education colleges and the workplace.

e) Improving Northern Ireland's transport infrastructure and external links.

f) Cross-border economic co-operation.

g) Enhanced effectiveness of IDB, LEDU and NITB.

14) Clearly the attainment of some of the goals outlined above will require further resources. Those who are serious about addressing the issue of economic inequality will have to deal with the question of where those resources are to be obtained. The Alliance Party has made it clear that an increase in personal taxation may be essential if we are to achieve many of the desirable outcomes in terms of improved health, education and economic justice that so many of us want to achieve.

Cultural Issues

15) Alliance actively seeks the development of a society in Northern Ireland which is pluralist and diverse and in which every citizen can feel at home. We believe that the wide range and quality of different forms of cultural expression in Northern Ireland, in terms of music, drama, literature and other art forms as well as language is a healthy tribute to the creative energies of local people.

16) Alliance recognises that many of those who speak the Irish language believe, with some justification, that insufficient efforts have been made in the past by public bodies in Northern Ireland to acknowledge them. **Alliance believes that the British Government should commit itself to ensuring that appropriate measures are put in place to ensure that fair treatment is provided for those who speak Irish.** Alliance also recognises the recent interest in 'Ulster-Scots'.

17) Alliance welcomes the British Government's commitment to consider the implications of signing the Council of Europe Charter on Regional and Minority Languages.

18) Alliance calls upon the Irish Government to drop its requirement for teachers from Northern Ireland seeking employment in the Republic to have an Irish language qualification. Alliance believes that this provision dramatically reduces the opportunities for cross-border activity in the vital area of education.

19) Alliance recognises the ever increasing number of citizens from ethnic minority backgrounds. We firmly believe that there must be a more explicit response to their cultural traditions than in the past.

Conclusion

Much attention has been given recently to the issue of early release of prisoners as a confidence building measure. If however we are to get to the root of the problem in Northern Ireland we must take seriously the importance of the underlying social, economic and cultural issues which we have addressed in this paper. Above all else politicians have a duty to put into place measures which can increase the confidence of every citizen that he/she can go about their daily lives without the threat of violence and in the knowledge that their individual rights and liabilities are guaranteed.