

Alliance Party Conference, 12-13 April 1996

1. The Alliance Party's twenty-sixth annual conference was held at the Balmoral Show Grounds, Belfast, on Friday 12/Saturday 13 April.
2. Approximately 400 delegates attended; the hall was full for the leader's speech. Those present were preponderantly middle-aged or elderly, although certain younger activists were in evidence. The average age of the party executive (the subject of a fundraising competition) is in fact relatively low, at 37.
3. The Conference agenda is attached. The public business of the Conference concluded with Dr Alderdice's address. Preparations for the forthcoming elections were then discussed in private session.
4. The Conference was also addressed by Lord Holme (Liberal Democrats) and by Mary Harney, T.D. Other guests at the Conference included Minister of State Durkan and Deputy Bradford (FG), Deputies Leonard and McDaid (FF) and Paddy Joe McClean (DL).

Resolutions for Debate

5. In the debates on resolutions bearing on the political situation and the forthcoming elections and negotiations, there were strong denunciations, notably by **Steve McBride** and **Séamus Close**, of the resumption of the IRA campaign and of the stance of Sinn Féin. **Philip McGarry** emphasised the effects of punishment attacks. Both David Trimble and John Hume were also criticised by Close: the former for his intemperance, the latter for evasiveness and an alleged refusal to engage in genuine dialogue. A number of speakers, emphasising the value of Alliance's participation in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation (such references were frequently applauded from the floor) appealed to the SDLP not to boycott the new forum in Northern Ireland.
6. Mild dissent from the general criticism of Sinn Féin was registered by two speakers. In the debate on the Mitchell report, **Brian Eggins** argued that subscription to the six principles should not be required at the opening of negotiations (Dr Alderdice intervened from the platform to disagree). In the debate on terrorism, **Julian Crozier** (who is the chief executive of the Training and Employment Agency) said that, while he of course shared in the condemnation of the ending of the ceasefire, it was important to bear in mind the deep distrust felt in republican circles of British intentions and good faith. Republicans had "watched peace go down the drain" and needed reassurance about the seriousness of the planned negotiations. Peace was likely to be restored only in such a context.

In the debate on marches, **Steve McBride** called for a sense of compromise and mutual responsibility, and repeated the party's call for an independent tribunal to adjudicate on parades. **Philip McGarry** denounced the equivocation of the UUP on the Ormeau Road riots (he singled out the McGimpsey brothers and Rev. Martin Smyth). He said that such events made the concept of "new unionism" risible: it was clearly as sectarian as the traditional version. (**Dr Alderdice** later referred to new unionism as old unionism with a new sash). Ironically, the UUP, in regard to its defence of parades and its refusal to condemn the predictable consequences of confrontation, was "parroting Sinn Féin". **Derek Bell** opposed calls for compromise: the way forward was to ban all sectarian and triumphalist displays. Not all traditions were worth preserving. **Brian Eggins** compared the Orange Order to a tomcat marking out its territory.

8. The resolution which attracted the largest number of participants was that on BSE. **Addie Morrow**, the party president and himself a farmer, told me of his embarrassment at having to refuse time to some speakers.

Dr Alderdice's Address

9. As is his custom, **Dr Alderdice** spoke with great fluency, and without notes, for about fifty minutes. His speech was enthusiastically received.
10. Dr Alderdice began by commenting on what he perceived to be a general sense of uncertainty and despondency. In some ways this was strange. While, admittedly, the British Government had, despite Alliance's warnings, chosen to implement an unnecessarily messy electoral system, there were nevertheless to be negotiations starting on 10 June. And while the ceasefire had ended, there had been no return to violence in Northern Ireland itself.
11. He suggested that the current mood perhaps derived from the unreasonably high expectations of certain architects of the peace process. Until 1992, there had been general agreement that it would not be possible to reach a political settlement supported by all. However, both Albert Reynolds and John Hume had argued that the real problem was violence, and that ending it would make all things possible. Of course violence was a serious problem, and exacerbated other difficulties; but the bedrock issue was the existence of divergent aspirations.
12. Moreover, the republican movement had gradually come to realise that the real nationalist consensus was substantially different from its own analysis. Indeed, Alliance was closer to the bulk of nationalist thinking than was Sinn Féin. The proceedings of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation had demonstrated to the IRA that even in a predominantly nationalist environment Sinn Féin could not get their own way. Moreover, the commitments demanded by the Mitchell report were

deeply unpalatable to the IRA.

13. However, it should not be concluded that the situation was hopeless just because "the extremes can't get their own way." He recalled that in South Africa both the Afrikaner right and Inkatha had either stayed out of negotiations or had resorted to frequent walk-outs and boycotts. There was no chance of total unanimity.
14. Alliance had sought to make the process work, even though "it wasn't our process." Negotiations were now to begin on 10 June. The people of Northern Ireland now had, both through the elections and in presentations to the Forum, to show what they really wanted. Was there really a groundswell of support for change? This might be Northern Ireland's last chance to solve its own problems.
15. Dr Alderdice praised both the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach (to warm applause). However, what was needed was for the two main leaders of Northern opinion, John Hume and David Trimble, to show statesmanship. John Hume was "the most capable leader Northern nationalism has had this century", while David Trimble was "able." But did they have the courage to move beyond representing the views of their own supporters to understanding, and explaining to their followers, the views of their opponents?
16. Dr Alderdice repeated that if the people of Northern Ireland did not take this chance, the two Governments would act together to put new structures in place. Compromise all round was required.
17. [Comment: While Dr Alderdice's speech was an eloquent re-statement of his own analysis of the basis of the peace process and of his belief in the need to build from the centre out, it notably lacked a sharp focus on the substance of the negotiations, or indeed on the likely work programme of the forum. He did not advert to the handling of the decommissioning question. It may be that Dr Alderdice's oratorical talents can allow him, intentionally or otherwise, to skirt the meat of an issue.]

Other Contacts

18. In private conversation, **Dr Alderdice** repeated that, in his view, there was an unwarranted degree of pessimism about the prospects for negotiations. He felt that there was a degree of momentum for a settlement, which would be reinforced by the work of the forum. He felt that the Unionists would eventually be led to engage seriously by two factors: the realisation that they would do no better under an alternative British Government, and by the fear that the two Governments together would impose a settlement if negotiations failed [this latter scenario was that he himself advanced at his recent meeting with the Tánaiste].

19. He thought it on the whole unlikely that there would be a formal resumption of the ceasefire by 10 June. Sinn Fein would therefore not be present in negotiations, at least in the earlier stages. This would put great pressure on the SDLP - but if the UUP were seen to be acting responsibly the SDLP would have to follow suit.

20. He repeated the view he had put to the Tánaiste, that decommissioning must be handled away from the main negotiations, if and when Sinn Fein's entry made the matter meaningful. He agreed that the Unionists could not be allowed to use the issue to block the negotiations moving ahead out of the opening plenary session, but appeared to envisage that thereafter the best guarantee of further movement was flexibility all round.
21. Some other party members I spoke to were more pessimistic about the likely scenario. **Sir Oliver Napier**, for example, told me that in his view there was no prospect of decommissioning at any time; this, together with Trimble's intransigence and volatility ("he was a little guttersnipe in the 1970s and he's still one") augured badly.
22. There was considerable uncertainty about the likely outcome of the elections. Several people (**Napier, Eileen Bell, Séamus Close**) felt that the confusion and ill-feeling surrounding the electoral system, and the lack of any very direct link between performance in the elections and weight in the negotiations, would lead to apathy and a low turn-out in both communities.
23. With regard to North Down, Napier felt that Alliance could win 2 seats. Robert McCartney, he thought, would secure only his own return: the UUP and the DUP could both pick up a seat.

Comment

24. Overall, the party leadership was probably reasonably happy with a harmonious and well-organised conference. While media coverage was fairly full and positive, the absence of real debate, and the slightly formulaic nature of the leader's speech, seem unlikely to have engendered the sort of renewed public attention necessary if Alliance are to have a prospect of improving substantially on their recent electoral performances. Dr Alderdice's apparent optimism may be somewhat at odds with the uncertainty others feel both about the elections and the negotiations themselves.