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Alliance Party Conference

23/24 April 1982

1. The conference was attended by approximately 200 party supporters and was held in the Europa Hotel, Belfast. A wide range of resolutions dealing with economic and social issues, local government, education, agriculture and housing were discussed. The main political debate took place after speeches made by the Leader and Deputy Leader on 24 April. Copies of the speeches are attached.

2. After Mr. Napier's speech the party executive proposed for debate the following resolution :

"This conference welcomes with a few reservations the publication of the Government White Paper, entitled "Northern Ireland - A Framework for Devolution".

Furthermore this Conference reiterates that the objectives of the Alliance Party within the framework presented by the proposed legislation will be to secure the setting up of a system of devolved Government based upon powersharing".

3. The main points to emerge in the various speeches and in private conversation with Oliver Napier were as follows:

(a) the Prior proposals are not "ideal" but they do provide an opportunity for Northern Ireland politicians to come together and try to solve Northern Ireland's problems. The proposed Assembly can work if Northern Ireland politicians want it to work;

(b) the SDLP and the Irish Government were singled out in particular for strong criticism for their opposition to the initiative. The Taoiseach and Mr. Hume were accused of not wanting devolved government in Northern Ireland in order to ensure continued instability in Northern Ireland. Mr. Napier stressed that in seeking a British withdrawal after protracted instability in Northern Ireland, civil war not unification would be the outcome;

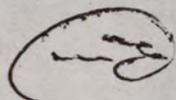
- (c) Mr. Napier and other party members constantly reiterated that power-sharing in the context of devolved government was the only way forward for Northern Ireland. Mr. Napier also pointed out to Unionist politicians that no British Government will ever give power back to Northern Ireland except on a power-sharing basis because of national and international pressure and the previous experience of majority rule in Northern Ireland;
- (d) in relation to the "Irish Dimension", the Alliance Party leader said that he was opposed to such a dimension if it is seen as some sort of all Ireland institution which could or might lead to Irish unity and can be used to undermine Northern Ireland's position within the UK. Mr. Napier however welcomed the "UK-Republic of Ireland" dimension which has been recognised in the establishment of the AIIC. He strongly supported the creation of a better climate of understanding and greater cooperation between the UK and Ireland. In private he repeated what other Alliance members have said that he would not be opposed to his party participating in a parliamentary tier;
- (e) Mr. Napier criticised the "incredibly simplistic" statement contained in the White Paper that there are two identities in Northern Ireland. He was proud to be both Irish and British and rejected the essentially sectarian definition that to be Irish is to come from a Gaelic Catholic Republican background;
- (f) the Alliance Party regretted Mr. Prior's decision not to include a Bill of Rights in his initiative although he has agreed to consider it at a later stage;
- (g) despite the various reservations expressed about Mr. Prior's plan, only two speakers totally opposed the initiative and supported the continuation of direct rule. The vote on the resolution above was passed with overwhelming support from the conference. A copy of Mr. Cushnahan's speech in proposing the resolution is attached.

4. There was a lot of discussion among delegates as to the likely support which Alliance might receive in an Assembly election. It was generally felt that the Alliance Party would improve on its showing in the 1981 local government elections (8.7%) and at least achieve 10% of first preferences which would result in 8 seats. The Alliance Party received 9.8% in the 1975 Convention election and 14.24% in the 1977 local government election. Mr. Napier was the only party member who indicated to me that the Alliance Party could get more than 8 seats.

5. The following resolution was adopted by the Conference and received strong support from delegates:-

That this Conference praises the leadership, professionalism and courage demonstrated by both the RUC and the Garda Siochana in the common fight against terrorism. In particular we welcome the continued development of close co-operation between both forces and reiterate our call for the introduction of extradition to facilitate this co-operation even further and to this end we commend the sentiments expressed by the recent Garda Conference on the extradition issue.

6. Other resolutions adopted included condemnation of the "Third Force" and a demand for prosecution of all those who were either directly involved in the Kincora scandal or who were party to the "cover-up". A resolution calling for talks with the SDP/Liberal Alliance with a view to forming some sort of partnership was rejected. While most delegates supported the general policies and outlook of the SDP/Liberal Alliance, closer ties were ruled out until the Alliance spelled out specific policies in relation to Northern Ireland.



Martin Burke

27 April 1982

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