

1971 – 1985

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland was born in the midst of the Troubles, in April 1970. **Denis Loretto** looks back at the party's history and its relationships with the Liberal Party and the SDP.

# Alliance, Liberals and the SDP

## A Personal Memoir

On the 9th of October 1968 I was drawn to my office window in Belfast by a commotion outside – hundreds of boisterous young people were heading down Linenhall Street. As I went to the door and looked out they responded to shouts from the front and all sat down in the street. They had been barred from access to the City Hall. The autumn sun beamed down on the peaceful but determined scene. At that moment I realised that the bitter realities of my native province had invaded my cosy world. At some point I would have to become involved.

What I had witnessed was the protest of Queens University students against the brutal sweeping from the Derry streets of a civil rights march four days earlier – the one that sent the first appalling TV images around the world. On that afternoon the People's Democracy was formed by those students. On the same day the Derry Citizens Action Committee was founded with John Hume as its Vice-Chairman.

My own political experience was limited to a couple of years in the Liberal Party in 1961/62 when I had gone to work in London. As it happened I lived in Orpington, Kent, and worked in the famous by-election campaign – heady days! Upon return to Northern Ireland I avoided politics like so many business and professional people of non-partisan view. There was a weak Ulster Liberal Party but it seemed to have no relevance in the local sectarian scene. I had sympathy with the civil rights movement but saw how easily it could be subverted by forces more concerned with 'Brits Out' than human rights.

It was the formation of the New Ulster Movement (NUM) which provided the vehicle for me. I

was there at the first meeting on 5th February 1969 and was attracted to the agenda put forward – chaos was at hand and it was up to the Northern Irish people themselves to put aside their sterile divisions and build the solution. The root problem was sectarianism. A combination of absolute equality and involvement for Protestants and Catholics and respect for the rule of law was paramount. Attacks on the majority view on the link with Great Britain were part of the problem and not the solution. The immediate objective was to support the reform programme and to recruit across the province members of all political parties and none. Adding spice to the meeting was the announcement the same day that Terence O'Neill had called a general election for the Stormont parliament.

I knew no-one on the platform but soon realised that some Liberal Party members – notably Oliver Napier – were the driving force. Their reward was expulsion from the Ulster Liberal Party who evidently regarded this as heresy of some sort.

It is often forgotten that O'Neill actually won the 'Crossroads' election on 24th February 1969 in that twenty-seven out of the thirty-nine Unionists elected supported his reform programme. However they were a mixture of Official and Unofficial Unionists and the divisions at the grass roots were serious. Three Nationalists were dislodged by Independents identified with the civil rights movement including Hume. Sheelagh Murnaghan who had held a seat for the Liberals since 1961 under the anachronistic University franchise was only able to muster 15% of the vote in North Down.

During 1969 NUM built an active organisation with thousands of members drawn from all sections

of the community. It issued many influential papers. It was the first to call for a Community Relations Commission and a Central Housing Executive. But its more radical members were becoming dissatisfied with a Movement. They wanted a new political party. O'Neill had resigned in April and was replaced by the ineffectual Chichester-Clark. The reform programme was continually overtaken by events including the major unrest in Derry's Bogside that brought the British Army on to the streets and led to the formation of the Provisional IRA. Loyalist attacks on Catholic homes proliferated.

The current political structure was not going to work. Without any publicity a sixteen-strong group was formed late in 1969 consisting of NUM members plus representatives of the 'Parliamentary Associations' which had formed around unofficial pro-O'Neill candidates in the February 1969 election. Behind the scenes it worked on the logistics of forming a political party from the ground up. I was proud to be a member of 'The Group' and had no doubt that launch was now only a matter of timing. It was the two by-elections on 16th April 1970 that gave us the signal. Paisley took O'Neill's former seat Bannside. In South Antrim Paisley's deputy Beattie won but an unknown candidate David Corkey standing as an Independent backed by NUM activists gained over 25% of the vote and was just behind the Official Unionist candidate. Paisley had made his entrance into elective politics and moderate unionism had no answer.

In a hectic weekend we wrote a declaration of intent containing the founding principles of the party plus all the supporting documentation for a press launch on Tuesday 21st April. The name of the party was one of the more contentious issues. In the end 'Alliance' was chosen because it was new, avoided any partisan flavour and would fit into a newspaper headline unabridged! In the declaration of intent we repudiated not only the Unionist and Nationalist parties 'for whom the clock stopped in 1920' but also the Labour and Liberal parties 'who have palpably failed to restart that clock'. Later we acknowledged that the Labour and

Liberal parties had made some attempt to cut across sectarian divisions 'but with doctrinaire policies geared to the general British political scene they have failed to solve the fundamental problems on their own doorstep. They have tended to divide moderate and liberal people on economic issues rather than uniting them to fight against sectarianism and the past.'

In drafting the founding principles we majored on healing community divisions but knew we must also be unequivocal on the British link. Vacillation on this issue was one of the defects of the Ulster Liberal Party. We knew that the majority of Catholics were prepared to settle for true equality and cultural freedom within a province largely running its own affairs within the United Kingdom. All that has happened since - up to and including the Good Friday agreement - has borne this out. For many years, both North and South of the border, clamour for breaking the British link has always peaked at times when there seemed to be no hope of a place in the sun for Northern Catholics.

It is worth quoting the founding principles of the Alliance Party in full:

1. We support the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom. We know that this belief is shared by the overwhelming majority of our people and that provocative debate about it has been a primary cause of our most fundamental troubles. The Union is in the best economic and social interests of all citizens of the state. It also implies British standards of democracy and social justice which will be energetically secured and steadfastly upheld. We are firmly committed to the principle of devolved government and would not support any attempt to suspend or dissolve the Northern Ireland Parliament.

2. Our primary objective is to heal the bitter divisions in our community by ensuring -

- (a) Equality of citizenship and of human dignity;
- (b) The rooting out of discrimination and injustice;

- (c) The elimination of prejudice by a just and liberal appreciation of the beliefs and fears of different members of the community;
- (d) Equality of social, economic and educational opportunities;
- (e) Highest standards of democracy at both parliamentary and local government level;
- (f) Complete and effective participation in our political, governmental and public life at *all* levels by people drawn from both sides of our present religious divide.

3. Our economic policies will not be shackled by any economic dogma, whether socialist or conservative. The Alliance Party will never accept any such socio-economic allegiance. Nor is there any intention or desire whatever to affiliate with any other party.

4. We firmly believe that without universal respect for the law of the land and the authorities appointed to enforce it there can be no measurable progress. We therefore intend to secure the rapid achievement of such respect and the absolutely equal enforcement of the law without fear or favour in every part of the state. Equal justice will be guaranteed to all citizens regardless of their political or religious persuasion.

The party launch brought a positive response from NUM members and others of like mind. The leadership rapidly got on with building a province-wide organisation with over 10,000 card-carrying members. Some feelers had been put out to civil rights activists - John Hume received a tumultuous reception when he addressed a NUM meeting in East Belfast in 1969 - but they kept their distance. It was a great disappointment to us that they got together with Nationalist members later the same year - on 21st August 1970 - to form the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). It had constructive intent and its advocacy of a United Ireland was only by consent. Clearly SDLP would get major backing from Catholics. But it would never be able to attract cross-community support and would always feel the danger of being outbid by the

forces of militant republicanism. Earlier there was a Westminster general election within two months of the Alliance Party launch. Given the orientation of Alliance towards devolved government the decision was made to hold fire and not to expose the fledgling party to a contest for which they would be unprepared. Liberal candidates stood in two of the twelve seats and came bottom of the poll in both. Paisley continued his advance by winning the North Antrim seat.

Against the background of continuing unrest, with Republican no-go areas being matched by growing loyalist militancy, Alliance spokesmen gained respect – particularly Oliver Napier and Bob Cooper. In April 1971 the party showed its strength by staging its first annual conference with nearly 2,000 members packing the Ulster Hall. The slogan was ‘Towards Government’ and that was our firm intent while having no illusions about how long it would take. We needed the impetus of high expectation to keep the adrenalin flowing in those crusading days.

Throughout 1971 escalating violence in the streets dominated further attempts at political progress. Despite hopeful signs of understanding emerging between SDLP and the Unionist Government now led by Brian Faulkner, SDLP became hooked on a demand for an enquiry into the deaths of two men shot by the Army in Derry. This led to their withdrawal from Stormont and setting up of the rather bizarre ‘Assembly of the Northern Irish People’ in Dungiven Co. Tyrone.

On 9th August the fateful step was taken to introduce internment without trial to sweep up suspect IRA volunteers. As 350 were taken into custody the Alliance leadership was faced with its first major dilemma. While most Catholics would be incensed by this move it was likely that the majority of Protestants would see it as a necessary measure to crush IRA violence which had caused most of the thirty deaths that year. At an emergency meeting of the party Executive we decided that an appalling error had been made which would increase rather than diminish violence and unrest. In any case the Party’s principles were clear – this was the

antithesis of ‘absolutely equal enforcement of the law’. An immediate statement was issued totally condemning the measure and warning of the inevitable consequences. On the same evening Alliance leaders travelled throughout the province and addressed hastily organised meetings of the party membership in an attempt to ward off any possible split on this emotive issue. In the event we lost no members. Not only had we given firm leadership but also our Protestant members asked their Catholic colleagues how they felt about the internment decision – and understood.

It was not long before our grim predictions came true. Between 9th August and the end of the year a further 143 people had been killed including forty-six members of the security forces. On 30th January 1972 the appalling debacle of Bloody Sunday when thirteen civilians were shot dead in Derry by British soldiers sent shock waves around the world. Shortly afterwards Alliance acquired a parliamentary party when the Stormont MPs Phelim O’Neill (Unionist), Bertie McConnell (Independent Unionist) and Tom Gormley (Independent Nationalist) left their former allegiances and joined the party. However this was short-lived as the refusal of Faulkner and his colleagues to accept the transfer of law and order powers to Westminster led to the suspension of the Stormont Parliament on 24th March 1972. Direct rule commenced under Secretary of State William Whitelaw.

After brief ceasefires violence continued unabated including Bloody Friday in Belfast on 21st July when twenty-six IRA bombs killed eleven and injured 130 people. Ulster Vanguard was formed as a symbol of loyalist resistance and ideas for some form of independence for the province began to surface. The British Government under Ted Heath decided to move rapidly towards testing the ground for restoration of some form of devolution.

In September 1972 a conference was held at Darlington to examine the options. As usual several parties including in this case SDLP and Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) refused to attend and only the Faulkner-led Official Unionists, Alliance and Northern Ireland

Labour turned up. Not surprisingly there was no agreement but the opportunity was taken by Alliance to put forward detailed proposals for an assembly and devolved government based on proportionality and without security powers in the initial stages. We also argued strongly for no severing of the link with Great Britain without the support of a majority of Northern Ireland voters and co-operation with the Republic of Ireland through an advisory Anglo-Irish Council involving Westminster MPs as well as members of the NI Assembly. Although not invited to the conference the Ulster Liberal Party made a submission on similar lines but with a Joint Council between Northern Ireland and the Republic only rather than an Anglo-Irish Council.

When the Government produced a Green Paper in October it was clear that much of this had been taken aboard. The ‘Irish Dimension’ was clearly going to be the most contentious issue. Prior to the publication of a White Paper the Government decided to hold a ‘border poll’ on 8th March 1973 – no doubt with the intention of demonstrating clearly to those pressing for Irish unity where majority opinion stood. Once again the Alliance Party leadership was faced with a difficult decision. It was one thing to have a party principle which supported the British link as the majority view but quite another to campaign in its favour in a referendum. Should we keep a low profile? As with internment two years earlier we stuck to our principles by giving political leadership and issuing a province-wide leaflet headed ‘Without Britain we’re sunk!’ We spelled out the alternatives as ‘a Sinn Fein United Ireland or a Vanguard Independent Ulster’ and mentioned the beneficial implications of membership of the European Community which the UK and Ireland had joined at the beginning of that year.

The reaction of both SDLP and hardline republicans to the border poll was to call for abstention from voting – always a useful ploy when defeat is inevitable because the usual proportion of the electorate who do not bother to vote can be claimed as supporters. In the event the percentage poll was 58.7% with 98.9% saying ‘yes’ to the

British link. But interestingly this positive vote was 57.5% of the entire electorate – enough to demonstrate that a significant number of Catholic voters had actually voted ‘yes’. The Alliance leadership felt justified but the poll was of little benefit and has not been repeated since.

When the White Paper was published a power sharing Executive drawn from an Assembly elected by single transferable vote and without security powers was to the fore. The shape and size of the Irish Dimension was left for further discussion and negotiation at a conference to be held after elections to the new Assembly between its representatives and those of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The White Paper divided the Unionists but Faulkner did manage to get a majority to accept it as a way forward. It was also largely accepted by SDLP and Alliance. While Paisley’s DUP rejected it, they did decide to contest elections to the new Assembly.

But first (on 30th May 1973) came the elections to the twenty-six new district councils forming part of the revised system of local government proposed by the Macrory Report in 1970. This was the first use of STV as a voting system since it was removed by the Unionist regime shortly after the creation of Northern Ireland in the 1920s. The Alliance Party fought an energetic province-wide campaign. Our level of expectation in those early days was such that any result short of an Alliance landslide would have been a disappointment! In the event we secured sixty-three of the 526 seats with 13.6% of the first preference vote. We gained representation on twenty of the twenty-six councils. Interestingly DUP were behind us with twenty-one seats and SDLP not enormously ahead of us with eighty-three seats.

On 28th June 1973 came the Assembly elections. Although only a month after the local government contest, tribal loyalties strengthened in a battle that would in effect appoint negotiating representatives. The Alliance first preference vote slipped to 9.2% but good transfers on later counts helped to secure eight of the seventy-eight seats. To the great credit of the party, Alliance

ran the Catholic Oliver Napier in largely Protestant East Belfast and the Protestant Bob Cooper in largely Catholic West Belfast and both were elected. Napier was elected as Alliance Party leader with Cooper as his deputy. On the Unionist/Loyalist side there was a multiplicity of party labels but in effect twenty-three members supporting the White Paper were elected and twenty-seven against. SDLP surged to nineteen seats.

Despite the bitter Unionist divisions a remarkable breakthrough was announced on 21st November 1973 after lengthy negotiations – a power-sharing Executive involving Unionists, SDLP and Alliance with Faulkner as Chief Executive and SDLP leader Gerry Fitt as his deputy. Alliance had two members – Oliver Napier and Bob Cooper. Only two weeks later the conference envisaged in the White Paper to negotiate the ‘Irish Dimension’ commenced at Sunningdale. During those two weeks I felt euphoric. The key was the entry of SDLP into an Executive before the conference started. To their supporters, the achievement of power-sharing was a glittering prize. For their representatives to come back from Sunningdale to announce they had thrown this away because of some detail of Southern involvement in Northern affairs was inconceivable. To me this factor gave Faulkner the leverage he needed to ward off an over-strong Irish Dimension which would destroy his prospects of selling the whole package to Unionists.

History now shows that Faulkner tragically underplayed his hand. Under the combined pressure of British and Irish Governments and the SDLP he conceded too much. Alliance representatives did their best to seek a better balance but could not in the end be seen to stymie an accord that all the other parties endorsed. So agreement was announced. In the resulting mayhem it was notable that the over-weighty Council of Ireland was the target of Unionist dissidents – little was said about the power-sharing Executive. Triumphalism by some SDLP spokesmen – utterly unnecessary in selling the agreement to their people – sounded appalling to Unionist ears.

Typical quote – ‘It is a vehicle trundling inevitably through to a United Ireland’. It was not surprising that a majority of the Unionist Council voted against the Sunningdale package in January 1974. Faulkner resigned as their leader and was replaced by Harry West.

Faulkner carried on as Chief Executive with a group of ‘Pro-Assembly Unionists’ around him. But his efforts to gain gradual public support for this brave and novel form of devolution were dealt a crippling blow by the man who had most pressurised him into agreement at Sunningdale – British Prime Minister Ted Heath. Harried by industrial unrest Heath called a snap general election for 28th February 1974 with the theme ‘Who governs Britain’. It was disastrous for him in that Labour headed by Harold Wilson narrowly won the election. It was even more disastrous to his Northern Ireland policy in that the united forces of all Unionist parties opposed to Sunningdale secured eleven of the twelve N.I. seats under the banner of the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC) with 51.1% of the vote. Their slogan ‘Dublin is just a Sunningdale away’ played well to Unionist fears. In an effort to avoid splitting the pro-agreement vote Alliance stood in only three seats and made little impact.

After that it was only a matter of time before the Executive collapsed even though it proved in its short reign to be a competent administration. In May 1974 the so-called Ulster Workers’ Council strike was feebly handled by a Labour Government instinctively opposed to strike-breaking and the Unionist members of the N.I. Executive resigned. Many years and many lives were to pass before anything resembling a political settlement surfaced again. During the rest of the 1970s Labour continued in government at Westminster, reinforced by a further general election in October 1974 that changed little in Northern Ireland. Again Alliance had limited involvement fighting five seats and gaining a rather distant second place in four.

Secretary of State Merlyn Rees attempted to find a way forward by means of an elected Constitutional Convention of the same size as the previous Assembly. In the election on 1st May 1975 Alliance

again won eight seats with 9.8% of the vote. The massive vote of 54.8% and forty-seven of the seventy-eight seats for UUUC candidates dictated the outcome of the subsequent negotiations – total failure after ten months. In September 1976 Roy Mason succeeded Merlyn Rees as Secretary of State. Both of them concentrated on combating the unremitting violence from both extremes. An IRA ceasefire in early 1975 came to nothing and some major explosions were perpetrated by Republicans in Great Britain. Escalating security powers brought no relief.

The formation of the Peace People in 1976 was a welcome reaction by ordinary people against violence and Alliance members took part in all of its rallies. Without any drive at political level it ultimately gained little. However a more lasting initiative was taken by a group of parents who formed 'All Children Together' as a pressure group for integrated education. They sponsored an enabling bill which was introduced in the House of Lords by Alliance Party Peer Lord Dunleath. This became the Education (Northern Ireland) Act in early 1978 and led to the founding of Lagan College with twenty-eight pupils. Today there are forty-six shared schools in the province educating 15,000 Protestant and Catholic children together – a beacon of hope for the future.

On 18th May 1977 came the second round of elections to the twenty-six district councils just after an abortive strike by loyalists against government security policy. It proved to be the best overall performance by the Alliance Party. We moved up from sixty-three to seventy seats and 14.4% of the vote. In Belfast Alliance secured thirteen of the fifty-one seats including my own entry into local government. This performance was to lead to David Cook being elected as the first non-Unionist Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1978/79. But on went the violence and measures to combat it that were the subject of constant controversy. Amid the tribal clamour Alliance spokesmen made consistent efforts to put forward non-partisan views based on the rule of law. In the Maze Prison republican prisoners began to engage in 'dirty' protests

against their treatment – something that would have immense significance later on.

On 3rd May 1979 came the Westminster general election that brought Margaret Thatcher to power. Alliance decided to fight every seat but to concentrate effort on target seats – particularly East Belfast with Oliver Napier as candidate. With the Unionist vote very evenly split between Craig (Official Unionist) and Robinson (DUP) we saw an opportunity to come through the middle. In the end after a three-way recount Robinson was elected with 15,994 votes, Craig was second with 15,930 votes and Napier was third with 15,066 votes. Bearing in mind that there were also moderate Unionist and NI Labour candidates with votes totalling 4,000 it was a very close run thing. As the constituency organiser I was bitterly disappointed. The gaining of representation at Westminster level would have been an immense boost for the Alliance Party and would undoubtedly have improved the battered image of the province. In fact the election within NI changed nothing.

But the change of power in the UK overall was to prove highly significant. A month later on 7th June 1979 the first poll for the European Parliament saw Paisley (DUP), Hume (SDLP) and Taylor (OUP) elected to the three seats. In such a province-wide tribal contest it was not surprising that Napier only polled 6.8% – probably not helped by the highly pro-European stance of the Alliance Party.

As Secretary of State the only real initiative by Humphrey Atkins was to convene an inter-party conference in October 1980 that was as usual boycotted – this time by the Official Unionists. After three months of discussion between DUP, SDLP and Alliance the conference broke up without agreement. However Margaret Thatcher became personally involved when the protesting republican prisoners in the Maze started hunger strikes in an attempt to gain recognition as political prisoners. Their irresistible force met in Thatcher an immovable object. At first the strikes were called off. Then in March 1981 Bobby Sands refused food. By the time this new protest was

called off ten prisoners were dead. While still in prison Bobby Sands won a by-election for the Fermanagh-South Tyrone seat and therefore died as a Westminster MP and a powerful martyr to the republican cause. This tragic episode inevitably deepened community divisions.

The May 1981 district council elections were held just two weeks after Bobby Sands' funeral. The DUP made major advances and the Alliance Party lost ground – down to thirty-eight seats and 8.9% of the first preference vote. While on one hand Thatcher was taking a rigid stance on hunger strikes she was at the same time seeking rapport with the Republic of Ireland Government. In December 1980 she took three senior Cabinet Ministers to Dublin and set up joint studies on a range of subjects. In November 1981 she agreed with the Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald to set up a British-Irish Intergovernmental Council. The moves that were to culminate in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 had begun.

James Prior took over as Secretary of State in September 1981. His initiative took the form of an Assembly with only advisory and consultative functions initially but able to gain real power in specific areas if a weighted majority (70%) agreed on this. It became known as 'rolling devolution'. This time it was SDLP who decided to boycott but did stand for election on an abstentionist ticket. The same stance was taken by Sinn Fein who were thus fighting a 'Stormont' election for the first time. The election on 20th October 1982 was on the same basis as the previous Assembly and Convention. Sinn Fein took five seats and 10.1% of the vote against SDLP's fourteen seats and 18.8% of the vote. Alliance managed to improve to ten seats with 9.3% of the vote. One of the new Alliance members was John Cushnahan, previously General Secretary of the party and a Belfast City Councillor. He was appointed Chief Whip and began to play a prominent role.

At this stage I was back in London having been promoted to an executive position in the insurance company for whom I had always worked. I retained my Alliance Party membership but

agreed when asked to act as an adviser to the Liberal Northern Ireland panel. I kept in touch with N.I. affairs particularly through contact with John Cushnahan. The Ulster Liberal Party still existed but was very weak. The national party had spoken out against violence and sectarianism and supported moves towards partnership during the 1970s but had little influence on affairs. Then at the Liberal Party Conference in September 1983 a resolution put forward by the Young Liberals was passed. It sought to commit the party to a United Ireland as a long term objective without any wording requiring consent from the N.I. people – a policy only Sinn Fein espoused within Ireland itself.

By this time the Liberals were in alliance with the newly-formed SDP and it was clear to David Steel and David Owen that a properly considered Northern Ireland policy was essential. In March 1984 they set up a Joint Commission on Northern Ireland chaired by Lord Donaldson. I was invited to be a member and we got down to work. In the meantime the Alliance Party had begun to attend meetings of the European Liberal Democrats and this led to David Steel coming to Belfast on 17th May 1984 to endorse the candidature of David Cook in the forthcoming European Parliamentary election.

Later that year as the Assembly at Stormont struggled to establish a worthwhile role Oliver Napier decided to step down after an immensely hard-working and courageous ten years as Party Leader. His distinguished service was subsequently recognised by the award of a knighthood. Fortunately in John Cushnahan he had a worthy successor. Cushnahan was elected on 24th September and soon established good relations with the press and other politicians. When the Joint Commission published its report in July 1985 Cushnahan recognised in it much that the Alliance Party could support and approached the Liberal/SDP leadership for talks. This gradually led to a high degree of co-operation.

Some years later Alliance was recognised as a sister party of the Liberal Democrats and attempts to maintain a

separate branch of the national party in Northern Ireland ceased with the full approval of the remaining local Liberal/SDP members. As to the Joint Commission report, I quote from a lengthy *Irish Times* leader of 23rd July 1985:

The Report ... is one of the most important documents published on the Anglo-Irish question in recent years ... it shows signs of hard work, rigorous thinking and a commendable attempt at objective analysis.

The report set out in detail how power sharing could work and was forthright in defence of civil rights and the rule of law including the conduct of justice. While stating that the status quo was not an option it upheld the principle of consent in pursuing change. It formed the core of Northern Ireland policy eventually inherited by the Liberal Democrats.

On 12 October 1984 the dramatic attempt on Margaret Thatcher's life at a Brighton hotel brought out her best qualities of courage and determination. Far from being deterred from the ongoing Anglo-Irish talks she stepped up the process behind the scenes. On 15th November 1985 she and Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald signed the historic Anglo-Irish Agreement. The key feature of the Agreement was that it gave the Republic a role in Northern Ireland affairs by setting up a Joint Ministerial Conference with a permanent secretariat. But it made clear that all of this could be altered if and when devolution on a power-sharing basis within Northern Ireland was achieved.

The Unionists were faced with the reality that continued intransigence on power-sharing would not necessarily result in the relatively comfortable option of permanent direct rule from Westminster.

The reaction of Unionists was immediate and bitterly hostile. As well as street protests culminating in an attempted strike and shameful attacks on police and their families by loyalist extremists, all fifteen Unionist MPs resigned their seats and caused by-elections. The only result of this tactic was to lose two of their seats to the SDLP. Through all this the Government and security forces held firm.

Cushnahan was faced with an important decision. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was one of the few issues on which real disagreement emerged within Alliance. The lack of consultation with Unionists and the danger of repeating the 1974 mistake of an over-strong Irish Dimension caused dissent. Cushnahan led from the front. He spelled out to his members that while consent on the British link itself was sacrosanct – as the Agreement re-emphasised – it was absolutely vital to break the Unionist veto on all forms of political progress. The Agreement could be the key to achieve that. Backed by a clear majority he indicated broad support for the Agreement. While another long period was to pass and many more tragedies were to befall the province, history will show that the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement was a major factor in drawing the Unionists into the negotiations culminating twelve years later in the Good Friday Agreement.

Looking back over this period in the history of the Alliance Party it could be argued that purity of purpose and firm adherence to principle was taken to the point of rigidity. Perhaps a greater flexibility and occasional bending towards popular opinion on one side or another could have brought more electoral success. I would argue that it was and still is crucially necessary for at least one organisation of strength and integrity to occupy the true centre ground in Northern Ireland politics. While liberal, outward-looking and willing to work closely with kindred spirits in the Liberal Democrats it must clearly be a product of the province itself. As Alliance spokesmen have said many times –

We do not just call for partnership between Protestants and Catholics.

We ARE partnership between Protestants and Catholics.

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