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Speech to Conference
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Conference, we meet at a time when this party is at its strongest state electorally for well over a generation.

Building on recent achievements including electing our first MP and obtaining two Ministers on the Executive and making a real, meaningful difference in government, in this month's Assembly election have obtained our best percentage share of the vote since 1987, and our largest overall number of votes since 1979.

And given the changing age profile of Alliance membership, I suspect that these results are the best achieved during the adult lives of the majority of people in this room.

It is also worth noting that Alliance is the only one of the five main parties that has never lost a sitting MLA and never failed to retain an Assembly seat.

Yet, this success comes at the greatest time of uncertainty and turbulence across the globe, since at least the end of the Cold War.

And at home, the very future of Executive, Assembly, and related-institutions are greatly in peril, drawing in question the very future of devolution, power-sharing and the wider Good Friday Agreement settlement.

Perhaps, the growing strength of Alliance is not a coincidence

It reflects a much greater desire to see a steady and liberal voice, providing strong and progressive leadership through the storms that lie ahead.

It reflects a commitment to equality, human rights, respect for the individual, and for rationalism, in the face of discrimination, bigotry, intolerance and even fake news.

And it is a vote for hope.

It was interesting to hear President Bill Clinton after the funeral of Martin McGuinness talking about the importance of interdependence.

And he was making it clear that interdependence is vital internationally but also domestically within societies, especially those with deep divisions.

The notion that we can return some romanticised notion of 19th century sovereignty is naïve in the extreme.

Around the world, we all benefit we can move freely to work and play, trade and access new markets, and come together to manage shared problems, such as how we can best manage collective challenges, such as protecting our environment and tackling climate change.

This logic applies most clearly when we talk about our common European home and the European Union.

Interdependence applies very clearly when we look in particular at Northern Ireland.

People have been commenting on the outcome of the Assembly Election and in particular the supposed political earthquake of unionists no longer having an outright majority in the Assembly, and almost parity with nationalism.

But for Alliance the fundamental dynamics don't change.

Whether we are talking about a majority-minority situation, or a minority-minority situation, the fundamental reality is that Northern Ireland can only be a success when everyone works together for the common good of the entire community.

Unionists cannot govern alone without working with Nationalists, and Nationalists cannot govern alone without working with Unionists.

And all of the knee-jerk calls for unionist unity, or demands for an urgent border poll cannot escape this inescapable requirement.

However, it is a major mistake to simply treat Northern Ireland as a society characterised exclusively by two communities at loggerheads.

Arguably, it was never that simple. But today, it is clearer than ever that Protestant doesn't always equal unionist and doesn't always equal British, and that Catholic doesn't always equal nationalist and doesn't equal Irish.

More and more people have open, mixed and multiple identities.

We are seeing this more and more in terms of how young people especially define themselves.

We are seeing it the growing number of people who define themselves as Northern Irish, and see themselves in terms of the region.

And we are seeing it in the over 70,000 people who are voting for the Alliance Party.

Our society is not only enriched, but much stronger as a consequence.

It is links and relationships across traditional divides than can bind Northern Ireland together.

And it is the time is long since passed that the sectarian designation system in the Assembly was condemned to the dustbin of history.

Alliance is a liberal and progressive party.

It is that appreciation for the rights the individual person, combined with support for a strong cohesive and fair community that characterise our values.

This is why we place such emphasis on education and skills, ensuring economic opportunities and empowerment, and ensuring that our public services have the resources to provide everyone with high quality healthcare and a strong safety net.

This is why we champion human rights and equality, and recognise our journey here in Northern Ireland is not yet complete when we don't yet have gender equality in many aspects of life and basic rights such as marriage equality are still denied.

And this is why we seek to build an integrated society and campaign for integrated education and mixed housing.

In terms of our politics, this is why we must preserve and protect the balanced settlement of the Good Friday Agreement – the Principle of Consent; Strand I - dealing with the internal governance of Northern Ireland; Strand II – dealing with North-South relations; and Strand II – dealing with East-West relations.

This brings me naturally to Brexit.

Before talking about the specific implications for Northern Ireland and more importantly what we can do address the challenges, I first want to make a few general points

I believe that Brexit is and will increasingly regarded as a huge mistake, and indeed a major tragedy for the United Kingdom as a whole.

And also bring serious implications for the Republic of Ireland, the European Union itself, and indeed the wider world.

For instance, I don't think we would have seen a President Trump if Brexit had not sparked a wider chain of events.

I also concur with those who regard the recent collapse of our political institutions and wider political instability here in Northern Ireland as an early consequence of Brexit.

Under all of the possible Brexit scenarios, the UK will be diminished.

The softer the Brexit, the better it may be.

But in every eventuality, the citizens of the UK will see fewer opportunities to live, work, trade, learn and play with people across Europe and to benefit from the input and engagement from other EU Nationals.

Then there is this dream of new and wonderful trade deals on the horizon, but it makes no sense to turn backs on the UK's largest export market.

It is a fallacy that a choice to be made being doing business in the EU or opening up new markets, when in practice, it is working through the European Union that will continue to be the most productive and inefficient route to these new opportunities and greater prosperity for all.

As the contradictions and realities of Brexit bite over the next two years and beyond, I suspect the false premises of the Leave campaigners will fall under even sharper focus.

Nowhere are these contradictions starker than here in Northern Ireland.

Brexit entails sharp choices and the erection of barriers in a situation that demands sharing, integration and interdependence.

While the courts may have ruled that the Good Friday Agreement is not directly impacted by Brexit, this ignores the indirect impacts and the reality that it is the joint EU membership from the UK and Ireland that gives practical effect to the Agreement and allows for unhindered movement and engagement on a north-south and east-west basis in parallel.

It is really important to understand the multifaceted nature of the border of the island of Ireland. Yet a return to a hard land border would seem to be inevitable if Northern Ireland is taken out of the Customs Union and Common External Tariff.

And this will bring considerable political and security implications, as well as disrupting the daily lives of 10,000s of people.

From the policing and security perspective, it is vital that co-operation between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as whole which is greatly underpinned by the European Union, is allowed to continue.

Economically, Northern Ireland depends significantly on exports within the EU and in particular has a close economic relationship with the rest of the island.

Indeed, many sectors such as agri-food are essentially organised on a North-South basis.

But Northern Ireland also depends heavily on the Great Britain market as does the Republic of Ireland.

So it is a nonsense to be asked to make a choice between maximising economic engagement in one direction over another – but still this is the warped logic of Brexit.

Also our potential as a location for inward investment depends heavily upon our participation in the EU Single Market.

Investment must be driven by Tax, Talent, and Trade.

Financially, Northern Ireland has a significant dependence on EU funding. And it is often these funding opportunities that allow us to address the structural weaknesses of our economy, and allow us to transform for the future.

European funding empowers our community and voluntary sector, our universities and colleges, and facilitates investment in our infrastructure.

And bear in mind that the Common Agricultural Policy provides over 80% of average farm incomes, and Northern Ireland receives 10% of the overall payments across the UK based on just 3% of the population. Our rural communities are extremely vulnerable under Brexit.

So for Alliance, Northern Ireland needs to be given a special status, or at the very least a special deal needs to be put in place.

This should include:

Continued participation in the EU Single Market

Arrangements to stay on the right side of the Customs Union frontier

Freedom of movement the island for people, goods, services and capital

Continued access to skills labour

A right to remain for all EU Nationals

Revised arrangements for access to European funding

Protection of policing and justice measures

And local control in relation to competence areas around EU Directives, including in particular environmental standards, consumer protection, employment rights and industry standards.

These steps must be regarded as a pragmatic response to the challenges of Brexit, and a cause that can unite the entire community.

Brexit will impact everyone, whether they are Unionist, Nationalist or a liberal, progressive.

And any response should be consistent with our current constitutional settlement.

But if we are to get anywhere in addressing these challenges, Northern Ireland needs a government that can engage with London, Dublin, and Brussels.

This can't really be done by proxies on our behalf.

In terms of the current talks, we believe that if there is to be a restoration of the political institutions on a stable basis, there needs to be a shared understanding at the Executive level of what are the key interests of Northern Ireland and a negotiating framework in which they can be addressed.

We also need a much more clearly articulated appreciation of the problems faced by this region on the part of the Irish Government and in particular the UK Government, and a commitment to work with a restored Executive to provide and implement a set of special arrangements.

Such statements today and concrete delivery over the coming years are integral to providing Northern Ireland with stability, particularly in light of its unique and particular setting.

But a special deal on Brexit is not the end point of our agenda, but rather it is the start – the protection of the opportunities that we already have, the defence of the foundation on which we can build.

I think in the last election campaign, the Alliance Party manifesto was not only long and detailed but was actually longer than the manifestos of the other four large parties combined.

We do this to show that we are serious about government, that we are serious about making a difference.

For some simply being in office seems to be the end in itself, but for Alliance it the means to an end, the chance to shape society in line with our values and therefore for the common good of all.

When given the opportunity and when the right conditions allow us to be effective, over the past number of years we have demonstrated our ability to deliver, and to be true to the agenda that we have set out in our manifesto.

Today, Alliance is to the forefront of standing up for investment in our economy and for reforming our public services.

But to get there, we need to be responsible with our public finances.

Over the past decade and longer, our public finances have become scarred by cheap populism. It can be really easy to take always take the easy route, but it just stacks up more and more problems in the longer run.

We have seen money squandered on vanity projects and schemes to placate vested interests.

We have seen much needed reforms to health, education and even our courthouses stalled because certain Ministers aren't prepared to take difficult decisions.

And even after report after report, and even some commitments, we still have yet to see any serious effort to address the financial and economic costs of managing a divided society.

Until and unless, we are prepared to address all of these challenges, then we are condemned to fall short in our potential as a society and see precious opportunities to do much better and much more pass Northern Ireland by.

We will struggle to keep up with the growing demographic demands for quality healthcare.

We will fall short in our capacity to invest in our teachers and pupils.

We will fail to make the necessary investments in our local infrastructure, from roads, schools to water and sewerage systems.

Only Alliance has a track record of standing up for responsibility and rational, evidence-based policy-making.

It is Alliance that continues to champion the skills agenda, and demands actions to improve levels of productivity.

It is Alliance that recognises that well-funded universities and colleges, and new apprenticeships and training opportunities are central to economic growth and providing tens of thousands of people enhanced life opportunities.

And beyond the controversy of the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal, it is Alliance which is stressing the need for a proper long-term energy strategy for Northern Ireland, for much-needed infrastructure investments including the second North-South interconnector, and championing continued investment in renewables.

In terms of education, as you have already clearly heard, Alliance is a key supporter and advocate on integrated education.

It should be seen as the default setting for our education system. It provides the best option economically and financially, socially and educationally.

And we have built up a strong record of understanding and articulating the full spectrum of interventions, from early years to work-related training opportunities, to address educational under-achievement, and standing up for Special Educational Needs.

But it is clearly in the area of healthcare that the greatest challenges lie ahead.

We are seeing huge advances in technology, treatment and drugs. People are thankfully living much longer.

But to meet these challenges, our health system needs major reform.

Already Health spending already amounts to just under half of the entire Block Grant.

Under the current configuration, health care inflation is running at 5% each year.

This means that the health system needs an additional 5% in order just to stand still.

But standing still is not itself good enough as the system is already stricken with long waiting lists, under funding of critical areas such as mental health, restrictions on access to drugs, overstretched social services and social care, and inequalities.

If the Executive does return over the coming days, it will be interesting to see when and where health is chosen in the D'Hondt pecking order.

It is depressing to see the Health Ministry constantly relegated to the end of the queue, and labelled as the difficult hot potato.

That sends a terrible message to healthcare staff and to patients.

So the system clearly needs reform. And it needs difficult decisions.

Our guiding principle should simply be what is the best option to maximise healthcare options?

Alliance does support the Bengoa report and the resultant framework. And we will not be found wanting in playing our role in supporting progressive change and holding others to account in their responsibilities.

Today, I am pleased to be addressing you for the first time as the new Deputy Leader of Alliance.

As Conference meets today, Alliance is a strong position.

We are clear in who we are.

We are clear in terms of our vision and values.

We are a party of constructive ideas.

We are party very much in tune of how Northern Ireland is changing, and where Northern Ireland is going to be over the years ahead.

We are a party of the future.

And we are a very much a team.

But we are also a team that is very much led from the front.

Naomi Long has already built up a strong record as a breakthrough political leader through becoming Alliance's first elected MP.

She has established an impact and reach far beyond the traditional audiences for Alliance.

And she has been respected as a common sense voice for reason and a voice that is prepared to challenge entrenched and incoherent positions from political opponents.

Over the past months, she has taken these attributes and applied them as the new Leader of the Alliance Party.

And in doing so she has brought us to fresh heights of electoral success.

In what is her first speech as Alliance Leader, please join in welcoming Naomi Long.