

Alliance Party Conference – 24 March 2018

Speech from Stephen Farr MLA, Deputy Leader

Conference,

We meet at a time when our future has never been so uncertain.

We are living through a period of unprecedented change.

We have that unique opportunity to choose our place - to be on the right side or the wrong side of what may be a defining moment in history.

We have that choice to step forward and be champions of a united community, that places reconciliation and healing at its heart, and to be plugged into Europe and rest of the world.

The challenges are many and real, there is no escaping that, but with every challenge, there is an opportunity.

We are a party of vision and courage, having always stepped forward to make often the first steps and frequently the big steps.

It is our collective responsibility to rise to this challenge, with renewed might and vigour, to ensure that every single one of us has the future that we deserve.

It is the easiest thing to sell a binary, reductive choice.

It is a more challenging to sell a vision that requires people to challenge their own prejudice, their own preference and place reconciliation and unity at the heart of the narrative.

The really the relevance of radical stance is neither a united Ireland nor a Northern Ireland firmly within the union, but a united community, living, learning and working together. That is where the transformation will come from.

At a time of crisis, and indeed, this is a crisis, the purpose, vision and universal and enduring values of the Alliance Party are more necessary than ever.

Alliance is not afraid to step forward and face that challenge.

Peace is hard work, and like anything worth pursuing, it isn't easily gained. It requires leadership, courage, and compassion.

Indeed, it is at times of greatest crisis that the universal and enduring values of Alliance, and our leadership, partnership and understanding, become key to defending what is important and to bringing radical change where reform is required.

As we meet today, we are in our 15th month without a government - 15 months.

While there have been has been many challenges, crises, and breakdowns in devolution over the past 20 years, this time, it seems qualitatively different.

The achievement of the Good Friday Agreement, almost 20 years ago next month, was a time of great elation and opportunity.

And while Northern Ireland has been transformed in so many ways since then, many of those hopes have not been realised.

In too many respects, peace was seen just as the absence of violence.

But peace is also the presence of justice and the presence of reconciliation.

For many victims and their families, ongoing needs for justice, truth and practical assistance to address mental and physical injuries go unrealised.

And our society remains scarred by deep division and segregation, with at best piecemeal progress towards integration including in key areas such as housing and education.

Too many parties didn't step forward to the challenge of building a shared and cohesive narrative for our society, and instead reduced politics to a transactional brokering house for different sections of the community.

To turn a famous statement from the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz on its head, "Peace became the pursuit of war by other means" with ongoing conflict around issues such as flags, parades, narratives of the past and language.

Many of the achievements of devolution, for instance greater inward investment, have been overshadowed by missed opportunities, neglected reforms, and the three Cs – corruption, clientism and cronyism.

Our economy remains relatively underdeveloped compared to our main neighbours. Our rate of growth is lower, our employment rate is lower, our productivity levels are lower – and this all before we even consider Brexit.

Public services, in particular health and education, are in desperate need for reform. We often have some of the poorest outcomes despite spending the most money relative to our neighbours. Indeed, in Belfast, you can drive less than two miles in the same constituency and have a world of difference in quality of life and length of life.

Our public finances are overstretched, but still we are managing segregation to the tune of £1bn, rather than investing in our health service, education system and economy. Twenty years after the GFA, did we envisage a segregated society? Of course we didn't; the time is long past due to end this wasteful, and ultimately divisive use of public funds.

Many of the reforms and changes that are happening in other places are not happening here. And the risk is that we fall further and further behind and our economy and society stagnates. It could take years to catch up.

So as we meet Northern Ireland has:

No Programme for Government

No Strategic Budget

No Economic Strategy

No Investment Strategy

No Social Strategy

No Skills Strategy

No Productivity Plan

All of this is before we consider the impact of Brexit.

If we are living in a defining historic moment, Brexit will be viewed as a huge historic mistake; not only an act of self-harm to the UK, but in particular to both parts of Ireland.

Clearly, the British Government didn't give any thought to Northern Ireland. In the event of a vote to leave, it was logically inevitable that Northern Ireland would be in an impossible position, faced with the prospect of a border and placed in an untenable economic position. And so it has come to pass.

And the implications for Europe and the rest of the world are also evident, as Brexit feeds into a wider rise of nationalism and populism that is undermining the liberal, international order.

For us in Northern Ireland, the main implications are both political and economic.

This is a complex, diverse and sadly divided society. It can only work through sharing and interdependence.

Yet the implications of Brexit are new border, barriers, division and friction.

So Brexit poses an existential threat to the concept of a shared and cohesive Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement brought complex and interlocking set of relationships: internal within Northern Ireland, north-south and east-west, alongside the Principle of Consent.

It was the joint membership of the European Union from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland that provided the underlying environment in which the Agreement could operate.

So in particular, a situation where physical borders are introduced anywhere in these islands going to set back and undermine the Good Friday Agreement.

The risk around borders is not just a question of economic friction.

Borders also need to be understood in emotional and psychological terms.

In particular, any physical border reintroduced in Ireland would be seen as a loss of the gains of peace and reversal over a quarter of century of change.

Economically, Northern Ireland is especially vulnerable from Brexit.

And in saying this, do recall that Northern Ireland is starting from a lower starting point.

Even the UK Government's own analysis suggests a major economic blow to this region over the next decade and beyond.

And Alliance has been almost alone in highlighting some of the other aspects of Brexit.

We have platformed some of these already today.

There are major challenges in terms of ongoing security co-operation through instruments and structures such as Europol, the European Arrest Warrant and the Schengen Information System.

And the policing of any border would bring its own challenges, and attempting to do so is in many ways unimaginable.

Attention must also be applied to civil justice matters, for instance family law and the interests of children, with a particular challenge being the enforcement of judgement.

Other matters include access to structural funds such as the European Social Fund, which complement and build upon what the state can do and support large aspects of the community and voluntary sector.

And ongoing environmental co-ordination, health care co-operation and access to research funding.

Brexit has thrown the constitutional question back on the table in contrast to a situation where despite the legitimate competing aspirations of unionists and nationalists, it had largely been parked.

In conjunction with the ongoing cultural war and the trench warfare of what has passed for a talks process over the past year, it has fed an increased polarisation in our politics.

We must recognise that many nationalists and indeed some others are questioning the functionality of Northern Ireland and looking to a united Ireland, while many unionists are acting irrationally at odds with their longstanding aspirations, drawing around the wagons and recasting the siege mentality of old.

It is in this respect that I have been saying that Northern Ireland is being slowly pulled apart.

It would be a cliché to talk about Northern Ireland being at a crossroads.

But major historical choices face not just this society, but the UK and Irish Governments that will influence the future direction of travel.

And whatever route we take, Kellie Armstrong will remind us that the road will be full of potholes.

For Alliance, we must ensure that we don't just seek to remain relevant, but that we are in fact having a meaningful and substantial influence over events.

And in doing so, we must seek to apply our values and follow our values, including liberalism, the rule of law, justice, fairness, compassion, integration and reconciliation.

We need to be innovators who are shaping events, not passive participants.

What does this look like in practice?

First of all, we need to get a talks process restored and to find the means to break through the immediate political deadlock. Naomi will shortly talk about our ideas in this regard, building upon the proposals we published earlier this week.

Yet any restoration of institutions will provide only short to medium term relative stability but cannot address the more fundamental dynamics without further actions.

Second, we need to defend the Good Friday Agreement. This has come under attack from some hardline Brexiteers who see it as an obstacle to the implementation of their ideological masterplan.

Yet we in Alliance know that it must be more than defence, there has to be reform to address flaws in the institutions, and to remove the institutionalisation of sectarianism.

Next, we need to deliver measures to address the legacy of the past, implementing the Stormont House Agreement, delivering a Pension for the Severely Injured, alongside proceeding with Legacy Inquests and critically from an Alliance perspective in particular, promoting reconciliation.

Ultimately, there is not a path to a reconciled and cohesive society unless we can deliver a comprehensive process for dealing with the legacy of the past.

Closely linked to reconciliation lies the promotion of an integrated society. With deep divisions in our society remaining so stark, and indeed in some respects, becoming even more deeply entrenched, there must be a greater onus on the government and others to promote and facilitate integrated education and housing.

There is also a clear economic and financial driver for this. Greater and better shared facilities will be more cost-effective. Until and unless we come to terms of the costs of a divided society, we will end up under-funding our public services, failing to invest in our key economic drivers such as our skills base and infrastructure, and short-changing our future.

But ultimately, we must return to Brexit. This is the greatest challenge facing Northern Ireland. But Alliance has a plan – a way forward.

Before we consider this, it would be better and easier if the UK as a whole was to reconsider the Brexit vote, and for the Government to offer a second referendum.

If this is not to be pursued, then it would be sensible for the UK to enter into a fresh Customs Union with the European Union.

This would go a long way, but not the whole way, to avoiding the inevitability of some form of border emerging within these islands.

Yet, this is also fundamentally in the interests of the UK as a whole. All of the credible economic analysts recognise the economic damage that any contrary path would involve, and key business organisations such as the CBI are calling for the UK to remain.

There is false assumption that there is some form of false choice to be made between trading with Europe and trading with the rest of the world.

The European Union is already the most far-reaching model of economic integration and free trade in human history. And, the best way for Northern Ireland to access the rest of the world is through working through the EU and its ability to strike further free trade agreements.

As things stand, I believe that there is already a majority in both Houses of Parliament for this course, and it is vital that this is properly tested before it is too late.

However, much less focus has fallen on the Single Market. In some ways this is even more fundamental to the UK and in particular Northern Ireland than the Customs Union. It extends to the freedoms of movement of goods, services, capital and most notably people.

It is more fundamental not just the Northern Ireland economy of today, but also tomorrow.

It is also so central to our future inward investment prospects. Northern Ireland can only be competitive if we are offering a base to the rest of the world.

So, for these reasons, Alliance has been calling for Northern Ireland to continue to participate within the Single Market.

This is the crux of our Bridges not Borders paper.

And at this point, I want to pay tribute to my wider Brexit team and in particular to Sorcha Eastwood and Maurice Campbell, not least for their efforts in drawing up our proposals.

To date, Alliance remains the only party to have published a coherent and detailed plan for the future economic relationship between Northern Ireland and Europe.

If we can get this right, Northern Ireland can be a bridge to the rest of the United Kingdom and to the European Union.

We could have the best of both worlds – a foot in both camps.

This could be Northern Ireland's greatest opportunity in decades to jump-start our economy and to deliver long-term and sustainable economic change.

It beggars belief that either an overly political insistence of special status on one side or a blinkered refusal to consider anything different for Northern Ireland would see this golden opportunity being missed.

All of this would be entirely consistent with the Principle of Consent.

Northern Ireland already does things differently from other parts of the UK. We have a different system of Employment Law. For instance, I blocked the draconian Trade Union Bill in Great Britain from Northern Ireland. Not so long ago, all five main parties were campaigning for a different rate of Corporation Tax, in effect creating a more aligned economic model on the island of Ireland. We already have a Single Electricity Market, and we have agricultural checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

None of these along or together brought the sky down. And nor should doing things differently in terms of the Single Market.

Ultimately, this will require devolution to deliver this. This approach can be characterised as Devo-Max.

Devolution today may seem somewhat unrealistic. But in so many ways, whether it is managing Brexit or anything else, we have to return to the central reality that a shared and cohesive Northern Ireland can only function through devolution, and anything short of that will be a source of instability.

The prospects around the realisation of our Brexit plan are actually quite positive.

And indeed some of the decisions over the coming months will be pivotal.

I thank the Irish Government in terms of their commitment to avoiding hard borders and to protecting the Good Friday Agreement.

The UK Government is making similar rhetorical commitments but have created a trilemma for themselves.

So far, they have committed themselves to avoiding a border in Ireland with infrastructure, to the UK as a whole leaving both the Customs Union and the Single Market, and to ruling out special measures for Northern Ireland in both those respects.

Even the most advanced Free Trade Agreement in the world would not be a Customs Union and resolve the Irish dimension. And the mooted technological solutions are increasingly being debunked as untried and untested, and I would also add in many respects actually miss the point of what it is that needs to be avoided.

This means that over the coming months in order to finalise their Withdrawal Agreement and to secure a Transition arrangement, the UK Government will need to make a u-turn on something.

Alliance does welcome the commitment of the European Union to providing a backstop insurance policy on the Irish border and the Good Friday Agreement. But I do want to stress that we are opposed to any borders within these islands and believe that it is through our proposals around the Customs Union and Single Market that we can best achieve this.

I also wish to highlight a further challenge. Much of the thrust of what the European Union is offering is essentially defensive in nature.

It is about avoiding a border, protecting the Agreement and defending existing north-south co-operation. What is on offer is less than the full Single Market. We have to be conscious of not just avoiding damage but thinking ahead to the future of the Northern Ireland economy and where growth can be achieved.

None of this can be achieved unless there is a greater recognition of what unites the people of Northern Ireland than divides them.

People here have different identities, many of which are multi-layered, diverse and indeed fluid.

All identities and aspirations are legitimate.

In many respects the European identity transcended the competing local identities and allowed many, especially young people, to buy into something bigger.

But we do need to think how we can better consider ourselves as a united community and ground this with reference to universal values.

So Conference, Northern Ireland can have a bright future. But nothing is certain. Nothing is guaranteed.

There are choices and decisions to be made.

But it must be a future that is in our hands.