

Alliance Party Annual Conference – Saturday 2nd March 2019

Speech - Stephen Farry MLA, Deputy Leader & Brexit Spokesperson

Conference, we meet at a time of unprecedented crisis.

We may not be seeing necessarily large scale violence or confrontation on the streets.

But we are witnessing:

A gradual and persistent erosion of the pillars of this society.

The pulling apart of those things that hold this place together.

The deterioration of our public services.

The undermining of our economy potential.

And the dashing of so many hopes and dreams.

With the Good Friday Agreement, and successive periods of devolution, Northern Ireland has had many opportunities to build on those foundations that were laid, to press on and transform this society, and to deliver integration, reconciliation and justice.

But instead these opportunities have been squandered:

Through the exploitation rather than healing of divisions

Through populism and failure to engage in evidence based policy making

Through clientism, corruption and cronyism.

No political system can survive, let alone flourish, without a basic level of trust and respect between the key actors.

Who knows where we would be today if people had kicked on from what was arguably the high water-mark of devolution between 2010 and 2012?

But instead, we have had an accelerating deterioration of relationships.

The absence of devolved government – for two years. Two whole years.

The potential unpicking of what had been successful police reform.

The political weaponisation of how we deal with our painful past.

And finally, Brexit has taken the situation to an even deeper abyss.

Conference, the sobering reality, is, that in this its 21st year, it is difficult to envisage how the Good Friday Agreement could today be made.

That is a sign of how far our politics has regressed.

And yet...

We must recognise the strengths that lie here in Northern Ireland.

The skills and creative talent of our people.

Our landscape and our attractions.

And the clear demand of a majority of our population for progressive social reform, economic opportunity and a shared and integrated society.

Amidst all of this, we must not lose sight of this central reality

Regardless of all the tensions and forces pulling us apart, this rich and diverse society only can work based on sharing and interdependence.

That brings us neatly back to Brexit.

There is no such thing as a good or sensible Brexit.

All versions of Brexit leave UK worse off, with NI particularly badly exposed.

Perhaps first time in history that a government is taking a course of action that will leave country weaker politically and will undermine its economy whilst in full possession of the facts

It is a massive self-inflicted wound.

The June 2016 referendum result was fed by populism and easy answers to complicated problems and challenges that were little to do with membership of the EU.

And that campaign was fuelled and twisted by significant breaking of electoral law.

Three key rationales for Brexit were always delusions.

Taking back control makes no sense in a world where pooled sovereignty is essential to tackle shared problems.

Running an independent trade policy counts for little when opportunities are greater through maximising economic relationship with EU, and benefitting from its existing trade deals while recognising it has stronger leverage and potential to agree more.

Restricting immigration makes little sense when key elements of the economy depend on migrant labour, particularly so for Northern Ireland.

Global Britain is a massive fantasy, harking back to an imagined or distorted sense of empire.

And implementation has gone even worse than most people's worst fears.

The UK invoked Article 50 without any idea of the type of Brexit it wanted.

It has spent the past two years negotiating with itself, with the Government, the Labour frontbench, backbench Brexiteer and of course the DUP all indulging:

incompatible redlines;

Creating unrealistic expectations;

imaginary solutions; and

unicorns and delusions.

Notwithstanding this, Brexit will fail either through an economic catastrophe or through being reversed.

This inevitable failure of the Brexit process will be laid at the door of Ireland and the wider EU.

Indeed, we must be alert to the forthcoming stab in the back narrative from the Brexiteer zealots that the perfect version of Brexit would have delivered if that pesky EU had not got in the way.

In this way, it will reflect the commitment of diehard communists who refuse to let go of their ideology despite the examples of the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China or German Democratic Republic.

But we must also be wary of the scapegoating that comes from betrayal narratives.

Brexit poses huge challenges to Northern Ireland.

Any version of Brexit raises the spectre of new divisions, boundaries and friction.

It poses threats to identities and rights, to the all-island economy of sales and supply chains, and to future opportunities and livelihoods.

In our approach to Brexit, Alliance is seeking to represent the best interests of people of Northern Ireland, through supporting political stability, defending the Good Friday Agreement, maintaining open borders throughout these islands, and protecting our economy.

We are putting people first – their jobs, their opportunities, their livelihoods, their futures.

And we must never forget that Northern Ireland voted to remain.

We have three potential pathways through Brexit.

Any and all of these have cross-community support and reflect a majority of popular opinion here.

Our priorities and preferences are in order:

1. **A People's Vote to reconsider Brexit, with the option to remain in the EU;**
2. **The whole of the UK remaining in the Single Market and Customs Union;**
3. **A Special Deal that helps the Northern Ireland economy and defends the Good Friday Agreement.**

By contrast, the UK Government and DUP allies are acting contrary to the interests of the UK as a whole and of Northern Ireland in particular.

Moreover, the DUP doesn't speak for Northern Ireland.

In particular, they are now very clearly at odds with large elements of the business community and civil society.

Indeed, in seeking the hardest Brexit possible and risking even a catastrophic no deal, the DUP seem prepared to tear the last remaining strands of fabric holding this society together.

The UK Parliament also has essentially three choices: 1. Approval of the Deal; 2. No deal; and 3. No Brexit.

Any withdrawal agreement is going to have a backstop.

The UK Government has waxed and waned on this central reality, and has ended up squandering its political capital and engendering mistrust.

And it is not just this current government that we have to watch, but what could be the next one.

We need the insurance against the mendacity and duplicity of the David Davis, Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Moggs of this world.

The developments over the past year reinforce the very reasons why the backstop is so necessary.

However, we welcome the ongoing understanding of the Irish Government and wider European Union to protecting the Good Friday Agreement, and being resolute around an open-ended all weather backstop unless and until something better comes along.

Let me be clear on a few things around the backstop.

The backstop was envisaged as the minimum involved to avoid a hard border and to protect the Good Friday Agreement, including north-south co-operation and rights.

It only arises because the UK is leaving the European Union.

The backstop isn't a constitutional issue. Northern Ireland remains part of the UK, unless and until something changes through the Principle of Consent.

It is consistent with devolution. Northern Ireland already does things many differently, including in economic terms – such as the Single Electricity Market.

The backstop builds on existing precedents of some limited checks down the Irish Sea

It does not cut off Northern Ireland from the Great Britain market. Rather it allows us to more easily be part of both the UK and EU economies.

All that said, the backstop isn't perfect, but it isn't meant to be.

It is an imperfect and defensive intervention to address a challenge that no rational person would want.

It is not the same as EU membership and it falls short in many respects.

The backstop only covers goods and doesn't address services or the free movement of people.

And there are major concerns at what is on offer regarding the protection for rights, the robustness of the Common Travel Area, and also whether the definition of North-South co-operation captures fully all current and future all-island economic and social interactions.

But the backstop is consistent with our own proposals in *Bridges not Borders*, and some of the language used to articulate it reflect concepts and phrases originally used by Alliance.

It can be a foundation from which to build a future relationship if we find that Brexit is going ahead and a softer version of Brexit UK-wide has not been adopted.

In that regard, given the potential comparative advantages that the backstop could give to Northern Ireland through having a competitive foot in both the UK and EU markets, it is stunning that, not only are some parties turning their backs on the backstop, but they turning it into a massive constitutional crisis.

Northern Ireland risks missing out on an historic opportunity.

The Government and DUP are going down a dead end in trying to change the backstop.

The Prime Minister is shamefully putting what is left of the cohesion of the Conservative Party and the fix with the DUP ahead of the national interest.

Opportunities to build a more centrist approach to Brexit around the Customs Union and Single Market have been consistently spurned.

Conference, it is incredible that the nature of Brexit remains so unclear with just 27 days to go.

Even more amazing is the willingness of some to flirt with a no deal outcome.

No deal amounts to the UK becoming a 'third country' and unilaterally leaving all EU mechanisms, instruments and arrangements and defaulting to other baseline systems such as WTO rules in trade

For Northern Ireland, the consequences would be particularly severe - economically, politically, emotionally and psychologically plus in terms of security.

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It would be very difficult to avoid an economic border on the island of Ireland as the two different jurisdictions would be in different customs and regulatory zones. Both the UK and the EU under WTO rules would have legal responsibilities in this regard. This would have massive implications politically and from a security perspective.

New tariff and non-tariff barriers would come into play.

Manufacturing and in particular the agri-food sector would face tariff barriers to accessing the EU market, and the service sector would suffer from the different legal frameworks emerging for what are even equivalent regulations.

Contrary to the delusions of the Brexit fantasists, the UK has little negotiating power on this.

A no deal will be bad for the EU, but the UK would be the worst affected by far.

The German car manufacturers are not rising up against the backstop.

In most negotiations, both parties can walk away and revert to the status quo ante.

But under Brexit, the consequence is that the UK goes over the cliff-edge.

While there is a need for certainty as soon as possible, certainty around a bad outcome is not the certainty that most people and businesses want

Going over a cliff-edge is pretty certain, but also pretty terminal.

At this stage, it looks like Parliament is poised to delay Brexit, at least for a few months.

This may at least buy some time.

But it would be fairly pointless unless it is used for reflection and reconsideration.

Parliament still seems to be against every possible scenario but cannot work out a majority for what it is for.

Conference, the best, most coherent and democratic route through Brexit is a People's Vote.

Alliance has led the way in championing the People's Vote here in Northern Ireland.

It was the leadership of Alliance councillors that saw first Newry, Mourne and Down and then Belfast City Council pass resolutions in favour.

The 2016 Referendum may have been the biggest UK vote to date. But it was a stark choice between a clearly defined Remain but an undefined Leave option.

Questions persist regarding the fairness and transparency of the process. Many false and obtainable promises were made, including the health funding pledge on the side of a bus.

Furthermore, the complexities, risks and impacts of Brexit upon so many areas of life are now much more apparent.

Democracy is an ongoing and active process. It cannot be a betrayal of the people who voted in 2016 to now check in again with the people again given what is happened.

What do some people have to fear?

We must also consider that well over a £1m young people have now joined the electorate. There should have been votes at 16 in 2016 and there should be votes at 16 today.

Indeed, it would be a tragedy if the UK ultimately left the EU, and in particular went over the cliff-edge in a no-deal context, if a majority of people don't want that to happen.

Any referendum at this stage would require an extension of the Article 50 timeframe. It would take around 24 weeks from start to finish. Parliament would need to legislate for it and set the question.

The optimal approach would be a multi-preference vote between: Remain, the proposed deal, and no deal. Remain must be a choice.

While unpalatable, it is unlikely that any referendum would be viewed as legitimate and conclusive without a No Deal option. The Electoral Commission would inevitably advise as such.

It is said that a new referendum would fuel further division. But the UK is already badly divided. It is far better to heal on a more rational platform rather than slavishly following an approach that makes us all worse off.

So Conference, if the opportunity comes for a People's Vote we must take that.

But, we also need to bank the backstop and avoid a catastrophic no-deal outcome.

What happens on Brexit is going to have a major influence on the future direction of this region and in particular the prospects for political progress

How we address Brexit should not be a constitutional issue, but we must nevertheless recognise that Brexit has placed the constitutional question back on the table rather than being essentially parked over the past 20 years.

Alliance supports the principle of consent. The rules for any change are well established. A

And we respect everyone's right to have their different constitutional aspirations. Indeed, we are a party of people from all sorts of diverse backgrounds.

Alliance is always up for inclusive and constructive debate.

But the priority for now has to be to sort out Brexit and to make this society here work in every and all circumstances.

Political deadlock is having a huge impact on our public services and economy.

Some good reforms may have happened over the past decade, but equally major reforms have been ducked and huge opportunities missed.

Northern Ireland was already starting from a lower base than much of the UK due to many structural problems.

We have fallen behind the rest of the island of Ireland.

Devolution not a magic wand but every day without devolution sees more and more damage to our public services and our economy

The longer this goes, the harder it is going to be catch up, never mind get ahead.

Direct Rule is not a realistic option for a divided society of Northern Ireland that needs shared governance.

This week we have seen the local budget announced with little scrutiny.

It is a series of quick fixes to the plug the holes in a sinking boat.

Northern Ireland's public finances are in a mess. We are a long way from a strategic multi-year budget linked to a Programme for Government and clear economic, social and environmental plans.

But without Ministers who can take policy decisions and drive reforms, we will continue with an unsustainable spending pattern, with inefficiencies tolerated and public services eroding, and opportunities to improve our economy and society passed up.

Shamefully, hundreds of millions of resource are tied up every year in trying to manage a divided society rather than investing in a shared society for all.

This party will continue to advocate for and advance shared housing and integrated education, not just for sound financial reasons, but for sound societal and educational ground.

Conference, policing reform has been one of the success stories of the peace process, but we must nevertheless be alert to the dangers of things moving backwards.

We pay tribute to the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and in particular recognise that officers continue to take risks and make sacrifices to keep the community safe and uphold the rule of law.

It is of fundamental importance that we have an effective police service, with strong accountability, that is properly representative of the community. We must acknowledge that there is more work to be done in this regard.

Policing and the wider criminal justice system, and indeed a culture of lawfulness, are central to tackling the ongoing scourge of paramilitarism in our society.

Far too many communities remain under the grip of organised crime and coercive control. We cannot have a normal society unless this is comprehensively addressed.

We must also recognise that the current diverse and piecemeal mechanisms for dealing with the legacy of the past are not working.

There are large numbers of victims and survivors who still bearing physical and psychological wounds, experiencing mental trauma and with practical needs still not fully addressed. They continue to have significant expectations for truth, justice and accountability.

The past cannot be swept under the carpet. Coming to terms with our past is central to the process of reconciliation, and the rule of law must always be paramount and not blind to injustice.

The Stormont House Agreement mechanisms represent the best and last opportunity for a comprehensive system to deal with legacy. There will of course be some changes that need to be made, but this template is the only viable way forward.

Alliance is also campaigning for a pension for those severely injured from conflict-related injuries. . In many cases, these are life-altering circumstances, interfering with their ability to earn or to do things many other people take for granted. They have had to essentially live off benefits. Many of

these injuries date from the early years of the Troubles. I was pleased that we were able to work with MPs and peers last autumn to move this issue along a little, but it needs to be brought to a conclusion quickly.

To paraphrase, John F Kennedy, we will do all of these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

The people of Northern Ireland have the right to demand better than what currently passes for a political system is throwing up.

And it is our task to do the hard yards in terms of delivering better.

The gaps in our society may be wide, and may be getting even wider.

But nevertheless, they need to be bridged.

The challenges may be great.

But they must be overcome.

The values of Alliance, namely equality, human rights, respect, opportunity, the rule of law, inclusion, rationalism, internationalism and pro-Europeanism are as relevant as ever, indeed even more so.

And there is no other sustainable way forward for this region, other than sharing, integration and reconciliation.