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Speech to Alliance Party Conference
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This is our 50th Anniversary Conference.

And rightly, we will look back and reflect over the past half century with pride.

At the same time, we come together at a time of unprecedented success and influence for Alliance.

It is great to see many of the founding generation with us here today such as Briege Napier, Jim Hendron, Dennis Loreto and the Glendinnings. We will be marking the 50th Anniversary more formally at an event in April. Our founders would be delighted at the current success of Alliance, and it is of course built on the foundations they laid.

Indeed, for a brief few weeks, at the end of January, we simultaneously had representation in Local Government, in the Assembly, in Parliament, and the European Parliament, plus a major role in government.

So we meet on the back of our most successful electoral year...to date.

Our success in the Local Government Elections exceeded our wildest expectations, with an incredible 53 councillors returned from an existing base in the low 30s. And still with a few more votes in the right places, we could have won even more seats. We are now players in Councils right across Northern Ireland.

But as it turned out, the Council elections were just the warm-up act for the Alliance surge to take Naomi all the way to Brussels and Strasbourg with a quite stunning result with impact well beyond our shores.

And in the General Election, our vote went up right across the board, with some spectacular increases in many constituencies. I previously described Alliance as the fifth party in a four-party system. We have now made the historic breakthrough to be the third party in share of the vote.

And of course, I am delighted to be here before you as Alliance's second elected Member of Parliament. It was especially poignant to win North Down during the 50th anniversary year, as the party's founding document was signed in Bangor.

I want to once again put on record my thanks to my election team so ably led by my election agent and successor Andrew Muir. And Andrew has literally hit the ground running as an MLA.

People are often asking what were the factors behind Alliance's success? For starters, Northern Ireland is changing, and changing more quickly than many appreciate. More and more people are moving away from traditional labels, and expressing open, mixed and multiple identities.

Second, we called Brexit correctly, right from the start, and have been consistent throughout. We have clearly articulated and defended Northern Ireland's interests.

Third, we have channelled frustrations around the politics of deadlock and delay, and the desire to see change, reform and delivery. Success has bred further success.

And the old canard of a vote for Alliance being a wasted vote has been shattered. We have proven that we can win anywhere in Northern Ireland. And we have drawn votes from right across the community. We have proven in a political context usually framed around the constitutional question and a clash of identities that a liberal and cross community party can not only survive but flourish.

But Conference, while we have broken the glass ceiling, there can be no room for complacency or sitting back on our laurels. We must press on to new heights. And we must also recognise that we gather at a time of unprecedented challenges for Northern Ireland, combined with uncertainty within these islands, across Europe and around the globe. There is no escaping from Brexit.

Apparently, the word Brexit has been banned in Downing Street and across government, except to references in an historical context. However, Brexit is set to dominate the political, economic and security context for at least the next decade. We were proud Remainers and we remain passionate Europeans today and into the future.

The European Union is central to shared peace and prosperity across the continent. And it provides the framework to better address common challenges such as international development, migration and climate change.

Coming to our own situation, Northern Ireland only works on the basis of sharing and interdependence. That was assisted by close cooperation between the British and Irish Governments, and the joint participation in the Single Market and a Customs Union that dissolved borders.

We should look forward and aspire to Northern Ireland rejoining the EU sooner rather later. But for now, Boris Johnson is set to pursue a reckless hard Brexit. The Brexit extremists exhibit the characteristics of revolutionaries, in this case fuelled by a libertarian ideology and wishful, delusional thinking. Dissenting voices are labelled as enemies of the people.

Like most revolutions, it will at some point run out of steam or destroy itself, but for now a collision course has been set with the EU with an irresponsible and unworkable prospectus for a future relationship.

The UK is turning its back on its biggest and most important neighbours for the pipe dream of a global Britain, all the time failing to acknowledge that it is through the EU that the UK can best project soft power and expand international trade. And without selling off the NHS or betraying our farmers and agrifood sector. And not undermining employment rights or putting our environment further at risk.

But it gets even worse, this government seems determined to sacrifice international human rights standards, and can't even commit to upholding the European Convention on Human Rights- something that is so central to the Good Friday Agreement. And most immediately, the Government is playing fast and loose with the Northern Ireland/Ireland Protocol.

Boris Johnson is failing to recognise the realities that flow from what he has already signed up to. This tendency is also infecting some of our local Ministers. We are not fans of the Protocol. We don't want to see any borders and friction anywhere in these islands. Northern Ireland depends on integrated supply chains and sales opportunities both north-south and east-west.

We preferred May's Deal with its backstop. The Johnson Deal is a harder Brexit and the Protocol is a front stop. But the Protocol is part of the Withdrawal Agreement, and failure to implement it not only undermines the UK's ability to negotiate Free Trade Agreements but also risks leaving Northern

Ireland is a 'No Man's Land', with the Good Friday Agreement undermined and a renewed risk of the return of a hard border on this island.

It is not in our interests to have a cowboy economy. We are a mature, rules-based, and globally integrated economy. Business needs certainty now and into the future. The Protocol brings its challenges. But we must be in the place of seeking mitigations and flexibilities, rather than evading responsibilities. That sharp distinction must be understood.

And with mutual trust, potentially we could build on the protocol and protect services and freedom of movement and enhance the all-island economy.

Pending the revolution eventually eating itself or a wider reconsideration of Brexit, there is no alternative but making this Protocol now work as well as possible for the good of Northern Ireland.

And on the theme of making Northern Ireland work, we now have the New Decade, New Approach document. While we have had robust engagement with both Governments over the past few months and beyond, I do want to put on record our thanks to both Julian Smith and Simon Coveney and their respective teams for getting us to this point.

Let's be clear, Northern Ireland should not have had over 1,000 days of uncertainty. Huge damage was caused to our public services and economic drivers during that period, alongside the unknown missed opportunities that will have passed us by.

And we should recall that prior exercises of devolved government were lacking in many aspects of good governance, coherence, strategic vision and delivery. More on that at the end of next week.

New Decade is not perfect solution. We are no illusion around its flaws and limitations, but coming from where we have been, it is a necessary starting point. But be under no illusions, it is far from the summit of our ambitions. For us, the central objective remains building reconciliation and creating an integrated society.

Three immediate challenges emerge from New Decade.

First, the reforms to the Petition of Concern need to be delivered, and if they are insufficient, the Government must go further. This is essential for delivering a fair, equal and rights-based society.

Second, the changing nature of our society must be reflected in our institutions. It is long past time that the designation system in the Assembly and the associated voting system were changed.

Third, we must address the situation facing Northern Ireland's public finances. Some important weeks lie ahead.

Let's be clear, the current situation is both the product of a decade of UK austerity, and local mismanagement and waste of public funds. Therefore, the devolved institutions both need to pitch for additional resources for Northern Ireland, while not only promising, but demonstrating the ability to deliver meaningful reforms.

We should continue to press the UK Government for further assistance, based on our legacy of division and violence, and the pressures that flow from that. But we shouldn't be afraid of our feet being held to the fire on reform.

Alliance has been clear and consistent in highlighting the considerable distortions to our public finances from a divided society, while calling for this to be addressed with resources redirected into public services. Others are now sharing this narrative, but the challenge falls to the Executive to turn this into reality.

No one involved in politics or within their community can be under any doubt of the enormity of the challenge facing the health service. Accident and emergency facilities are often at breaking point, waiting lists are beyond belief, GPs are far too stretched and health service staff are under-valued and under-resourced. Northern Ireland is missing out on new drugs, treatments and technologies that are available elsewhere in these islands.

Meanwhile our mental health challenge deepens, with a particularly serious challenge around suicide prevention. And on top of all of that, it must now also address the yet uncertain impact of the Coronavirus. This society can't carry on this way for any longer. Bengoa needs to be delivered.

And in Education, we also need Bengoa-style reforms. Alliance is proud to have played the central role in securing commitments in New Decade to that comprehensive top to bottom review. While our education is world class in many respects, there remain challenges of inequalities and underachievement. Not enough is being done to prepare young people for the world of work.

Too many young people are still educated separately, missing out in valuable educational and life experiences. And once again an inefficient and ineffective system prevents enough money from being invested in the front line, in addressing special educational needs, and investing in teachers. The goal must remain to have children educated together in the same classroom.

Of course, Alliance is now back in Government. This was not a straightforward decision, but it was right thing to do. This is a time for everyone to step up and take responsibility. We are delighted that Naomi has taken over the role of Justice Minister. She will be work closely with all of the Justice Stakeholders, including the Chief Constable from who we will be here later.

It is right that we pay tribute to the officers of the PSNI and all other actors in our criminal justice who work on behalf of this society and the rule of law, while under ongoing threat and danger.

Naomi has a busy in-tray. For the first time, she will bring forward a domestic abuse bill before Easter Recess. This will close an important gap for victims of domestic abuse, introducing an offence to cover emotional or coercive behaviour for the first time.

An advocacy support service for victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse will also be created in order to provide a more coordinated and tailored response to their needs. She will also implement key Gillen recommendations which also have the potential to transform the experience of vulnerable complainants, for example by avoiding retraumatisation in repeatedly giving evidence.

An important theme was the need to speed up justice, which has much wider impacts on the entire criminal justice system.

This is why she will introduce a Committal Reform Bill to streamline the committal process and help tackle delay in the system.

Naomi has met with victims of stalking who have been failed by the gap in the current law. This is why a Stalking Bill will be introduced in the Autumn, and will also provide a more effective and appropriate legislative framework to protect victims.

We will also be introducing a range of measures to tackle paramilitarism and organised crime by the end of the year, enacting the Criminal Finance Act.

And she will continue to lead a cross-departmental approach to stamp out paramilitary control of communities, build a culture of lawfulness and confidence in the entire justice system and create safe, shared communities.

We are committed to making devolution work. There is no other sustainable way to govern this region than power-sharing.

Alliance is conscious of calls for wider change across these islands. We recognise that Brexit and other factors have energised the debate around the constitutional question. Given the nature of Alliance, some may suggest that this would be a particular challenge. But on the contrary, these are debates that in which we can engage with confidence.

Alliance is not a party that is defined by the constitutional question. We are not an amalgamation of unionists and nationalists in an uneasy co-existence. Rather we are a cross-community party, proud and self-confident in our identity. While there may be some members who prefer the union, and some who prefer a united Ireland and indeed many who are open to persuasion, we are not only united, but defined, by our shared commitment to make this society work, to overcome division and to build a better future.

Wherever lines are drawn on maps, these will remain the core challenges for this place, and in turn the spirit of partnership and co-operation across these islands, built on the Good Friday Agreement, must be preserved and indeed enhanced. We don't believe that there is currently the case for a border poll, and nor are we pursuing one, but we do recognise that there is a very fluid situation and multiple active debates are underway.

We can with confidence, and without prejudice to any outcome, engage in civilised, rational and evidence-based discussions. In all respects, we will be guided by our vision and values and always advocate what we think is right for Northern Ireland.

Still, there are other uncertainties in the decades ahead with which we must engage. Across Europe and many parts of the world, the traditional rules based international order is coming under more and more stress.

We are seeing the rise of populism and nasty, exclusionary manifestations of nationalism. Sadly, many of these traits are seen here within Boris Johnson's United Kingdom. We see this with the hostile environment, the abuse of the Windrush generation and the undermining of human rights standards.

In particular, we reject the looming immigration bill. Immigration and specifically freedom of movement have not only provided great assistance to our economy but enriched our society. There is a false choice presented between developing our local skills base and being open to the rest of the world. We must do both.

Beyond seeking mitigations from that legislation to recognise the specific economic circumstances of Northern Ireland, we are opposed to these proposals as a matter of principle.

All of this is put in context by the current climate emergency. This is set to be the greatest and global challenge facing us all. We should be inspired by the leadership demonstrated particularly by many young people.

A pan-society and pan-governmental approach will be required, and some difficult decisions and choices lie ahead. Great ingenuity and innovation will also be required. And through a Green New Deal, new economic opportunities lie ahead.

We are determined to provide strong leadership, and to ensure that the burdens of change are shared fairly and equitably.

So Conference, as Alliance enters its second half-century, we do so with confidence and pride.

We have played a crucial and constructive role in transforming Northern Ireland. But there is so much more to do...

The next few years are set to a roller coaster, but our vision and values will be instrumental in steering this society to a secure and better future.

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