

E. R.

ALLIANCE PARTY

The Alliance Party manifesto was launched at a press conference at the Europa Hotel on 11 April by Oliver Napier and most of the party's election candidates. Set out in the format of a 4 page newspaper, the manifesto repeated the party's 4 main founding principles and described its policy on most major issues, constitutional and socio-economic. The lay-out was designed to reinforce the message of the Party Conference earlier in the month that the resolution of socio-economic problems was as important as, if not more so, than the solving of the constitutional issue. The main points of the manifesto were:

- (1) its commitment to the constitutional position of NI as an integral part of the United Kingdom (one of its founding principles) -
 "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 the primary cause of all our most fundamental troubles".
- (2) its commitment to devolved government (or devolution in stages) based on partnership in order to obtain the necessary widespread acceptance -
 "The Alliance Party has consistently worked for the establishment of devolved government in order that the people of Northern Ireland can work together to solve our common problems ... devolved government cannot work unless it has widespread acceptance throughout all sections of the community. To do so it must permit the participation of all those who are prepared to undertake their full responsibility for the welfare of all the people of Northern Ireland and support all the institutions of government..... Alliance MPs would, however, be prepared to support devolution in stages, provided that it was genuinely leading towards agreed full devolved government".
- (3) its opposition to local government reorganisation -
 "Alliance MPs would strongly oppose major reorganisation of local government as this would merely increase bureaucracy and make a return to devolved government much harder to achieve".
- (4) its call for an end to the Republic's constitutional claim over NI but also for increased socio-economic cooperation --
 "The present constitutional claim over Northern Ireland, -- and failure to introduce extradition for politically motivated crimes of violence, limits the growth of mutual trust and respect. It would be entirely consistent with progress towards greater European cooperation for changes to be made by the Dublin Government which would help towards better relations between North and South".
- (5) its commitment to the firm and fair application of the rule of law (a founding principle and an obvious reference to the recent allegations of police ill-treatment of suspects held at Castlereagh), and firm opposition to any reintroduction of special category status.
- (6) its call for a Bill of Rights as the cornerstone for any new constitution, and for PR in Westminster elections.

In the mass of material on the Alliance Party's socio-economic policies, it might be worthwhile to highlight the following:

- (1) housing: opposition to the return of housing policy to district councils, and criticism of the Rent Order and of NIHE maintenance services;
- (2) health and social services: retention of local hospitals;
- (3) EEC: support for and reform of the EEC, particularly the CAP, and entry into EMS;
- (4) education: support for integrated education by consent, opposition to selection at 11+ and the current alternative transfer procedure;
- (5) prices: pressure for fuel price subsidies, a gas pipeline and links with the national electricity grid, and opposition to British Airways' monopoly on flight travel.

There was little that was new in Alliance's consistently middle of the road, but essentially Unionist, stand on constitutional issues. There was no mention of the call for inter-party talks made at the Conference although Oliver Napier was reported as saying that he "would be prepared to look very sympathetically at any proposals which represented a real step towards devolved government with the United Kingdom". He emphasised that a new government should seek to reintroduce agreed devolved government as soon as possible but stressed, however, that widespread acceptance by the minority community remained the key to any lasting structure; linked with the manifesto's opposition to local government reorganisation this was a clear challenge to the UUP and other more Loyalist parties.