

Thank you to Eilish and to you all for the opportunity to address this meeting. I do so as an elected representative from a business background and not as a historian, and as someone who unashamedly looks to unite people, to a shared future, rather than to our divided past.

What does that mean in the current context? My dad is a presbyterian Minister and so I grew up with 3-point sermons, I always liked to challenge ‘tradition-for-tradition sake’ and so I’m going to talk about four core times in our history before moving on swiftly to our future.

Liberals in Ireland are probably the best representative of the forerunners of the Alliance Party from around the period of the

Great War. Their judgement was, in general terms, that “Home Rule” – what we would now in fact call “devolution” – was the fairest way forward to keep Ireland united despite its people’s legitimately competing national identities. I am not a historian, but I would note just one thing from the Covenant of **1912**: it makes specific reference to the economic well-being of the people of Ulster and thus the need for maintaining direct links to Great Britain, which at the time had an Empire spanning a quarter of the globe. 110 years on, the world has changed. In 1912 Belfast was a powerhouse of industry within the UK and on this Island, with over 80% of the Irish economic activity concentrated around the 3 counties near Belfast. Today in 2022, Northern Ireland’s

economic share of this Island has sadly reduced to close to single% digits, and annually needs a subvention to stand still. We should return to that Economic ‘Well-being’ point, and so Alliance remains a strongly pro-European party. The biggest challenges we face are global and we believe that our influence is greater if exercised in cooperation with our nearest neighbours. We therefore want to re-join the EU at the earliest opportunity. In the interim, we want to foster a close and constructive relationship with the EU. Access to the EU Single Market is essential and massively important to us in the Alliance Party.

The next key period is half a century or so after partition, at the outset of the Troubles. Amid the instability and the tragedy, Northern Ireland's current party-political system was born. The Alliance Party was established to urge people to come together and to focus on things which unite rather than divide.

Of course, given that choices in nationality, schooling and leisure often fall along sectarian fault lines, this was not as straightforward as it sounds. People, in effect, were being asked to put their practical interests ahead of their identities – if you like the civic ahead of the national. The truth is, the voters showed some

interest initially, but as the Troubles went on that interest did begin to decline.

The third period, of course, was the 1998 Agreement. As we know only too well, referendums force you to vote one way or another; there is little room for nuance! The Alliance Party of course supported an Agreement which fundamentally sought to enable people to live according to their preferred nationality and to express their identity while at the same time leaving the question of ultimate sovereignty for a majority to determine, with rights around nationality and identity guaranteed regardless of where sovereignty ultimately lay.

Of course, this proved a hard sell for the Alliance Party because all the emphasis went on moderate voices in Unionism and Nationalism. What resulted has, by and large, been for the good – but not always. But as we come towards the 25th anniversary of the GFA, change has been ridiculously slow. One outcome was institutionalised sectarianism in our institutions, and we are all now paying the price for that.

We should not ignore either a couple of things that have just happened. Sinn Fein became the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Secondly - the census showed that Northern Ireland is no longer even remotely a “Protestant state”. Most interesting of all, although I would say

this, was the sudden jump in Alliance representation from seven seats before May's election to 17. Effectly creating 3x main blocks in the assembly.

I would love to put that jump down purely to the Alliance Party's own brilliance. Having consistently the most popular Leader does help, yes, but in fact the "Alliance Surge", as it has come to be called, is representative of a broader social change, as people increasingly come to reject the idea that they have to pick one "side" or another. I come from a Presbyterian Manse, and have been welcomed into the GAA. That is becoming normal with many families. Why can they not play both GAA and rugby, if they choose? Why can they not attend a "Protestant"

primary school and a “Catholic” post-primary school before an “integrated” college? **Why can they not make their prime identity civic rather than national,** and perhaps “Northern Irish” rather than anything else? The media struggle to report this, as it defies the “them versus us” default they are used to.

Alliance is proudly liberal, progressive, and internationalist in its politics. As an Alliance elected representative I will always champion a positive, inclusive, and pro-diversity message. We want to build a new Northern Ireland that reflects these values and is open and welcoming to all.

The Alliance Party was post-Nationalist even before the phrase was ever used. We believe that, yes,

>we should make Northern Ireland work; and

>we believe also, that we should embrace change and reform things that don't work.

We should reform an education system which continues to divide along sectarian **and** class lines. We should reform a Health system which people cannot even access in far too many cases. And yes, we should reform a political system which provides nothing but permanent veto and gridlock.

With access to both the GB and EU markets we have the opportunity to grow the Northern Ireland economy, create highly skilled jobs and

so increase the wealth of our people. It's unacceptable that we are one of the poorest regions of the UK and wider EU.

Put simply, it is time for Northern Ireland to grow up.

Here in the Republic, you can help. I do not just mean symbolically – though I note Frank Feighan's enthusiasm for Irish Commonwealth membership.

But I also mean in terms of demonstrating to us and helping with economic development, outreach to attract inward investment, and supporting business as a central feature of any free society, not some optional extra. A growing number in our business community look at your economic success with envy. ...

There was a trade delegation from Lisburn, in my constituency, to Galway a couple of weeks ago, something I had proposed when elected to Council in 2019 – why solely go to China, Holland, Slovenia when we have thriving economic hubs in Dublin/ Galway /Limerick /Cork a couple of hours drive away. One of the delegation said me – “It’s a different world, a world of opportunities. They don’t just talk about it, they build the infrastructure, they support business and have the stability to go after it. But also interestingly added: “they also celebrate their success.”

You can also help in terms of showing that politically compromise is not a dirty word, but in fact a daily necessity. I mean in terms of

developing ongoing North/South relationships and indeed expanding them in areas such as sport, infrastructure, railways, and tourism.

What perhaps we need to do collectively is shift politics away from endless identity debates – which can never meaningfully be “won” – and on to practical delivery on the issues which count.

We in Northern Ireland should be much more open to different ways of doing things – in our education system, in our health service, in our economic development – so that we can genuinely make it work both politically and economically.

Where 1922 was the age of partition, let 2022 onwards be the age of reform, the age of change

– and of emphasising our common interests.

Together.

Thank you.