

Anne and Bill Barbour
A Tribute from

Eric Bullick

The Alliance Party

To James, Charlotte, Pauline and Tom; The wider family circle; Friends
of Anne and Bill

Let me start by expressing my profound sympathy to the members of the Barbour family circle. I trust that with the passing of these several weeks some degree of acceptance has established itself. There is reassurance in the knowledge that whatever anguish Anne and Bill were experiencing that night in late November, that anguish has been replaced with peace.

To my profound regret I had not been in regular contact with Anne and Bill over recent years but Bill and I worked together in the Alliance Party during the twelve year period 1981 to 1993.

Anne and Bill were already long retired when I first met them but I recall being instantly struck by the boundless enthusiasm and indeed the youthful exuberance of this retired couple.

As my relationship with Bill was honed whilst tramping the streets and laneways of Fermanagh, those outdoor expeditions meant that I was denied the opportunity of getting to know Anne quite as well as Bill. Nevertheless I was ever conscious that Bill's pioneering work outside the family home was only possible because his loyal and stalwart partner was back in Old Rossorry holding the fort.

Bill was a uniquely special individual and looking back I realise that I was deeply privileged to have known him.

Bill had so many admirable qualities that it difficult to know where to begin.

- His seemingly limitless energy left me - almost 30 years his junior – constantly straining to match his pace.
- His genuine love and compassion for the people of NI and in particular for his adopted Fermanagh – that love drove his conviction to endeavour to create a better place for us all to live in.
- His sincere interest in the views and motives of others meant that he was able to simultaneously observe and analyse a problem from several different perspectives at once

His general demeanour – he was so pleasant to work with, so calm, so professional, so committed, so sincere

His considerable intellect meant that he was the finest of strategists knowing intuitively which lines of action were paramount and which were merely peripheral.

His pioneering spirit and his raw courage in the face of adversity – the Alliance message of co-operation and mutual understanding was not universally popular in every corner of Fermanagh.

- His endearing smile and his infectious laugh lessened the ardour of every task
- His boundless good humour based on the wise premise that you should never take yourself too seriously

Firmly rooted in reality, his innate sense of proportion frequently came into play when he perceived that I might just be taking my politics too fervently – “remember Eric,” he would admonish me gently – “there are only 1000 Alliance votes in the whole of Fermanagh – canvassing an additional fortnight in the wind and rain won’t increase that by more than a dozen votes”.

Before the recent boundary changes my home had been in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency and it was during four General Elections between 1981 and 1993 that I got the know what drove this talented individual who to me – a mere youngster - was really Mr Alliance - the leading activist in the South West and indeed one of the most ardent Alliance workers anywhere in NI.

In the Hunger Strike Election of October 1981 Seamus Close was the Alliance candidate and (if I recall correctly) Bill was his Election Agent. That was a contentious and fraught election campaign and it took real courage to enter the fray.

Bill had long ago recognised that politics was the only route to bring about change in Northern Ireland and he worked tirelessly to establish and expand the middle ground which had already existed but which had never found its voice.

However, squeezed as it was between two ideological monoliths, the middle ground was tiny and it required ingenuity to express itself in a convincing manner. Bill possessed an abundance of that ingenuity. Hammering away on his typewriter he would create press statements and campaign plans by the crate full.

As we are all too well aware a hesitant, faltering and imperfect form of Power-Sharing is currently in place in our Assembly. However almost four decades ago the far-sighted and intuitive Bill Barbour was convinced that power-sharing both at Stormont and at Local Government level was the only means by which a modicum of trust could develop between rivals.

Whilst so many were simply prepared to acknowledge that this was the way forward, and then sit back and watch the grass grow, Bill immersed himself in every activity which would turn this aspiration into a reality.

I recall a slogan from my own youth “Integrity without Action is as pointless as a Seed without Soil”. No person I have ever worked with better epitomised the meaning behind that phrase “Integrity in Action” more than Bill Barbour.

And another of Bill’s attributes is well captured in another old rallying slogan “No Ideas Without Chores”. Bill was a champion of the political campaign trail because in addition to dreaming up innovative activities, he never shied away from the hard work required to implement those same ideas.

In the April 1993 Westminster Election I was the Alliance Party candidate for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Bill was my Election Agent. It was during that intense period working together that I gained further insights into the creative energy of this man and the loyal wife who created the space for him to be so active.

His in-depth knowledge of Enniskillen and the issues which motivated the electorate was invaluable. He knew every corner of every estate and he planned each day’s canvassing with military precision.

As a mere blow-in and not endowed with the distinctive Fermanagh dialect, I was frequently greeted suspiciously on the doorsteps so Bill would tactfully suggest “Let me do the talking”.

But there were those odd days when Bill was not available to canvass - *he was after all in his early seventies.*

Such days yielded some memorable exchanges on the doorsteps.

I would be extolling Alliance Party policy on such obtuse issues as ‘building in the countryside’ or ‘the powers of local government’ and conclude by seeking the person’s vote on polling day.

“What Party did you say you were from?” “The Alliance Party!” “Lyons Party? Didn’t know the Lyons had a Party.” “Alliance!” “Oh you mean Mr Barbour’s Party!!” Why didn’t you say that in the first place? Now you’re talking!

On another memorable occasion a whole evening’s canvas was threatened by the fact that I had mislaid a bundle of registers for part of Belleek – I had been told we have quite a lot of support in the area so I turned to Bill to express my frustration. “Don’t worry” said Bill, “we don’t need the registers - we do indeed have a large number of supporters in that part of Belleek but I know both of them!”

For more than three decades he ploughed his Alliance furrow without eliciting the wrath of political rivals and I would like to pay tribute to the speed and the sincerity with which both Arlene Foster and Michelle Gildernew responded to the death of Anne and Bill.

It is always difficult to talk of someone in the presence of family members and close friends all of whom knew Anne and Bill much better than I did but this in itself is testament to another unique aspect of their lives - the multiplicity of their contacts and their ability to maintain strong relationships with such a wide variety of people.

In 1988 Bill launched himself with typical vigour into the embryonic Integrated Education movement and this exemplary establishment with its excellent reputation is yet another legacy to his life-long endeavours.

Anne and Bill touched numerous lives and many here today will have their own personal stories. They touched my life in two particularly profound ways:

- (a) In 1983 it was an invitation from Anne and Bill to a late night barbeque at their cottage at Topped Mountain that provided me with an excuse to invite a young lady out on a date. The young lady subsequently became my wife – so I have much to be grateful for to Anne and Bill

- (b) In 1993 I applied for a job that I really wanted – the headship of a local Integrated Primary School. I recall being shown into the interview room and being faced with a sea of unsmiling faces. This is going to be fun I thought to myself.

There were so many on the interview panel that it had a front row and a back row. And then suddenly someone caught my eye. On the back row I spied the familiar smiling face of Bill Barbour. I'll not go into the details but I got the job.

In our innermost thoughts during December we have probably all asked ourselves if there are lessons to be learned from Anne and Bill's deaths BUT this afternoon I wish to pose an equally pertinent question to everyone here. What are the lessons to be learned from Anne and Bill's lives? – lives which were packed with meaningful / purposeful activity, an inherently positive outlook on life, an insatiable belief that our primary duty in this world to bring about improvement in that world.

The best tribute - dare I suggest the only appropriate tribute - to Anne and Bill would be for each one of us to leave this hall today determined to redouble our effects to progress the work which was so dear to Anne and Bill's hearts – reaching out hands of friendship and thereby building bridges within our divided community.

Let us honour Anne and Bill Barbour by continuing their work.

Thank you

Eric Bullick January 2010