

Agreeing New Political Structures

draft
outline

Introduction

1. In a submission to the Talks last year entitled *Requirements for New Structures* the SDLP indicated what it believes to be the essential characteristics which such structures must contain if they are to effectively address the nature of the problem facing us. It will be helpful to be reminded of what these requirements are as participants to the present round of talks begin addressing the task of seeking agreement on new political structures.

2. The requirements listed by the SDLP are as follows:

- (i) Parity of Esteem
- (ii) Equity of Treatment
- (iii) Capable of providing Peace and Stability
- (iv) Based on Democratic Process, founded on Consensus
- (v) Recognition of Totality of Relationships
- (vi) The European Community Dimension
- (vii) Innovative
- (viii) Confidence-Building
- (ix) Durable and Capable of Evolving.

3. The SDLP believes that the structures to be outlined in this paper adequately meet the test suggested by each of these requirements and that they amount, therefore, to an effective set of political means for addressing the problem facing us.

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Proposals for New Political Structures

A Three-Part Structure

4. The SDLP proposes a three-part ^{two-part} structure to the new political institutions to be adopted for Northern Ireland. These components are as follows:

(i) A six member Northern Ireland Commission with over-seeing and certain executive functions as well as powers to initiate legislation;

(ii) A Northern Ireland Council of Ministers to be appointed by the Commission to take charge of the government departments responsible for whatever range of functions would be agreed to come under the control of the government of Northern Ireland;

(iii) A Northern Ireland Assembly with scrutiny and legislative powers.

Or

(i) A six member Northern Ireland Commission with over-seeing and executive functions as well as powers to initiate legislation; the Commissioners would have executive responsibilities for the government of NI as well as a liaising role with the the British and Irish governments as with the EC; to assist in their executive responsibilities the Commissioners would appoint Assistant Commissioners drawn from the NI Assembly;

(ii) A Northern Ireland Assembly with scrutiny and legislative powers.

Membership

5. Membership of the Commission would be determined on the following basis:

(i) Three members to be directly elected from a three seat constituency, by STV, by the people of Northern Ireland;

(ii) One member to be nominated by the British government; one by the Irish government; one by the European Community.

6. Membership of the Council could be drawn from, but not restricted to the Assembly; a crucial criterion would be community balance within the Council.

^{The SDLP proposes a membership of 5 elected}
7. ~~Membership of the Assembly would be on the basis of the~~ existing 17 Northern Ireland constituencies, five members ^{to be} elected for each constituency by the STV system. [^]

Meeting the Requirements

In our submission to the talks.

(Here we take each requirement in turn and indicate how our proposals meet the test implied; what follows is a very tentative and first attempt to apply some of these tests)

Parity of Esteem

The proposed structures ensure *parity of esteem* by providing mechanisms whereby representatives of both the nationalist and unionist communities are involved at all levels of the structures on a basis of equal esteem, due regard being granted to the relative strengths of such representation (see below *Based on Democratic Process, founded on Consensus*). Within the Commission both communities would be represented by Commissioners enjoying equal powers. The significance of the wider relationships with Britain and the rest of the island of Ireland are also reflected on a parity of esteem basis through the presence of Commissioners nominated by the Irish and British governments and by the European Community.

Equity of Treatment

Based on Democratic Process, founded on Consensus

The *democratic basis* to the proposed structures would be ensured through direct elections for the local Commissioners and for the Assembly, while *consensus* would be essential to the successful operation of the Commission. Assembly committees would also require a high degree of consensus for their effective operation. PR as a basis for elections would safeguard appropriate degrees of representation for all sections of society in NI.

Capable of providing Peace and Stability

Recognition of the Totality of Relationships

The totality of Irish-British relationships would be very effectively and adequately recognised by the direct involvement of all relevant aspects of these relationships within the proposed structures. This would be most obviously the case within the proposed Commission.

The European Dimension

Innovative

The failure of previous political structures designed for Northern Ireland necessitates that new structures provide against the prospect of any attempt to undermine them. The SDLP's proposals endeavour to meet this requirement by separating the executive body (ie the Commission) from the deliberative body (ie the Assembly). This separation of functions would be innovative as far as political traditions in these islands are concerned. However, such a separation is characteristic of many political cultures where it has been deemed necessary to avoid the concentration of deliberative/consultative/legislative powers within the same body from which the executive is drawn thereby making the latter dependent on the former. France and the US are two pertinent

examples where this separation has been adopted, though in different ways. The history of political structures in NI teaches that a similar separation would be more likely to succeed than structures which sought to emulate the past, irrespective of whatever new safeguards might be included.

Confidence Building

Durable

Capable of Evolving