

Ulster Democratic Party

North/South Structures

The governments' discussion document Strand 2: North/South Structures published on 27 January 1998 was a yet another attempt at trying to 'sell' the defunct frameworks document to the people of Northern Ireland. The **Ulster Democratic Party** rejected the Framework proposals in February 1995 because they are deterministic and do not deal with the totality of relationships. Consequently we also dismiss the 'framework' dimension of this unrealistic discussion document on the same grounds.

This does not, however, mean that the **Ulster Democratic Party** is opposed to the notion of North/South relations in principle. Cross-border co-ordination and co-operation should be considered if it makes sense economically, is part of broader regional co-operation within the British Isles, and is not in any way imposed upon the people of Northern Ireland.

As we see it, the potential development of cross-border North/South structures is comprised of two components: First, that deeper economic and business links between Northern Ireland and the Republic will be economically beneficial, and second, that cross-border co-operation may encourage reconciliation between nationalists and unionists. Both components are limited by the economic and political parameters on the ground.

Limits on Cross-border Co-operation

When considering the possibilities and scope for North/South structures in order to facilitate cross-border co-operation, the economic realities of the

Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom as states on the European periphery cannot be ignored.

- Both Irish and UK trade are locked into international economic systems. This already existing dependency reduces the scope for companies and businesses in Northern Ireland and the Republic to create new or deepen links across the border.
- Both the Northern Irish economy and that of the Republic are relatively small. It is thus unlikely that the dynamic gains associated with trade integration, as in other parts of Europe, will arise.
- The United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have pursued policies of geographic dispersion in order to pre-empt concentrations of high unemployment. Cross-border co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic would most likely result in a concentration of employment and industry in the East, along the Belfast-Dublin route. Thus, successful cross-border co-operation would ironically exacerbate the divisions between the two traditions in Northern Ireland by integrating the mainly unionist eastern part at the expense of the mainly nationalist western part.
- The Republic of Ireland has a centralised pay-system, while Northern Ireland has a de-centralised pay-system. The wage-structures, pay relativities between occupations, pay dispersion rates, the systems of income tax, and social charges on labour are also different.
- Looking at the private sector, given the existing business outlook and behaviour in both the Republic and Northern Ireland, steps towards economic integration could result in competition for each other's markets which would neither stimulate economic growth nor create new jobs.
- And finally, the different approaches by Dublin and London towards European integration and monetary union must also be taken into consideration. The Republic of Ireland's intention to join a single currency in the first wave and the UK's decision to wait may hinder cross-border co-operation.

The position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, as well as the UK's and Irish Republic's economic and political orientation within Europe pose a number of obstacles to North/South co-operation. Given the inter-dependency between the economies of the UK and the Republic of Ireland,

North/South co-operation realistically needs to be dealt with within the broader context of the British Isles.

Scope of Cross-Border Co-operation

Numerous obstacles to cross-border co-operation, however, do not mean that North/South structures should not exist. Rather, these obstacles serve to limit the scope of and expectations for North/South structures in accordance with economic reality. Indeed, while not questioning the premise of North/South co-operation on issues where it makes sense, the obstacles listed above question the notion of harmonisation strategies and the idea of 'rolling integration' held in nationalist and republican circles. The logical approach based on existing economic realities is that of mutual recognition already employed by the European Union. It by-passes the administrative problems of harmonising diverse standards by mutual recognition of those standards. Since both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland are part of the EU, there is no reason why the mutual recognition approach should not be used as a basis for encouraging North/South policy co-ordination.

In some areas of public policy there is broad scope for cross-border co-operation and consequently a remit for North/South structures. These include transport, infrastructure, agriculture and fisheries, health, the environment, tourism, anti-drugs policy, smuggling, labour law, unemployment, EU programmes, education and training, industrial and trade matters, waterways, social welfare, and energy.

Issues which could be addressed within this context include:

Agriculture:

- rural development
- animal health
- plant health
- agricultural research and training

Industrial and Trade Matters:

- trading standards
- development of indigenous industries
- inward investment
- promotion of tourism
- research
- labour law

Transport:

- improvement of North/South road and rail links

Education and Training:

- mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications
- students with special needs

Health:

- sharing of expensive equipment and resources between health authorities
- medical emergency planning
- food safety

Social Welfare:

- portability of pensions
- revision to social security systems that would encourage search activity among the unemployed
- unemployment

Environment:

- waste management
- pollution control
- wildlife conservation

EU Programmes:

- co-operation in the implementation of European health and safety policy
- Peace and Reconciliation Programme

Remit of North/South Structures

The creation of North/South structures should serve to facilitate co-ordination and co-operation in the above mentioned areas. A North/South Ministerial

Council should serve as the main co-ordinating body, composed of representatives of the Irish government and Northern Ireland Assembly. The Council's main function is to identify projects for co-ordination and co-operation, to undertake in consultation with experts viability studies on said projects, and once unanimous position has been reached, to present possible projects to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish parliament.

The function of the Council will be advisory only. Executive, budgetary, and legislative authority will rest with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish parliament, and in some cases with Westminster as regards non-devolved issues. After the cross-border co-operation proposals have been sanctioned, the Council will then be given the responsibility of implementing the initiatives. In all functions, whether advisory or implementary, the Council shall be fully accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish government.

The representatives to the Council shall be appointed by the Northern Ireland Assembly and Irish government to be augmented by specialists and independent consultants when the Council deems necessary. European Union matters within its remit should be addressed in close co-operation with Irish and Northern Irish MEPs and in close co-operation with the Assembly's and the Republic's offices in Brussels.

As many of the issues which will fall into the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council are of equal importance for East/West relations, they therefore shall be properly dealt with within the broader remit of the Council of the Isles.

There is no doubt that co-ordination and co-operation in areas such as, among others, trade, agriculture, transport, and unemployment makes sense. It must, however, be part of the overall settlement, and it must be part of more far-

reaching co-ordination including the British Isles and to some extent Europe. These additional frameworks of consultation will play a stabilising role.

Reserving executive powers for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Parliament prevents administrative and legislative conflict, while ensuring unionism that North/South structures are not an attempt at 'rolling integration' into a united Ireland. At the same time North/South economic co-operation would strengthen the political stability of Northern Ireland by providing nationalism with an institutional expression of identity.