

Social Democratic and Labour Party

Nature Form and Extent of Strand 2 Arrangements

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1. Arrangements to be agreed in Strand 2 are arguably the most important in terms of redefining relationships between the two main political traditions on this island and pose the greatest challenge to a successful outcome to these negotiations. This is so because the identities and allegiances of both traditions transcend the confines of Northern Ireland and together represent the essence of the conflict which has divided the people of those traditions.

2. The provision of new institutions on a North-South and all-Ireland basis has, therefore, long been deemed essential to the creation of a balanced accommodation of those traditions. This was enunciated at the Anglo-Irish Summit in 1980; it was endorsed by all of the parties at the New Ireland Forum; it was an accepted basis for the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 and for the inter-party and inter-governmental talks in 1991-92; and it was fundamental to the Joint Declaration of 1993.

3. In our submission on 'Constitutional Issues' we stated :

"Until the border artificially divided them, northern Nationalists were indistinguishable from the rest of the nation. Their sense of Irishness is just as strong and just as important to them as the sense of Britishness which is central to the Unionist identity. Nationalists aspire to participate in a wider Irish political system no less strongly than Unionists assert their right to have their British identity expressed in a British system"

It should also be stated, in this regard, that the vast majority of citizens south of the border retain a sense of identity with citizens of the Irish nation in the North, and are entitled also to aspire to the creation of close North-South linkages. Unionists, too, frequently stress their Irishness and are, thereby, also entitled to its expression in North-South institutions.

4. The requirement for North-South institutions is not an issue of recent recognition. Prior to the partition of Ireland the island was an administrative unit. The Government of Ireland Act proposed a Council of Ireland to obviate the difficulties which partition would create. Indeed, as the Explanatory Memorandum to that Act stated, it was envisaged that the efficacy of its work could generate the conditions which would bring forward a single parliament for Ireland. In the period from 1921-70 the Stormont and Dublin administrations could not avoid making at least some specific, ad hoc arrangements for co-operation on practical issues and in the Sunningdale Agreement a meaningful Irish dimension was recognised as a 'sine qua non'.

5. Effective, meaningful and dynamic North-South institutions are, therefore, necessary not only to reflect the identity and allegiance of Nationalists, but also for clear social, economic and cultural reasons. Evidence presented both to the New Ireland Forum in 1983-84 and to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, 1993-95, stress the need for ever closer forms of North-South consultation, co-operation, co-ordination and decision taking in all of these spheres. Within this context, the need for a joint approach to matters arising from our common membership of the European Union has also received particularly strong support. In addition, many submissions emphasised the need to promote reconciliation, respect and mutual understanding between our different traditions, North and South, and to do so within an agreed political framework.

6. Studies on economic development point to the significant gains which would flow from the creation of a single market on the island of Ireland. In many sectors businesses are already operating on an all-island basis and their experience reveals the need for an agreed political framework to provide the necessary support to maximise the benefits from such a context, and to plan effectively for future development.

7. Since the case for new North-South arrangements is fundamental, it follows that their existence and operation cannot be dependent on the decision of any one political interest. It also follows that the forms and functions of such arrangements as well as their relationships to other arrangements must be negotiated as part of an overall settlement. North-South arrangements are not matters to be dealt with only after arrangements in other strands have been agreed and are in operation.

8. As we stated in our opening submission to this Strand, The New Ireland Forum led the way in redefining the basis to these relationships by stressing that any new settlement would have to accommodate together two sets of legitimate rights:

- the right of the nationalists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity; and

- the right of unionists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life.

It is our conviction, therefore, that arrangements to be agreed in Strand 2 must ensure such an accommodation and do so in a manner satisfactory to the representatives of both traditions .

9. Agreed Strand 2 arrangements aimed at achieving a just balance between both these sets of rights will reflect the reality of diverse aspirations, reconcile as fully as possible both traditions and promote economic, social and cultural co-operation between them within an all-island context. Such arrangements must even-handedly afford both traditions parity of esteem and equality of treatment and must enhance and facilitate the development of a truly pluralist ethos throughout the island of Ireland. To do so such arrangements must command support and allegiance throughout the island.

10. Within the context of these aims, the SDLP believes that North-South arrangements must contain political structures which will provide the dynamic for a new partnership in Ireland. To achieve these aims the level of political representation from both parts of Ireland must be significant; the executive powers vested in them must also be significant so as to ensure their effectiveness in discharging their allotted roles and functions. These structures, with executive powers, should be characterised by:

- a capacity to represent both the nationalist and unionist traditions in a manner which would attract support and allegiance throughout the island;
- a capacity to address all matters of mutual concern and interest to the people of the whole island;
- a capacity to promote and achieve harmonious interaction between institutions and agencies throughout the island;
- a capacity to promote co-operation and co-ordination in social and economic developments as they affect the whole of the island;
- a capacity to provide for the administration of services on a mutually agreed basis;
- a capacity to represent common Irish interests to the European Union and other international agencies as appropriate; and
- a capacity to break down barriers of distrust which have led to past divisions and to promote agreement, accepting both diversity within Ireland and the unique relationships between the peoples of Ireland and Britain.

11. The form and functions of North-South institutions must be carefully defined in terms of relationships with arrangements being negotiated for Strands 1 and 3. The SDLP believes that in determining these relationships, North-South institutions should be characterised, as the 'Frameworks' document states (Part II, para.25), by a 'clear institutional identity' and by a degree of operational autonomy as will enable them to function effectively with respect to the above capacities. The institutions to be agreed should, therefore, have a clear set of purposes and an overall remit to deliver on the capacities outlined above.
12. The SDLP believes that in determining the details for North-South arrangements, the need for decision-making within them to be on a consensual basis is essential. Only such an approach will provide the necessary safeguards against fears that any section of those represented within them would be coerced by a majority.
13. Reaching agreement on North-South institutions will, as has been stated above, be amongst the most difficult challenges facing all parties and both governments in these negotiations. Healing the fractured political relationships between both parts of Ireland will take time and require considerable courage, forbearance and commitment. Suspicion, apprehension and misunderstanding abound on this issue. However, it is gratifying to note that these feelings are being countered by the considerable amount of goodwill towards enhanced North-South relationships evident throughout the country and by a deep desire that the healing process should begin. It is in recognition of these feelings and in a spirit of reconciliation that the SDLP wishes to advance the case for North-South arrangements in this Strand of our negotiations.