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UUP Proposals: A Council of the British Isles

The UUP propose the establishment of a Council of the British Isles. The Council of the British Isles would consist of the British and Irish Governments, plus representatives of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. The existing regional administrations of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, which are not part of the United Kingdom would be invited to take part. Consideration would also be given to representation of the English regions.

Any agreement must look to the totality of relations within the British Isles. The interactions on an East/West axis between Northern Ireland and Great Britain are greater in relative and absolute terms than those on a North/South axis between Northern Ireland and the Republic. For example, environmental, agriculture and fishing issues are all best dealt with on a British Isles basis. An appropriate cross frontier relationship could be located within this, based on pragmatic considerations of mutual benefit and not on a political agenda. Such a relationship would not pose a threat to either jurisdiction and would, unlike the present arrangements, correspond to the real needs of all the people.

The Council would have a varied and flexible structure. Provision would be made for meetings at various levels, i.e. government only, governments plus representatives of some or all regional interests, meetings at regional level and meetings at official levels. It would be serviced by a single, small administrative unit.

The Council would not have, nor would it acquire, any direct executive function. It would, however, be the place where mutual co-operation would be discussed and it could be the place where agreements on inter-governmental or inter-regional co-operation could be made. Matters discussed within the Council, whether at governmental, regional or official level, might result in a government or regional administration deciding to take action within its own area of responsibility.

Such discussions might result in agreement between two or more governments and/or regional administrations. Such agreements would be subject to the control of the respective democratic institutions. The implementation of these agreements, whether by means of legislation or administrative action, would be the responsibility of the particular governments or regional administrations that had entered into the agreement in question. It could, however, be appropriate to create specific instruments to deal with matters on an intergovernmental or inter-regional basis. Any such instrument would be distinct from the Council and would be directly responsible to the governments or regional administrations that created it, thus ensuring that the Council remained purely a forum for discussion and agreement. The creation of an instrument would not prevent further discussion of the matter within the Council. The Foyle Fisheries Commission could act as a model in this respect.