

Social Democratic and Labour Party

Nature, Form and Extent of New Arrangements

Strand 3

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1. The SDLP have long asserted that the historic and geopolitical framework of the problems which we are seeking to resolve is the British-Irish framework. We continue to argue that the framework of the problem must also be the framework for the solution. Therefore clear understandings and significant arrangements for the development and management of Irish-British relationships are indispensable requirements for stability and progress.
2. The validity and viability of such arrangements have already been proved by successful work carried out between both governments through Anglo-Irish Joint Studies and the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council, by the Intergovernmental Conference under the Anglo-Irish Agreement and by the Inter-Parliamentary Body. The Joint Declaration at Downing Street and the formulation of the Framework Document (at the request of several Northern Parties including Unionists) have underscored the special capacity and significance of intergovernmental initiative. It should not be overlooked that the terms of reference for the current negotiations as was also the case for the "Talks Process" in 1991 and 1992 were agreed by both governments.
3. The Progress of the last decade or so has shown that, when all else is failing to work or happen, undertakings between and by the two governments can generate new possibilities and new realities. We cannot therefore treat the question of structures and systems for "East-West relations" as little more than optional accessories on top of arrangements which might be agreed for the other two strands. Whether with or without relevant political development in respect of the relationships covered by Strands One and Two, the East-West axis will continue to be a key political axle bearing difficult loads and providing a turning point for progress.
4. This point is demonstrated in paragraph 44 of the Framework Document which addresses "issues of political consensus". It states, "For so long as these matters are not devolved, it will be for the governments to consider ways in which a climate of peace, new institutions and the growth of political agreement may offer new possibilities and opportunities for enhancing community identification with policing" This evinces the reality that East-West structures cannot operate as simply a Dublin-London corridor with no meaning for relationships within Ireland or bearing on issues in the North.
5. We note the two Governments' reference in paragraph 39 of the framework Document, under the heading "East-West Structures", to "a new and more broadly-based Agreement, developing and extending their co-operation, reflecting the totality of relationships between the two islands, and dedicated to fostering co-operation, reconciliation and agreement in Ireland at all levels". The Intergovernmental process has value and validity not only as a generator of new approaches but also as a guarantor of any new agreements. This is recognised in paragraph 13(c) of the Framework Document which gives East-West Structures the

job description "to enhance the existing basis for co-operation between the two Governments, and to promote, support and underwrite the fair and effective operation of the new arrangements". We note that this is repeated in paragraph 46 along with the function "to keep under review the workings of the Agreement".

6. We agree that this process will provide a forum through which the Governments will work together in pursuance of their joint objectives of securing agreement and reconciliation amongst of people of the island. If it is to achieve these objectives, an intensification of the co-operation and partnership between both Governments on a wide range of issues concerned with Northern Ireland and between both parts of the island is essential. East West structures must be substantive and their work efficient and effectively programmed.
7. We therefore favour the maintenance of a standing Intergovernmental Conference to be co-chaired by designated Ministers and supported by a Permanent Secretariat. The Intergovernmental Conference arrangement has already established itself as a constructive and conciliatory process and we would welcome its development in a new and more broadly based agreement.
8. The programme of work for the Conference and the nature of its implementation would have to take due account of such other arrangements as exist in respect of relationships and issues between North and South and within the North. Appropriate procedures for involvement in or association with the work of the conference, where have to be agreed on a principled and practical basis. We welcome the fact that both Governments as well as envisaging such procedures in paragraphs 48 and 49 also recognise the need for the so-called "fallsafe mechanism" in paragraph 47.
9. While recognising the Intergovernmental Conference as the "principle instrument", the SDLP also attach importance to enhancing the Inter-Parliamentary process. This process with its more representative membership span can contribute significantly to mutual understanding, common policy appraisals and co-operative initiative affecting a diverse range of issues and interests. The Inter-Parliamentary Body and the Conference could, among other approaches, sponsor productive linkages among local and regional authorities in given areas of policy development and delivery, not least in the context of EU programmes.
10. We are concerned to ensure that East-West structures do not only address matters on the island of Ireland but also truly grasp a wider range of issues in and between both islands. The range of social, economic, cultural, environmental, legal and fiscal issues where comparative appraisal, compatibility, co-operation and co-ordination would be mutually and collectively advantageous will continue to grow, not only in light of likely EU developments. East-West Structures must therefore be capable of development in response to changing realities with the agreement of all concerned and must have the capacity to provide for the discharge and delivery, by appropriate agencies, of commonly determined functions and standards.

11. The great potential for East-West Structures to yield positive dividends across so many policy concerns and sectoral interests throughout both islands should not be used to detract from the core political import of the Conference - to provide an institutional expression for the Irish Government's recognised concern and role in relation to Northern Ireland. We would underscore that agreed North-South institutions alone will not fulfil the right and need of nationalists in the North to administrative, symbolic and political recognition of their identity. The nature, scope and capacity of East-West Structures will, clearly have profound significance given their potential to complement and guarantee arrangements in respect of other issues and relationships.
12. East-West Structures will be no less significant for Unionists. Like Nationalists in the North they are fearful of being abandoned as the ultimate minority. Meaningful East-West Structures can serve to pre-assure and reassure both traditions. In this respect the proposed "Charter or Covenant... for the protection of fundamental rights of everyone living in Ireland" would have certain East-West dimensions.
13. This is implicit in paragraph 52 which states "It could incorporate also an enduring commitment on behalf of all the people of the island to guarantee and protect the rights, interests, ethos and dignity of the Unionists community in any all-Ireland framework that might be developed with respect in the future, to at least the same extent as provided for the Nationalist community in the context of Northern Ireland under the Structures and Provisions of the new Agreement". Such a commitment is consistent with views forwarded by the SDLP during the 1992 Inter-party Talks. Given the significance of such protections and guarantees for Nationalists to take account of history, identity and political reality, we can equally recognise the right and requirement for Unionists to enjoy the same. We acknowledge that this can only be accommodated and achieved with a meaningful British-Irish framework.