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Council of the British Isles

We propose that a Council of the British Isles be created. This Council will be the forum within which consideration can be given to the "totality of relations" within the British Isles. The Council will consist of the two governments plus representatives of regional administrations. The new Northern Ireland administration will be one such regional administration. The existing regional administrations in the Isle of man and the Channel Isles, which are not part of the United Kingdom should be invited to take part.

Consideration will have to be given to the representation of other regions such as Scotland and Wales which like Northern Ireland have a distinct identity in terms of history and culture and also have significant separatist minorities.

Scotland and Wales do have devolved administrative structures and these could be represented in the Council. But the Scottish and Welsh Offices are emanations of central government and so are not necessarily representative of their region's views on all matters. Consequently an alternative means of representation for these regions may have to be found. This problem would cease to exist if, as sometimes mooted, Assemblies are created for these regions. In that case the Assemblies would be represented in the Council.

Consideration will also have to be given to the representation of England, either as a unit or as several regions. We note that in this context reference is usually made to the standard eight regions for planning purposes. We also note that development towards single tier local authorities will create the space for



regional authorities and that as the principle of subsidiarity extends downwards from Whitehall, as it must, that it will require the creation of regional administrations in some form.

The Council of the British Isles must not be regarded or treated as just a "Celtic fringe" affair.

#### Structure

The Council will have to have a varied and flexible structure. Provision may be made for meetings at various levels, ie government only, government(s) plus representatives of some or all regional interests, meetings at regional level and meetings at official levels.

Thus it will be possible for meetings to be arranged within the framework of the Council which deal with particular topics or particular geographical regions. Such meetings would have a membership appropriate to their nature.

It is envisaged that the "Inter Irish Relations Committee", referred to in our strand II papers, will be a committee of the Council. It must be emphasised, however, that our willingness to participate in such a committee is dependent on it being established within the framework of the Council of the British Isles, ie we are firmly opposed to any free standing body relating to the island of Ireland as a whole.

It is not, however, realistic to separate such a committee from the rest of the Council. The North South axis within the island of Ireland cannot be divorced from the East West axis within the British Isles. Many of the issues of concern on the one axis are matters of concern on the other also. The new Northern Ireland Assembly will only have a limited competence so that London will



have to have an involvement in the Belfast/Dublin axis, if only to approve any financial aspects. See also the comments made in our paper of 22 September 1992.

#### Bureau

A Bureau should be established to service all Council and committee meetings. As the Council will necessarily be flexible and will probably operate mainly through committees a single administrative unit will be essential in order to prevent competition, confusion or conflict between the various aspects of the Council. The Bureau's role, however, will be confined to co-ordination and it will not have a policy role.

There could be a Head of the Bureau with a number of deputies. The Head would be appointed by the Council and will have to be a person who would command trust and respect across a wide range of Council members. His Deputies could be representative of the various national and regional interests in the Council, ie England, Ireland, Ulster, Scotland, Wales etc. and so would be appointed by the relevant Council members.

There should be complete openness about all Council and committee proceedings and an important part of the Bureau's work will be to see that all the constituent elements of the Council are fully informed of any developments at any level within the Council that might affect that region. This latter aspect of the Bureau will be vital in building confidence especially with regard to the actions of the two governments.

Funding and staff could be shared by the participating bodies with staff composition on lines similar to the EC Commission or other analogous bodies within the CSCE process.



### Functions of the Council

The Council could be a forum within which consideration is given to maintaining and enhancing the recognition and protection of human, civil and cultural rights of individuals and communities within the British Isles. This could take the form of enabling any member of the Council to raise within the meetings of the Council or its committees any matter relating to the particular rights enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in so far as they relate to any part of the British Isles. It is expected that discussion of these matters would take account of proceedings and agreements made within the CSCE process.

Consideration within the Council could be given to co-operation on economic and environmental matters either at a British Isles level or at an inter-regional level.

Provision will have to be made to ensure that any of the above matters which fall within the jurisdiction of the EC are integrated into the relevant European procedures. The two governments may also want to use the mechanism of the Council to co-ordinate their approach to European matters.

Provision must be made for consideration of security and counter terrorist measures, if only at the level of establishing a mechanism for the exchange of intelligence and co-operation aimed at improving the skills and resources of the various security forces within the whole of the British Isles. Consideration should be given to making effective arrangements relating to the control of movement of persons and extradition.



#### Discharge of functions

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, may result in a government or regional administration deciding to take action within its own area of responsibility.

Such discussions may result in an agreement between two or more governments and/or regional administrations. 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 may, however, be appropriate to create agencies to deal with specific matters on an inter-governmental or inter-regional basis. Any such agency however, 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 agency would not prevent further discussion of the matter within the Council. The Foyle Fisheries Commission could act as a model in this respect.

#### Inter-Parliamentary relations

It is envisaged that any inter-parliamentary body should be distinct from the above Council. There is an existing Anglo-Irish Inter-Parliamentary group, formed within the Inter-Parliamentary



Union but operating on a different basis from normal IPU groups. Consideration will have to be given to whether the existing body should be expanded to include representatives from any Assembly to be created. This might cause problems because of the differing status of those involved. In view of the establishment of the Council of the British Isles, it may be best to let inter-parliamentary relations revert to that for normal IPU groups. Subject to the above consideration it is envisaged that Unionist MPs would take part.