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A Sinn Féin Discussion Document submitted to Strands 2

Lancaster House, London

27 January 1998

Introduction

Sinn Féin believes that all of the parties, and especially the two governments, should give a detailed outline of their vision for the future. Obviously this has to include the democratic ethos and the social, economic and cultural structures and arrangements to reflect this. Democracy needs to be rooted in the daily lives of citizens. It needs to be based upon equality. So far, the negotiations have not dealt with this. Indeed Sinn Féin has argued that many of these matters are issues for the governments which should not be hostage to the resistance among some parties to the kind of fundamental change which is required. The discussions have concentrated, primarily, on institutional matters. In order to assist these discussions, Sinn Féin wishes to outline our view of structures which could best serve the needs of all of the people of this island.

Democratic Structures

Sinn Féin seeks the establishment of a 32 county unitary state. We believe that an Irish national democracy, with a central government and regionalised government structures, represents the most efficient model for the stability and prosperity of all the Irish people. We propose a constitution for all Ireland and a Charter of Rights for all citizens. Within this political democracy we envisage an economic democracy - decentralised to bring real power to the regions.

The following sections outline how we believe these proposals could be developed into a working democratic model.

Sinn Féin proposes a series of governmental tiers including community, district and regional councils, with a national parliament. These tiers are based upon the need for involvement of the people at every level.

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Regional Councils

Democratic regional structures would allow for national co-ordination and supervision of regional programmes, economic planning and development. Regional Councils would be charged with planning and development co-ordination for the region.

Within the context of national government public expenditure programmes, and aware of the need for development which is both economically and environmentally sustainable, regional councils should have a key role in economic planning, in partnership with district councils and the national parliament.

An integrated strategy for rural development in particular would require a measure of partnership between central government, development agencies, private business and local communities, where regional councils would provide a vital link.

District and regional councils would ensure the continuity of democratic participation, accountability and control from local through regional to national level and beyond.

Development within each of the regions would be more evenly spread by linking the local decisions to be taken at district council level with the wider rural and urban regeneration strategies, agreed at central government and EU.

Future planning from the local to the national level cannot achieve full potential without community participation. While communities cannot redress the economic and social deficits faced by many rural and inner-city localities alone, they must play a central role in helping to plan and implement the regeneration of their own areas.

In local communities there are many individuals and groups with information and ideas on what products and services are needed and, in some cases, the skills for producing them. They lack the resources to put these ideas into action. Regional councils could promote development in this field by acting as facilitator with state agencies to link local knowledge, skills, intelligence and energy with state resources in training, marketing, management and the capital necessary to support communities in the development of social infrastructure, small businesses and marketing.

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This proposal would require the transfer of funding presently controlled by central government to both regional and district councils respectively. As it devolves powers to the lower tiers of administration the national parliament would also need to devolve a proportion of the finances it currently controls. Regional Councils would be funded by block grant and would not themselves raise finance.

Structure

Ireland as a single unit could have 15 regional councils. That is, the Gaeltacht region, South Connaught, North Connaught, West Ulster, East Ulster, Belfast, South Ulster, North Leinster, Midlands, Dublin, South Leinster, East Munster, West Munster, Cork, North Munster.

Most of the regions would serve a population base of approximately 200,00 to 300,000, and would be made up of district council groupings. Belfast, Midlands and Dublin regions would have higher populations, with Dublin in particular requiring over 25 districts to serve a population of over one million.

The Gaeltacht

The most notable exception would be Comhairle na Gaeltachta, comprising each of the Gaeltacht areas and providing an Irish-speaking administration for these areas as a unit, in co-ordination with the surrounding regions, where necessary. This would reverse the trend where State agencies themselves promote English in Gaeltacht areas, and would stabilise Irish as the Gaeltacht community language.

Border Regions

Regions which straddle the present border have been devastated by partition, and need special aid to help them to recover and develop. Partition fragmented local economies, inhibited proper economic and commercial development, destroying businesses on both sides of the border, increasing emigration and rural depopulation.

The fortification of the border further undermined commercial activity in these areas. Obviously a reversal of this policy would greatly enhance any regeneration programme for those district council areas affected by the present border.

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As with other democratic bodies, the number of members of the regional council would be in proportion to the population of the region. Members would be delegates from district/county councils. There would be provision for nominees of representative organisations and bodies with interest and expertise in the various sectors to be invited to attend meetings of the regional council. There would be no direct elections to the Regional Council.

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