

Solution must be based on reality

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Sean Farren's article in the News Letter this week presents an upbeat image for the future. There are aspects that Ulster Unionism can agree with such as structures of government in Northern Ireland that would attract the support and allegiance of both communities.

Like the SDLP, we believe failure to make political progress should not be contemplated.

However, Sean Farren expresses the right to require “effective political expression of their identity” which is likely to be a North/South Forum to determine policy on an all-Ireland basis. John Hume has made the SDLP's position clear: without this dual legitimacy and equality there will be no agreement.

From a unionist perspective, the legitimacy of Irish nationalism is not rejected in the sense that it is entitled to wish for a united Ireland, though unionism does not accept the validity of the nationalist argument. The real problem is the extent to which the nationalist aspiration is to be given expression within the structures of government.

Both the United Kingdom and Irish governments view unionism and nationalism as equal. This is a fundamental flaw in principle. For example, they view in an equal manner the viewpoints that unionists will not accept a united Ireland while nationalists will not accept Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

Each viewpoint has equal legitimacy as a viewpoint but legally they are entirely different. The legal position accepted by international law is that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom whereas the status of the SDLP's all-Ireland viewpoint is that of a legitimate right to wish for a change in Northern Ireland's legal position.

This attitude by both governments goes to the very heart of the difficulty in trying to find a political way forward.

The United Kingdom and Irish governments advocate acceptance of an all-Ireland body that will have significant responsibilities and functions with no limit to be imposed on the nature and extent of these functions. In similar situations elsewhere in the democratic world, such cross-border bodies do not exist and are not advocated. What is unique about Northern Ireland is not the problem but the solution advocated by government.

The reality of such proposals is that not only do they offend unionists by the extent of the all-Ireland dimension but are also insufficient to satisfy the aspirations of those who wish for a united Ireland - hence the need to describe the process as “dynamic in order to satisfy the nationalist aspiration”. The outcome has been continuous political instability.

Nationalism's viewpoint derives from its perception that the partition of Ireland was both illegal and unjust. Eddie McGrady MP, SDLP, has stated in the House of Commons that he represented a community whose consent to the structures of government was "never asked, earned, or given."

Nationalists base their position on three aspects. The island of Ireland was, and should revert to, one political unit: the agreements entered into in 1921 and 1925 were not freely arrived at on the Irish side: and that successive Irish governments consistently repudiate these agreements as evidenced by Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution.

If Nationalism is so certain of its position why is its case not taken to the International Court at The Hague? Last month's European Union summit in Luxembourg directed Turkey to settle its dispute with Greece over land in the Aegean Sea by way of the International Court, before it would be considered for membership of the EU.

The truth is that nationalism has no case. Yet the whole Northern Ireland community has suffered for years because nationalism will not settle our difficulties by accepting governmental structures that are applied to similar situations elsewhere in the democratic world.

For example, there is no logic to 'geographic statehood'. To say that since Ireland is an island it should be one political unit is like saying, for example, that the island of Borneo should be one political unit and not three units comprising part of Malaysia, part of Indonesia and Brunei.

Throughout the world political borders both divide land and transcend water. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a valid legal entity, founded by a process the same as that for most states in the world. This is reality and solutions must be found that are based on this reality.

Unionism wishes to be positive about the political talks process. Unionism's vision is clear and its message simple: we wish for the same rights, same stability and same principle of government - including structures of government to accommodate minorities - that operate elsewhere in the democratic world.

In addition, we wish to see practical co-operation between the United Kingdom's regions and the Republic of Ireland on matters that are of mutual benefit. There is more in common between the two main islands than there is between any part of the islands and the rest of Europe.

We use the same first language, are joint heirs to a rich Anglo-Irish culture, share many customs and practices, are accessed by similar media, drive on the same side of the road and have a similar climate which impacts upon many aspects of life. The British/Irish Isles is a cohesive unit within Europe. Perhaps instead of a 'New Ireland' as the basis for a political unit (as indicated by the SDLP) we need a 'New Islands' unit. The economies of scale within a unit of 60 million people will always be greater than those within a unit of five million.

One can readily accept today that borders have ceased to be as important as they were in the past. However co-operation across borders, whether in the EU or similar

geographical groupings, has only succeeded where each participating Member State accepts the existing internationally determined borders. Borders only decrease in importance when they are at first recognised by way of government institutions. If the talks are to succeed, both nationalism and the United Kingdom and Irish governments must accept this reality.

We only have a short time left to see whether participants in the talks process can grapple with reality and come to an agreement. For all involved, failure to try at this time cannot be contemplated.

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