

Europe, not South Africa, must guide Labour's thinking

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In 1992, when 'talks' last took place regarding its future, Northern Ireland was viewed by both governments as unique, thus requiring a unique solution.

Today the world has moved on and it is against this background of world events that we now must consider the way forward for Northern Ireland.

The new Labour government has brought a freshness to many aspects of politics, including foreign policy, which is to have human rights at its heart. Unfortunately though, the least innovative of Labour's policies seem to be its approach to Northern Ireland. Here it has taken up much of the Conservative policy, which has left community relations at an all time low.

What is currently missing is a clear framework, or morality, of the kind, which Labour intends to use as a basis for its foreign policy. Without a clear framework, Labour's policy for Northern Ireland will veer first one way and then an other. So-called confidence building measures designed to entice Sinn Fein into peaceful politics could alarm Unionists, possibly leading to further community tension.

Does Labour, like the Conservatives before it, lack a coherent approach because Northern Ireland presents unique difficulties? Far from it. Since the demise of the USSR in 1989 there have been minority problems within many countries. Many of these countries now wish to join the European Union (and NATO) but before doing so, stability within each country is required.

It is thus obvious why there has been a sudden revival of interest in minority rights protection within Europe. An established body of international law and practice has evolved to deal with them.

These principles began to be developed via the United Nations from 1945. Today the Council of Europe, an intergovernmental body comprising 40 states, (including all major European States) has established the most effective means to ensure compliance with human rights. Building upon all previous international law, the Council published, in 1995, the means by which minorities can be protected.

At the heart of the matter is a principle common to all international law, namely that accommodation of different groups must be done within the limits of existing borders, unless all parties involved agree to a change in the border. In short, current borders are protected but this must be complemented by genuine efforts to build confidence and promote equality among different groups within a State.

The concept of 'parity of esteem' between two groups within a State has been widely debated. The council of Europe's position is clear. There is nothing to prevent persons

belonging to a minority from establishing and maintaining free and peaceful contact across borders with those whom they share a cultural or ethnic identity. It does not extend, however, to trans-border political linkages.

Using the above bases the International community is endeavouring to solve diversity among people within States. Such problems are similar to Northern Ireland in that there is often a neighbouring State with which the minority in the other State has an ethnic or cultural affinity.

Bosnia has been Europe's most violent and divisive situation since the Second World War. In order to try to progress to peace the full force of the international community has implemented the human rights principles stated above. The process of reconciliation is slow and without international political commitment it would probably be non-existent. The key point to note is that international action is based on the principles of protecting borders and promoting co-operation within.

Though not nearly as extreme in outcome, such minority problems are many. For example, there is a large Hungarian minority in Slovakia as well as a Slovak minority in Hungary. Estonia has a large Russian minority. All these countries are endeavouring to solve their problems in line with the agreed principles laid down by the Council of Europe.

Other examples are the Swedish-speaking Finnish in Finland and the indigenous Sami people in Norway. In both cases minority rights are now fully recognised. In 1992 a long-running dispute between Austria and Italy was settled. The Austrian community in the South Tyrol region of Italy has now achieved full parity of esteem with the Italian community. This is within a framework of self-government established in line with accepted principles of government in other parts of Italy. Austria then gave a declaration that the dispute between the two countries over the South Tyrol was at an end.

Most of the above cases are like Northern Ireland in that a large minority borders a state to which the minority feels culturally close. In each case there has been no border change.

The possibility of conflict has usually been avoided by keeping expectation of changes to being within the already existing borders. In Northern Ireland the exact opposite has been the case.

By pointing up the importance of human rights the Labour party, by its own admission, is trying to restore trust in the way we are governed. 'New Labour' compared with 'Old Labour', presents the opportunity of a new beginning.

Against the wider European background and, considering Labour's declared aims, how the participants should respond in the 'talks' that have re-started this week needs to be examined.

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