

# Minority protection pact 'will help us'

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The United Kingdom government last week agreed to implement a European Convention to protect minorities within the United Kingdom. Though largely unnoticed, this represents potentially the most significant development to help resolve our present difficulties.

The Convention, coming into force on 1<sup>st</sup> February, is the first legally binding European agreement on this subject.

The intensification within Europe concerning minority protection has arisen primarily because of greater instability after the demise of USSR influence. The mind turns immediately to the former Yugoslavia, but minority problems also exist, for example, in Slovakia, Romania, the Baltic countries and, for a long period, in Italy.

The Council of Europe - comprising 40 European states - prepared the Convention in order to make a contribution towards peace and stability within Europe.

The Council (January 1995) described a 'national minority' as a group of persons within a state "who display distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics" and "are motivated by a concern to preserve together that which constitutes their common identity". They are also to be "sufficiently representative, although smaller in number than the rest of the population of that state or a region of that state". The problems of Northern Ireland are clearly not unique within Europe.

Some of the principles in the Convention are as follows: freedom of peaceful assembly and religion; access to the media for national minorities in order to promote tolerance and to permit cultural pluralism; usage of personal names in the minority language; the right to display minority language signs of a private nature visible to the public; the right to use freely and without interference his or her minority language, in private and in public, orally and in writing; and the right to display traditional names such as street names in the minority language where there is sufficient demand.

In addition, the Convention supports persons belonging to a minority establishing and maintaining free and peaceful contact across borders with those whom they share a cultural or ethnic identity. Though encouraging trans-border co-operation, it does not extend to trans-border political institutions: it stresses respect for the political independence of States.

It encourages the development of real equality within a state. All should have effective participation in the political decision-making process within a decentralised form of government.

Central to the Convention is a principle common to all international law, 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. It contradicts completely the government's 'Frameworks Document'.

Within one year of implementation, the UK government must present to the Council of Europe a report indicating how it has implemented the principles contained in the Convention.

The new UK government has taken a first step towards following the true European model of reconciliation between different groups within a state. For the first time a UK government has seemingly recognised what is appropriate. All should accept these principles.

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