

Unionists wish for rights accepted world-wide

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Unionism's vision in the current Talks process is clear and its message simple: we wish for the same rights, same stability and same principles of government that operate elsewhere in the democratic world. We wish unionist and nationalist to participate fully at all levels in the government of Northern Ireland. We wish to convince nationalists that there can be a fair deal for all in Northern Ireland.

In addition, we wish to see practical co-operation between the UK's regions and the Republic of Ireland on matters that are of mutual benefit (the on-going authority for this co-operation involving Northern Ireland to come from a NI assembly).

There is much to commend the 'Council of the British Isles': 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 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 first recognised by way of government institutions.

These are the realities that will help most to bring success to the Talks, but success will continue to elude us if nationalism persists with demands that are both unreasonable and unrealistic.

John Hume has made the SDLP's position clear: his party demands new institutions to provide "political expression of the Irish identity of nationalists". The Taoiseach has said that the North-South Ministerial Council will "have executive implementation"; "stand alone"; and be "subordinate to nothing". Without this joint authority, nationalists insist there will be no agreement.

Unionists, as the majority in Northern Ireland, are unable to accept this joint authority. Although unionists fully respect minority rights, it is also true that majorities have rights. In particular, they possess the right to maintain the territorial integrity and political independence of the state in which they live.

At the heart of the matter 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 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.

Unionists fully recognise the democratic right of nationalists to campaign for a united Ireland, while at the same time absolutely rejecting the validity of their argument. The problem is that seemingly the Irish Government is determined that the nationalist aspiration be given expression within the structures of government, despite the failure of nationalism to win the political argument.

The view that nationalism and unionism are equal is fundamentally flawed since both nationalism and unionism have entirely different bases in law. The existing position that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom is fully accepted in international law. Nationalists' goal of a united Ireland is nothing more than a political aspiration: without the support of Northern Ireland's majority, its legitimacy is accepted by no democratic government anywhere.

The attitude of attempting to fudge this basic difference in legitimacy goes to the heart of current attempts to find a political way forward.

Nationalists also wish that the North-South body has no limit imposed on the nature and extent of its 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 nationalists.

Nationalism's viewpoint derives from its perception that the partition of Ireland was both illegal and unjust. They 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 EU 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 EU membership.

Nationalism does not, however, have a case. Yet the whole Northern Ireland community has suffered for years because nationalism has not, to date, settled our difficulties by accepting governmental structures which are applied to similar situations elsewhere in the democratic world.

I ask nationalism to take a small step back on cross-border co-operation: withdraw the precondition that executive authority reside at the all-Ireland level. The result would be a giant leap forward towards finding a durable political settlement.

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.

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 cannot be contemplated.

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