

# Responsibilities and challenges facing 'positive unionism'

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Unionism today faces formidable pressure to concede on principles which are fundamental not only to Unionism, but to international law and practice. The Nationalist position has not altered in 25 years and appears to show no willingness to compromise.

Events such as 'The Anglo-Irish Agreement' and 'The Frameworks Document' have been seen as a one-way process. This challenge must be met by Unionists not only with determination and resolve but also with a clear and positive vision of the future.

The problem with unionism has not been the lack of vision but how to realise it. Unionists more often agree on what they do not want than on a simple policy detailing what they do want. Yet, clearly the Union will not be preserved by social disobedience or a 'unionist' terrorist campaign.

If the Union is lost, it will be lost by Unionists, rather than taken by Nationalists. Though the task facing Unionism seems extremely difficult, the approach to the solution is clear.

Firstly, the new Labour government has the key responsibility. It already has made proposals to incorporate into UK law the 'European Convention on Human Rights', which it views as a valuable step in protecting basic human rights.

It needs to go further for Northern Ireland by ratifying and implementing the 1995 'Convention for the Protection of Minorities'. This could best be done by incorporation into a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Both conventions, developed by the Council of Europe, conform to the 'European model' for solving the problems of a divided society. Since introduction in 1995, countries such as Estonia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia have already ratified the convention: the question to London is, why are you delaying?

The Dublin government's role is also clear. Dublin, along with London, is the joint sponsor for the talks process. However, Dublin's only interest permitted by the Council of Europe, is to ensure that good government is established in Northern Ireland.

It cannot have 'a say' in the Northern Ireland government nor try to impose an all-Ireland administration.

This is unambiguously clear. Territorial integrity and political independence of states is accepted as a fundamental principle of international law, in order to preserve (or

secure) peace and stability. Northern Ireland is no different from any other part of Europe.

With the right to statehood protected, come responsibilities; the building of confidence is required. Unionists must convince Nationalists that there can be a fair deal for all within Northern Ireland - that they can have a stake in Northern Ireland and play an important role at each level of government.

Equally Nationalists must convince Unionists that they will work within the institutions of government in Northern Ireland. This is where the real confidence building is required. Only when such confidence is developed can genuine cross-border co-operation develop.

The Council of Europe has devised the most detailed measures of any international body aimed at giving confidence to a minority within a State. These include cultural, linguistic, educational and religious rights.

Confidence within and between both communities can occur. New Labour must provide devolution for Northern Ireland akin to what is proposed for Scotland and Wales, alongside the implementation of a composite Bill of Rights.

Unionism's position is clear. Politically, we need to wipe away all the negative impression of our arguments. We say yes to participation in government at all levels by all constitutional parties; and in turn, yes to full co-operation with our nearest neighbour, the Dublin government, on matters of mutual benefit.

The vision is clear and the message simple; we say yes to the same rights, same stability and same principles of government - including structures of government to accommodate minorities - that operate elsewhere in the democratic world.

This is the projection of a strong positive argument for Unionism. It is not a triumph of Protestant over Catholic but rather the triumph of logic and reason over narrow-minded dogma. To be positive and at the same time rigorously defend the Union is not a contradictory position – we can and must do both.

This 'European model', though it may not be advocated by all, can surely command high acceptability. A Labour party document, published in December 1996, wished for the “development of a distinct package of rights” for Northern Ireland. This package already exists and thus progress to stability should be made quickly.

The United Nations Vienna Declaration (1993) declared that the population of a sovereign State has a right to democracy. Government must act and provide that democracy. If therefore there is no progress soon in the talks it is the government's responsibility to provide accountable democracy in Northern Ireland.

**Dermot Nesbitt**