

Central problem is wrestling with national identities

Belfast Telegraph - 15th January 1998

The political pace is now about to gather momentum: we have had the Heads of Agreement paper from the UK and Irish governments endeavouring to plan a political way forward.

In addition, this week's Belfast Telegraph opinion poll gives a likely indication of the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland, including the importance of a Bill of Rights that guarantees equality for all.

Against this background local politicians will endeavour to resolve our problems where communal identity and allegiance do not coincide with the State. There are other aspects to this problem, but they are only a dimension of this central problem of conflicting national identities.

However, we are not alone: there are many other European states which are wrestling with conflicting national identities. Democrats throughout Europe accept that the foundations for peace, justice and stability are best maintained by effective democracy and a common understanding and observance of human rights.

In practice - and for new countries wishing to be considered for membership - the following principles are applied by the European Union. Where there is aggressive nationalism the EU expects current borders to be respected by way of the institutions of government.

Where there is dissension within a region of a state regarding the validity of that state, autonomous regional government is developed and institutions are expected to be created within that state in order to protect all ethnic groupings. Where there is tension and a lack of trust across borders within Europe, co-operation is encouraged and expected to be built up slowly from the base of already existing, and functioning, regional government.

Where there are States that have an ethnic affinity with a group of people in a neighbouring state, their only interest is to ensure that their kin flourish under conditions of good government in that neighbouring state, not to have a say in its government.

These fundamental democratic rights and freedoms are being advocated and applied both fairly and equally, on the same footing and with the same emphasis, elsewhere in modern Europe. It remains to be seen over the coming weeks whether or not they will also be applied to Northern Ireland.

Though the proposals by the two governments contain ambiguities, they do have the potential to provide for structures of government in Northern Ireland in line with practice elsewhere in Europe.

In essence: a stable border; an assembly for Northern Ireland which would enable political trust and confidence to be developed; and, in turn, the fostering of mutually beneficial cross-border co-operation, the on-going authority for this co-operation coming from the Assembly.

Unionism's response to these proposals is positive and our message simple: we wish for the same rights, the same stability and the same principles of government that operate elsewhere in the democratic world, including structures to allow full - and equitable – participation by all constitutional parties.

Further, we wish to see practical co-operation among the UK's regions and the Republic of Ireland on matters that are of mutual benefit. 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. Also, the economies of scale within a unit of sixty million people will always be greater than those within a unit of five million.

However, Irish nationalists' emphasis is different: they wish for a clear all-Ireland political expression of their identity which, translated, means a North-South body to determine policy on an all- Ireland basis. They would wish this body to have ever-increasing significant responsibilities and functions enabling progress towards their ultimate goal.

Yet, 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 nationalism.

One can readily accept today that borders have ceased to be as important as they were in the past. However, co-operation across borders has only succeeded where participating states accept the existing internationally determined borders. Borders only decrease in importance when they are first recognised by way of government institutions.

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

Dermot Nesbitt