

A NEW SYSTEM OF NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS

An Alliance Paper

27 October 1997

A NEW SYSTEM OF NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS

- Our proposals for arrangements for North-South co-operation are necessarily based on our views on constitutional issues, already set out in a previous paper, and on our thinking on Strand 1 issues, in which we envisage a responsibility-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly with a wide range of powers, as the key element.

It is difficult to proceed far in identifying any possible Strand 2 structures without establishing a degree of clarity about Strand 1 structures, because any effective North-South co-operation will have to be based on those structures, and on the structures of governance in the Irish Republic. We find it difficult to envisage effective co-operation between institutions which are not at least broadly similar in their shape and scope.

The central issue for us in any North-South arrangements is democratic accountability. Any cross-border institutions must be based on, and answerable to, democratic structures in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, notwithstanding the differences between a devolved government and a sovereign government. Without democratic accountability any such arrangements would be liable to generate suspicion, distrust and resentment, and not only on one side of the border. Arrangements in both Strand 1 and Strand 2 must therefore be such as to provide a proper role for all elected parties who wish to take part, and are prepared to shoulder their responsibilities.

TRIPARTITE COUNCIL

Given the wider context within which North-South co-operation would take place, and given that very significant powers, notably in defence, customs and excise, international relations, and in some wider economic matters, would remain primarily the responsibility of the Westminster parliament and the British government, we would propose that there should be a tri-partite structure involving the British government, the Irish government, and a new Northern Ireland administration, to ensure consultation and co-operation on matters of common concern. This would replace, or extend the current Inter-Governmental Conference.

An expanded inter-parliamentary body, involving representatives from Westminster, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Dail, and building upon the current Inter-Parliamentary body should also be part of this wider framework.

NORTH-SOUTH STRUCTURES

Any new North-South structures should operate within the context of that broader framework, so as to maximise communication and co-operation, but North-South elements of the conference would meet separately on matters which were particularly within the remit of the Northern and Southern administrations.

North-South institutions would involve, at different levels, those exercising executive responsibility in the two jurisdictions, civil servants, and inter-parliamentary contacts, and would promote consultation, co-operation and even, where appropriate and agreeable to both sides, harmonisation, in respect of particular areas falling within the competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Dail.

Areas particularly suitable for *co-operation* might include economic development, tourism, agriculture, environmental protection, health care especially in border areas, and in respect of high specialist equipment or techniques and training, and cultural and sporting affairs. Different areas of co-operation might require different institutional arrangements and mechanisms, for example, work referring only to border areas co-operation, or the development of a Belfast-Dublin economic corridor, need not be all-island in their remit.

Areas such as animal health, anti-drug programmes and other areas of preventative health may be suitable for consideration of *harmonisation* of standards.

Other important areas, notably EC affairs and the development of the border areas might also require cross-departmental arrangements within, as well as between, North and South. In all areas the reality of the benefits of North-South co-operation need to live alongside the other reality of North-South competition, not least in areas such as tourism and inward investment.

FORMAL STRUCTURES

In any event some wider co-ordinating structure will be needed to ensure co-ordination and to ensure the widest practical involvement and support from the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Meetings should be on a regular basis, between the co-ordinating body, respective Heads of Department or Ministers, or inter-departmental Committees as appropriate.

Such structures would provide for consultation and the exchange of information, and where practical, for the development of common strategies and programmes.

Civil servants from each jurisdiction could provide back-up in the form of research, reports and recommendations.

Any decision could only be on the basis of full agreement, and would be implemented separately in each jurisdiction by the relevant Head of Department or Minister after appropriate consultations.

There could be a permanent secretariat in which officials from each jurisdiction would be represented, remaining answerable to their respective jurisdictions.

While the most fruitful areas of co-operation would clearly be those kinds of areas over which the Northern Ireland Assembly would have direct powers, consultation

and discussion might usefully cover much wider areas, such as Irish Government policy in various fields.

- Structures of the kind suggested here should be capable of flexibility and development. The essential governing features must be the establishment of goodwill, co-operation, mutual respect and, eventually, trust.