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Ulster Democratic Party

A Council of the British Isles

The suggestion of addressing East-West relations through a Council of the British Isles is not new. In fact, the **Ulster Democratic Party** proposed the establishment of such a Council to deal with the relationships between the peoples of these islands already in 1990. Our proposal was a sound basis for a comprehensive settlement eight years ago, and remains so today.

Indeed, the establishment of a Council of the British Isles has gained increased relevance with the Labour Government's devolution plans as well as the on going process of European integration as it embodies the notion of regionalism. Regionalism recognises regional diversity while, at the same time, focuses on broader regional commonality superseding parochialism. Moreover, it increases regional and local participation in decision-making.

The British Isles are particularly well suited as a unit for such co-operation. They are sufficiently large and diverse in order provide for a dynamic other than British-Irish and nationalist-unionist, but, at the same time, sufficiently small and geographically separate to constitute a natural unit for co-ordinating policies vis-à-vis continental Europe. A co-ordinating body such as a Council of the British Isles consequently makes sense.

The UDP's 1996 document 'Council of the British Isles: A Proposal for Meaningful Co-operation' outlined the following principles which must be observed by any proposed model:

- It must observe the principle of subsidiarity.
- It must not create supranational bodies.
- It must be based on the principle of consent.
- All structures and decision-making must be transparent and accountable.
- Decisions must be unanimous.

The **Ulster Democratic Party** still considers these principles vital for the establishment of a Council of the British Isles.

Good Regional Relations

A friendly and co-operative relationship with the Republic of Ireland is desirable to enhance the economic, social and political status of the British Isles. The **Ulster Democratic Party** advocates such a relationship on the basis of mutual advantage, transparency, and accountability. In essence this means that regional co-operation must be driven by economics and pragmatism rather than nationalism.

A Council of the British Isles can only be successful if the conditions for its establishment are right:

- Any comprehensive settlement must be preceded by the successful resolution of relations within Northern Ireland.
- The Irish Republic's claim to territory and jurisdiction over Northern Ireland as embodied in Articles 2 & 3 must be unequivocally removed before establishing a Council of the British Isles in order to ensure equality for all member regions.
- The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement will be replaced by a more broadly based agreement.

The Council of the British Isles

The **Ulster Democratic Party** proposes the establishment of a Council of the British Isles comprised of the elected representatives in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands, and the Republic of Ireland. In the case

of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland the representatives would be elected members of the devolved assemblies or parliaments.

There are many models for a Council of the Isles. One which has found considerable favour is based on the Nordic Council. The Nordic Council consists of three Monarchies, two Republics, and three autonomous regions, some within the EC others outside, with numerous languages and cultures. They share a common history of both co-operation and conflict. But they have come together to co-operate to share knowledge and experience.

The UDP proposes a Council of British Isles, hereafter referred to as the Council, consisting of two bodies:

- 1) An Executive Council comprised of elected representatives from the governing bodies of Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Isles. The total number of representatives is to be agreed upon by the constituent members. Representatives will be either from the respective assemblies or parliaments, or nominated by various government offices for non-devolved regions.
- 2) A Regional Council comprised of MPs, MEPs or local councillors. The numbers would be suitably proportionate to the population.

Both bodies of the Council would be supported by a secretariat, the budget for which will be drawn from the constituent members.

- The purpose of the Council of the British Isles is to deal with the totality of relationships within these islands.
- The Council shall serve as a forum for debate, consultation, co-ordination, and co-operation for all constituent elements of the British Isles.

- The composition of the Council shall be augmented by specialists and independent consultants when the Council deems necessary.
- The Council would operate on the basis of unanimity in order to ensure equality for all regions represented.
- The Council's role, however, is advisory only. Like the North-South Ministerial Council (see UDP paper on North-South Structures) the Council of the British Isles shall not have any executive powers. Executive, budgetary, and legislative authority will rest with the respective institutions of governance.
- The Council as a whole shall meet on a quarterly basis. Additional meetings between two or more of the Council's constituent members may also be convened. The North-South Ministerial Council, for example, would function within this framework.
- Bilateral or multilateral meetings are restricted to discussion only. Policy recommendations for particular regions must be dealt with by all representatives of that region. Executive, budgetary, and legislative authority, however, will rest with the respective assemblies or parliaments, and in some cases Westminster with regards to non-devolved issues.
- The Council as a whole also does not have executive powers, decisions agreed upon must be deferred to the respective assemblies or parliaments for ratification.

Remit and Responsibilities of the Council

There are many issues which can be dealt with on a regional basis. Indeed, it does not make sense to address these issues purely on a North-South basis as trade, labour and migration within the British Isles moves East-West rather than North-South. A Council of the British Isles would recognise these existing realities.

Issues which can be addressed within the framework of the British Isles include:

Agriculture & Fisheries:

- rural development
- animal health
- plant health
- research and training

Crime Prevention:

- drugs
- terrorism

Environment:

- pollution control
- waste management
- wildlife conservation

Education:

- mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications
- students with special needs

EU Programmes:

- co-operation in the implementation of European health and safety policy

Health:

- food safety
- medical emergency planning

Industrial and Trade matters:

- trading standards
- development of indigenous industries
- inward investment
- promotion of tourism
- research

Labour:

- migration
- training
- professional standards
- equal opportunities
- industrial safety
- labour law

Social Welfare:

- portability of pensions
- unemployment
- social security

Transport

- road, rail, air, and sea links

While it makes sense to address these issues in the broader framework of the British Isles, the remit of the Council of the Isles should be limited by the economic, social and cultural needs of its members. In short, regional co-operation is designed to address specific issues on a case by case basis rather than take on a political life of its own.

Relations with other Institutions

As Strand 3 is an integral part of the overall political settlement, relations between the Council of the British Isles and the other newly created institutions as well as Europe must be outlined.

1. *The Northern Ireland Assembly*

- Representatives to the Council will be selected from within the Assembly. This dual role will ensure the democratic input by the Assembly into the Council. Conversely, council decisions will be relayed to the Assembly by the designated representatives for debate and ratification.
- Executive, budgetary, and legislative authority will rest with the Northern Ireland Assembly, as detailed in the UDP's position paper 'A Northern Ireland Assembly'.

2. *The North-South Ministerial Council*

- The North-South Ministerial Council shall be fully integrated into the framework of the Council of the British Isles.
- Like other bilateral meetings it will serve as a forum of discussion only. Executive, budgetary, and legislative authority will rest with the respective assemblies and parliaments.

3. *Europe*

- Relations with the EU will remain the responsibility of the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland respectively.

- The Council of the British Isles will, however, be able to make recommendations on EU policy in close co-ordination with the UK's and Irish Republic's offices in Brussels.