

Ideas on development of NIWC position for Think Tank consideration

The following sets out a short synopsis of a variety of ideas and positions we have discussed recently. It includes the development of ideas already agreed and some new ideas which the think Tank might like to consider. It should be read alongside the NIWC March 6 paper which was presented to the US (Jim Steinberg) at a meeting on Tuesday and the UK and Irish Governments on Wednesday.

1) Record of Understanding

This idea follows discussions with Rolf Mayer and is particularly appropriate because it was used following the break-down of agreement in South Africa in 1992. The NIWC paper (March 6) explains the detail and sets out a draft which was submitted to Senator Mitchell during the Review process. In essence, we are asking parties to use the statements published by Sinn Féin and the UUP in November as the starting point and move to a collective pro-agreement position which will serve to clarify the common objective of all pro-agreement parties.

2) Implementation Committee

Recognising that the implementation of the Agreement involves much more than the narrow issues of decommissioning and devolution, the NIWC has called for the creation of a pro-agreement Implementation Committee to review the workings of the GFA in its entirety. It would meet on a regular basis, in times of crisis and calm, and focus on long term as well as short term problem solving. The aim is to produce a more managed forum and allow for more regular and more constructive contacts between the pro-agreement parties on an on-going basis. The Committee could be chaired by the First and Deputy First Ministers and involve the British and Irish Governments (if considered appropriate). It would work in parallel with the IICD and have linkages to it.

Agenda items could include reviewing progress on the Criminal Justice Review, the Bill of Rights, the Patten proposals, the Equality provisions and the establishment and workings of all Institutions (including the Civic Forum, the North/South and East/West elements and decision making within the Assembly). It should also review progress on other elements of the Agreement including provision for victims and the promotion of reconciliation at all levels of society.

3) Involvement of Civic Society

The NIWC believes that civic society has a vital role to play in supporting the efforts of the political parties to achieve social, economic and political stability. The opportunity to channel the voices of civic society into the process through the creation of a Civic Forum and a North/South Consultative Forum was lost during the period of devolution because it was not seen as one of the priorities for action. This, we believe was a serious mistake. We are now calling for both institutions to be set up (albeit in shadow form) to allow progress to be made in this area and to provide civic support for the current attempts to move the process forward. The NIWC is also calling for support to be provided for the creation of a Public Implementation Committee to facilitate broad public and cross-party debate on these issues (similar to the Opsahl Commission).

4) Devolution

The NIWC believes that the devolved government experience worked well, particularly in its ability to bring pro-agreement and anti-agreement parties together to discuss issues of common concern. The experience of the operation of the Assembly and the Assembly Committees was a valuable confidence building exercise between parties and at the level of public opinion. The suspension of devolved Government has broken down that confidence and created a damaging vacuum which must be filled as soon as possible. The NIWC does not believe that the formation of an Executive is the gift of any one party. It is the shared responsibility of all parties to work collectively to create the right conditions to facilitate the return of devolved government as a matter of urgency.

5) Decommissioning

The NIWC believes the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms should happen but that it must be a voluntary act. We do not believe that the imposition of deadlines facilitates this process. We are concerned that any fixation on deadlines will only serve to frustrate the process further. We believe that the integrity of the IICD to carry out its mandate should not be compromised. We commend those paramilitary organisations which are continuing their contacts with the IICD and we call on others to return to, or enter into, discussions with the IICD. The NIWC also believes that the return to normal peace-time security levels should move in parallel with the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. This includes the 'normalisation' of army and police presence in heavily militarised areas and a reduction in the number of legally held weapons. To this end we are calling for the immediate introduction of the Dunblane legislation.

6) Analysis of the Republican and Unionist position

In its statement on November 16, Sinn Fein said it "has a total and absolute commitment to pursue our objectives by exclusively peaceful and democratic means..". In its statement on the same day, the UUP said it was "committed to securing equality and mutual respect for all elements of our diverse culture". Both statements echo "deep regret" for the suffering of all people and both statements call on the parties to work together to achieve the common goals of "co-operation and accommodation" (SF) "cooperation, reconciliation and mutual respect" (UUP)

The starting point for any analysis of these positions must be to accept the word of both. Looking for deeds from either side to prove commitment only results in side-taking, point-scoring and blame-gaming which is detrimental to the process. The commitment, by both parties' leadership, to work together collectively and constructively to achieve these goals must, therefore, be taken at face value. Difficulties undoubtedly arise when the broader constituency of Unionism and Republicanism is taken into account.

This is particularly the case for broader unionism, because it contains very large and very vocal elements which are totally opposed to the objectives of the Good Friday Agreement. This group is, for the most part, outside UUP party control, although an element is gaining strength within the UUP. It is, however, also the case for broader Republicanism which also contains an active element which is opposed to the GFA and the question of how much influence SF has over these elements must also be raised.

The problems facing the leadership of both the UUP and SF in their attempts to bring their constituencies with them should be regarded as a mirror image and are reflected in both parties difficulties to persuade their constituencies to support them in their efforts to implement both the letter and spirit of the Agreement.

Both Adams and Trimble are restricted in moving too far too fast because they are aware that it is more important to keep their 'hard-liners' on board than leave them behind. Both leaders are attempting to move their separate constituencies out of the 'dark ages' and into an inclusive future together and this can only be done through a process of mutual recognition of difficulties a mutual agreement to help each other.

While the common objectives are peace and political stability, based on equality and democracy, consideration must also be given to the separate constitutional objectives and the legitimate right to hold these objectives. The consent principle has been accepted by all pro-agreement parties. This means that all these parties accept that Northern Ireland remains part of the UK and they accept United Ireland, if that is the democratic will of the people.

In the political pursuit of their constitutional objectives, Unionists and Republicans should become more aware of the need for support from outside their constituencies as well as from within. If Republicans and Nationalists want to secure support for a United Ireland, they should attempt to attract Protestant voters. At the same token, Unionists should attempt to attract Catholic voters for support for the UK position.

This use of 'persuasion', which has been alluded to many times in the past, will only work if the Protestant or Catholic voter is persuaded that his or her best interests will be served in any similar or new constitutional arrangement. A measure of the success of the Good Friday Agreement will be the ability of Unionists, Nationalists, Loyalists and Republicans to win votes from each other. The PUPs have already shown some solid new movement in that direction.