

FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

POLITICAL STRUCTURES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

DEMOCRATIC LEFT STATEMENT BY PROINSIAS DE ROSSA TD

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The British Government's proposals for the internal governance of Northern Ireland have so far received little attention. It is claimed that it builds on the agreement reached between the parties up to the 1992 talks. If so, one wonders why so few of those subscribing parties have shown the slightest interest in its contents. Does this perhaps, reflect an unwillingness to address that part of the settlement without which there is no settlement?

While most parties around this table accept that an internal agreement alone is not sufficient, is there anyone here who believes that a settlement is possible *without* an internal agreement?. An answer to this question is necessary because failure to answer by those of us participating in this Forum will confirm unionist fears that this whole process has only one possible outcome: a United Ireland.

Even the most die-hard unionists accept that the Union that was constructed in 1921 has gone forever. This is not only because of the collapse of the internal functioning of the Northern Ireland state but also because of the nature of change in the Britain itself. The old Imperial Power is a thing of the past. It has been replaced by a struggling democracy, an equal partner among others in EU. The nature of British society is changing; the monarchy is in danger of collapse; the multi-cultural and ethnic nature of its citizenry is increasingly evident.

It is against this background that Northern Ireland unionists have to construct a new relationship with Britain and the Republic of Ireland. It is evident that it cannot be constructed on past prejudices. If a new Northern Ireland is to emerge as a positive political gain after years of conflict then it will have very distinguishing characteristics that might also usefully be adopted by the Republic and Britain itself.

- It must be pluralistic: it must command the allegiance of both Ulster unionists and Northern nationalists: not as a repository of dreams and illusions but as a ~~compromise~~ between total integration and unification. It must leave space for, and indeed foster, the development of other political identities - in particular the emerging Third Strand ~~which~~

has been suffocated by sectarian politics but which will play a crucial role in the development of democratic politics in Northern Ireland. The Third Strand comprises those individuals, groups and parties who do not subscribe to either unionism or nationalism and whose political motivation stems from intellectual conviction rather than religious background. It is not a party but a movement for pluralism. It is Democratic Left's view that a strong Third Strand is the key to a democratic Northern Ireland.

- It must be participative. Every citizen must feel that the state belongs to them and is not simply the construct of political elites.
- It must allow for future generations being able to improve upon our best efforts; it must in itself be a vehicle for change.

Set against these criteria, the Framework document disappoints. Northern Ireland is to be governed by 'more of the same' type of legislative assembly as exists elsewhere. That will not do. Furthermore, the notion that the good governance of Northern Ireland can be handed over to three persons is alien to our concept of democracy.

There has so far been a deafening silence on the internal proposals. The system of governance by quangoism and quangocrats which all parties, ours included, complain about but serve on continues. While some will certainly survive at least the fledgling years of an Assembly, others will not. How are these to be selected and disposed of?

Democratic Left welcomes the recommendation of weighted majority voting for an Assembly as a progressive measure that moves us away from simple majoritarianism and towards pluralism. But more important is the need for structures to facilitate political participation that builds on the merits of civil society demonstrated during the past twenty-five years. Second chambers have their uses: they do not all have to be as awful as the House of Lords. While a Northern Ireland Assembly might not have the full range of parliamentary powers it will nevertheless exist in a unique European context and therefore indigenous solutions may well be the most relevant and apt, not those imported from, or modelled on, actual existing parliaments.

Northern Ireland should have a second chamber. Not a talking shop but a positive means of giving expression to those who have held civil society together when Northern Ireland walked a thin line between collapse into anarchy and communal strife and hanging together by the threads of human decency.

Democratic Left proposes a second chamber as an essential and meaningful body to encourage participation in political life and to take political life to the public. Such a body would, we suggest, in the first instance, comprise various sectoral interests such as women, community and voluntary groups, youth, agriculture, business, trade unions, further and higher education, district councils. Those to be elected from such panels would be so elected on the same basis as directly elected members. There could be a restriction on someone serving more than two consecutive terms to allow for new faces, new ideas. It should have a strict gender quota to positively encourage more female participation in politics. Its remit would be to review the work of the Assembly, perhaps organising debates and discussions on matters arising from its own area of interests, initiating legislative proposals and perhaps undertaking many of the administrative functions now undertaken by Area Boards. Whatever its potential shortcomings it certainly offers a more democratic option than the three sober suited males which is proposed in the British document.

In conclusion, both framework documents send conflicting messages about a Bill of Rights. There is a world of difference between a Charter and a Bill which provides legislatively enforceable rights. While the Forum awaits the work of its own consultants on this matter it should be noted that this is the only area of political agreement within Northern Ireland. If Northern Ireland, having suffered both, can agree on common mechanism for resolution then Britain must accede while we in the Republic of Ireland should insist on these safeguards and prepare to live with the consequences in our own jurisdiction.