

SENATOR GORDON WILSON

Political Structures in Northern Ireland

I welcome the commitment to cross-community agreement and consensus expressed in the JFD and the British Government paper *Accountable Government in Northern Ireland* and I look forward to the day when we in Northern Ireland will control our own affairs. I believe that the Sunningdale agreement provided a good model for government in Northern Ireland. Perhaps it was too far ahead of its time. I note that in the present document the British Government states that new institutions should 'be innovative in the sense of learning from and not merely modelled on any previous arrangements'(para.3). They also say that these institutions should be 'workable in the sense of being as straightforward to operate as possible' (para.3).

While I accept that the British Government has had an extremely difficult task in trying to draw up a plan which would be agreeable to all sides I find once again that the structure described here is too large and therefore, I fear, unworkable. Like Sunningdale, it is perhaps attempting to do too much too soon.

It does not seem to take into account the structures that exist already in Northern Ireland, namely local councils and community organisations. There is a large gap between the present councils, which are virtually powerless, and the proposed assembly which is to have extensive and expanding power. In the absence

of real community involvement in local management there is a danger that the assembly would be as remote from the people as Westminster is.

There are many people in Northern Ireland who do not want any change in the present administration and who fear that any change will undermine them. They can only be persuaded by a gradual process of adjustment and any new institutions would have to be phased in, working from the bottom up through the present local authority structure.

Councils should be given more power and be required to adopt some form of power-sharing procedure, with weighted majority voting. Apart from improving community relations this will act as a proving ground for a new generation of politicians. They should also consult those organisations which have been working towards peace and reconciliation at community level, many of whom we have heard here. They have a valuable contribution to make, especially now when Northern Ireland is in a phase of transition.

The proposed assembly with its departments, committees and three person panel is too big and complicated to be imposed overnight. Even in the long-term its structure would work against efficient decision-making. We all have experience of sitting on committees and I think all would agree that every meeting involves a great deal of preparation and discussion and that resolutions are reached very slowly.

In my view it would be almost impossible to run a government department by committee. Besides, the range of duties imposed on the chairpersons of the committees places unrealistic demands on them. They are to chair these committees, act as heads of departments, sit on a general purposes committee and on the North/South institutions outlined in the JFD.

The three person panel (paras 18- 22) poses several difficulties and its scope is also unrealistic. The first difficulty is the suggestion that it might be comprised of people from one constituency (para. 5). This could hardly be representative of the whole of Northern Ireland and, given the nature of politics, would inevitably lean towards its own constituents thus fostering new divisions in our society.

The role of the panel as defined here combines procedural, legal and fiscal powers. Effectively, it would act as a second chamber, reviewing legislation, arbitrating public expenditure disputes and reviewing the procedures of the assembly. In addition it is to approve public appointments and draw up the list of nominations for chairpersons of the departmental committees. But, unlike a second chamber it does not refer these matters back to the first chamber, the assembly. It seems to hold ultimate power, depriving the assembly of real authority. Again, unlike a second chamber, it risks being dominated by personality rather than being tempered by debate.

In keeping with the principles of open democracy these decisions should be taken by the assembly, using a system of weighted majority voting. If this is not considered a sufficient safeguard then a proper second chamber should be created.

The paragraphs in this document on Rights (para.12) and Law and Order (paras 13 and 14) are fundamental to any new arrangement in Northern Ireland. These measures should be put in place immediately and not be delayed by discussion about the shape of future political institutions. Until human rights are secured, preferably by a Bill of Rights, and the police service wins the support of both communities in Northern Ireland, people there will not feel secure or confident enough to consider endorsing a new political order.