

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Ms Griffin
For file

Taoiseach
I take it this is a
D/Foreign Affairs
paper, as it develops, 90 DD, 18 JAN
then previous ideas slightly.
I support their view on the need
for prudence and restraint in this
area.

18-1-2000

General Approach

1. Given that the Northern Ireland situation has such a central place in the political business of the State, there is a case for an informed, representative Northern voice to be heard in the body politic here. This is to some degree already catered for in the appointment by successive governments over many years of prominent Northern persons, including politicians, among the Taoiseach's nominees to the Seanad. However, to date this has been very much an ad hoc process and, while valuable in itself, does not have the structured, balanced representative dimension that is required.

2. A range of proposals, including the right of Westminster MPs and Northern Assembly Members to take seats as of right in the Dáil, have been put forward. While there is a case for such proposals, on balance they are neither practical nor politically prudent, at least at this time.

3. It is particularly important that the careful balance of the Good Friday Agreement be maintained. In addressing the relationship between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Oireachtas, the Agreement provides that the Assembly and Oireachtas should "consider developing a joint parliamentary forum, bringing together equal numbers from both institutions for discussion of matters of mutual interest and concern". This recommendation is worthy of strong endorsement.

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Seanad

4. At the same time a representative Northern Ireland political voice could contribute in an important and significant manner to informing, and deepening the level of, debates in the Oireachtas, especially on Northern Ireland related issues. It would seem appropriate that this be channelled through the Seanad.

5. Given that devising arrangements for direct elections would be complex, one way of proceeding could be to increase the number of Taoiseach's nominees to the Senate from eleven to seventeen. These additional six seats should be set aside for Northern Irish representatives. This would in effect be a development and formalisation of the existing practice.

6. It would be vitally important that such additional Taoiseach's nominees be representative of the two traditions. To give effect to this, the Taoiseach of the day might consult with Northern political leaders and take their views fully on board. The resultant nominations could then be made on a basis which would reflect the proportionate strength of the parties. And if the parties representative of any one tradition declined to become involved, it would be important that other persons from that tradition should be selected.

7. The proposed expansion of the number of the Taoiseach's nominees from eleven to seventeen would require a constitutional amendment. The arrangements necessary to give effect to this should be initiated as soon as possible.

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Special Dáil Debates

8. The North/South Ministerial Council will play a significant role in the development of relationships on the island. Clearly, the lines of accountability will be between the relevant Ministers, North and South, and their respective parent legislatures. Nevertheless, the quality of consideration of North/South issues would be enhanced if Ministers, as members of the Council, had the capacity to address the legislature in the other jurisdiction.

9. Special Dáil debates (perhaps taking place in a Committee of the Whole) on the work of the North/South Ministerial Council could be arranged from time to time, with Northern Ireland Ministers being entitled to attend and speak. There could also be participation in relevant committees. (There would likewise be merit in the extension by the Assembly of reciprocal arrangements to involve Southern Members of the North-South Ministerial Council in its debates on issues addressed by the Council).

10. As an extension of the above, representatives of the Assembly parties could be invited, on a proportionate basis, to address other specially-convened Dáil debates on issues of an all-island nature.

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