

Sinn Fein MPs must not be allowed to speak in Dail

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I never cease to be amazed at the chasm in understanding of some nationalists towards the unionist position. I witness an Irish Government that is seemingly prepared to act both outside international law and against its own Constitution in order to placate the demands of aggressive nationalism. And then, as unionists, we are supposed to act as good neighbours.

Taoiseach, you are reputedly an excellent political operator. You probably believe that politics is the art of the possible. However, sometimes politics is a choice between the disastrous and the unpalatable. I suggest that speaking rights for Northern Ireland MPs in Dail Eireann is one such choice.

Let me be clear, I wish to see harmonious working relations within this island. Since I became involved in politics I have had a vision of an inclusive society in Northern Ireland, strongly supporting the 1974 power-sharing Executive. As a Minister I wholeheartedly participated in North/South co-operation. I still advocate positive political developments within this island, but only on the basis of agreed international norms.

Speaking rights seems an insignificant development, but it is an important litmus test. What is the Irish Government's view of good neighbourliness? I say to members of Dail Eireann: according to international law this development would represent interference in the domestic affairs of the UK.

Throughout the wider world, there is an accepted approach to dealing with national identity problems. We are not unique. International agreements define the rights of people within States and the obligations of States towards them.

Thirty years ago the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe adopted proposals for promoting better relations among States. Known as the Helsinki Final Act, it laid down principles that subsequent international agreements have followed. Importantly, it stipulated that States should refrain from "any intervention, direct or indirect, individual or collective, in the affairs falling within the domestic jurisdiction of another State."

To the Irish Government, I say: examine the Council of Europe's view of Poland's efforts to influence how other States treat their Polish minorities. Attempting to influence what other States should do was deemed unacceptable. How much more important is it that a neighbouring State does not take such responsibility upon itself? Examine the agreement reached between Hungary and Romania on the development of good neighbourliness.

Nor is this aspect confined to Eastern Europe. Examine the declaration between Austria and Italy concerning the South Tyrol. All these reflect the principle initially adopted in the 1975 Helsinki Act.

Put simply, the Irish Government would be in breach of its international obligations if it unilaterally succumbed to Sinn Fein's pressure to allow speaking rights in the Dail. As a member of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, surely Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern could not conclude differently?

Don't take my word for it: consider other evidence. The Downing Street Declaration considered how progress could be made in our relationships. The Irish Government said that it might establish a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in order "to make recommendations on ways in which agreement and trust between the two traditions in Ireland can be promoted and established."

The Forum met and commissioned studies. It asked Asbjorn Eide to consider human rights, describing him as "a leading international authority in the field of human rights". Sinn Fein always refers to the importance of this issue.

His study considered Ireland as an "outside minority-related" State in relation to Northern Ireland (i.e. having an Irish nationalist minority in Northern Ireland). He indicated that such States "must show respect for sovereign equality, territorial integrity and political independence of States" viewing this as a "principle basic to all international instruments in this field". Non-interference is clear.

Professors Boyle, Campbell and Hadden were also asked by the Forum to consider human rights. They made it clear that the human rights to be protected are agreed by international organisations. They are not "a matter for people in individual States to decide" nor should they be "subject to bargaining between the parties." Not only is non-interference clear but no government has any option in the matter.

Both studies considered the Council of Europe's National Minorities Convention to be particularly relevant to Northern Ireland. So does the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. What of this Council of Europe?

Ireland was one of the 10 founding States of the Council in 1949. It is the premier world body for the implementation of human rights, comprising 46 countries, including 21 from Central and Eastern Europe.

The Minority Convention aims to protect individuals within a State who form a particular cultural, linguistic, educational or religious group. There are millions within Europe in this category. Ireland has not declared the existence of a national minority within its jurisdiction although it applies the Convention to the Traveller community, which has a "special position". The UK applies the Convention to several declared minorities, including the Irish.

Individual States are responsible for implementing rights appropriate to their minorities and are accountable to the Council for implementation. No other State can interfere in this implementation. The Council has already reported on both Irish and

UK implementation recommending, respectively, better provision for Travellers and improvement of Irish language provision. It will monitor progress.

At the time of ratification of the Minority Convention the Irish Government stated: "...it is fitting that Ireland further demonstrates its belief in the Council of Europe and its standard setting work in human rights..." Fine words, but actions must match them. If you join a club, you must abide by the rules.

Where does this leave Irish nationalists and Sinn Fein in particular? It seeks "basic rights and entitlements". It sees no reason why Northern Ireland MPs "should not be afforded the opportunity to represent" their voters in the Dail. If this development occurs, it is completely outside international law, against Ireland's Constitution and makes a mockery of the Irish Government's commitment to the Council of Europe.

Where next, Taoiseach? This is not just about speaking rights but about the overall attitude of the Irish Government to good neighbourliness. Everyone knows that speaking rights is not the limit of Sinn Fein's vision for the future.

I am concerned that the Irish Government's approach indicates a willingness to accommodate Sinn Fein on this issue rather than to follow internationally agreed norms. As one whose party has taken huge unpalatable political risks to make progress, I say draw back from this Sinn Fein demand.

Subscribing to these international norms is unpalatable to many. However, forsaking them is potentially disastrous for good neighbourliness. Members of Dail Eireann, the choice is yours: choose wisely.

Dermot Nesbitt