

Learning lessons from Europe's crises could get Northern Ireland parties agreeing again

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Following the Assembly election, a former editor of the Belfast Telegraph, Edmund Curran, wrote: "Respect. That one word sums up the challenge posed by this election result." Sinn Fein's Michelle O'Neill stated: "I'm a very reasonable person and what I'm asking for is very reasonable. I'm asking for equality and respect."

Is Sinn Fein acting in a reasonable manner? Consider, for example, its constitution. Caoimhghin O Caolain wrote: "Sinn Fein candidates in Westminster elections are pledged not to 'sit in, nor take part in, the proceedings of the Westminster parliament'. That is because we believe the Westminster parliament has no right to legislate for any part of Ireland."

A reasonable question: does this demonstrate respect for the legal status of Northern Ireland?

Consider international law regarding 'respect'. The principle is clear. For example: the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Stability Pact states that one of its principles is "respect for internationally recognised frontiers".

The Council of Europe, comprising 47 member states, has developed the first legally binding convention for the protection of national minorities - a central problem in Northern Ireland - including, in the UK, the protection of Cornish, Irish, Scottish and Welsh people.

Protection of identity is wide-ranging, including ethnic, cultural, language and religious dimensions, and is provided "within the rule of law, respecting the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of states".

The Northern Ireland 'problem' is not unique. For example, there is a large Hungarian minority in the Slovak Republic, as well as a Slovak minority in Hungary. Estonia has a large Russian minority.

In 1992, a long-running dispute between Austria and Italy was settled. The Austrian community in the South Tyrol region of Italy achieved full parity of esteem with the Italian community. This was within a framework of self-government established in line with accepted principles of government in other parts of Italy.

Austria then made a declaration that the dispute between the two countries over the South Tyrol was at an end. All these countries have endeavoured to solve their problems in line with the agreed principles of international law, as laid down by the Council of Europe.

Michelle O'Neill has previously stated: "We're the only part of these islands that doesn't have a language act and all the other... Scotland and Wales even have language acts and still have a health service and a strong economy."

Others have referred to an Irish Language Act. Henry McDonald, writing in this paper, raised the issue of the Irish language deserving to be more than a bargaining chip, or a battering ram. He referred to Wales and also to Belgium, indicating that the present position here was "tawdry and tribal".

The right to have the Irish language recognised in the form of a separate Act, as advocated by the Council of Europe, is wholly acceptable, as far as is possible, and - more importantly - in accordance with international law.

However, it is also reasonable to ask that Sinn Fein complement its Irish language approach by respecting the national constitution and acting without prejudice to the territorial integrity of the UK - also in accordance with international law - as manifested, for example, in Scotland and Wales.

This would not deny the right to seek separation from the UK, as made clear in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

I believe that this is not a truculent unionist position, but rather a reasonable position that respects accepted international norms in a stable society that we all wish to achieve.

I have had a vision of an inclusive society ever since I was Brian Faulkner's election agent in the early 1970s, and was a strong supporter of the ill-fated power-sharing Executive of 1974.

I wish to see international norms implemented for the protection and development of all identities and cultures within Northern Ireland. I have no desire to define cultural identity and associated rights in a restrictive manner.

But, importantly, I wish to base decisions on international law that follows practices in the wider Europe. This takes any discussion away from 'local' arguments and provides a focus on what is needed to assist in moving towards a stable society when, hopefully, politicians can focus on the expressed needs of the whole community.

In a wider international setting, Sinn Fein has referred to international law. Aengus O Snodaigh TD, concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stated that Israel must "comply with international law".

Recently, Gerry Adams, in reference to President Trump's initial ban on entrants from some countries to the USA, stated that this ran "counter to international obligations".

However, it remains silent on obligations at home.

Others also have their part to play. The UK Government has disregarded its obligations to the Council of Europe. It has also failed to recognise the breadth of respect required in order to establish the rights of those who wish to see Irish identity promoted.

Irish identity is not at variance with Northern Ireland being part of the UK. With rights go responsibilities and when you are a member of a club, you are expected to accept and abide by the rules.

The leaders of unionism have an important part to play. The result of, for example, Arlene Foster using the crocodile metaphor will require an enormous effort by the DUP to build a more harmonious society. It will not be easy.

Eamonn Mallie, standing in Stormont's Great Hall during UTV's View from Stormont, stated: "What if Arlene shepherded, navigated, the Irish Language Act through this building? Wouldn't that be some gesture?"

I agree. However, gestures are also required from Sinn Fein.

Were all participants in the present talks to abide by international standards, progress would be made.

Indeed, it will only be by such a commitment in word and deed to those standards that we will obtain a truly stable society.

There are agreed international principles that balance majority rights and secure borders with minority rights and democratic inclusion. It is long past the time when they are accepted by all.

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