

**Social
Democrats**

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Northern Ireland and Irish Unity



Introduction

The 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement remains the cornerstone of policy of the People of Ireland for our own political future. This is a living and developing process through the St. Andrews Agreement (2006), Hillsborough Agreement (2010) and Stormont House Agreement (2015) “A Fresh Start” (which dealt with paramilitaries and peace walls but parked legacy issues).

The implementation of the agreement and its successors has been handicapped by subsequent events, in particular the application of the Northern Ireland Protocol. This, and the lack of impetus to develop and reform it to reflect a changing society and its new realities has suited the two dominant parties in Northern Ireland, to the detriment of smaller political parties (particularly those who decline to be identified as either Nationalist or Unionist).

Civil Society and non-party political organisations have also been left behind unless they fall into narrow definitions related to cross-border or cross-community. The Social Democrats will engage positively with all such groups to ensure that their voice is heard in the Republic of Ireland, which has a duty as guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. Such groups include service providers filling a void left by failures of government, trade unions, rights-based groups and others not currently represented.

Brexit and the repercussions have stimulated increased interest in a united Ireland, but we are still missing a roadmap for how to get there. Stronger arguments must be presented to persuade a majority to vote for it and people should be able to see a solid plan for what would happen after unification.

A united Ireland, achieved by consent has the real potential to benefit the people of the entire island economically, politically and culturally. We will therefore work towards achieving this in a spirit of mutual respect of and by the two parts of the island and based on a foundation of social democratic principles. In Government, we would support the creation of a Citizens’ Assembly on Irish Unity and the future of the island.

Supporting the unification of our island will be an important objective of the Social Democrats in government, and we will ensure any Programme for Government we negotiate will include deliverable commitments to advancing this project.

The Social Democrats believe:

- The Northern Ireland Protocol is integral to the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement as it avoids a hard border on the island of Ireland and safeguards the Good Friday Agreement. It is critical that the European Union and United Kingdom sustain a constructive working relationship to resolve challenges affecting Northern Ireland and deliver the best possible benefits for both society and the economy.
- A narrow political focus on marginally out-voting those currently in the majority to change the status quo, and the politicisation of cultural division (e.g. of the Irish language and institutionalised sectarianism at Stormont), reduces the prospect of the successful unification of people, and consequently of the island.
- The prospect of a Border Poll being held is welcome, once the conditions as set down in the Good Friday Agreement are met. There is, however, much that can be achieved to unite people before a border poll, such as focusing on cross border services and initiatives that can be mutually beneficial to both communities.
- A border poll without any clear indication of what is to happen afterwards could be viewed as purely a sectarian headcount and might also depress turnout. A Green Paper presented following comprehensive discussion with all stakeholders in advance of a Border Poll would be helpful to address the key challenges that will arise and serve to identify all available options to facilitate implementation in the event of a yes vote for unification.
- The fullest co-operation between agencies and bodies on both sides of the border should be encouraged, supported and funded, where such work leads to practical positive outcomes, rather than being driven by a political goal. The two parts of the island have no option but to coordinate on matters such as energy, the environment, animal health, fisheries, and telecommunications.

But these areas of co-operation should be expanded, for example with regard to public health such as out of hours GP services and specialist hospital services. It is important that freedom of movement of workers be continued e.g. teacher qualifications and exchanges.

Strategic transport planning for the island is inherently valuable as is the promotion, marketing, research, and product development of tourism. In a post-Brexit Ireland, the various EU Programmes such as SPPE, INTERREG, and Leader are more important than ever before.

- The Irish Government should act as a voice in the EU for the greater number of people in Northern Ireland who voted against Brexit.
- Trade between the economies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is an important component in advancing economic growth and prosperity on the island and consequently enhanced efforts to grow activity in this area should be actively pursued.
- There are fundamental challenges which must be

addressed in the Republic of Ireland in advance of any unification process. This includes a universal healthcare system and an equitable tax and social welfare system. The Republic of Ireland should aim to be seen as a beacon of progressive social and economic policy, which an objective observer in Northern Ireland would wish to emulate and ultimately, join.

The Republic of Ireland is not yet such a model.

- Constitutional reform will be necessary and must ensure absolute separation of Church and State. The specific model following a yes vote for unification – for example whether a single unitary state, a federation, or another model – is a matter for the people of Ireland to address through consultation at that time.
- In Northern Ireland, enhanced co-education programmes must be encouraged and prioritised. There should be a timeline for the ending of designation of parties on sectarian lines (which could be replaced by using PRSTV in the election of First and Deputy First Ministers), and a building up of

the profile of Northern Ireland as a viable destination for sustainable investment, and many other confidence-building measures.

Progressive politics of whatever persuasion requires that the economy and society in Northern Ireland succeed in the interest of all the people who live there. The challenges we face for the next generation are the same; housing, climate change, privatisation of public services, aging populations, tax and social welfare reform and inequality.

- It is important to work unimpeded with all parties interested in peace and reform. Therefore, we will not contest elections in Northern Ireland in the short term. This leaves the

Party free to pursue contact with all political and civil society groups to act in a progressive manner in the interest of all so that a social democratic ethos is cultivated across all facets of life in Northern Ireland.

- The extraordinary richness and the diversity of Northern Ireland's communities with its range of opinion and religious belief and culture is a strength and an asset for Ireland which is to be fostered as an integral part of what we are as a people.
- Transparency, accountability, and integrity in political life both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland must be sustained and built upon as a core value.

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