



The 21st Century Commission NORTHERN IRELAND

The 21st Century Commission's conclusions about Northern Ireland (Section 8) are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

Contrary to what its report says, the Labour Party would NOT have to designate itself as either Unionist or Nationalist in order to organise and contest elections in Northern Ireland.

Organisation in Northern Ireland doesn't require designation at all, and neither does contesting Local Government elections. Designation would only become an issue for the Party if it were to contest elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly – since members elected to the Assembly have to designate themselves as either **Unionist**, **Nationalist** or **Other**, before taking their seats. This is a requirement of Clause 6 of Stand One of the Good Friday Agreement, which states:

“At their first meeting, members of the Assembly will register a designation of identity – **nationalist**, **unionist** or **other** – for the purposes of measuring cross-community support in Assembly votes under the relevant provisions above.”

It goes without saying that, if the Party were to stand in Assembly elections, it would opt for the **Other** designation, as Alliance and Green Party members of the Assembly do at the moment, and which would offer the best chance of the Party making an appeal across the traditional divide.

Unfortunately, the 21st Century Commission doesn't seem to be aware of the existence of the **Other** designation. Its report states:

“... we are not at all convinced that parties based in either Dublin or London have any real or significant contribution to make to Northern Ireland politics by organising there – and adopting one or other of those labels for the purpose.

“Effectively, this would require Labour to opt for adherence to – and seek votes exclusively from – just one of the two traditions, ...”

Given the existence of the Other designation, that passage is simply untrue. The Good Friday Agreement would NOT “require Labour to opt for adherence to – and seek votes exclusively from – just one of the two traditions”.

Labour Party members in Northern Ireland are drawn from both traditions. We are utterly opposed to the Party seeking votes exclusively from just one of the two traditions and we wouldn't remain members if it did. Happily, the Good Friday Agreement doesn't require the Party to do so, if it were to put up candidates in either Local Government or Assembly elections.

STRENGTHENING LINKS WITH THE SDLP

THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS “the strengthening of links” between the Labour Party and the SDLP, rather than the Party organising and contesting elections in Northern Ireland in its own right.

Remember, the SDLP has always chosen to designate itself as **Nationalist** in the Assembly and to opt “for adherence to – and seek votes exclusively from – just one of the two traditions”, in the words of the Commission.

Under the Good Friday Agreement, it has always been open to the SDLP to designate itself as **Other**, and attempt to appeal across the traditional divide. It has never done so. Were it to do so, it would obviously risk losing a significant section of its vote to Sinn Fein – and it’s therefore unlikely that it will ever do so.

If the Labour Party were to stand for elections in Northern Ireland, it would seek to appeal across the traditional divide. To that end, in Assembly elections the Labour Party would obviously designate itself as **Other** and, by so doing, avoid giving the appearance of appealing to just one tradition.

ARE WE TO BE INSTRUCTED TO JOIN THE SDLP?

A FINAL POINT: the report poses the question “should the Labour Party follow Fianna Fail and consider organising in the North”.

We find it difficult to believe that the Commission is NOT aware that the Labour Party is already organised in Northern Ireland, and has been since 2004, when Pat Rabbitte launched the Northern Ireland Labour Forum (NILF) in Belfast. We proposed to the Labour Party conference last November that the Party contest Local Government elections in Northern Ireland. In response, the NEC set up “a special commission, representative of the NILF, the PLP and the NEC” to explore the issue, amongst others. Two Party members from Northern Ireland sit on the special commission, which has yet to report.

The 21st Century Commission has now apparently usurped the role of the special commission and concluded, on the basis of an imperfect knowledge of the Good Friday Agreement, that the Party should have no organisation in Northern Ireland, as the Party did in 1970 at the time of the SDLP’s foundation. It follows logically from this that the existing organisation of the Party in Northern Ireland should be disbanded.

In 1970, as the Commission’s report reminds us, the Party “instructed all its members to join the new SDLP”. Is that the Commission’s recommendation in 2008? Are we going to be told to join a party which, in the words of the Commission, has chosen to opt “for adherence to – and seek votes exclusively from – just one of the two traditions”.

As members of the Party from Northern Ireland, we would like to know.

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