

Northern Ireland: The way ahead

I am visiting Northern Ireland today at a time of considerable political change. The Assembly elections brought forth a new generation of voters and representatives who are confident and optimistic about the future.

The Northern Ireland of today does not see itself as a post-conflict society but one that is maturing into a story of sustained success. One in ten of the population were not born here. Local people have thrown open their doors to those fleeing Ukraine. A sizeable portion of the electorate were not even born in 1998. They are at ease with change, and at ease with each other.

The Northern Ireland of today is a place that has rediscovered the manufacturing verve that once made it the biggest shipyard in the world. Harland & Wolff is cutting steel again. Belfast is host to some of the world's most innovative companies in biotechnology and the creative industries, and the No1 international investment location for US cyber security firms.

This means Northern Ireland contributes a huge amount to the rest of the UK. When the pandemic hit, it was a County Antrim diagnostic company, Randox, that was at the forefront of the UK's Covid testing regime. Today, I will visit Thales, the high tech company which has played a vital role in the defence of Ukraine.

But there is more to be done to level up this place with the rest of the UK. If NI's productivity grew to match the UK average by 2030, its goods exports could be around double the level recorded in 2020. The Government will do its part with record investment, funding and the new City Deals. But I know from my time as Mayor of London that there is no substitute for strong local leadership. I will tell party leaders today that this progress will be stalled without a functioning Assembly and Executive.

Restating our commitments

In a time of change, against the backdrop of European war and a cost of living crisis, I also want to use my visit today to affirm some core principles about the UK Government's approach to Northern Ireland.

Thirty-two years ago, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland made a speech which many see as playing an important role in the initiation of the peace process.

Peter Brooke argued that Britain had "no selfish strategic or economic interest" in Northern Ireland. Not no strategic or economic interest – but no selfish strategic or economic interest.

It was a concept that became a pillar of the peace process – the basis of "rigorous impartiality" and "the principle of consent", from the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 to the Belfast Good Friday Agreement itself.

Times have changed, at home and overseas. But our commitment to these principles is as strong as ever.

Equally I want to be clear that this Government is not neutral on the Union.

Indeed I was heartened to hear that Sir Keir Starmer made clear in a recent interview here that the Labour Party under his leadership would campaign for the Union, should there ever be a border poll.

There should be nothing controversial or surprising about that.

The Government's commitment to the Union is above politics.

It was proved – with no politics attached – during the pandemic, with one of the fastest vaccine roll-outs in the world. It was proved – with no politics attached – by the remarkable furlough scheme that kept so many businesses and families afloat.

It is partly because of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement that the benefits that accrue from being part of the fifth largest economy in the world need not be a source of controversy, or eternal debate in political life.

They just exist, like Samson and Goliath on the Belfast skyline. They are the structural facts of economic life here, welded even more tightly by the rapid evolution of a high-skilled and high-tech economy.

Embracing change

But nor is there some perfect constitutional clockwork version of how the Union should be. Northern Ireland has always been a place in its own right, in which governance has been contested, broken, re-imagined and carefully nurtured.

Those arrangements continue to evolve. And far better, I think, is the Northern Ireland of today in which people look any way they want (north-south, east-west, or both) – depending on their identity, and their family, and their economic interests.

In today's debates about Brexit and the Protocol, let us embrace that hybridity. Let us make it work.

We stand above all else for the 1998 Agreement. Its three strands. Its commitment to harmonious relations across all these islands.

We do so, first and foremost, as co-signatories and as co-guarantors. And as partners of the Irish Government.

And we do so, next, with a commitment to work with the democratically elected parties in Northern Ireland, whom I see will today.

That means abiding by the rules that have previously been agreed, including those around the title of First Minister.

So I want to repeat my congratulations to Sinn Fein as the largest party. Respect for the rights and aspirations of all communities are an essential part of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement.

And I think it is testimony to the path that Sinn Fein have taken from 1998 that Michelle O'Neill is now awarded the position of First Minister. I have no doubt we will work together well.

But it is equally clear that the balance on which the Northern Ireland institutions have been built has not been fundamentally transformed by these elections.

The unionist and nationalist blocs are largely matched, as they have been at every election since 1998, with the unionist electorate remaining slightly larger. Unionist parties performed well in the recent election, affirming overwhelming support for power-sharing on the basis of consent.

The most significant development in recent years has been the growth of a third grouping in Northern Ireland, represented by the Alliance Party – to whom I also pay tribute. They are an important voice in the new Northern Ireland but also, let's be clear, a party which stuck to its principles in a darker and more difficult past.

Taken together, what the election results tell me is that the basis for successful power-sharing and stability is actually enhanced. Whichever way you cut it, there is a large majority for making Northern Ireland work.

And every single party and MLA has heard the same message from their constituents.

Focus on everyday issues. Schools. Hospitals. Cost of Living.

So it is time for all of the local parties to get back to Stormont. Elect a Speaker. Create an Executive. Get back to work.

Unique responsibilities on the British government

But the 1998 Agreement bestows other commitments on the British Government that go beyond its position as a co-guarantor.

One of those is to take difficult decisions: to assume a burden of responsibility, and indeed unpopularity, when consensus cannot be reached.

That is why we will deliver on three pre-existing commitments in the coming weeks.

We will take forward the Language and Culture Package agreed as part of the New Decade New Approach agreement, thereby addressing an issue that has prevented the formation of the Executive in the past.

We will intervene to ensure that women and girls have access to abortion services in Northern Ireland that are their legal right, following the failure of the Executive to deliver this.

And this week we will introduce into Parliament new measures to deal with the legacy of the past. These are different from those in our Command Paper last year. We have listened to many people in recent months and reflected on what we heard. Dealing with the past will still require difficult decisions but there will be no blanket amnesty. Immunity will only be available to those who co-operate and prosecutions could follow for those who do not.

Addressing the issues with the Protocol

In the international agreement that sits alongside the Belfast Agreement, as the sovereign government of Northern Ireland the UK also assumes specific responsibilities that go beyond its role as co-guarantor.

To protect the “economic rights” of the people of Northern Ireland. And to ensure “just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities”.

We must admit that those commitments have sometimes been difficult to navigate through Brexit.

We insisted throughout that there would be no scenario in which a hard border would be allowed to emerge. And we have delivered that 100%, as we said we would, protecting in full the rights that were enshrined in 1998.

We told the Irish Government that we would take special measures within the UK’s internal economy to protect their place in the EU single market. And we have done that.

We committed to maintain the Common Travel Area and associated rights. It is another commitment that British Government has kept, even throughout the pandemic when so many restrictions were enforced.

Seeking changes to the Protocol

It is because of these complexities that the Protocol exists. It is why the Protocol was agreed in good faith. And it is why those who want to scrap the Protocol, rather than seeking changes, are focusing on the wrong thing.

But there is no disguising the fact that the delicate balance created in 1998 has been upset. One part of the political community in Northern Ireland feels like its aspirations and identity are threatened by the working of the Protocol.

And the Protocol involves other responsibilities which also need to be lived up to by all sides, including the commitment to protect the Belfast Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions.

We cannot allow the impression that one strand is deemed more important than others; or that EU custom codes – designed for vast container ships coming from Shanghai to Rotterdam, not supermarket lorries from Liverpool to Belfast – somehow trump everything else.

We must remember that all parties to the Protocol made a commitment to be

willing to revisit, adapt and change these arrangements over time – and to protect the internal market of the UK.

In the absence of change, the prior commitments made by the British Government – to protect all three strands of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, to protect economic rights and parity of esteem – are coming into sharper focus.

Every unionist representative campaigned against the Protocol, as currently constituted. More importantly, every party, across the divide, seeks mitigations and change. None support a zealous zero risk approach to its implementation. None wants to see grace periods terminated, as the EU insist they must be in return for limited mitigations elsewhere. Some feel that their economic rights as members of the United Kingdom are threatened, which the 1998 Agreement is supposed to protect.

The simple reason for this is that the East-West dimension – by far and away the principal artery in Northern Ireland's economic life – is taking too much of the strain.

Strand 3 of the Agreement, which promised the "harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of the relationship among the people of these islands", is not functioning as it must. And Strands 1 and 2 – of equal importance and mutually dependent – are now being negatively impacted too.

Many things have changed since the Protocol was agreed. It was designed in the absence of a Trade and Cooperation Agreement and when it was unclear one would be agreed. It has not been adapted to reflect the realities of the TCA.

It was designed before a global pandemic and a European war which has created a cost of living crisis on a scale not seen for half a century.

For there even to be a question about the fast availability of medicines or medical testing in Northern Ireland (between two constituent parts of the same National Health Service) is incompatible with the post-Covid era.

For the Chancellor of the Exchequer to say in his Spring Statement that people in Northern Ireland could not be granted the same benefits in terms of tax and VAT as those in the rest of the same country is a serious issue. It means that our ability to assist with post-Covid recovery and – moreover, the long-term economic development of Northern Ireland – is restricted.

We have been told by the EU that it is impossible to make the changes to the Protocol text to actually solve these problems in negotiations – because there is no mandate to do so.

We will always keep the door wide open to genuine dialogue. And we will continue to protect the single market – as it has been protected throughout the existence of the Protocol so far – and the open border with the Republic of Ireland which will always be of paramount importance.

There is without question a sensible landing spot in which everyone's

interests are protected. Our shared objective must be to create the broadest possible cross-community support for a reformed Protocol in 2024.

I hope the EU's position changes. If it does not, there will be a necessity to act. The Government has a responsibility to provide assurance that the consumers, citizens and businesses of Northern Ireland are protected in the long-term. We will set out a more detailed assessment and next steps to Parliament in the coming days, once I return from discussions with the local parties.

In doing our part, we expect all elected representatives to get back to work and deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.