

Peace process pillars must stand

In a time of uncertainty both the UK and Ireland will benefit from forging stronger ties, says Josh Stephens

Ernest Bevin once said that British foreign policy rests on “three main pillars”: relations with the United States, with Europe and with the Commonwealth.

As the Oval Office receives a somewhat unpredictable occupant and Britain begins European Union exit negotiations, it has never been more important to look to our closest neighbours for support, stability and solidarity.

I’m sure Bevin would have agreed that good relations across the Irish Sea, and on the island of Ireland, are crucial as we navigate these challenging times.

2017 will be an absolutely vital year for British-Irish relations and for the Northern Ireland Peace Process.

We face a plethora of challenges, and a number of unknown quantities that weigh heavily on communities, on business and on our political institutions.

At a time of such uncertainty, it is important to view events through the lens of our recent historical achievements.

2017 marks the vicennial anniversary of the New Labour Government that was elected on a landslide with a commitment to peace in Northern Ireland, following progress seen under John Major and Albert Reynolds.

Twenty years ago, Labour’s 1997 general election Manifesto committed to “reconciliation between the two traditions and to a new political settlement which can command the support of both”.

The manifesto went on to promise that “Labour will help build trust and confidence among both Nationalist and Unionist traditions in Northern Ireland by acting to guarantee human rights, strengthen confidence in policing, combat discrimination at work and reduce tensions over parades.”

This was nothing short of finding common ground where none or very little existed, but through this ambition we achieved the Good Friday Agreement.

Now more than ever, we must learn from that ambition as the stakes grow higher.

Post-EU referendum, both the Leave and Remain camps must recognise that the triggering of Article 50 will have a destabilising effect on the island of Ireland.

The progress in peace and reconciliation since the Good Friday Agreement has its roots in good British-Irish bilateral relations and a mutual desire for peace and prosperity on the island of Ireland – but it also pivots on decades of progressive European integration.

Britain’s exit from the EU undermines that Agreement and threatens three of its key provisions: dual British – Irish citizenship, soft Irish borders and freedom of movement on the island of Ireland.

First, any question over access to dual citizenship poses enormous challenges to Northern Ireland, and British citizens with Irish heritage. One estimate shows up to 6.7 million people living in Britain and Northern Ireland who don’t already have an Irish passport, have the right to hold one.

More than 37,000 people in Great Britain and Northern Ireland applied for an Irish passport in the first three months after the EU referendum – an 83 per cent increase on the same three months a year before.

Dual citizenship is a fundamental right to the people of Northern Ireland, as well as a key plank of the Peace Process. It must be protected at all costs.

Second, the spectre of a fortified land border is anathema to the Peace Process and would be a disaster for the people of Northern Ireland.

It is also a symbolic threat to increasing cooperation



The Good Friday Agreement is signed

between Britain and Ireland. Any militarised line of demarcation on the island of Ireland is diametrically opposed to the goodwill expressed between communities there, not least by the up to 30,000 people who cross between Northern Ireland and Ireland each day, according to the British-Irish Chamber of Commerce.

At a time when a pledge to wall off the southern frontier of the United States helped win a Presidential election, we must show the world that barriers are neither desired nor required on the island of Ireland.

Third, any restriction on freedom of movement and commerce between Britain and Ireland presents a massive economic threat. According to HMRC figures, British exports to Ireland totalled £15.1 billion in 2015, with £11.2 billion of goods imported from Ireland into Britain.

A Common Travel Area has existed in one form or another throughout these Islands since the 1920s – long before EU freedom of movement – which has helped to facilitate this impressive trading relationship.

Nothing says “open for business” across these Islands like an opportunity to run a firm with offices in Glasgow, Cardiff and London and Belfast, Dublin and Cork – with no hard borders.



Britain’s close relationship with Ireland must be preserved

Increased trade between Britain and Ireland, and successful commerce on the island of Ireland have also been instrumental to the Northern Ireland Peace Process by providing communities with greater economic opportunity.

It is clear that Britain’s relationship with Ireland, and in particular the complex legal arrangements that underpin the Good Friday Agreement, demand a special focus from the British Government during EU exit negotiations.

Instability and uncertainty for Northern Ireland and Ireland resulting from a Brexit deal (or indeed the lack of one) can’t just be dismissed as a symptom or a by-product of these negotiations – it must be a priority one item to avoid.

This is why 2017 will see a renewed and redoubled effort from CHAMP, the organisation that promotes peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland, and across these Islands.

CHAMP holds high level events throughout the year to encourage dialogue, discussion and diplomacy at the highest levels between Britain and Ireland, and within Northern Ireland.

We engage with British, Irish and Northern Irish political leaders and create forums for discussion – where opinions can be expressed forcefully, but with respect.

At party conferences, our famous Ulster Fry breakfast events promote informal discussion, but with a serious focus on peace and prosperity. As one commentator observed last September: “Breakfast means breakfast”.

We know that it hasn’t always been easy to talk about the issues that affect us, but by recognising our shared progress we create a greater space for dialogue and goodwill.

2017 will undoubtedly bring more instability and uncertainty, but with this comes an opportunity to strengthen friendships and relationships, including those between Westminster, the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

We can all learn from Ernest Bevin’s doctrine of the three pillars as Britain forges a new role in the world. But we must also remember to build bridges with our oldest and closest neighbours.

Josh Stephens is deputy director of CHAMP, the organisation that promotes peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland, Ireland and across the UK