

## Alliance Party Conference, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2017

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### **Contribution to Panel on Brexit**

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this panel. I like the title: “What is the best deal for Northern Ireland after Brexit?”: it forces us to think forward. That is a particularly challenging thing to do because much of the logic of Brexit has been a movement of nostalgia. As a consequence, it is no surprise that a glorified notion of sovereignty and absolutist nationalism has been very much to the fore in the debate so far. We know here the dangers of such ideology and it is imperative, then, that we attempt to think in more imaginative ways.

I am going to try stick to my allotted three minutes by making 6 brief points as to what we might need in order to get the best deal for NI. In an effort to make them memorable I have 4 ‘re’s and 2 ‘de’s!

#### ***First, the Re’s.***

No. 1: *Restore devolution*: if our parties cannot find agreement, they are handing power over to the UK government and, to a lesser extent, the Irish government. This is not in the best interests of NI, given that these two will be opposite sides of the negotiating table, and on opposite sides of an EU external frontier. The mandate to govern has been given. It is delusional to think that we can get a better deal through direct rule.

No.2 *Repatriate powers*: Some of the powers that will be returned from the EU encompass matters covered under Schedule 10 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) (e.g. agriculture, environment, employment). The Welsh and Scottish governments want *all* power repatriated from Brussels directly to Cardiff and Edinburgh – for example, developing separate Welsh and Scottish agricultural policies, together with ‘new UK-wide frameworks’. Indeed, the Scottish Parliament has been assured by the UK government that its power would increase after Brexit. NI has not been offered such an assurance.

No. 3 *Redistribute funding*: with one or two small exceptions, the EU has been the primary way in which cross-border projects have been funded, from small scale grassroots community projects to large scale infrastructure. This is not just North/South. For example, Interreg VA has included Scotland and Wales. The loss of EU direct funding will be felt across these islands; for that reason, proper and realistic commitments for sustaining such funding will be required.

*No.4 Revitalise the cross-border institutions:* - The British Irish and North/South bodies will require a shot in the arm. There will be fresh challenges in established areas of cooperation – trade, waterways, food safety – and challenges in new areas – energy, environment, employment. Is there room for new institutions and mechanisms here?

**Secondly, the ‘de’s.** These are a little more tricky.

Relating to the above point: *Depoliticise borders:* The logic of cross-border cooperation for mutual benefit has driven the European project. The 1998 Agreement, and British/Irish and North/South relations more broadly, have been improved as a result of this context. There may well be a need for common customs controls or for checks on movement between this island and Britain. It need not be politicised.

One last suggestion: *Denationalise the main identity categories, especially in future association with the EU.* What we do not want to happen is for the association of ‘Irish’ with EU, and ‘British’ left as a standalone identity. This only draws the EU in to bolstering the difference between the two. The Alliance Party paper has it right, I think, when it calls for EU citizenship for all born in Northern Ireland. This could go further – it could be connected to an ‘amnesty’ for whoever is already here. Moreover, it could be an opportunity to set forth the uniqueness of Northern Ireland in a positive way: not just binary identities, but diverse ones. Formal recognition of British-Irish identity and of Northern Irish identities or of ‘other’ can be a way of helping to counter the risk of further division within this small region.

So I propose: restore devolution, repatriate powers, redistribute funding, revitalise cross-border bodies. In addition, depoliticise border arrangements and denationalise identities. If we can even begin to think what these might mean, and what they would require from us and from the EU negotiators, we would be in a much stronger place for ensuring that the Brexit deal might bring something positive to our future after all.