

The work of the Barroso Task Force and future NI engagement with the EU

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Introduction

As one of the members of the original Delors Task Force which helped set up the first EU peace programme in Northern Ireland in 1994, I am familiar with the EU task force approach to problem solving and appreciate both the uniqueness of the method and the value of its implementation.

The Delors Task Force was a short-lived, one off policy instrument designed to gather information on the needs of Northern Ireland following the ceasefires and put proposals to EU Heads of State and Government at their meeting in December 1994. Those proposals unlocked initial EU finance worth €500 million, set up an all-inclusive consultation process, built the foundation for a peace programme which still exists after 20 years and has spent more than £1billion on initiatives to help cement peace and stability in the region.

The Barroso Task Force, set up following the devolution of power to Belfast in 2007, is a very different, more extensive and much longer-term form of engagement. It commits expert officials in Brussels to a greater degree and uses unique arrangements to strengthen EU/Northern Ireland relations in a way which compliments the ongoing work of all EU funding instruments, including the EU Peace Programme. It also extends the reach of the relationship into new areas of cooperation.

Background

The Barroso Task Force was created on the personal initiative of the EC President to show solidarity for the newly devolved Northern Ireland government but it was more than a simple political gesture. It was a novel response to the reduction in EU funding brought about by the accession of poorer Eastern European countries to the EU and increased prosperity in Northern Ireland. Thanks to relative political stability and resulting higher GDP per capita, NI could no longer qualify for 'Objective One' status which meant EU funding would decrease over the years.

Recognising that financial assistance is only one of the many tools used by the EU to support growth in the regions, EC officials working with the newly devolved NI administration, organised the Task Force as a means of interlocking, extending and exploring all aspects of future EU/NI cooperation to boost engagement and increase the benefits to the Northern Ireland economy.

The potential for increased cooperation, outlined in the excellent first report of the Task Force in 2008, was considerable. It covered everything from protected status of farm products, to town twinning, to exchange of educational experience, to research and development and the information society. It also recommended new areas of cooperation, such as those within Horizon 2020, as well as new and different forms of finance such as lending from the European Investment Bank.

In the context of the EU Peace Programme, the Task Force recommendations also included support for proposals to create a Centre of Excellence for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland. This recommendation was backed by two further reports, also published in 2008, by the European Parliament (rapporteur NI MEP Bairbre de Brun) and the European Economic and Social Committee (rapporteur NI EESC Member Jane Morrice). All three reports emphasised the important role played by the EU in the Northern Ireland Peace Process and referred to the valuable lessons which could be learned by other conflict zones throughout the world. This has been a recurring theme in NI/EU engagement since.

Eight years on..... slow start or missed opportunity?

The work of the Task Force got off to a slow start, due mainly to a lack of engagement within the Northern Ireland administration at the political level. This is explained not least by the difficulties arising from setting up a new government, but also a preference to look to America rather than Europe for political support. On the EU side, the fallout from the financial crisis, the effect on the Eurozone, the banking systems, unemployment as well as political and social upheaval on its borders, resulted in the EU having to deal with more pressing problems. Northern Ireland was clearly no longer a priority when it came to EU support and the valuable opportunity provided by the unique form of cooperation that was offered by the Barroso Task Force, risked being missed altogether.

The re-launching of the Task Force by Barroso himself at the end of 2010 kick-started a process which may have been close to shutting down due to lack of interest. The momentum for greater NI/EU engagement has since started to build in a variety of different ways. This has been helped by increased scrutiny by the OFMDFM Assembly Committee, the creation of a post in the Assembly focussing on EU relations, the recruitment of 'desk officers' in the NI Office in Brussels, more frequent meetings of NI representatives to the EU institutions and the setting up of the NI European Regional Forum. The latter, set up in 2012, has been highly successful in increasing awareness, engaging stakeholders and exchanging information on areas of cooperation.

The future.....the Northern Ireland example

There is no doubt, 20 years after the start of the EU Peace Programme, there remains a sympathetic ear in Brussels to the needs of Northern Ireland. This genuine appreciation in EU circles of the progress made is thanks to the hard work of those on both sides of the Irish Sea and the English Channel who continue to keep the lines of communication and cooperation open. There are, however, a number of challenges which must be addressed to ensure Northern Ireland continues to benefit from the 'special treatment' demonstrated by a continuation of the Task Force.

The first is the 'changing of the guard' in Brussels which has brought new people to the top of all main EU institutions. If contact is not made at the highest political level soon, the 'institutional memory' of the Belfast/Brussels relationship is likely to disappear. This will be a lost opportunity, particularly when a new round of funding is being negotiated for 2014-2020 and discussions are ongoing on the make up of the new Peace Programme. Given the new leadership in the EC, the EP and the Council, now is the right time to revitalise the political and administrative links which worked so well in Northern Ireland's favour in the past. By exploiting the valuable resources within the Task Force and holding it up as a role model for EU work with other regions, Northern Ireland could become a real example for new ways of working at regional level within the EU.

The second is the issue of the European Centre of Excellence for Peace and Conflict Resolution, foreseen in the original Task Force Report. This initiative, for which some €20million was earmarked in EU Peace Funding, has been shelved because of controversy around the location of the Centre. This could be another seriously missed opportunity for Northern Ireland not only to recognise the support provided by the EU and the international community for the peace process but also to showcase the lessons learned in Northern Ireland for other conflict zones. With so much turmoil in the world at present, there is a dire need for more work to be done in this area and the Northern Ireland experience is hugely important in this context. A two-site location, as originally proposed, making use of both the Crumlin Road Gaol/Courthouse and the Maze/Long Kesh could be a possible solution which itself could be an example of overcoming obstacles to peace-building.

The third challenge will undoubtedly be the renewed focus on European affairs over the next few years in the lead up to any referendum on the subject of UK membership. Of all parts of the UK, Northern Ireland has undoubtedly benefitted a great deal from EU membership and may have the most to lose if the UK pulled out. This, and the UK position in negotiations in Brussels, is something which will need to be considered in detail by all political, economic and social actors in Northern Ireland as positions are decided in advance of a referendum. In this context, the Task

Force could be used to help focus the debate on specific themes and topics of importance to EU/NI cooperation.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that more should be done to make better use of the unique resource that is the EU Task Force. There should be high-level political engagement with the new powers in Brussels as soon as the New Commissioner portfolios are decided. A communication strategy should be set in place to increase awareness of the work of the Task Force (and NI/EU relations in general) at local level within the public and private sector and there should be increased training, secondment, internship, exchanges and cooperation at all levels. With so much change, so much demand, so much need and so much interest in EU affairs over the coming years, Northern Ireland only stands to gain from an increased understanding of the issues involved.

Increased cooperation through the Task Force as well as through all the other channels available, including through NI representatives in the the EP, the EESC, the CoR, the Executive Office in Brussels and the EC Office in Belfast will enable that to happen.