

Lord Howell - Speech to the House of Lords – 11th October 2022

‘My Lords, I cannot pretend to offer any better ideas than anybody else about how to get Stormont going again but I must say that I sense a change of mood now in this whole situation and some welcome changes too in the wider context of the issue which, even if they are medium term or long term, can feed back positively into the immediate. So while the world drifts dangerously towards nuclear war with Russia and the Chinese carry out extending their sphere of influence and subverting Commonwealth members, among other countries, and while we are, as my noble friend Lord Skidelsky said in a remarkable speech last night in this Chamber, in effect in a war situation, I feel we can at least say that here in the British Isles there is one age-old problem that may just possibly be moving forward on the right lines.

Why do I say that? Let me enumerate some positive aspects, while not denying the negative ones. First, we are seeing distinct signs of a change of tone both in Brussels and in London, and of course in Dublin in recent days. The argument about the protocol—the one that says that one side wants changes in the protocol itself and the other side says it agrees to changes in the way it is administered but cannot open the protocol itself—is a classic diplomats’ dilemma. In the right atmosphere it really ought to be resolvable by our proverbially efficient and effective diplomatic service, with ministerial guidance, of course.

And what exactly creates that atmosphere? Let me start with a rather personalised point. We on this side have a colleague, Steve Baker MP, who is very able but also a renowned hardliner on most things. He is now newly holding the job of Minister of State for Northern Ireland—which happens to be exactly the job that I held 50 years ago. He has discovered, as I did when I went there at the height of the violence, that there are legitimate interests all round which he and others like him had not shown sufficient respect to. He said that it was time to rebuild the UK’s relations with Ireland and make sure that the two countries went forward as “closest partners and friends”.

That tells me that the talks that are about to begin will at least start on the right note, and that, despite all the aggro about the Bill, about which we have heard a considerable amount this afternoon, it is all part of a subtle and delicate negotiating positioning which could succeed. We should be very careful—I do urge my friends and other noble Lords—about barging into and upsetting what is going on. That is why, although there is plenty of room for doubts, I shall support the Bill tonight and the vote that goes with it if we have

one, and why I hope that we can be spared any further, sadly misinformed if well intentioned, American advice on this matter.

However, it is in the longer-term developments where I feel the best hope is growing and where wise unionists of any shade should face reality and, if they are skilful, take their opportunities from this situation. As I said, the mood in Dublin is clearly changing. Ireland is a rich and talented neighbour nation that we should now look on with the greatest respect and treat as our major partner in the British Isles—which we have not always done in the past, to put it mildly. Before this protocol drama began, there were even signs that the forward thinking in Dublin was to be associated with the Commonwealth. We had several meetings to that effect in Dublin. Of course, that could also be part of the glue of the future as well.

Today, Ireland is far readier to drop the endless battle about old-style reunification by violence and by claim and think about different and far more constructive kinds of unity between separate communities with two capitals on the island. Issues such as energy and transport—for Ireland is one electricity market—bind both parts together, but there are also legitimate separate and lasting identities which keep them apart. With census results showing that Northern Ireland has more Catholics and Protestants for the first time, and with Sinn Féin majorities on both sides of the border, of course the conversation will change, and we will hear more about border polls. That will have to be faced. I myself bear some responsibility for that, having taken the Northern Ireland (Border Poll) Act 1972 through the House of Commons under the late Willie Whitelaw, which of course was reaffirmed in the 1998 Good Friday agreement and which Ted Heath talked about as

“a system of regular plebiscites.”

The latest survey by LucidTalk in August showed that those wanting reunification remain a clear minority. The clever unionist co-operation with Sinn Féin in Belfast can build on that to give Northern Ireland a permanent, stable and prosperous position in the future, as a constitutional part of our United Kingdom but also a good—a very good—neighbour of the Republic.’