

# PAPER SETTING OUT A PROPOSAL FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIC FORUM

## Introduction

1. The Good Friday Agreement provides for the establishment of a consultative Civic Forum (paragraph 34, page 9). It provides that the Forum will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and other such sectors as agreed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister; that the body will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues; and that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will, by agreement, provide administrative support and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives.
2. This paper develops these outline arrangements with a view to consideration in due course by the First and Deputy First Ministers, in consultation with the Assembly.

## How will the Forum be constituted ?

3. It is envisaged that the Settlement Bill will contain an outline clause placing an obligation on the First and Deputy First Ministers to establish the Forum and to draw up guidelines for the selection of members. It is assumed that they will conduct the latter exercise in consultation with the shadow Assembly.

## Timing

4. Since the Civic Forum is an obligatory element of the institutional arrangements provided for in the Strand One section of the Agreement, it is similarly envisaged that the Settlement Bill will provide for it to operate from the date of full devolution, when the new Assembly formally comes into being.

To see, please return to me (Jia)

Barbara

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## Role of the Forum

5. As a consultative body, the Forum will have no legislative, executive or administrative powers but will act instead in an advisory capacity for the Northern Ireland Assembly on all major policy issues. It will not exercise formal power as such but will aim to inform and improve the quality of decision-making in public life through the promotion of informed debate. Respecting, strengthening and involving Northern Ireland's civic society will help create a strong, moral and ethical environment within which elected politicians will be encouraged to make informed, fair and impartial decisions.
6. In particular the Civic Forum might:
  - initiate debate on any topic of general relevance to Northern Ireland;
  - investigate and report on any issues it feels are of particular local concern;
  - initiate its own research and policy studies for publication and communication to the Assembly;
  - establish investigative committees on to which it could co-opt specialists not already represented among its membership;
  - respond to invitations from the Executive Committee or the Assembly or its other Committees to offer views on major policy initiatives (including PE priorities);
  - investigate broad policy decisions and proposals (but not individual cases);
  - for this purpose, be able to invite Ministers and/or officials to discuss particular aspects of the administration's policies, subject to the discretion of the relevant Minister;

- generate cross-community and cross-sectoral solutions to problems; and
- produce an annual report on Forum activities for presentation to the Executive Committee and for debate in the Assembly.

### Membership

7. The Forum might comprise around 50 members (although a membership of 54 [108\2] would give it some symmetry with the Assembly). A larger number could put the Forum in danger of becoming a mere debating chamber; anything smaller risks the possibility of failing to achieve critical mass, given the diverse nature of the subject areas to be examined. However, a figure of around 50 has a good chance of achieving a reasonable measure of collegiality.
  
8. Members might be appointed for a four year term by the First and Deputy First Ministers and be drawn from the following key areas of activity (suggested numbers in brackets):
  - Voluntary and community groups (10)
  - Business and the professions (8)
  - Trade Unions and employees groups (8)
  - Women's groups (5)
  - Academics (4)
  - The churches (4)
  - Youth groups (3)
  - Groups representing the elderly (3)
  - Groups representing the disabled (3)
  - Ethnic minority groups (2)
  - Environmental groups (2)
  - Agricultural industry groups (2)

health - education

9. This split would ensure that members are drawn from every Departmental sector within Northern Ireland.

10. Nominations might be sought in two ways:

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(i) Northern Ireland Departments could be asked to draw up complete lists of those organisations from within their areas of influence which fall into each of the above categories. Each organisation could then be canvassed for 3 nominations, including appropriate citations, to allow for sufficient opportunity to achieve community, gender, age and geographical balance.

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The resulting pool could then be sifted and recommendations put to the First and Deputy First Ministers. Lists of organisations to be approached would be published in advance to allow for appeals to be lodged.

or:

(ii) Press advertisements could invite up to three nominations/ citations from all those organisations who consider that they fall into at least one of the categories and believe they have a contribution to make to the work of the Forum. Shortlists could then be drawn up for submission to Ministers for final decisions. This would be a much more open and visible process, consistent with, for example, the new approach to public appointments and Honours. It might also be a better way of ensuring that only those committed to the Forum would be considered.

what X?? criteria  
(iii) electoral colleges

11. Either of these two methods could be augmented by giving certain positions, as opposed to named individuals in society, membership of the Forum as of right. These positions could include the leaders of the four main churches, the Vice Chancellors of the two universities, the Presidents of the main business organisations, trade unions general secretaries, and so on, although they might be able to nominate an alternative to take up their place. The other posts could be filled by the methods described in either (i) or (ii) above.

- ✓ 12. Given the representative nature of the Forum, and the fact that many members will already be very busy people, it is for consideration whether members should be able to nominate reserves who could attend in their place.
- ✓ 13. The Forum might meet on a monthly basis in plenary session (though with discretion to vary the timing) under a Chair elected at the inaugural meeting. It might also divide into Committees (which could meet as frequently as business required) to examine particular topics and issues.

#### Staffing and Resources

- ✓ 14. It might be expected that a great deal of the consultative, analytical and advisory work will be carried out by the members of the Forum. The combined resources of all the members would be a considerable asset available to the body. However, a small number of dedicated staff would be needed to service the Forum and its committees. This would be provided by the First and Deputy First Ministers, in accordance with the Agreement. There might also be provision for a budget for research, travel and so on, to be agreed with the First and Deputy First Ministers on an annual basis.
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#### Remuneration

- ✓ 15. Given that it has no executive powers, the Civic Forum will be effective and influential only if it has strong and energetic members who regard their work as a necessary act of public service. While this suggests that members might be expected to work *pro bono publico* it nevertheless seems reasonable to offer a certain recompense for loss of earnings.

16. Options might include:

- a set amount for travel and subsistence;
- a per diem rate;
- a combination of these, or
- in accordance with recent developments in local government, a fixed annual sum.

The options would need further consideration.

#### Accommodation

17. In current circumstances the options for accommodation that would give the Forum an appropriate status are limited. It could meet in the former Northern Ireland Forum chamber in the Interpoint building. Alternatively, it could meet in the Senate in Parliament Buildings although it is an open question whether there would be much cross-party support for its location at Stormont, particularly if the Assembly is sited there.

18. A further option might be for the Forum to move around the Province and meet at various locations, thus giving the entire community the opportunity of easier access and of making a contribution to the decision-making process. Again, all of this would require further consideration.

#### Conclusion

19. This paper represents a tentative outline of arrangements for the establishment of a Civic Forum. Comments are invited on whether it forms a reasonable basis for further discussion and for consideration in due course by the First and Second

Ministers for consideration. It might also be suggested to the First and Deputy First Ministers that the document could be issued for consultation during the shadow period.