

PROPOSAL FOR A NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIC FORUM

1.00 INTRODUCTION

1.01 The IOD has publicly expressed its support for the Civic Forum as proposed in the Good Friday Agreement. We believe that such a body would assist the Assembly particularly in its difficult formative years and could provide a bank of expertise to assist the Assembly in dealing with the various policy areas.

1.02 It is important however, that the body does not become an additional bureaucratic layer which could add confusion rather than assistance to the policy formation and legislative process. The key to effectiveness lies in its structure, terms of reference and in particular membership.

1.03 We have carried out consultations with various groups including the political parties and the National Economic & Social Forum in the Republic of Ireland and have set out our views in this paper.

2.00 STRUCTURE

2.01 It is important that the body is genuinely complementary to the Assembly and does not overlap functionally with it. It should not therefore either be able to initiate or veto legislation or policy. It should however, be a consultative body and a formal procedure should be established to ensure that it is consulted on any significant policy or legislative matters. Papers prepared by the Forum should be debated by the Assembly as the matter of procedure.

2.02 Members of the Forum should be determined by the selection of representative organisations who would be invited by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to provide nominees. Any proposed nominee should only be rejected by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on very exceptional grounds.

2.03 Nominees should be appointed for a 3 year term and serve a maximum of two consecutive terms.

2.04 The key issue which will determine the nature of the Forum will be the choice of representative organisations which will provide nominees. It is important that the body will be dynamic and effective whilst representing as wide a range of views as possible.

Wealth creation is a vital task in the new Northern Ireland and thus the Forum needs a strong business representation. It is equally important that our society addresses the problems of economic marginalisation as well as all the other social issues to ensure we establish a fairer society in which people can have a sense of belonging.

2.05 It is not easy to choose the nominating organisations. We believe that it is preferable to select "umbrella" organisations to guarantee the widest representation. For example the various business organisations will cover all sectors of the economy. As a failsafe however, we would propose that some additional seats are set aside for direct nomination by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

2.06 It is important to have a direct link to the Assembly by having one representative from each political party in the Assembly also nominated to the Forum. Ideally these should be elected Assembly members but political party nominees could be acceptable. Such assembly nominees should not be permitted to vote on Civic Forum issues or chair Standing Committees or Working Parties but should be able to contribute in every other respect.

2.07

We would propose the following list of nominees:

Business	Confederation of British Industry	4 nominees
	Institute of Directors	4 nominees
	Chamber of Commerce	4 nominees
Trade Unions	NI Trade Union Congress	4 nominees
Community	NI CVA	4 nominees
Youth	Youth Forum	2 nominees
Education		2 nominees
Health		2 nominees
Political Parties		1 nominee per party
Government & Local Authorities		1 nominated Assessor per Department plus 2 L.A. nominated Assessors
Unspecified		4 nominees

2.08

We would propose that nominating organisations should co-operate when selecting their nominees to ensure the widest range of expertise is available. Taking for example the business sector, the three nominating organisations should form a steering group to co-ordinate nominations to ensure that as many of the commercial sectors as possible are represented.

2.09 We consider that it would be helpful if representatives from the main Government Departments and Local Authorities would serve on the Forum as Assessors. This would greatly assist communications and would help to access for the other members useful information relevant to the issues being dealt with. Assessors should not be permitted to vote.

2.10 The Forum shall elect its own Executive Committee which shall have the following representatives.

Business	- 3
Trade Unions	- 1
Community	- 1
Youth	- 1
Education	- 1
Health	- 1
Government & LA	- 1 Assessor

plus Chairperson & Vice Chairperson

The Executive shall determine the areas of activity and shall establish Standing Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Parties deemed necessary to delivery results.

2.11 The Forum will have a full Secretariat to deal with all administrative matters.

3.0 **ACTIVITY**

3.1 The primary function of the Civic Forum would be to provide an effective and expert support structure for the Assembly. This support would cover areas of policy formation and legislation. A key aspect of its work will be the preparation of reports on selected subjects which when completed must be debated by the Assembly.

3.02 Legislation drafted by the Assembly should be circulated to the Forum for comment at an appropriate stage. It is important that this is carried out in a manner which does not unduly impair the efficiency of the creation of legislation. It would create a procedure in the process which would give the Assembly the benefit of an expert and non-political view on its own product.

3.03 Another important function of the Civic Forum would be at the earlier stage of the process wherein it would make available to Assembly members appropriate expertise to assist in drafting policy legislation. This should improve the product and should often streamline the process.

3.04 One of the key benefits of the Forum would be the informal dialogue resulting from communication lines which would develop as a matter of course.

3.05 The Forum should meet in Plenary Session at least 2 times per year.

4.0 CONCLUSION

4.1 N.I. is an unconventional society in many ways. The Good Friday Agreement offers the opportunity of a new beginning politically but the process is likely to need innovative support. The Civic Forum is an innovative way of helping to deal with an issue unique to our Society caused by our recent political history.

It may however, prove to be an instrument of Government with merit in any situation and be valid for Societies which do not have our problems.

4.02

It offers the combined benefits of support and challenge to the political institution. If adopted in N.Ireland it should initially be established for a limited period of say 3 or 6 years at which time its usefulness could be analysed and a decision on its future taken.

Denis Rooney

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