



31 August 1998

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- 2 SEP 1998
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SM 523192

Mr Seamus Mallon MP
Deputy First Minister (Designate)
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
BELFAST

Dear Mr Mallon

Proposed Civic Forum

As you know a special support programme for Peace and Reconciliation established by the European Commission contains provision for a "Consultative Forum".

As members of that Forum we view the proposal in the Good Friday Agreement to set up a Civic Forum with great interest. We enclose comments on our experiences of that Consultative Forum that we hope may be of some value in determining the terms of reference, and makeup of the new Forum.

For your information the signatories to this letter i.e., myself, Keith Cradden is a Civil Servant and a member of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance. I was nominated on to the Forum by the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The other signatory, Kenny McAdams, also comes from a Trade Union background and currently works for Disability Action who nominated him to the Forum.

We realise that the proposed Civic Forum has provoked considerable discussion and comment and hope that the attached view will be of some help. If you require clarification on any of the points raised in this paper please contact us at the above address.

Yours sincerely,

KEITH CRADDEN

Enc.

PROPOSED CIVIC FORUM

The proposal in the Good Friday agreement to establish a Civic Forum is to be welcomed and encouraged. The following comments from individual members reflect views and experiences of the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the operation of its Consultative Forum. We accept that the proposed Civic Forum will be more complex in structure and unlike the Special Support Programme, will deal with a multiplicity of issues. However the experience of Consultative Forum could provide useful insights into the management, role, and structure of such an initiative.

The Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland, was set up by the European Commission in response to the 1994 Cease-fires. The programme contained provisions for the use of new and innovative delivery mechanisms and as part of its monitoring structures, a Consultative Forum was established to act in support of the Monitoring Committee, the latter having overall responsibility for the management of the Programme.

Since it was established the Forum has within its terms of reference played an active role, i.e.

1. To draw to the attention of the Monitoring Committee the opinion of the Forum on the implementation of the Programme.
2. Be consulted by the Monitoring Committee regarding any major developments to the Programme.
3. Comment on the Annual Report for the Programme, prior to its adoption by the Monitoring Committee.
4. Offer an opinion on the interim assessment of the Programme in terms of final impact or process before such an assessment is adopted by the Monitoring Committee.

The Forum has sought to fulfil that need by holding Consultative meetings and by the presentation of Forum opinion to the Monitoring Committee. The vast majority of this work has been provided in an entirely voluntary basis by individual members and groups within the Forum and has included comment on issues such as:

- a. The need for long term sustainability of projects funded by the programme, and the development of exit strategies to secure long term funding beyond the life of the Programme.
- b. The role of "Peace and Reconciliation" and how they can be built into the aims of the Programme.
- c. The need to establish best practice for the various funding bodies.

- d. Simplification of procedures for administering the Programme.
- e. The need to develop a clearly understandable system to monitor levels of spend.
- f. The establishment of permanent links between similar Groups funded within the Programme to develop the aims of Peace and Reconciliation.

The Forum also carried out its own comprehensive monitoring and evaluation report on the experience and opinion of users of the Program. This report included a consultation exercise within the membership of the Forum and users of the S.S.P. The results were channelled into the main Monitoring Committee.

On the basis of these experiences, the Consultative Forum, we as individual members would like to offer the following comments on the proposal for a Civic Forum.

Introduction

The Special Support Program for Peace and Reconciliation is rightly considered to be a success in spite of the continuation of violence. The intermediate funding bodies have demonstrated an ability to react flexibly and speedily to demands on the ground. The Partnership Boards along with the Consultative Forum have been successful in bringing together a range of community and voluntary workers, politicians, representatives of the Statutory Sector, Trade Unionists and representatives of large and small industry. They have worked successfully together to extent that has surprised practically all participants.

It is accepted that the Special Support Program is much more focused than the role of the Civic Forum. Nevertheless the delivery mechanisms within the Forum have shown very clearly that in spite of the continuation of violence here the vast majority of people and organisations are quite willing and prepared to work together for the common good.

The primary lessons that come from experience are:

- ◆ The Civic Forum must be as inclusive as possible of Civil Society. Northern Ireland contains pockets of exclusion that are both social and geographical. It may take time to identify an appropriate level of membership but it is vital to get it right
- ◆ That there is a need for clearly understood role for a Forum that fits into the general role of the new Assembly and is understood both by the Assembly and the Forum. There was occasional conflict between the Consultative Forum and the two Finance departments on issues such as the right to seek information on matters such as Additionality, responsibility for publicising the programme, etc.
- ◆ The timetable for the work of the Assembly should reflect the need for proper consultation with the Civic Forum. The new Forum will be eager to ensure its own internal democracy and this requires sufficient time to report back and seek opinion from the Forum.
- ◆ The expertise and resources must be made available in order to allow the Civic Forum to carry out its agreed function. To date the Finance Departments have still to agree an operational budget to facilitate research by the Consultative Forum.

Composition

There will be an understandable tendency to try to restrict the size of the Civic Forum. However we would oppose the imposition of any artificial restrictions on numbers, or areas of representation. One of the most exciting developments of late, due in part to the Special Support Program has been the growth in community activity particularly in those geographical areas and sectors that have felt excluded from the main "movers and shakers" in the more established interest groups. For example rural interests are complex and many rural communities suffer from geographical isolation and high levels of social and economic deprivation.

The achievement of a true balance on the Forum will be complex but must include a potentially diverse mixture of community groups, special interest bodies, voluntary sector organisations, trade unions, business and political interests. Overlaying this there must also be further considerations of gender, disability, geographical and social economic interests. The above list cannot be considered as comprehensive and the identification of the appropriate makeup of a Forum will require further thought.

The Special Support Program Consultative Forum is made up of approximately 80 people but the work of the Consultative Forum is carried out by a small Steering Group. This Group was selected on the basis of ensuring broad sectoral interests but we would accept that the ad hoc approach taken to this within the Forum would not be acceptable within the proposed Civic Forum. If management by a steering group was acceptable its makeup could be determined by "electoral colleges" within the membership of the Forum. This Management Committee would in turn have the power to appoint special committees from within the electoral colleges to deal with specialist interests that have come before the Forum from the Assembly. Again this needs to be thought out. a committee on F.E. colleges for example may involve different interests than Primary Education,

Remit

The Agreement states that the Civic Forum will "act as a consultative mechanism on the social, economic and cultural issues". The New Assembly will have to commence a programme of social and economical reconstruction that will hopefully benefit from the renewal of all paramilitary Cease-fires.

There has been a view (justified or not) that the established social partners are too centralised in their thinking, that the more remote areas of the Province are not given an appropriate priority. It is a matter of record that many parts of the Province have suffered particularly from social and economic deprivation and one of the primary aims of the Assembly will be to embed the peace by the achievement of social and economic progress. The assembly will of course have to decide public expenditure priorities within limited budgets. It is this debate in particular that may shape the work of the Civic Forum. The Forum will hopefully provide a non party political response to public expenditure priorities therefore it's remit must include:

- ♦ formal consultation on public spending;
- ♦ consultation and programme for achieving peace and reconciliation;
- ♦ programmes for community development particularly in areas of social need;
- ♦ The development of necessary legislative changes to achieve the above

Conclusion

At the time of writing we are all still reeling from the consequences of the atrocity in Omagh. However we must take some comfort that this Society is still prepared to be shocked to its very foundations by such an outrage.

This must lead to hope that the Civil Society can start to rebuild itself on the working relationships that already exist. Some of these are long established, like those between trade unions and industry and some more recent like the growth of the community and voluntary sectors and special interest groups such as those representing people with disabilities and ethnic minorities. The community as a whole feels the need for change and it is important that this mood is not lost. We have been shocked and horrified before, but in time that has dulled and the men of violence have been allowed to reclaim the agenda. The Civic Forum presents an opportunity to compliment the work of the new Executive Assembly, not just by responding to the Assembly but also by building and encouraging the process of creating a unifying peace. To date those elements of civil society that have sought to bring about social justice have not been co-ordinated and at times have been marginalised by the sheer brutality of Sectarianism and by paramilitary activity.

Hopefully those times have passed. However the all important process of involving Civil Society in supporting the Assembly cannot be rushed.

It is therefore important that we do not rush into setting up a Civic Forum without first seeking agreement from the extended group of social partners mentioned above and with the Assembly itself. It will take time to determine how the Civic Forum would link into the work of the Assembly and how it would deal with issues such as employment, health, education, training and economic development.

The relationship between the Forum, the Assembly and the various Civil Service Secretariats would also have to be defined given the experience of the Consultative Forum and its sometimes difficult relationship with the Finance Departments North and South.

In conclusion, the Good Friday Agreement offers the best way forward for peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland but real peace and prosperity can only be achieved by including as wide a section of the community as possible in active participation.

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