

POINTS FOR THE FORUM MEETING - DUBLIN  
16<sup>th</sup> January 2003.

1. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition did express reservations about
  - (a) The lack of adequate consultation with at least some political parties in Northern Ireland about the re-calling of the Forum.
  - (b) The lack of a clear remit and mandate for the re-convened Forum; and
  - (c) The need for clarity about the relationship that any re-convened Forum might have with the ongoing Implementation Talks amongst parties in Northern Ireland.
2. The Coalition was also deeply concerned that the Forum would represent an exclusively Nationalist political constituency. While not disputing the right of any particular political opinion to organise and present their views on the future of this island, and on the future relationships of these islands, we would prefer for any such discussions to be as inclusive of all political perspectives as possible. We were also concerned that there would be a perception within the Unionist/Loyalist communities that there was a broad Nationalist consensus where, in fact, this is not the case. The Coalition feels that there are currently ample grounds for suspicion and mistrust without creating more – that may well be unwarranted, but are no less real for all that.
3. However, having expressed these concerns in December, it is the Coalition's belief that every opportunity should be taken for dialogue and discussion given the most recent suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly. We fully accept that the Belfast Agreement does not solely belong to the people of Northern Ireland, but it is also the property of the people in the Republic. As such, parties in the Republic have every right to express their concerns and their views about the way forward.
4. Nevertheless, the Coalition would still argue for the need for a clear and agreed Job Description for this Forum. We feel that this would facilitate a broader engagement both North and South.
5. As a cross-community party, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition decided to use the Christmas period of invite a range of community-based activists from mainly Unionist and Loyalist areas to express their views about the current political impasse, and what issues they would wish to see addressed on an all-island context. While responses to the short Survey Form that we circulated are still being received, it might be useful for us to share the tone of the responses received to date. They fall into a number of categories.
6. There were overall concerns expressed about the lack of any sense of ownership of the Agreement – and more importantly of the implications of the Agreement – by many Loyalist/Unionist communities. Indeed, some respondents raised a concern about whether there was a genuine understanding of the provisions of the Belfast Agreement – an understandable concern given the very varying interpretations taken by even pro-Agreement political representatives. One specific request that was made was that the implications of the change to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution should be explained in greater detail. There was also a concern that concessions are being made to Republicans that fall outside the terms of the Agreement. This is a general perception within these

communities, and if it is untrue, then the context for proposed changes (or concessions as they are currently perceived) must be clearly cited within the terms of the Agreement.

7. Security issues were also high on the agenda. Support for the new policing arrangements by all parties was argued – so too was the need to ensure that the Police Services, North and South, worked closer together. It was argued that there needed to be clear political support for those Catholics who did join, or participate with, the PSNI. The need for decommissioning of weapons was spoken about – with clear evidence that decommissioning was taking place. There was a certain sense that while some people called for a decommissioning of all paramilitary forces, that the IRA were primus inter paries – they have a status and an organisational standing that does not allow them to be equated with other paramilitary groups.
8. Then there were those views that focused on the need for the Peace Process to ensure investment in disadvantaged areas. It was felt that one of the causes of creeping disillusionment was that the so-called 'peace dividend' had benefited the more affluent communities and classes. There were also complaints about the perceived lack of investment in traditional Loyalist communities and interface areas.
9. The other broad category of concern was around issues of identity. The lack of an adequate recognition of the Ulster-Scot and British-Ulster identity. There were also calls on the Irish Government to articulate its understanding or policy regarding the minority Protestant population in the Republic. The specific area of the teaching of history was raised – and the need to adopt more inclusive approaches both North and South. One group raised the use of the word Ireland by institutions in the Republic – the President of Ireland; the entity of Ireland as referring to the 26 counties of the Republic. It is as though Northern Ireland, or the 6 Counties, does not exist on the island.
10. Comments around the issues relating to the promotion of peace and reconciliation noted that the implications of such a process needed to be explored within the southern context, as well as within the north, and on a north-south basis. There was a feeling that peacebuilding was all too often left to northerners. Such a reconciliation process was accepted as essential, but it was felt that it could not be imposed on a top-down basis, it had to start with small group interaction at local level. Nevertheless, there was a need to extend it beyond local communities; and it was argued that reconciliation had to be more complex than simply trying to identify and name the historical villain.
11. We asked groups to suggest areas that this Forum could usefully consider during the course of its future meetings. The replies included –
  - The discussion of interface/flash point situations.
  - The development of educational systems outside the influence of Churches.
  - The discussion of how local communities in Northern Ireland can obtain a greater understanding of politics and society in the Republic, and vice versa.
  - A possible relationship to the Commonwealth.

- **Methods for developing a more inclusive, shared history, while creating space for a diversity of identities.**
12. **Finally, there was a plea that the Republic would take its commitments under the Belfast Agreement seriously. There was a perception that to date there had been a minimalist, formulaic approach in the south – virtually going through the motions for the sake of it rather than seeking to embrace the ‘spirit’ of the Agreement. While it was felt that it would be positive if southern politicians would take the time to meet with communities across Northern Ireland, both Nationalist and Unionist, to listen to their views, aspirations and fears. There was a feeling that particularly during our current period of transition that traditional representative democracy could be usefully complemented by an investment of time and resources in participative democracy.**

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