



Press Release

Coalition consult loyalists for Forum 16 January 2003

The Women's Coalition today presented the findings of a survey of Unionist and Loyalist community groups to the Peace and Reconciliation Forum. Forum delegate, Jane Morrice explained their consultation had been carried out to make sure unionist opinion would be included in discussions at the Dublin-based Forum.

Speaking before the Forum meeting, Jane Morrice MLA outlined their findings:

"As a cross-community party we feel we are in a unique position to make sure the views of Unionists and Loyalists are heard. We have been critical of the Forum for not doing more to include Unionist views. However, it is important to be constructive and to find other ways to feed in a wider range of opinions to the discussions.

We have been in touch with a number of loyalist and unionist community groups from across Northern Ireland, and asked their views on the current state of the peace process. This is the first survey of its kind since the suspension of the Assembly (*I'm checking this with Avila*).

It is clear that those surveyed were keen to see an inclusive peace and reconciliation process, but raised some concerns about its current direction. Respect for unionist culture and traditions, nationalist support for the new policing arrangements and ownership of the Agreement by loyalist and unionist communities have to be addressed to re-build confidence.

Several groups made suggestions on what role the Peace and Reconciliation Forum and political parties in the Republic could play in helping to move the peace process forward. Many loyalist groups felt that they could make more efforts to hear different political traditions in Northern Ireland. A willingness to discuss education north and south, interfaces and a possible relationship to the Commonwealth would be welcomed by the groups surveyed.

It is crucial for southern parties to respond to loyalist and unionist concerns, if they want to make a positive contribution to the peace and reconciliation process. We feel a clear and agreed 'Job Description' is needed for the Forum to get broader engagement from groups in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland."

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The key issues raised by loyalist groups who participated in the survey were:

- A **lack of ownership** of the Agreement by the public, particularly in Loyalist/Unionist communities.
- **Security issues** were high on the agenda, particularly the need for nationalist support for the new police service, interfaces and decommissioning. While many called for the decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons, the IRA was seen to have particular role to play because of its status and organisational standing.
- The need to ensure **investment in disadvantaged areas** was crucial to tackling disillusionment with the peace process. The 'peace dividend' was not being felt in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland.
- A number of issues around **identity and respect** for the Ulster-Scot and British-Ulster tradition were raised. Calls were made for the Irish Government to consider the experience of the minority Protestant population in the Republic. An inclusive approach to education, specifically the teaching of history, is needed both north and south.
- Reconciliation between individuals and communities within Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland and on a north-south basis was seen as important. Parties in the south could take time to meet with communities across Northern Ireland, both Nationalist and Unionist, to listen to their aspirations and fears.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Notes for Editors

1. The Women's Coalition contacted around 100 groups in loyalists and unionist communities and invited them to complete a questionnaire, with the results being presented to the Peace and Reconciliation Forum. Individual forms will be treated as confidential.
2. A full transcript of the evidence presented by the Coalition is available on request.

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