

FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Fine Gael Contribution to the Discussions of the Terms of Reference and Modus Operandi

The setting up of this body has been linked to the announcement of the IRA ceasefire. Fine Gael heartily welcomes this ceasefire and pays tribute to all those involved in bringing it about. We believe it is permanent.

Fine Gael, and other opposition parties in Dail Eireann, have had, and will continue to have, a major role in the search for genuine peace and reconciliation. Fine Gael's continued insistence that nothing less than an absolute cessation of violence would suffice, and its insistence on full acceptance of the principle of consent in both parts of Ireland to any new constitutional arrangements, have helped to push the Republican movement towards a radical reassessment of their position, and to a complete cessation of violence. This role has been complementary to, and necessarily different from, that of the Government. Without a vigilant and critical opposition, the negotiating position of the Government would have been weakened. This underlies Fine Gael's approach to discussions about the proposed Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

Fine Gael recognises that the onset of peace will lead to substantial improvements in the lives of ordinary people in Northern Ireland. Apart from the ending of threats to life, the reduced security presence should enhance the quality of life for all.

As far as this Forum is concerned the relevant passage from the Downing Street declaration is as follows:

"10. The British and Irish Government reiterate that the achievement of peace must involve a permanent end to the use of, or support for, paramilitary violence. They confirm that, in these circumstances, democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the Governments and the political parties on the way ahead.

11. The Irish Government would make their own arrangements within their jurisdiction to enable democratic parties to consult together and share in dialogue about the political future. The Taoiseach's intention is that these arrangements could include the establishment, in consultation with other parties, of a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation to make recommendations on ways in which agreement and trust between both traditions in Ireland can be promoted and established".

It is important that all the conditions set out in both these paragraphs be fully met, and that this be verified for all to see. Fine Gael approaches discussions about the Forum in a positive way; we want it to achieve its full potential. We would not wish to be part of something that was mere windowdressing.

The Forum is designed to achieve Peace and Reconciliation. They are of equal importance. Without reconciliation any peace that may be achieved will only be temporary. The reconciliation that is most necessary is between people of the Nationalist tradition and people of the Unionist tradition on the island.

Reconciling Sinn Fein and the Republican Movement generally to an acceptance of the principle of that there must be consent within Northern Ireland to any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, is an important subsidiary purpose of the Forum. But the overall reconciliation between the two traditions is what is really necessary.

If the Forum is to be an instrument for this overall reconciliation, both of the traditions to be reconciled must be fully represented at it. In any area of life, it is almost impossible to achieve reconciliation with a partner who is absent. It is hard to accept that a Forum for reconciliation from which Unionists were absent could be able to live up to its name. Enormous time and effort must therefore be devoted to creating conditions for full Unionist participation in the Forum, before it is set up.

The setting of an artificial timetable, which would force Unionists to make an early formal decision on participation is undesirable. Any final decision taken by Unionists about participation in the Forum before their constituents had had time to satisfy themselves that the IRA cessation of violence is actually permanent - not merely "suspended", would be likely to be negative. Furthermore to ask the Unionists to take a decision to participate, in advance of the British Government's timescale for verification, is unrealistic and may prejudice them against participation.

Unionists do not understand the compatibility of the retention of substantial amounts of arms by the IRA, with a declared commitment to permanent non-violence.

Sinn Fein, which supported the IRA armed struggle in the past, is now being granted political recognition precisely because that armed struggle has apparently ceased. At the same time Sinn Fein disclaims responsibility for IRA activities and will answer no questions about them. Thus, it is not clear that Sinn Fein will be able or willing, at any stage, to give definitive answers about offensive arms retained by the IRA.

Sinn Fein has, however, derived some of its status, from the fact that it is able to put proposals and questions to the IRA. Sinn Fein should therefore be asked by the Taoiseach and Tanaiste, at every opportunity, to ask the IRA about its plans for its large dumps of offensive weapons. They should also be asked to ask about "exclusion orders" issued by the IRA excluding certain people from their home areas of Northern Ireland, and consequences of a breach of such "exclusion orders" by an individual.

Fine Gael can never accept the existence of private armies in any circumstances. However, against a background of attacks on nationalist areas in the past, it is claimed by some that there may be a reluctance to give up arms for self-defence, until a loyalist cessation of violence is also verified, and until acceptable policing arrangements have been made. This, it is said, will take time. But there is, in any event, the separate question of IRA stores of material that have no conceivable defensive purpose - such as semtex explosives and rocket launchers. There is no ground in "self-defence" for retaining these.

It is clear that, if Unionists are to be expected to sit down with Sinn Fein in the Forum, these issues will have to have been worked out before hand. This would be particularly difficult within an artificially constricted timetable.

In order to give an assurance to all concerned that they will only be dealing with parties who are committed unambiguously and exclusively to the use of peaceful constitutional methods, consideration should be given to asking all the parties taking part in the Forum, to sign a peace pledge. The wording of such a pledge can be open to discussion, but it should indicate that the commitment to peaceful methods is irrevocable.

There are a number of other operational questions which will need to be discussed.

Eligibility for attendance

Participation in the New Ireland Forum was open to

"all democratic parties who reject violence and have members elected or appointed to either House of the Oireachtas or the Northern Ireland Assembly".

The Northern Ireland Assembly no longer exists as a functioning body and thus membership of it cannot be used as a test for eligibility to attend the Forum. In view of the overriding importance of having a Unionist presence at the Forum, it is important to leave the door open to participation by smaller Unionist parties, if participation of larger Unionist parties cannot be obtained from the outset.

● Terms of Reference

It is important that detailed terms of reference for the Forum be negotiated with all the possible participants on a basis of mutual respect and esteem. Fine Gael has prepared draft terms of reference which it has submitted to the Government today. Any draft terms of reference submitted by non-Government parties should have equal status in negotiation with terms submitted by Government parties.

● Fine Gael believes that employment should have a very high place on the agenda of the Forum. Northern Ireland has a high level of unemployment. It also has an artificially large public sector. Peace will bring a rapid transformation of the Northern economy, and there will be a requirement to develop the autonomous enterprise sector of the economy very quickly. Cross-border co-operation affords big opportunities in this regard. But much of the co-operation to date has been between public sector bodies and this is of only partial relevance in current circumstances. Suggestion of the addition of US and EU aid are very welcome. The lack of truly transparent methods for verifying the economic impact of the spending of existing EU funds is something that needs to be tackled. These matters must be covered in the terms of reference.

The terms of reference should include an examination of the impact of twenty five years of violence on those who have suffered directly from it. The victim's voice should be heard at the Forum. If this is done, and seen to be done, it will help heal the wounds that have been caused, and will engender a more humane attitude all round.

Purpose and Method of Work of the Forum

The purpose and duration of the Forum should be clear from the outset. To whom will it report? What will be its statutory, legal, financial and constitutional basis? Will it work by unanimity or by majority vote? Where will it meet? Will it operate through committees?

Will the Forum have any input to the current inter Governmental negotiations in regard to the Framework document? Is it envisaged that the Forum is to be given some ongoing role in the institutional arrangements to be set out in the Framework document? If not, what medium term future does the Forum have? Will the Framework document be published before the Forum is set up?

These are questions to which clear answers have not yet been offered in our discussions with the Government. The questions are fairly elementary, and the lack of full answers at this stage is somewhat disquieting, particularly in view of the speed with which the Government wishes to establish the Forum.

The Forum is liable to absorb a lot of time of the participants. If this time is to be well spent, details of this nature should be fully agreed in advance. All parties participating in the Forum should have adequate research facilities provided to them for the duration of the Forum.

Fine Gael believes that it would be useful if the Forum, or its committees, had the option of meeting in places other than Dublin.

As noted already, it is of vital importance that there be substantial Unionist presence at the Forum. Everything must be done to achieve this. The important question of whether to hold all sessions in public, or to hold some in private, cannot be realistically determined until efforts to persuade the principal Unionist parties to attend have been brought to a conclusion. The holding of private sessions, while some major parties remained outside, would add further fuel to suspicions that something was being done behind their backs.

The Chairmanship of the Forum is of considerable importance. To broaden the mandate of the Forum, consideration should be given to having an opposition politician in the Chair. This would have the effect of bringing a wider range of representative public opinion along with the process. We will, of course, be willing to look at other suggestions on this matter in a constructive spirit.

Various methods of parliamentary work need to be considered so as to achieve the maximum degree of genuine and committed consensus. Members should aim at the highest common denominator, not the lowest.

Traditionally, bodies like the Anglo-Irish Parliamentary tier, have worked on the basis of reports prepared by the entire committee or sub-committee. In practice, this means that reports are drafted by the secretariat, rather than by politicians. This has tended to lead conclusions towards the lowest common denominator, because the secretariat will be reluctant even to put forward proposals initially, that would be unacceptable to some members.

To overcome this, Fine Gael suggests that the "Rapporteur" model, as practised in the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, be used. In this model, an individual politician is charged by his/her Committee with preparing a report, which he/she then must bring back to the committee for agreement. This process would force politicians themselves to try harder to seek agreement with one another, rather than leave that responsibility to official drafters in the secretariat. This would only be valuable, of course, if the representation on the Forum is genuinely broadly based across both traditions. Pushing towards an agreed position within one tradition if the other tradition is not substantially involved in the process, would probably be counterproductive and would probably deepen division on the island.

Links with other Bodies

As pointed out earlier, the Forum can only live up to its name if both traditions on the island are fully represented. The defining characteristic of the Unionist tradition, even in its very title, is its commitment to the Union.

From the Unionist viewpoint the Northern Ireland problem has a British dimension. If that dimension is excluded, or if the problem is defined in solely Irish terms, that causes a problem for Unionists. This was specifically recognised in the New Ireland Forum Report. For instance paragraph 4.9.1 stated.

"Unionists generally regard themselves as being British, the inheritors of a specific communal loyalty to the British Crown".

On the other hand, Republican separatists and many Nationalists have an equivalent difficulty in defining the problem in anything but purely Irish terms, because they regard separation from Britain as the ultimate goal. The concept of Irish self

determination, as refined in discussions between John Hume and Gerry Adams has had a useful role in bringing about the present cessation of violence. It is reflected in the Downing Street declaration.

If both traditions are to participate successfully in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, there must be institutional recognition of both points of view about the context in which a solution is to be found.

The fact that full representations on the Forum is confined to parties active on the island of Ireland can be represented as a recognition of the nationalist perspective, and of its view of the context in which the problem can be solved. On the other hand, recognition must also be given to the Unionist viewpoint as to the appropriate context for solving the problem.

There is no substitute for full Unionist participation in the Forum, putting their own viewpoint. In order to facilitate this essential involvement Fine Gael suggests that consideration might be given to a formal link being established between the Forum and the Westminster-based House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. The terms of reference of the Select Committee are as follows:

Administration and expenditure of the Crown Solicitor's office (but excluding individual cases and advice given by the Crown Solicitor); and other matters within the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (but excluding the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Northern Ireland and the drafting of legislation by the Office of Legislative Council).

The Select Committee is currently working on issues related to jobs and inward investment. Its next meeting takes place on 19 October. A permanent cessation of violence will obviously have a major impact on the responsibilities and work of this Select Committee and there could therefore be mutual benefit to be derived from discussions between the two bodies. The link would also break any sense of isolation that might be felt by Unionists who are participating in the Forum. This proposal is put forward in order to ensure the success of the Forum, by making it easier to achieve essential Unionist involvement in it. We will be happy to consider any other suggestion that will achieve this essential result by another route.