

Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

Parity of Esteem

1. The concept of parity of esteem has in recent years become a significant element in debate about relationships within Northern Ireland and within Ireland as a whole. While not using the phrase per se, the report of the New Ireland Forum stated that the nationalist and unionist identities both "must have equally satisfactory, secure and durable, political, administrative and symbolic expression and protection". For its part, the report of the Opsahl Commission, in recommending the legal recognition of nationalism within Northern Ireland, argued that parity of esteem "ought to be given legal approval, promoted and protected, in various ways which should be considered".
2. However, while the ideal of parity of esteem might appear to enjoy substantial, if not universal, support, it is also a rather elastic and potentially confusing concept. It is evident that there are, including among the parties represented in the Forum, differing views about the extent of its useful applicability and, consequently, about how wide the terms of reference of a study should be. There is general agreement that, as a minimum, parity of esteem relates to the legal and administrative recognition, protection and promotion, within existing jurisdictions, of communal identity. Some delegations would argue that, as the issues of allegiance and self-determination are deeply bound up with communal identity, the concept should also be used as a guide to the definition of wider constitutional, political and institutional structures. Others would disagree. Some delegations would wish to extend an analysis of parity of esteem into the area of socio-economic disparities, and also perhaps into the field of individual rights, including those which have more recently received general recognition (the rights of women, children, gays and lesbians). A further issue is whether the concept should be analysed in respect simply of Northern Ireland, of both North and South, or also in the context of a possible future agreed Ireland.
3. It is arguable that the various wider potential implications of the concept of parity of

esteem might, in terms of the Forum's programme of work, most effectively be dealt with (a) in any conclusions the Forum might reach on the nature of the problem and the principles underlying its resolution and (b) in work on other appropriate sectoral topics, in particular The Social and Economic Consequences of Peace and Economic Reconstruction (resource allocation, fair employment), North-South Cooperation (areas which would lend themselves to single administration), Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (individual rights), Policing and Justice Issues, Constitutional Issues and Political Structures. Attitudes in the South to expressions of the Unionist and British traditions might be considered under the rubric of Obstacles in the South to Relationships of Trust.

4. It is proposed, therefore, that the Forum's examination of parity of esteem might concentrate on its administrative, cultural and symbolic aspects, in particular within Northern Ireland. Any report or study issued by the Forum could make clear the widespread view that the implications of the concept are indeed much broader, and indicate explicitly that it should be read in conjunction with the rest of the Forum's output (which it is clear must deal with the wider aspects raised by delegations).. The report or study might have a title such as Parity of Esteem - Administrative, Cultural and Symbolic Aspects.

Possible Terms of Reference

5. The Forum will examine the administrative, cultural and symbolic aspects of the concept of parity of esteem, with particular reference to
 - the treatment of communal identities and traditions and their expression in selected divided or multi-cultural societies, for example Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Lebanon, the Sud-Tirol/Alto Adige (the Forum is conscious that aspects of the Irish situation are sui generis and that consideration of international precedents does not of course preclude the development of unique approaches)

- the current legal and administrative position within Northern Ireland regarding the recognition and protection of both main traditions, and of others.
- the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland.
- the role in Northern Ireland of flags, emblems, anthems and other symbols of identity.

In its examination, the Forum might engage the services of a consultant, in particular relative to international practice. The Secretariat, with the assistance of the members of the Forum and other interested persons and groups, might prepare a report on the other issues mentioned.

6. The Forum might then consider and make recommendations on options for the achievement of full parity of esteem in all relevant sectors, bearing in mind the scope for variation at local or regional level.

Forum Secretariat

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