

FORUM FOR PEACE
AND RECONCILIATION



FÓRAM UM SHÍOCHÁIN
AGUS ATHMHUINTEARAS

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Peace Forum to debate proposals received from the public

The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation will this week hold the first in a series of public meetings at which individuals and groups who have written to the Forum will be invited to outline their views in person.

One of the Forum's first decisions was to seek contributions from the public on how lasting peace and reconciliation can be fostered. The response to the Forum's call for public submissions has been very encouraging (over 350 submissions, one-third of these from Northern Ireland) and many valuable contributions have been received.

The Forum's Chairperson, Judge Catherine McGuinness, stressed the importance of the public submissions in bringing to the fore issues and ideas that might otherwise have been neglected. Judge McGuinness noted the impressive range of topics dealt with in the first batch of submissions currently being examined by the Forum. These include: the importance of cross-border co-operation; the need to bring people together by means, for example, of sporting contacts and exchanges between Community groups; the desirability of strengthened British-Irish links; the role of education in overcoming divisions; the significance of the Irish language; the introduction of a Bill of Rights; economic regeneration; equal status for the different symbols and expressions of identity; local government reform; and an unarmed police force.

Submissions stressed the value of broadcasting and of music in introducing the two traditions to each other. There was a call for the setting up of a new civil and human rights organisation to work for justice in Northern Ireland and for greater co-operation on tourism and between youth groups. One contributor proposed a new national peace day to be celebrated North and South. Another called for the evolution of a new umbrella identity for Northern Ireland formed around the ideal of peace. There was a call on the British Parliament to guarantee that there will be no re-partition if a majority in Northern Ireland opts for a united Ireland.

Several submissions suggested that changes are needed in the South, including a new national anthem, and the creation of a more open, tolerant and inclusive society. One submission proposed rejoining the Commonwealth. Different views were expressed about changes to Articles 2 and 3.

A number of contributors presented themselves as reflecting a unionist or northern Protestant outlook. Among the points made in these submissions were that: Unionists see themselves, politically and culturally, as British; opposition to any effort to alter the ethos of Northern Ireland; and the idea that Protestant self-determination cannot be minimised or ignored.

The first public submission will be made on Friday when Mr. Roy Garland, from Lisburn, will address the Forum in a personal capacity. Mr. Garland's submission stresses the need to heal the wounds of the past and supports a new Community Assembly in Northern Ireland with considerable powers which can provide a basis for a new and non-coercive relationship between all the peoples of these islands.

The Forum's Chairperson, Judge Catherine McGuinness, said that she hoped "the sessions at which we hear public submissions will highlight new aspects of the reconciliation process". She hoped that the decision to hold more public sessions would create a better understanding of what the Forum is all about.

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