

# FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

## SUB-COMMITTEE ON OBSTACLES IN THE SOUTH TO RECONCILIATION

### Progress Report

Chairperson, Members of the Forum:

#### Introduction

As Chairperson of the Committee on Obstacles in the South to Reconciliation and in accordance with the Forum's agreed work programme, I would like to bring you up to date on the work of the Committee. You will recall that the Forum held a plenary debate on the issue of obstacles in the South to Reconciliation on the 24 February and that the Forum concluded that it would be worthwhile to pursue the issue in more detail. The Forum agreed to establish a Sub-Committee to bring the matter forward and to report back in due course. It was decided not to restrict membership of the Committee to Forum members, alternates and substitutes in recognition of the potentially heavy workload which the Committee would have to bear and the difficulties of the smaller delegations in servicing the frequent meetings. As it turned out, only one delegation availed of the opportunity to nominate a representative from outside their Forum delegation.

The committee met for the first time on 31 March and at roughly fortnightly intervals since then - seven times in total so far. The first task of the Committee was to define the scope of its work. The basis of the Committee's work is of course the commitment in paragraph 6 of the Downing Street Joint Declaration to have examined those aspects of life in the South that can be represented to the Irish Government in the course of political dialogue as a real and substantial threat to the way of life and ethos of the Unionist community or that can be represented as not being fully consistent with a modern democratic and pluralist society. This two fold objective

has made the Committee's work more complex than it might at first sight appear.

At the outset, the Committee recognised that steps towards greater pluralism in the South need not necessarily be of interest to Unionists and, in particular, would be unlikely to affect their attachment to the Union with Britain, certainly in the near term. Nevertheless, the Committee felt that the cultivation of pluralism in the South would appeal to those who consider themselves to be British-Irish and to those, both North and South, who consider the main obstacle to reconciliation to be the absence of pluralism in the South. The Committee went on to define reconciliation as the achievement of better relations among the people of Ireland, North and South, based on respect for diversity and acceptance of the existence within the island of different traditions and allegiances.

### **Perceptions/religion**

The areas which the Committee have chosen to examine reflect the need to address both real and perceived obstacles in the South to reconciliation. It was felt that it would be important to examine perceptions of the Irish State as against its reality. In this context, the members of the Committee attempted an initial identification of prevailing perceptions among the Unionist people of the North as to the obstacles in the South to reconciliation and to identify approaches to reconciliation. The Committee provisionally concluded that the most significant obstacle was the perception of the Catholic Church's influence in the social and political life in the South, especially in the health and education areas and the related perception that the Protestant population in the South had been adversely affected by the denominational ethos of the State. This obstacle is the main focus of the Committee's work.

The Forum will recall that Irish Marketing Surveys and its associated company in the North recently carried out a survey as its contribution to the Forum's work. The survey questioned people North and South as to what they felt were the obstacles to better relations between the North and South and the results tended to reinforce the Committee's own provisional conclusion that the influence of religion, particularly the perceptions of the role of the Catholic Church, looms large in the Northern perception of the Southern state. The results of that survey have been made available to all Forum members and also received widespread distribution and

publicity in the media.

Having regard to the results of the survey and the Committee's provisional conclusions, it is likely that the health, education and anti-discrimination areas will form the core work of the Committee from the point of view of cultivating pluralism in practice in the South and will have considerable weight in its final report.

As part of its exploration of this topic, the Committee has set in train a number of studies to assist it in deepening its analysis. In one, Professor Terence Brown of Trinity College, Dublin, is carrying out a socio-political analysis of the historical and contemporary position of the Protestant and Jewish populations since shortly before the foundation of the state. A second study by Professor Jerry Sexton of the ESRI will examine the demographic profile of the two groups in the same period and the causes of the changes in population that have taken place. It is proposed, subject to the views of the Sub-Committee and the Forum's Coordinating Committee to publish these studies in the autumn as separate outputs of the Forum alongside the report of the Committee. A study has also been commissioned from Dr. Dermot Keogh, University College, Cork on the historical-political evolution of the Catholic Church and its influence in the same period. Finally the Committee felt that it would be worthwhile to have the issue of obstacles in the South to reconciliation examined from a Northern Unionist perspective. The Secretariat is engaged in preliminary discussions with suitable Northern academics with legal and political science backgrounds to establish their availability for this undertaking.

### **Health/Education/Anti-discrimination legislation**

The Committee has had the benefit of a number of presentations to assist it in its examination of the health and education areas. Representatives from the Department of Education made a presentation to the Committee on the aspects of the recent White Paper on Education which are relevant to its work. The Campaign to Separate Church and State also made a quite substantive presentation which outlined views in favour of secularisation. The Committee had hoped to conclude work in these important areas before the summer break but has decided to wait until the autumn. This essentially reflected timing difficulties. The first of these was the need to

postpone to the autumn the intended Public Hearing on Education in a Plenary session of the Forum. A more complete examination of education will be possible after that hearing has taken place. In the health area, it emerged in discussions with the Department of Health that it would be possible to have a more comprehensive and open examination of relevant issues in the health sector once the current negotiations on the new Tallaght Hospital have reached a conclusion. The Forum will be aware that the Board of the Adelaide Hospital has made a submission to the Forum. It is intended that the Adelaide be called to make a presentation to the Committee in the autumn when the Department of Health is also ready to participate.

On a separate but related topic the Committee has heard a presentation from a representative of the Department of Equality and Law Reform who explained the Government's proposed anti-discrimination legislation. The Committee has a generally positive attitude to the Government's approach but may wish to pursue further the question of discrimination on the grounds of political affiliation.

### Constitution/symbols

Partly reflecting the timing difficulties in regard to the health and education sectors, much of the recent work of the Committee has been taken up with consideration of a complementary package of issues which could be described as being less directly related to the practice and more related to the symbolic expression of pluralism and for this reason has proved more difficult and complex in discussion. The issues here are those aspects of the Constitution which are perceived by some not to have a fully inclusive character, such as the religious or the historic references, mainly in the Preamble, and the provisions relating to the Irish language, the role of women, the prohibition on divorce, state aid for denominational education, and, a separate issue, the role of symbols in the form of the flag, the national anthem and the broadcasting of the Angelus.

In the case of the Constitution, it is clear that from the point of view of Unionists, the major obstacle to reconciliation is the territorial claim in Articles 2 and 3 and the related philosophical content of the Articles 1,4,5 and 6 which has to do with definitions of Irishness and statehood. I consider that these questions are outside the remit of the Committee because they fall within a separate sub-theme of the Forum to do with constitutional issues; some members disagree and

it is likely that the Committee will look again at this point. Nevertheless, the Committee felt that it would be worthwhile to examine the other aspects of the Constitution mentioned from the perspectives both of pluralism and reconciliation and has spent a considerable amount of time doing so. What has emerged from the debate so far is a broad range of views on the need or otherwise for the Committee to suggest change now or in the future in the relevant parts of the Constitution, with shades of agreement more pronounced in some areas than others. Had there been time for one more meeting of the Committee, it might have been possible to identify approaches that would bridge the differing views in certain areas. Lack of time and the complexity of the issues, however, dictated that it will be necessary to return to them early in the autumn.

For the discussion on symbols, the Committee had the benefit of a presentation by Mr. Tony Buckley, an anthropologist and co-author of a pamphlet on symbols for the Cultural Traditions Group of the Community Relations Council of Northern Ireland. He drew attention in particular to the fact that symbols, while powerfully expressive, are no more than representations of social, economic and political realities and could change with circumstances. He also pointed out that at the cutting edge of situations where people felt doubt, symbols provided reassurance. [This week's events in the North suggest the truth of this remark]. Some more time is needed to explore how far the emerging consensus among a wide range of delegations can be transformed into an agreement to which all delegations can subscribe.

### **Reconciliation in sport and acknowledgement of British-Irish links**

Finally, the Committee agreed that it would look at areas where practical, visible and accessible measures could be taken to promote reconciliation and to show respect for diversity. It was decided to look at sport where in many cases reconciliation already operates in practice. This aspect of the Committee's work will be held over until the autumn, when it is anticipated that the Forum will hold the Public Hearing on the potential of sport to promote reconciliation and understanding. This was to have taken place in May but had to be deferred. The Committee will also look at ways in which existing British-Irish links can be acknowledged and strengthened.

## Conclusion

As a final comment, I would say that the main difficulty facing the Committee is that it has to look at the whole question of obstacles in the South to reconciliation from a number of different perspectives, to which different delegations give differing degrees of emphasis. There is the perspective that we should be taking steps to promote pluralism for the greater benefit of society as a whole and the range of groups and opinions that are increasingly forming part of that society. A second perspective is that of reconciliation. In this perspective we are required to examine what would make life in the South, and on the island of Ireland, more attractive and reassuring to the Northern Unionist outlook; this approach need not necessarily involve the same approach as the first perspective and should bear in mind that any change for the purpose of removing a real or perceived obstacle for one tradition could, unless handled with care and sensitivity, give rise to fears and anxieties for Irish nationalists. This latter consideration influences a final view held by some, that any change contemplated must be considered in a wider context, including wider political negotiations and therefore is best brought forward in the context of a political accommodation. All of these perspectives have been in play in the Committee's discussions to date, particularly in relation to what might be termed the more politically complex questions of the constitution and symbols.

The Committee's work will resume on 29 September. In the meantime the Secretariat will carry out some basic background work on the issues which remain to be discussed and will also be in consultation with Forum delegations and other relevant representative bodies on issues where further work needs to be done. I expect that the final report of the Committee will contain important conclusions, particularly in relation to the first package of topics, the health/ education areas and the related area of anti-discrimination legislation. We will continue to work on the questions of the constitution and symbolism with a view to reaching consensus and hope to make a thorough investigation of the areas of reconciliation in sport and acknowledgement of British-Irish links. The studies commissioned by the Committee will also be available in the autumn and will, I have no doubt, be a valuable input into our work.

I would like to conclude this presentation by paying tribute to the commitment of all Forum delegations to the work of the Committee. I believe that every one of the 13 delegations was

represented at every meeting, almost always by the designated representative on the Committee. One sad exception was the lamented absence from our most recent meeting of the late Senator Gordon Wilson who was a very active and thought - provoking contributor to our deliberations and who is sadly missed. I was in the unconventional position, for a civil servant, of chairing a committee of political, mainly elected, representatives - but they forebore from pulling rank on me and, one and all, made thoughtful and constructive inputs into the work of the Committee, for which I thank them.