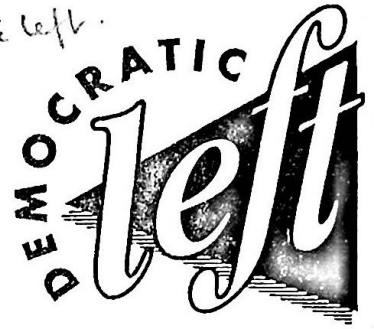


New file
- Democratic left.



Northern Ireland Region
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3 / 1 / 96

Dear *John*

The enclosed article has been written for publication in the local media. So far only snippets from it have appeared in the Belfast Telegraph. It is, in essence, the summary of views expressed by our members at their end-of-year Conference (30.1.1995) in Belfast.

At Conference's end, the members present adopted a proposal to put forward into the public arena the idea on an Elected Conciliation Conference as a means of facilitating political dialogue and discussion to prepare the way for negotiation and eventual accommodation.

Members felt strongly that there was a need for a time, space and opportunity to enable trust and confidence to be built so that a political culture could begin to emerge, take root and flourish. They felt equally strongly that the general public should be given a chance to contribute to and take ownership of the peace process.

Conference urged me, as chairperson, to circulate copies of their proposal to all political parties, community organisations, church groups and interested individuals as well as to the media and to ask, where appropriate, for a meeting to discuss our ideas.

Please contact either of us by fax or telephone so that we can agree a mutually suitable date to discuss these and other relevant matters.

I remain

Yours sincerely

Paddy Joe McClean (Chair)

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One of the most obvious and glaring weaknesses to date of “the peace process” has been the lack of public participation or input into it. Even so, the fact that tens of thousands took to the streets during the visit of President Clinton indicated clearly that they were welcoming the end of armed conflict and celebrating the peace. To my mind however the presence of such vast numbers on the streets of Northern Ireland’s two main cities carried a greater message. In the only way open to them at the time, these vast throngs of our neighbours were expressing their desire that they wanted political dialogue to secure the peace. And more. They would be willing again, if given a proper opportunity, to play an even more meaningful part in securing it.

Since the Clinton visit people recognise that their peace is threatened just as much by the rhetoric of those ‘talking up a storm’ as by the death squads now masquerading as a Sinn Fein social control police force. Yet in the midst of this unease and uncertainty the public are denied any effective mechanism to obtain ownership of the peace process or to indicate how they believe peace can be consolidated and secured.

To my mind what is needed now - indeed is long overdue - is that steps should be taken to create the conditions whereby a political culture can take root and where the public can become participants in the process rather than the passive observers they are at present. Mine is not the only mind that has been exercised in this direction. Several suggestions have been put forward into the public arena to find ways and means of circumventing obstacles to political dialogue. All deserve careful consideration and merit responses. For a political culture even to begin to flourish, everyone but especially political party leaders must grow away from the old habits of negative knee-jerk reactions and the shooting down of ideas just because of who puts them forward. A ceasefire in the head is every bit as necessary as the ceasefire on the streets.

So whilst there is a yearning for all party talks and whilst the de-commissioning commission and governments get on with their tasks in hand there is much that we can do for ourselves as well. Before going further let me say that I take into account completely the terrible hurt, the suspicion and the intolerance that have both fuelled and sustained the last 25 years of conflict. I recognise that the sufferings and pain have not disappeared

overnight. I go further and say that my firm conviction is that these will remain like a cancer in remission with the capacity to further erode civil society in Northern Ireland unless creative, imaginative and inclusive steps are taken to deal with them.

A period for trust building is necessary. And an opportunity must be given for the peoples' elected representatives to meet in a pre-negotiation stage to get to know each other, to allay fears, to remove suspicions and mutual hostility and learn to tolerate each other's political views and respect deeply held convictions.

I am not talking about anyone having to give up any political principle or ideal. *What I am talking about is finding an inclusive method and providing a space and opportunity for politicians to begin to learn to work together, hearing what each has to say and mapping out visions and principles which might underpin a new political beginning for, and in, Northern Ireland.*

Furthermore I do not believe that it is beyond our collective ingenuity to find and agree such a mechanism. I have referred to the several helpful suggestions already in the public arena. But even the mere mention of 'elected representatives' or the 'holding of elections' sends shivers of fear down the backs of those who rightly see the danger of a backward rush to the sectarian trenches once we are confronted with electoral choice.

Yet there are examples in other countries of how an electoral procedure can be used intelligently to promote inclusiveness and to involve most shades of political opinion. I refer to a 'mix and match' of multi-seat constituency members elected by single transferable vote and a list system for across Northern Ireland which would provide 'top-up' representation for smaller parties and groupings.

This is not an attempt to distance political opinion or to secure seats for smaller parties just because they are small. It is a genuine attempt to reflect the widest possible diversity of political views. It seeks to extend and deepen democratic practice rather than narrow it. And legislation exists to give it effect almost immediately.

At its end-of-year conference my party, Democratic Left, endorsed a proposal for an Elected Conciliation Conference. This conference would be composed not just of the five members to be elected from each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies but would be topped up by others also elected on a 'Mix and Match' basis from a list system. It would be time limited, say for a period of two years. It would have no powers but would allow elected representatives time and space to listen and talk to each other. And it could provide a facility for input from Trade Unions, Women's Groups, the business world - those groups active and working daily for peace in the community.

Politics and peace belong to us all. Not just the few. This New Year is an appropriate time for new political initiatives which seek to go to the heart of our difficulties. Indeed in view of the increasing weakness of the British Government it is essential that mechanisms be devised which can allay fears and suspicions of secret political deals being done.

The New Year should also offer politicians within Northern Ireland an opportunity to meet together in a genuine effort to replace previous political prejudice and lack of understanding with knowledge, information and tolerance. Such an Elected Conciliation Conference would give an opportunity for public participation in, and ownership of, the peace process. In my view that would be the strongest bulwark against attempts to derail it. And, lest we forget, there are still those who believe that they stand to gain greater partisan, political control by abandoning the road of democratic politics.

Paddy Joe McClean is Chairperson of Democratic Left's Northern Ireland Regional Executive Committee. A past chairperson of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, he is one of his party's representatives at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.