

FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Impact on, and Outreach of Forum to, Unionist Tradition in Northern Ireland

Developments and Position to Date

1. From the time when consultations were held prior to establishment of the Forum, all delegations in it have been concerned that there should be participation by the Unionist tradition in Northern Ireland, either through direct membership, some arrangement such as observer status or other participation e.g. attendance at Forum sessions or submissions/presentations to the Forum. Aspects of the terms of reference and other arrangements for the Forum were specifically tailored with this objective in view. The main unionist parties and later, after the loyalist ceasefires, the loyalist parties and Mr. Gusty Spence were invited to participate. However, none of them accepted; there was a polite reply from Mr. Molyneaux declining.
2. In the work of the Forum to date, every effort has been made to facilitate the participation, in some form, of people or groups from the unionist tradition. In the pre-Forum consultations, advice was received from a number of sources that it would be preferable not to make direct approaches, at that stage, to groups within the unionist or loyalist traditions, other than the main Unionist parties, encouraging them to make submissions to the Forum, on the basis that this would prejudice any prospect of securing participation in some form by one or more of the main Unionist parties at a later stage, since they might see such approaches as an attempt to circumvent them. Instead, the advertisement seeking submissions was placed in a large number of media outlets in the North, involving significant coverage of the unionist tradition. This has led to a response that is not unsatisfactory but could be better: about one-third of the 300 submissions received emanate from Northern Ireland and an impressionistic estimate is that, even excluding such bodies as the Irish Council of Churches, 10-15% are from the broadly unionist tradition, although the proportion from persons of mainstream unionist political outlook is lower than this.
3. A number of people of broadly unionist background were invited to be in the audience at the Public Hearing on 16 December, e.g. Chairpersons of a number of Chambers of Commerce. Quite few came but the notice was short and a number of the invitations reached the addressees quite late: at least one invitee (Chair of Portrush Chamber) indicated he would have come had the invitation been received earlier. People and groups within the unionist tradition are, again, being included in the invitations for the Public Hearing on 20 January. Considerable efforts have, of course, been made, to secure significant participation by persons and groups of Unionist background on the panels for that Hearing.

4. Media coverage of the Forum in specifically Northern media has not been very extensive, partly reflecting the fact that much of the Forum deliberations have been in private. However, Southern media are widely accessible in Northern Ireland and have given extensive coverage to the Forum: it may be, however, that mainstream unionists have availed themselves relatively little of access to this coverage. Such channels as Sky News have also given significant coverage. As previously reported by him, the Forum Press Officer has been working assiduously to improve Northern coverage and, for example, will have (1) a range of leading Northern journalists in Dublin for the public hearing on 20 January and (2) will host journalists from Co. Fermanagh for the Forum meeting on 13 January.
5. Feedback received from some Forum delegations that are well-placed to monitor attitudes within the broadly unionist community suggests that the Forum does not have a particularly high profile within that community but that among those who follow political developments more closely, there is a significant degree of interest and a reasonably positive image of the Forum and of its evolution to date.
6. The Taoiseach recently reiterated his strong desire to see Unionist participation in the Forum. The reactions from the Reverend Ian Paisley and from Mr. Jim Wilson, Chief Executive of the Ulster Unionist Party suggest that official participation by either of the main Unionist parties is a distant prospect.

Assessment

7. It is clear that
 - (1) the Forum's efforts to encourage greater participation by people of the Unionist tradition need to be directed at persons or groups other than the top leadership of the main Unionist parties;
 - (2) while some impact has been made on that tradition, clearly, further progress would be desirable; and
 - (3) a multi-faceted approach is required, embracing such aspects as presentations by persons or groups selected from among those who have made submissions (including perhaps hearing such presentations in Belfast), enhanced media coverage in the North, greater involvement in Forum meetings etc.

The Chairperson and Secretariat are making contacts, including with Forum delegations, on how best to make progress in this area. Delegations should, of course, continue and, as opportunity offers, step up their own contacts with the Unionist tradition.

- (1) a public launch in Belfast of a volume containing the papers of all delegations on the Nature of the Problem underlying the Conflict and Principles for its Resolution (delegations could have an opportunity to, if desired, tidy up their papers before such publication).
- (2) reviewing submissions which have been received from Northern Ireland and

identifying gaps; and then specifically approaching persons or groups, within the broad unionist tradition, directly or through intermediaries, in order to encourage them to make a submission or otherwise to participate; the Secretariat look forward to assistance from delegations in identifying relevant groups and persons.

- (3) trying to encourage a Northern T.V. channel to take the broadly monthly programme on the Forum which RTE propose to screen.

Forum Secretariat
12 January 1995