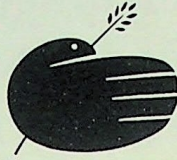


F118
FORUM FOR PEACE
AND RECONCILIATION



FÓRAM UM SHÍOCHÁIN
AGUS ATHMHUINTEARAS

To: Members of the Co-ordinating Committee/Delegation Secretaries

Re: Debate on Parity of Esteem, 10 February 1995

The Chairperson and Secretariat considered that it might be useful if the Chairperson were to open the Forum's initial plenary debate on parity of esteem and, in doing so, pose some questions that delegations might wish to address in the debate. I am attaching a draft of the Chairperson's remarks, in the belief that delegations may find this helpful, for example in allocating among their members contributions on the political, economic and social, legal and related, cultural and educational aspects of the matter, together with the other issues raised in the Chairperson's remarks (such as the question of implications for the South).

**Walter Kirwan
Secretary-General
9 February 1995**

Debate on Parity of Esteem, 10 February 1995

Draft Opening Remarks by Chairperson

Before opening our debate on Parity of Esteem, perhaps I should explain how I propose that the debate be conducted. I would also like to make a few brief observations of my own on the issues involved as they appear to me, and to throw out a few questions which I hope might evoke answers, or reactions, which could help to focus discussion.

First of all, as to organisation. It is intended that this be a very wide-ranging debate and that as many of you as possible will be able to participate. We've agreed that there won't be pre-arranged speaking slots, but I will try to call speakers in such a way as to ensure the maximum variety and diversity. If we are to have a genuine debate, and if everyone who wishes to speak is to have a chance, I would urge - indeed insist - that contributions be short, and certainly no more than five minutes in length. I will enforce this strictly. Those who have not already done so should give their names to Mr Kirwan during the debate.

At what appears to me an appropriate point some way into the debate, I will call upon our two Observers from the European Parliament, Mr Dankert and Mr Tindemans, who we are delighted to see back with us. Both of them come from countries in which the concept of parity of esteem has considerable resonance and in their long and distinguished careers they have had considerable experience of its political and practical implications.

I am not sure who first used the phrase parity of esteem in this particular context, but the idea has certainly in recent years become a significant element in debate about relationships within Northern Ireland and within Ireland as a whole. At the same time, it is clear - and this emerged in early discussions in our Co-ordinating Committee - that there is considerable disagreement, and indeed public confusion, about what the term means in practice, or what it should mean. It was our feeling that it would be interesting and helpful to debate the issue in plenary session and to see where it fits in to our overall programme of work.

The report of the New Ireland Forum insisted that both the nationalist and unionist identities "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".

Nevertheless - and this ties in with what I was saying earlier - the concept can appear remarkably elastic. It can be used in a wide variety of ways. Does it primarily relate to the legal and administrative recognition and protection of the communal identity of the Northern nationalist community within Northern Ireland? To issues like flags and anthems -which, as recent controversies have reminded us, are themselves highly sensitive? Or, while involving these things, does it also have more profound implications for constitutional, political and institutional arrangements on the island as a whole, as the deepest expression of identities and aspirations?

Is parity of esteem a useful guiding principle in considering socio-economic disparities and fair employment, or policing and justice issues, or is it more useful to work from the standpoint of individual rights and of equality of opportunity?

If communal rights can be identified, how are they best protected? Through political arrangements or through a Bill of Rights?

What are the implications of parity of esteem in the cultural and educational areas? What, for example, should the status of the Irish language be in Northern Ireland?

How do we ensure that implementing the principle of parity of esteem does not lead to enshrining division or fostering sectarianism? What of that minority which refuses to define itself as part of either main tradition?

At the level of symbols, there are a number of approaches: giving equal value to the symbols of both traditions, or trying as far as possible to avoid the use of either, or indeed attempting to create new, neutral symbols. Which approach is most realistic? Could one envisage variations at local level - should the practice in Crossmaglen be the same as in Newtownards?

Finally, does the concept of parity of esteem have implications for the South, either now or in the future?

I do not expect that we will agree on the complete answers to all of these difficult questions today, but I look forward to what I am sure will be a very stimulating debate.