

# ANALYSIS OF PROPOSALS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIC FORUM

## Introduction

1. The Good Friday Agreement provides for the establishment of a consultative Civic Forum (paragraph 34, page 9). It provides that the Forum will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and other such sectors as agreed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister; that the body will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues; and that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will, by agreement, provide administrative support and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives. The Secretary of State has now formally referred the matter of the Civic Forum to the Assembly for consideration.
2. The Northern Ireland Bill contains a clause placing an obligation on the First and Deputy First Ministers to make arrangements for obtaining from the Forum the views of the community on social, economic and cultural matters. The Bill also states that the Assembly shall meet the costs of the Forum and will ensure that it is provided with all property, staff and services required.
3. Furthermore, the Belfast Agreement charges the First and Deputy First Ministers with drawing up guidelines for the selection of members. It is assumed that they will conduct this particular exercise in consultation with the Assembly.
4. This paper presents an analysis, drawing largely on contributions received from interested parties since the signing of the Agreement and has been drawn up for consideration by the First and Deputy First Ministers.

## Timing

5. Since the Civic Forum is an obligatory element of the institutional arrangements provided for in the Strand One section of the Agreement, there was general consensus among those offering views that it should become operational from the date of full devolution, when the new Assembly formally comes into being.

## Role of the Forum

6. Most contributors agreed that as a consultative body, the Forum should have no formal legislative, executive or administrative powers but should act instead in an advisory capacity for the Northern Ireland Assembly on all major policy issues. There was also widespread support for charging the Forum with addressing and improving the quality of decision-making in public life. Most contributors also felt that the Forum should be able to generate its own investigations and reports as well as commenting on and analysing long-term strategic policies.
7. There was, however, widespread belief that the Forum should avoid, where possible, involvement in immediate political and/or potentially divisive issues.
8. In particular, contributors suggested that the Civic Forum might:
  - initiate debate on any topic of general relevance to Northern Ireland;
  - investigate and report on any issues it believes are of particular local concern;

## Membership

9. Those submissions which offered a view on the number of members agreed that a figure around the 50 mark would give the Forum a critical mass given the diverse nature of the subject areas which might be examined (although a membership of 54 [108\2] would give it some symmetry with the Assembly). Many felt that any larger number could put the Forum in danger of becoming a mere debating chamber; anything smaller risks the possibility of failing to achieve the necessary measure of collegiality.
10. There was general consensus for a four year term of appointment. Members could be drawn from the following key areas of activity:
  - Voluntary, community and cultural groups
  - Business and the professions
  - Trade Unions and employees groups
  - Women's groups
  - Academics
  - The churches
  - Youth groups
  - Groups representing the elderly
  - Groups representing the disabled
  - Ethnic minority groups
  - Environmental groups
  - Agricultural industry groups
11. This would ensure that members are drawn from every Departmental sector within Northern Ireland. Voluntary sector interests do not favour serving politicians participating in the Forum.

12. There was almost universal support for permitting organisations to nominate their own representatives. The basis of nominations will however have to be considered within the context of Peach requirements and the choice would seem to be between giving nominating rights to a range of groups or bodies or inviting nominations and subjecting them to a selection process.
13. Either methods could be augmented by giving certain positions, as opposed to named individuals in society, membership of the Forum as of right. These positions could include the leaders of the four main churches, the Vice Chancellors of the two universities, the Presidents of the main business organisations, trade unions general secretaries, and so on, although they might be able to nominate an alternative to take up their place.

#### Meetings

14. The Forum might meet on a monthly basis in plenary session (though with discretion to vary the timing) under a Chair elected at the inaugural meeting. It might also divide into Committees (which could meet as frequently as business required) to examine particular topics and issues.

#### Staffing and Resources

15. The combined resources of all the members would be a considerable asset available to the body and it might be expected that some of the consultative, analytical and advisory work would be carried out by the members of the Forum. However, a small number of dedicated staff (6-8) would be needed to service the Forum and its committees.

The establishment of such a small secretariat, combining a mixture of civil servants and secondees from other sectors with relevant policy expertise, drew almost unanimous support from organisations who offered a view.

16. This team would be provided by the First and Deputy First Ministers, in accordance with the Agreement. There might also be provision for a budget for research, travel etc, to be agreed with the First and Deputy First Ministers on an annual basis.

#### Remuneration

17. Given that it will have no executive powers, the Civic Forum will be effective and influential only if it has strong and energetic members who regard their work as a necessary act of public service. While this suggests that members might be expected to work *pro bono publico* it nevertheless seems reasonable to offer a certain recompense for loss of earnings.

18. Options might include:

- a set amount for travel and subsistence;
- a per diem rate;
- a combination of these, or
- in accordance with recent developments in local government, a fixed annual sum.

The options would need further consideration.

### Accommodation

19. In current circumstances the options for accommodation that would give the Forum an appropriate status are limited. Clearly the most appropriate and sensible location is the Senate Chamber in Parliament Buildings. An alternative is the Interpoint Building, although this is currently occupied by the Commission on Policing.
  
20. Once the Forum is set up, they may decide to hold meetings in other locations in Northern Ireland, thus giving the entire community the opportunity of easier access and of making a contribution to the decision-making process. All of this would require further consideration.

### Conclusion

21. This paper presents an outline of possible arrangements for the establishment of a Civic Forum drawing on those comments offered to Government since the concept of a Forum was accepted by the signatories to the Agreement. It is offered for consideration by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Central Secretariat

August 1998