



25 Riverside Drive
Lisburn
BT27 4HE
Tel: 01849 677264

Our Ref: ID/CF01 Date: 8.10.98

Rt Hon Mr David Trimble MP First Minister (Designate)
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast

Dear Mr Trimble

CIVIC FORUM

I am writing to you in my capacity as Chairman of the Ulster Humanist Association. I understand from the press that the selection of members of the Civic Forum will be one of your responsibilities and we feel strongly that the views of a large proportion of people in Northern Ireland who wish for a more secular society must be represented on the Forum. We believe that the Ulster Humanist Association is best placed to represent these views.

We listened to your speech in the Waterfront Hall at the time of President Clinton's visit and were greatly heartened by your promise that Northern Ireland should have a Pluralist Parliament for a Pluralist People. It is essential for the Civic Forum to be as inclusive of the plurality of society as possible and especially to give voice to those who have had no arena in the past for the expression of their views. Even the main Churches are beginning to admit that religion has been a part of the problem in Northern Ireland. We believe that the evidence for this is everywhere. A separation of Church and public life is a requirement for a truly pluralist society.

A Humanist on the Civic Forum would have two functions.

(1) to represent and bring to the attention of policy makers, the difficulties which fellow humanists and others with a non religious view of life, face in a society where much of public life is dominated by the Churches. For example in the field of education where the curriculum is overtly Christian in character.

The Ulster Humanist Association is affiliated to the British Humanist Association: President Sir Hermann Bondi FRS.

Vice Presidents: Baroness Blackstone, Professor Richard Dawkins, Lord Normand of Easington, Dr James Hemming, Dr Harry Stopes-Roe, Baroness Turner of Camden, Jane Wynne Wilson, Professor Lewis Wolpert CBE FRS

There may be as many as 160,000 people in Northern Ireland (according to the last Census) who do not subscribe to a religion and probably many more who are opposed to the current influence which the main Churches have on all aspects of life here including politics, education, health, matters of life and death, gender and so on. We have been representing the views of such people for over 30 years and have developed considerable experience in this area. The Association is resolved to ensure that the voice of this substantial proportion of people is heard in the new, inclusive political and social structures being set up in Northern Ireland

(2) to promote a more open, tolerant and secular society and open debate on issues regarded as taboo by the main Churches. A Humanist representative would highlight areas of social life requiring change where present policy is circumscribed by religious canon. For example, in the issues of educational curricula, euthanasia, abortion, homosexuality, contraception, teenage pregnancy and genetic research. We believe that the influence of the Churches in the Forum must be balanced by an alternative view where issues are dealt with on their merits and with sympathy rather than dogma

We are not opposed to individuals who hold religious views, on the contrary we are tolerant and respectful of the rights of individuals to hold whichever views they choose. We are, however, opposed to the limits which such people would impose on the rights and freedoms of others with other or no religious beliefs.

In the European Union and the United Nations, humanists work quite easily alongside representatives of the main churches in formulating European policy and commissioning joint projects which promote humanist values. Such working relationships provide a model for the Civic Forum. Humanism is recognised as a quite distinct set of values which can act as a counterweight to the views of religious institutions.

The Forum will no doubt be asked to research, review and advise on many aspects of life in Northern Ireland. The main Churches may well hold permanent seats on the Forum and, while well meaning, will offer views on a wide range of issues which reflect their own perspectives and interpretations rather than seeking to truly reflect the expressed needs and desires of those whom they will consult.

Humanism is not amoral, on the contrary, it requires individuals to act only in ways which are tolerant of others. It is a life-stance which requires human beings to take responsibility for their own lives rather than to blame others or to live by external dogma. It is rationalist in outlook, preferring to use scientific methods and open debate to resolve social problems rather than taking a partial moral stance. It believes that one should show tolerance and a willingness to compromise for a greater good as well as an understanding of one's fellowman rather than indoctrinate the young and the vulnerable with one's own view of the world. We believe that Northern Ireland needs a moral foundation based on tolerance and inclusion rather than sectarianism.

Humanism is a world-wide movement which is supported by very many respected leaders of social and academic institutions. We have within the Ulster Humanist Association, the capabilities to fully participate in the very important work of the Civic Forum.

We qualify to participate in the Forum on both social and cultural criteria. In the past the Association has campaigned for the secularisation of education and politics, for freedom in matters relating to gender and homosexuality and for free debate on such issues as abortion.

We also offer a range of services to fellow Humanists such as funeral ceremonies, assistance with problems with over bearing religious instruction in schools, and other pastoral services. We have offered our views on many issues and have been invited to participate in debates with the clergy in the broadcast media

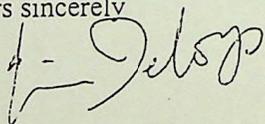
Our experience in these areas could prove invaluable in leading debates on sensitive issues, consulting with minority groups and preparing well thought out and non-dogmatic advice for the Assembly.

We would seek to use a seat on the Forum to promote humanist values which we feel would lead people throughout society to take a more tolerant and rational approach to social issues. We would also use it to balance the influence of the Churches which is so endemic in our public life. I am sure I have no need to review the often negative impact such influence has had in many instances in the past. If, as seems to be suggested in the press, the Churches are to have four permanent seats on the Forum then that is a sufficient case to have the views of the large number of non religious people represented by at least one Humanist member. In any case, the promotion of a secular, pluralist Northern Ireland would be considerably advanced by the active participation of the a Humanist in the Forum.

In conclusion, therefore, on behalf of the Ulster Humanist Association, I would ask that you consider asking the Ulster Humanist Association to nominate a Humanist to the Civic Forum.

Finally, we understand that you are prepared to meet with groups such as ours in your deliberations on how to build a new society in Northern Ireland. We would be very happy to meet with you at the earliest possible date.

Yours sincerely



Iain Deboys B.A.(Hons) QUB MSc
Chairman Ulster Humanist Association

Note: This letter will be published at the end of October in The Ulster Humanist

cc. New Agenda Group, 53 University Street, Belfast.