

Some further thoughts on the idea of a "civil society" initiative

In discussions on Tuesday, the idea of some kind of initiative to re-involve civil society in the peace process – as one of the means of filling a vacuum that may be created if the institutions go down – was mooted.

There are good reasons to consider this:

- The political process has, to some extent at least, lost touch with ordinary people
- Apart from us, no-one is arguing cogently for the Agreement itself as a nationalist/unionist win/win structure and a locus outside political society could do that
- The forces mobilised during the Yes campaign, however effective or not we consider that to have been, are still there but are not currently mobilised in favour of the Agreement
- Properly structured it would offer an arena within which NIWC activists could argue for the Agreement and the Coalition's role
- It may be possible to attract extra financial resources for such an initiative that would aid the pro-Agreement cause but would not be available to political parties.

An idea for discussion is that the NIWC take the initiative (public or private) in establishing a "Peace Congress." A "congress" concept implies a movement, not a political party, bringing together civil society groupings (trade unions, business etc) and political activists and parties, with a single overriding aim uniting otherwise disparate groups (cf ANC).

The aim of the Peace Congress would be to work to support the peace process based on the principles of the Agreement. Its main methods of work might be to, on the one hand, produce information and publicity supporting the peace process and the Agreement and, on the other hand, provide spaces for the collaborative working out of problems and discussion of difficulties.

At a central level it could invite participation from the employer federations, the trade unions, voluntary and community sector, churches, youth sector and so on, as well as the pro-Agreement parties. This would aim to be a very serious, heavyweight grouping.

At a local (constituency?) level, local Congress groups could be set up. Participation could be invited from local businesses, trade union groupings in local industries and other employment, community groups, churches and so on. This would give links into much of the social and economic life of an area.

There is no point in further elaborating on ideas at this stage – this is simply raised for discussion. It might be seen as particularly relevant if we are faced with a lengthy period of inactivity at the formal political level. On the other hand it may be seen as a diversion from party political and electoral work, if we do have elections coming up.