

Liaison Sub-Committee on Confidence Building Measures

Opening paper - Alliance Party.

Remit of the Committee

This Committee has a potentially important role in the Talks process and one which requires it to be able to deal - in some form - with any matters which members may consider relevant. It is important that parties should have a forum in which to raise any matters which may be important to them but which do not sit easily within the formal structures of the talks. It is also appropriate that there should be a mechanism whereby parties can quickly raise matters which they consider urgent. This committee provides that forum and mechanism and its remit should accordingly be broadly construed so as to permit it the maximum flexibility in responding to issues which may emerge.

The procedural motion of 24th September refers to "all aspects of the Report of the International Body relating to further confidence building measures mentioned in that Report which participants may wish to raise". Section 7 of the Report of the International Body, which relates to confidence building measures, refers to certain particular such measures but does not seek to define confidence building measures or provide an exhaustive list of such measures. We take 'further confidence building measures mentioned in that Report' to include all such possible measures. We therefore see no need to construe the September 24th remit in any narrow way. We take it to mean that Plenary may require the Committee to consider certain matters but that otherwise it's agenda is for the Committee to decide. The actual organisation and timetabling that agenda would be for the Chair to decide after consultation with the parties.

Role of the Committee.

It is however important to consider the role of the committee. It is a liaison committee and cannot itself take decisions. If a consensus emerged in the committee on some matter that would hopefully be taken very seriously by those who do make the decisions, but the reality, given the nature of the issues likely to be before the committee, is that it will not be easy to reach a consensus on most issues. The role of the committee therefore is to allow the airing and discussion of issues. The right of any party to raise issues does not impose any duty to reach conclusion or require other participants to do more than provide a hearing.

Confidence building measures.

It is also important to give some consideration to what 'confidence building measures' means. Some parties appear to think that 'confidence building measures' means them getting concessions, rewards or encouragements. That is not how it appears to us. In fact that kind of attitude, when it starts to approach the level of people demanding concessions to keep them in the process, diminishes confidence in the process and in those involved.

Confidence building is necessary because of the deep distrust, within the community and within the political groupings, which is the inevitable consequence of the events of the last nearly thirty years and because it is easy for some participants to suspect that other participants have no intention of reaching a real agreement and are only in this process to pursue their own agenda and to weaken their opponents.

We see confidence building as being relevant at two levels. the first level is between participants in the talks. At that level confidence building measures provide reassurances to some participants of the good intentions of other participants. Actions which are consistent with a desire to reach an agreement and which show a willingness to prepare for a shared and peaceful society afterwards are confidence building and further the overall process. Actions - and comments - which evince a reluctance to give up the failed methods and mentalities of the past are not confidence building and make it difficult for others to move or make concessions in the talks proper. It is important that all participants are seen to be making a real effort to respond to the concerns of others and are seen to be seeking to solve problems - especially those problems which they are particularly able to solve.

The second level at which confidence building is relevant is in the wider community. Deep distrust exists between different sections of the community and deep scepticism about the willingness or ability of some or all of the participants here to reach a real agreement is widespread. It is important for the success of this process that the public is given confidence that the war is over, and that political leaders are seriously pursuing a lasting agreement.

An agenda for the sub-committee.

We have already indicated that it should be possible for any participant to raise any issue they consider important. Nonetheless reasons of practicality dictate that it will only be possible to look at a few issues in depth. The items mentioned even in the first meeting could keep the committee in business for years - as indeed it may in effect be, since the final resolution of many of these issues will be the task of the new institutions emerging from these talks. That being the case the some of the items referred to in Section 7 of the Report of the International Body ought to provide the basis for the agenda for this committee for the time being.

They fall into three clear categories which the committee should consider:

1. Activity of paramilitary groups. This would include concerns about targeting, beatings, exclusions, and the provision of information about the missing.
2. Prisoners. This is an issue of great sensitivity and difficulty on all sides.
3. Policing. Forthcoming legislation on policing might provide a useful basis for discussion of some issues. New legislation of parades, already before Parliament, would provide a basis for the discussion of another important and closely related issue.

Building for a shared future

There is one other item which figures high on our confidence building agenda. It must be the objective of these talks not just to bring about a patched up short term compromise settlement but to bring about the beginnings of a radically changed society in which we can put the communal divisions of the past behind us forever. If we do not end those divisions then they will inevitably - and sooner rather than later - destroy any agreement reached here. Our confidence in others will be proportionate to their willingness to address the question of how we end the divisions which have bedevilled us for so long and create a truly shared society.

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