

A CIVIC FORUM : THE CASE FOR A SECOND CHAMBER IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition welcomes the fact that the current Labour Government in the United Kingdom has recognised the strength of the demand for more decentralised forms of government. A willingness to adopt a 'variable geometry' approach in the proposed institutional arrangements offers an opportunity to reflect the wishes of regions.
- 1.2 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition believes that any political structures proposed for Northern Ireland must be developed within the context of the totality of relationships within these two islands - both North/South and East/West - with a clear recognition of, and provision for, the synergy possible within the island of Ireland.
- 1.3 Any new political structures must be designed to accommodate:
 - * communities divided along often reinforcing lines of political identity, religious background and national aspiration;
 - * communities that bring a legacy of hurt, fear and uncertainty to any political changes;
 - * communities that have often developed their own forms of social, economic and political activism at a level that has not always been reflected by mainstream political parties.
- 1.4 It is expected that a Northern Ireland Assembly will be directly elected from a number of constituencies across the region, hopefully by an electoral system that will be designed to be inclusive and equitable. This Assembly should be complemented by a Second Chamber that will help to represent the diversity of experiences and sectoral interests in Northern Ireland.

2. RATIONALE

- 2.1 The Women's Coalition proposes a bicameral system which, while recognising the constitutional superiority of the Northern Ireland Assembly, would through a Second Chamber, bring a broader reflective role in terms of public policy and interest.
- 2.2 The Second Chamber, known as the Civic Forum, will provide an opportunity for the widest range of interests in Northern Ireland to engage constructively in the democratic process and with politicians.
- 2.3 It will assist in overcoming the difficulties in achieving democratic development in a divided society by augmenting the opportunity for active citizenship.

- 2.4 It will assist in embedding understanding of and respect for new political institutions within communities and among different sectoral interests and strands of life across Northern Ireland.
- 2.5 It will accelerate the impact of electoral and participative democratic processes and promote a style and level of interaction and involvement more suited to the new millennium.
- 2.6 It will counterbalance and complement the Assembly through the involvement in the Second Chamber of special interest representatives, with particular social and economic expertise.
- 2.7 It will provide an opportunity for a structured and strategic economic and social partnership between political representatives in the Assembly and specialist representatives from the Second Chamber.
- 2.8 It will contribute to the stability and sustainability of a political settlement by complementing the work of the Assembly and ensuring that a broad range of society has a stake in its operational and political success.

3. **A MODEL FOR THE COMPOSITION OF THE SECOND CHAMBER**

- 3.1 The Civic Forum should be constituted with a view to ensuring equity in its composition, particularly in terms of gender balance and perceived community background. Rural as well as urban interests should be assured.
- 3.2 It is recommended that a range of eligible organisations should be encouraged to apply for, and be held on a register of nominating bodies to the Civic Forum which could be arranged in a series of Panels under the following categories:
- * Cultural and Educational Panel
 - * Youth Affairs Panel
 - * Industrial and Commercial Panel
 - * Labour Panel
 - * Community Representation Panel
 - * Administrative and Social Concern Panel
- 3.3 Application by relevant organisations to be included in one of the above Panels would be made to a Civic Forum Registrar who would be appointed to fulfil this task. Eligibility for registration will be laid down in detail in legislation. No organisation could be listed under more than one Panel.
- 3.4 In general terms the objectives of the applicant organisation must primarily relate to, or be connected with, the interests and services indicated by the relevant Panel. The organisation itself must be a recognised legal entity and its members must be representative of persons and/or groups who have a knowledge and a practical experience of the appropriate interests and services. Organisations should be able to evidence an open, transparent and accountable manner of operation.

- 3.5 The Cultural and Educational Panel should include organisations that have a knowledge and practical experience of culture, literature, art, education.
- 3.6 For the Youth Affairs Panel it is regarded as appropriate for organisations representing young people (16-25 years) to have representation of the Civic Forum. The emphasis in this panel would be on the election of young people between the ages of 18 and 25 years.
- 3.7 The Industrial and Commercial Panel would provide representation of employer bodies, and business, trade, farming and fisheries interests.
- 3.8 The Labour Panel would represent those organisations that have a practical experience and knowledge of both employed and unemployed labour. In general terms these could be seen as those organisations affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.
- 3.9 The Community Representation Panel would provide representation from registered community groups. These groups should be registered for charitable status or be able to demonstrate other form of recognition. Nominating bodies for this Panel might be initially registered with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action for this purpose.
- 3.10 The Administrative and Social Concern Panel would facilitate representation of those interests involved in public administration, health and social affairs. This would potentially encompass a wide range of groups.
- 3.11 Each of the above Panels would return 12 representatives with at least 40% of either gender being returned by each Panel.
- 3.12 It is recognised that either a nominating body or an individual candidate may be qualified for more than one Panel. In such case the organisation/individual will have to indicate their preference and the Registrar will have to concur with the preferred option by examining the primary experience, knowledge and qualifications of the prospective body/individual. There will be no duality of representation.
- 3.13 Election could be either by Panel with the electorate being those registered under the Panel, or by universal suffrage alongside the Assembly election. If election is by Panel it is accepted that the detailed electoral arrangements may vary as between Panels, but every effort should be made to devise an inclusive electoral system.

4. **A MODEL FOR THE OPERATION OF THE SECOND CHAMBER**

- 4.1 The Civic Forum should be elected for a period co-terminus with the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- 4.2 The Civic Forum will adopt a role that is complementary to the work of the Assembly. It will demonstrate a particular commitment to social, economic and cultural development.
- 4.3 The Civic Forum will undertake consultative, monitoring, referral and representational functions. It will have a general duty to liaise with the Assembly (and the Secretary of State); and with appropriate comparable bodies in the South of Ireland under North/South arrangements and East/West under Intergovernmental Council arrangements.
- 4.4 The members of the Civic Forum will elect a Chairperson and a Deputy Chairperson at the first session. The terms of office of these individuals will be the term of office of the Civic Forum.
- 4.5 The Civic Forum shall ensure that there is gender balance in its allocation of posts, chairs and committee positions.
- 4.6 The Civic Forum should develop its own rules and standing orders. A business committee should be established to oversee the operation of the Forum.
- 4.7 The Civic Forum shall have the power to:
 - * set up Standing Committees on areas of interest eg. education, community relations, civil and human rights, rural development and European affairs;
 - * establish special sub-committees as appropriate;
 - * establish Expert Panels from among its membership;
 - * hold consultations and public hearings under Committee, Panel or plenary Forum format as appropriate.
- 4.8 The Second Chamber's role, powers, rights, duties and responsibilities will include:
 - (i) supporting the Assembly in its policy-making role through forwarding views, holding public consultations, providing advice from Expert Panels;
 - (ii) consideration of proposed legislation specifically referred to it under Assembly procedure with power to offer opinion or propose amendment;

- (iii) consideration of actions or proposals referred to it under Assembly procedures with the power to give opinion or propose amendment;
 - (iv) initiation of discussion on particular issues and general policy debate and where appropriate refer these to the Assembly;
 - (v) hearing reports from Committees of the Civic Forum;
 - (vi) preparing annual reports for the Assembly (and the Secretary of State) on the work of the Second Chamber and its view of the operation of political institutions.
- 4.9 With regard to non-devolved powers the British Government may seek the opinion of the Civic Forum on specific issues of interest.
- 4.10 The members of the Civic Forum will have the power to initiate discussion on an issue by moving a motion. It is envisaged that motions for consideration by the Forum as a whole should be put forward by a member/members of each Panel in sequence.
- 4.11 If the members of the Civic Forum are in agreement with Standing Committee and other reports, the Forum can refer the report for consideration by the members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, by the North South Ministerial Council, by the Intergovernmental Council and by the Intergovernmental machinery.
- 4.12 The Civic Forum and its Committees shall take decisions by consensus. Where there is disagreement the Forum shall record assent and dissent. Where every effort has been made to reach consensus without success and a decision is proven to be required, a threshold of 66% of those present and voting must be achieved.
- 4.13 The Civic Forum shall conduct its business in an open and transparent manner. Its proceedings will be recorded and published and the sessions of the Forum will be open to the public.

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