

CIVIC FORUM REVIEW

Response of the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (Congress) is the largest voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland. Congress represents in excess of 230,000 workers covering over 30 trade unions. These workers are employed in all sectors of economic and social activity.

Congress was a firm supporter of the Good Friday Agreement and canvassed vociferously for a Yes vote in the referendum held to promote the Agreement. One of the key issues which we welcomed in the GFA under Strand I was the formation of a Civic Forum. Paragraph 34 of the Agreement made specific reference to the business, trade union and voluntary community as the key pillars for the Forum.

In common with the representatives of the other two sectors referred in paragraph 34 we made representations suggesting that these three pillars should hold the majority of the seats on the Civic Forum.

Congress was disappointed that the Forum was created with so many seats and, given the specific reference to the social partners, was even more disappointed to learn that, rather than form the core and majority of the Civic Forum as anticipated and agreed under Strand I, the social partners were reduced to a minority element.

Notwithstanding these comments, we welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Civic Forum Review Team. The concept of a Civic Forum was enshrined in the Agreement supported by the British and Irish Governments, local political parties and, through a referendum, by the citizens of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

We remain committed to the recreation of a Civic Forum however, as we have said previously in our original submissions, this should not be seen as a 'second chamber' to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Below we provide our response to the questions put in the Review Document.

Q1 What do you consider would be the best way for Government to engage with and consult Civic Society?

1.1 Government has the opportunity to engage and consult with all the elements of civic society. A Civic Forum is but one of these and should not be seen as replacing the rights of representative organisations to be consulted separately.

1.2 Congress is of the opinion that the Civic Forum should be re-established as part of the GFA and that it should be constituted in line with the current social partnership arrangements recognised by Government, i.e. employers, trade unions

and voluntary and community sector, as well as the agricultural and rural representatives.

Such a Forum should have the opportunity to comment on all public consultations if it feels it is so appropriate.

1.3 For the Forum to be effective and assist the Executive and the legislature its numbers should be much less than the previous 60. We believe that somewhere in the order of between 20 and 25 would be appropriate and that the majority of these seats be held by the social partners as was originally intended in the 1998 Agreement.

Q2 What do you consider were the main strengths and achievements of the (1999-2000) Civic Forum as originally constituted?

2.1 This question pre-supposes the fact that the Civic Forum had strengths and achieved outcomes. Congress believes that the concept of the Civic Forum was an excellent one but the model established did not allow for strengths or achievements.

Clearly, there were attempts made by a range of participants to give advice and opinion to the Executive on social, economic and cultural matters. Some good work was done and good working relationships were established however, it must be said that, given the broad nature of representation it was extremely difficult to produce cohesive pieces of work which would be of benefit to the Executive and legislature. Any new Forum must address this weakness.

2.2 The creation of some working groups to look at issues was beneficial and the formulation of a comprehensive document on the effects of poverty in Northern Ireland was an extremely useful piece of work and is a tangible example of how a cohesive Civic Forum can work.

Q3 What, in your opinion, were the main weaknesses of the original Civic Forum and how might they be remedied?

3.1 Our comments in the above paragraphs should give the Review Team more than a flavour of our views on the weaknesses of the original Civic Forum and we have made some suggestions in these paragraphs as to how these weaknesses might be remedied. For emphasis, we shall make the following points.

3.2 The membership of the Forum was too unwieldy which, in the absence of a pre-agreement on operating procedures, contributed to an enormous waste of time at the initial sessions of the Forum.

3.3 The absence of a connect between Forum members and the Chair appointed without any reference to Forum members indicates that whatever form the new

Forum takes it is critical that Forum members are involved in appointment of the new Chair.

3.4 Contrary to the original terms of reference for the Forum, both OFMDFM and indeed the Assembly failed to engage the Forum on issues initiated by them. This failure was compounded by the same institutions failing to respond to matters raised by the Civic Forum.

It is apparent to Congress that the relationship between any new Forum and OFMDFM, the Executive and the Assembly requires clear definition. The Civic Forum, in whatever form it takes, must have clarity of remit, clarity of focus, clarity of role, rooted in independence with adequate secretarial and administrative resources, as well as, an adequate budget to carry out its function and conduct research as necessary. The provision of a website detailing the role, work and activities of the Forum should be seen as fundamental in making the Forum a success.

3.5 One of the major difficulties that impacted adversely on the role of the Forum was the diverse nature of its membership. Whilst some members were appointed under the intention of paragraph 34 of the Agreement, a number of others appeared to come out of the ether with no direct representative role or cohesion within the community as was intended by parties to the Agreement. Therefore, Congress holds the strong view that nominees to the Civic Forum must be actual representatives of specific sectors and consequently must contribute on that sector's behalf and have a reporting mechanism with their nominating sector.

Q 4. To what extent do you think that sectors included in the original Civic Forum remain representative of civic society? Who do you think should be represented on a new Forum and what should be the balance between different sectors?

4.1 Again, Congress has commented on this question in the paragraphs above. We would once more take this opportunity to stress our disappointment that the social partners were not given the role anticipated by them and laid out in the Agreement. Speaking for our own organisation which covers 34 trade unions and members in the hundreds of thousands we believe that our ability to influence the work of the Forum and thereby give advice to the Assembly and represent such a large section of our community was undermined by the previous structures and composition of the Forum.

Clearly, as we have stated previously, the social partners should form the majority and hold the balance on any new Civic Forum.

4.2 Again, Congress believes that the new Forum should comprise no more than 25 members. Twenty of these members should be drawn from the business

community, the Ulster Farmers' Union, NICVA, and the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

4.3 These five nominees from each of the main social pillars must be drawn from all Section 75 categories and, in particular, should take account of the change in the cultural landscape of Northern Ireland given the enlargement of the European Union.

Q.5 Do you consider that an alternative model of social partnership might provide a suitable example for a new Forum? If so, what type of model would you propose and why?

5.1 The Civic Forum mission statement that *"The Civic Forum will exercise effective community leadership and directly influence the building of a peaceful, prosperous, just, cohesive, healthy and plural society"* is a statement that Congress could broadly concur with.

5.2 Congress recognises that the term 'social partnership' and who comprises social partners has been diluted in recent years. Our firm understanding of social partnership is that it comprises the business, voluntary/community sector, the farming community and trade unions. Engagement with these main pillars will promote the concept of social dialogue and our proposals under composition would allow for other key players to be part of this social dialogue.

5.3 The core question in response to this question is how relevant will the Civic Forum be in its relationship to the institutions of governance and to the citizens of Northern Ireland. For relevancy and relationships to be meaningful it is crucial that social dialogue is recognised and accepted as a valued instrument to increasing participative and representative democracy.

5.4 The role of the new Civic Forum should be based on the social dialogue model seeking consensus to promote the central tenets of the mission statement. This role should be characterised as influencing policy formulation in all social, economic and cultural matters within the control of Government, Ministers or the Assembly.

With the implementation of RPA and new local government arrangements it may be useful to examine how the Civic Forum could work through the Executive and the Assembly given the new allocation of additional powers to local government.

5.5 The remit of the Civic Forum should extend to policy issues currently being deliberated upon by Government. To the extent that it is feasible within the time and political constraints necessary the Civic Forum should enjoy an advisory role in compilation of the content of the Programme for Government and the Comprehensive Spending Review.

5.6 Another element of the remit incorporated into the work of the Civic Forum should be that of responding to matters as requested by the Assembly, Executive and individual Ministers.

5.7 One further aspect to the remit of the Civic Forum is that of initiating work programmes on evaluation of the impact of Government social and economic policies on the marginalised in our society with particular emphasis on equality.

Q6 What should be the role and remit of the Forum? What type of issues might form the basis of its work programme and how should they be prioritised?

6.1 The foregoing paragraphs give a strong flavour of how we see this question being dealt with.

Q7 What should the relationship between a new Forum and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Assembly?

7.1 If the a new Forum is to be meaningful and to have any resonance with Government and the community then a mechanism should be created whereby, not only the First and Deputy First Ministers but all Ministers, Assembly Members and Chairs and Deputy Chairs of the various Assembly Committees should have the opportunity to discuss issues jointly.

Q8 What suggestions would you make for the organisation of a new Forum in terms of Membership and Chairperson?

8.1 A response to this question has been given in our comments above. With particular reference to the position of Chairperson and any Deputies which may be appointed it is essential that the main components of the Forum have confidence in such persons.

8.2 Congress is of the opinion that to preserve the independence of the new body that membership of that body should be renewed every three years. To allow for continuity, a mechanism should be devised for rotational retirement. Members should be entitled to be reappointed.

8.3 Forum members should be remunerated on an attendance basis similar to that of the Economic Development Forum plus travel expenses as per the public service terms and conditions. In particular, those members of the Forum requiring assistance with caring duties should be financially supported.

8.4 The Civic Forum should meet initially as required to develop operational processes, programme of work and meet thereafter on a quarterly basis. If necessary, sub-committees could be formed on a time limited, specific issue basis.

8.5 The Civic Forum administration and secretariat facility should be located in an accessible environment.

8.6 The budget for the Civic Forum should be allocated and controlled by OFMDFM.

8.7 Congress does not see the necessity for the Civic Forum to have any legal status.

8.8 It is the view of Congress that the Civic Forum and its membership should not fall under the remit of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and that those constituents agreed by Government should have the right to nominate individuals provided that they have the capabilities to promote and contribute to the work of the Forum.

Q9 How might a new Forum interact with other consultative fora within Northern Ireland to avoid duplication?

9.1 It is the view of Congress that the Forum, when necessary, should engage with other consultative fora and civic organisations with an interest in the issues being deliberated upon by the Forum. This could be of particular importance were other groups in society have specific interests on individual matters being considered by the Forum.

Q10 How should a new Forum interact with bodies representative of civic society outside Northern Ireland?

10.1 Congress favours the European Social Model, the heart of which is rooted in social dialogue. Within the budget allocated to the Civic Forum it should be possible for the Forum to meet with other civic society organisations outside Northern Ireland. Clearly these will include bodies in the Republic and in GB and should also extend to European Union countries.