

Contribution to the Review of the Civic Forum,

1. The starting point for a review should be that the Civic Forum which was established in October 2000 was a bold and imaginative experiment which failed. As an experiment, it was conducted under highly unfavourable conditions, and hence, arguably, no definitive judgements upon its success or otherwise can be given, and no clear inferences drawn about what might be done to enhance its capabilities. Different participants and observers will doubtless have different views of the key factors which contributed to its difficulties. Among them however I would list the following:
  - Although agreed in principle as part of the Good Friday Agreement, there was no genuine political consensus over its legitimacy. Designed to keep the Women's Coalition on board, it was backed by the loyalist representatives and SDLP for their own different reasons, and promoted by two of the 'social partners' – the VCS and trade union movement. The Unionist parties were unsympathetic, and Sinn Fein engaged only so far as they could use it as part of a broader strategy. The philosophy of 'participative democracy' which underpinned it and united its proponents was a fashionable, though always rather woolly, idea of the liberal intelligentsia based largely in South Belfast. Promoted as an alternative to representative democracy, it challenged the legitimacy of elected representatives, and was always going to be treated by them with suspicion. To the VCS it was a vehicle for maintaining the position they had established in governmental circles in the 1990s, and averting what had happened to community development in 1974 with the first power-sharing Executive. For the trade unions, it offered potential for restoring lost influence, and creating the kind of corporate bargaining relationship with Government that existed in the Republic.
  - The short, and interrupted, period of time during which it was active did not allow it to bed down properly and establish effective internal working relations, nor good working relations with the Executive or the Assembly. Some members of the Forum had had large aspirations for its role, resented the fact that these had been cut down in the process of setting it up, had little time for the elected politicians, and took the view – and in many respects were correct to do so – that the civil service was anxious to minimise the Forum's role, partly at the behest of the politicians, partly to protect its own monopoly over policy development. The tensions within the Forum between those who espoused a maximalist view of its role, and those with a more realist perspective, grew as time went on, and came to focus around the position of the Chairman. He himself was torn between the responsibilities and accountabilities of the post as defined in his appointment, and his accountability to the membership of the Forum itself. These tensions permitted some members unsympathetic to the philosophy of the Forum and its liberal provenance to create trouble beyond their numbers.
  - Although the Forum's broad powers were delimited, a great deal of its internal processes, procedures, and focus was left to internal determination. Arguably, the

failure to come to agreement on these during its short lifetime meant that it gradually fell into internal chaos and public disrepute. While the trade union members were accustomed to congresses that acted on majoritarian principles, and business representatives expected decisions to be taken on managerial lines by those elected or appointed to the core committees, the principle on which it agreed to act was that of consensus, which was rarely achievable, or achievable only by default. Some members stated that they were principally accountable to the constituency which had appointed them and were largely 'single issue' figures – others worked more constructively to create a climate of collective corporate action. Many members drifted away over time because they could see no point to its deliberations, and grew weary of the small group which appeared to have the time and commitment to dominate proceedings - many members of the general public who attended plenary sessions went away wondering what it was for. In terms of outcomes, it achieved one solid constructive Report advocating an anti-poverty strategy, although probably too radical for nervous civil servants and departmentalised ministers. The second major Report emerged from a somewhat chaotic process and proved to be quite banal. Other reports and recommendations said little that was distinctive, interesting or innovative.

- Although the Forum was undertaking a review at the time of suspension, and many members protested that it should have remained in existence while the Executive and Assembly were suspended, it was perhaps kind to put it out of its misery.

2. Realistically, three approaches are now possible.

- a. Reform the structure, financing and procedures of the Forum, elect or appoint new members, clarify its role and mission in response to the specific weaknesses which were displayed in the experiment. If this were to be done, the issues that would need to be addressed would probably be: smaller size; an independent chair and staff with adequate funds and skills for research; broader constituencies, and representatives with a broader remit and accountability; a significant independent sector rather than appointees; a more consultative ethos; a more focussed and less hurried agenda of work, with better procedures and division of labour. If it were to function as a distinct and useful voice within the governance structure of Northern Ireland, its role would need to be more clearly defined, and better acknowledged internally and externally.

Two main arguments, however, tell against restoration. One is that, whatever recommendations for reform come out of the current review, it is unlikely that they will achieve the appropriate level of agreement or support. The main institutions set up after the Good Friday Agreement were negotiated among the parties who were to participate in them, and even here it has proved difficult to work them – a new Forum would in all likelihood consist of people who had had little say in its creation. The second is that we are already undertaking in the Review of Public Administration a major thinning out of the institutions of government, and, arguably, we shall be tackling the

excessive number of ministerial positions and departments in the future. It would seem paradoxical in what is already an over-governed society cluttered up with public bodies to bring in a further institution of governance.

- b. Abandon a purely Northern Ireland Forum, and focus upon creating an all-Ireland consultative body following the St Andrews Agreement. This initiative would have an additional political edge. But precisely for that reason, its role would need to be more tightly defined, it would have a smaller and perhaps more select membership and it would be likely to have a more sensitive awareness of its powers and responsibilities. The fact that the Republic has such consultative bodies and Northern Ireland currently does not poses problems in relation to balance within such a structure, and would obviously also be conditional upon the goodwill of the southern government.
- c. Not incompatible with b., but focussing upon a different issue, would be to expand the consultative and participatory foundations upon which the Forum was founded to a much larger and wider array of mechanisms and citizen engagement. The main thrust of the public philosophy in the twenty first century is towards diversity and consumer choice, and away from producer dominance. The Civic Forum, for all its novelty, was based upon old-fashioned principles of producer involvement – it was dominated by organised trade unions, employer organisations, and the third sector deliverers of services. Their representativeness of ordinary citizens' views was always suspect.

Government is slowly - more slowly in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain – beginning to develop mechanisms such as citizens' juries and consultative polls to engage ordinary citizens in key administrative and executive decisions. The Prime Minister indicated in a speech last year that he sees this movement expanding. They have their limitations, and also their critics. But they have the advantage of focussing upon specific areas of controversy, being concerned with outcomes rather than mere processes, and engaging the members of 'civic society' directly rather than through intermediaries.

If public money is to be spent on consulting 'civil society', I believe that it could more wisely be spent on funding these activities, rather than supporting what is potentially always going to be something of a white elephant. It would hopefully contribute to the improvement of the public services, and public decision-making, and, though always having the potential to embarrass politicians, would always be less threatening. Certainly the evidence provided by studies of such practices elsewhere has been more positive than negative, and with a degree of political wind behind them coming from Britain are more likely to be accepted than attempting to return to a failed experiment.

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