

**FROM: TONY McCUSKER
CENTRAL SECRETARIAT**

DATE: 7 AUGUST 1998

cc: Copy distribution below

PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

CONSULTATIVE CIVIC FORUM

Summary

Issue: The head of the support team for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has requested a paper on the Civic Forum, its role and relationship with the Assembly, its size and membership, funding arrangements, administrative support, location etc.

Urgent: Urgent.

Recommendation: That the Secretary of State agree to the release of the attached paper.

Introduction

1. The Secretary of State has referred 3 main policy areas to the First and Deputy First Ministers for consideration:

- options for Departmental structures;
- the Civic Forum; and
- North/South co-operation.

2. David Ferguson, recently appointed as head of the support team for the First and Deputy First Ministers, has now asked formally for papers on the Civic Forum and North/South co-operation. The latter will be available for the Secretary of State to approve on her return from leave.

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CENT SEC

HEAD OF THE N.I.
CD 29
07 AUG 1998
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CIVIL SERVICE

Mr Heffington

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Mr Dwyer
Mr Dwyer
LD 899

ASST SEC - 8 SEP 1998
CENT SEC

Mr Brown

Background

3. The Agreement provides that the Civic Forum will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors and such other sectors as agreed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The body will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues and the First and Deputy First Ministers will, by agreement, provide administrative support and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives. The Northern Ireland Bill confirms these arrangements.

4. Initial outline proposals for the Civic Forum were prepared during May and June drawing on those views which had been received at that stage. A further paper has now been drafted which builds on the earlier submission by incorporating proposals and suggestions which have been received subsequently. This final document attempts to pull all views together and highlight those areas where there is commonality and consensus.

Recommendation

5. The Secretary of State is invited to agree:

- that the attached paper (Annex A) be offered to the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers in response to David Ferguson's request; and
- the covering minute (Annex B) which, among other things, draws attention to the fact that the paper does not represent the views of

all sub-groups within those sectors specifically listed in the Agreement, for example the Federation of Newsagents, which, as a national organisation, has long been used to approaching central Government directly and has been unaware until very recently that it may now have an opportunity to be represented at a regional level within Northern Ireland.

Introduction

TONY McCUSKER

cc PS/Mr Murphy (DFP,B&L)
PS/Mr Ingram (DED,B&L)
PS/Lord Dubs (DANI,DOE&L)
PS/Mr McFall (DENI,DHSS&L)
PS/Mr Pilling
PS/Mr Semple
NI Perm Secs
Mr Jeffrey
Mr Watkins
Mr Stephens
Mr Hill (o/r)
Mr Maccabe
Mr Whysall
Mr Gamble
Mr Smyth

ANALYSIS OF PROPOSALS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIC FORUM

Introduction

1. The Good Friday Agreement provides for the establishment of a consultative Civic Forum (paragraph 34, page 9). It provides that the Forum will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and other such sectors as agreed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister; that the body will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues; and that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will, by agreement, provide administrative support and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives. The Secretary of State has now formally referred the matter of the Civic Forum to the Assembly for consideration.
2. The Northern Ireland Bill contains a clause placing an obligation on the First and Deputy First Ministers to make arrangements for obtaining from the Forum the views of the community on social, economic and cultural matters. The Bill also states that the Assembly shall meet the costs of the Forum and will ensure that it is provided with all property, staff and services required.
3. Furthermore, the Belfast Agreement charges the First and Deputy First Ministers with drawing up guidelines for the selection of members. It is assumed that they will conduct this particular exercise in consultation with the Assembly.

4. This paper presents an analysis, drawing largely on contributions received from interested parties since the signing of the Agreement and has been drawn up for consideration by the First and Deputy First Ministers.

Timing

5. Since the Civic Forum is an obligatory element of the institutional arrangements provided for in the Strand One section of the Agreement, there was general consensus among those offering views that it should become operational from the date of full devolution, when the new Assembly formally comes into being.

Role of the Forum

6. Most contributors agreed that as a consultative body, the Forum should have no formal legislative, executive or administrative powers but should act instead in an advisory capacity for the Northern Ireland Assembly on all major policy issues. There was also widespread support for charging the Forum with addressing and improving the quality of decision-making in public life. Most contributors also felt that the Forum should be able to generate its own investigations and reports as well as commenting on and analysing long-term strategic policies.
7. There was, however, widespread belief that the Forum should avoid, where possible, involvement in immediate political and/or potentially divisive issues.
8. In particular, contributors suggested that the Civic Forum might:

- initiate debate on any topic of general relevance to Northern Ireland;

- investigate and report on any issues it believes are of particular local concern;

- initiate its own research and policy studies for publication and communication to the Assembly;

- establish investigative committees on to which it could co-opt specialists not already represented among its membership;

- respond to invitations from the Executive Committee, the Assembly or its Committees to offer views on major policy initiatives (including PE priorities);

- investigate broad policy decisions and proposals (but not individual cases);

- be able to invite Ministers and/or officials to discuss particular aspects of the administration's policies, subject to the discretion of the relevant Minister;

- generate cross-community and cross-sectoral solutions to problems;

- create a strong, moral and ethical environment within which elected politicians will be encouraged to make informed, fair and impartial decisions; and

- produce an annual report on Forum activities for presentation to the Executive Committee and for debate in the Assembly.

Membership

9. Those submissions which offered a view on the number of members agreed that a figure around the 50 mark would give the Forum a critical mass given the diverse nature of the subject areas which might be examined (although a membership of 54 [108\2] would give it some symmetry with the Assembly). Many felt that any larger number could put the Forum in danger of becoming a mere debating chamber; anything smaller risks the possibility of failing to achieve the necessary measure of collegiality.

10. There was general consensus for a four year term of appointment. Members could be drawn from the following key areas of activity:

- Voluntary, community and cultural groups
- Business and the professions
- Trade Unions and employees groups
- Women's groups
- Academics
- The churches
- Youth groups
- Groups representing the elderly
- Groups representing the disabled
- Ethnic minority groups
- Environmental groups
- Agricultural industry groups

11. This would ensure that members are drawn from every Departmental sector within Northern Ireland. Voluntary sector interests do not favour serving politicians participating in the Forum.

Selection

12. There was almost universal support for permitting organisations to nominate their own representatives. The basis of nominations will however have to be considered within the context of Peach requirements and the choice would seem to be between giving nominating rights to a range of groups or bodies or inviting nominations and subjecting them to a selection process.
13. Either methods could be augmented by giving certain positions, as opposed to named individuals in society, membership of the Forum as of right. These positions could include the leaders of the four main churches, the Vice Chancellors of the two universities, the Presidents of the main business organisations, trade unions general secretaries, and so on, although they might be able to nominate an alternative to take up their place.

Meetings

14. The Forum might meet on a monthly basis in plenary session (though with discretion to vary the timing) under a Chair elected at the inaugural meeting. It might also divide into Committees (which could meet as frequently as business required) to examine particular topics and issues.

Staffing and Resources

15. The combined resources of all the members would be a considerable asset available to the body and it might be expected that some of the consultative, analytical and advisory work would be carried out by the members of the Forum. However, a small number of dedicated

staff (6-8) would be needed to service the Forum and its committees.

The establishment of such a small secretariat, combining a mixture of civil servants and secondees from other sectors with relevant policy expertise, drew almost unanimous support from organisations who offered a view.

16. This team would be provided by the First and Deputy First Ministers, in accordance with the Agreement. There might also be provision for a budget for research, travel etc, to be agreed with the First and Deputy First Ministers on an annual basis.

Remuneration

17. Given that it will have no executive powers, the Civic Forum will be effective and influential only if it has strong and energetic members who regard their work as a necessary act of public service. While this suggests that members might be expected to work *pro bono publico* it nevertheless seems reasonable to offer a certain recompense for loss of earnings.

18. Options might include:

- a set amount for travel and subsistence;
- a per diem rate;
- a combination of these, or

- in accordance with recent developments in local government, a fixed annual sum.

The options would need further consideration.

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ANNEX

Accommodation

19. In current circumstances the options for accommodation that would give the Forum an appropriate status are limited. It could meet in the former Northern Ireland Forum chamber in the Interpoint building, although this is currently occupied by the Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland. Alternatively, it could meet in what was the Senate chamber in Parliament Buildings

20. A further option might be for the Forum to move around the Northern Ireland and meet at various locations, thus giving the entire community the opportunity of easier access and the opportunity of making a contribution to the decision-making process. Again, all of this would require further consideration.

Conclusion

21. This paper presents an outline of possible arrangements for the establishment of a Civic Forum drawing on those comments offered to Government since the concept of a Forum was accepted by the signatories to the Agreement. It is offered for consideration by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Central Secretariat

August 1998

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ANNEX B

**FROM: TONY McCUSKER
CENTRAL SECRETARIAT**

DATE: AUGUST 1998

Mr Ferguson

CONSULTATIVE CIVIC FORUM

1. Thank you for your minute of 17 July.

2. The purpose of the attached paper is to provide the First Minister and Deputy First Minister with an examination of how the consultative Civic Forum could be established and its remit may be. The paper also sets out an analysis based on those contributions we have received from interested parties since the signing of the Agreement and explores the following aspects:
 - how the Forum would be constituted;
 - timing;
 - the role of the Forum;
 - membership;
 - possible selection processes;
 - staffing and resources;
 - remuneration; and
 - accommodation.

3. The paper is not, however, the result of any formal consultation exercise but rather a synopsis of contributions we have received from those organisations who feel they may have a part to play in the work with which the Forum will be involved. The paper does not, therefore, represent a complete picture of the views from all those who may ultimately play a key role. For example, the Federation of Newsagents, which as a nationally-based organisation, has long been used to approaching Government directly, has been unaware until very recently that it may have an opportunity to be represented at a regional level in Northern Ireland.

4. In conclusion, this paper is presented as a starting point from which you may wish to begin detailed planning and consultation.

TONY McCUSKER