



COISTE NA n-IARCHIMÍ

**Response to
NIO
consultation**

paper on

A Shared Future

September 2003

1. Introduction

Coiste na n-Iarchimí, is the national network for republican ex-prisoners. Our network involves 15 local groups with a number of other non-funded ex-prisoner associations. We have secured funding from the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation to employ over 60 people who provide support services to the ex-prisoner community (i.e. ex-prisoners and their families) and the community in general. Our network has member groups both in the 6 and 26 counties. We have Coiste offices in Belfast and Dublin.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this paper on the future of “community relations” work. We are actively engaged in work that is relevant to the issues in A Shared Future. For example, our **Processes of Nation Building** programme, funded under measure 5.3 of the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation) is developing opportunities for engagement and honest dialogue between republican ex-prisoners and representatives from other sectors of Irish society. Moreover, our member groups at local level are actively pursuing dialogue and debate with people from perspectives traditionally hostile to republicanism in order to increase understanding and build relationships.

In addition to this programme, through our advocacy work on behalf of the ex-prisoner community, we are seeking to address social exclusion and discrimination. Because we see inequality as being at the heart of community divisions, we see this commitment to social inclusion as being of great importance in achieving a peaceful and progressive society throughout Ireland.

In order to develop our response to the consultation paper, we held three meetings involving a representative grouping from across our network. This response has been endorsed at our Executive Committee meeting on 30th September 2003. We look forward to the opportunity to be involved in further consultative meetings as the policy is developed. We believe that we have much to contribute to this debate and are eager to do so.

2. Setting the theoretical framework for policy formulation – why the paper gets it wrong

The perception in the republican community – and among republican activists in particular – is that community relations has been a strategy employed by the British government and the Northern Ireland Office to try and de-legitimise republicanism. It is therefore a positive development from our point of view that the **Shared Future** document frankly acknowledges that the strategy has been a failure.

We hope that this indicates a willingness to plot a more meaningful approach to the future of the island.

Notwithstanding our welcome for the paper and the potential it holds for a debate on how to build the conflict-resolution process, we do feel that the document is flawed on a number of levels. Before outlining our own perspective, we wish to identify a number of theoretical flaws which undermine the potential of **A Shared Future** for future policy development. These are:

- **That the Shared Future document locates the discussion in a purely 6 county context.** Republicans will bring great energy and enthusiasm to a project which seeks national reconciliation across the island. The geographically-truncated nature of the analysis in **A Shared Future** constitutes its major flaw. In this regard, any policy for good relations must reflect the constitutional principles of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent legislation which entrench a consociational model of governance for the 6 counties. This means that equal value and respect for both political communities in the north is mandatory and should inform all government policy. Furthermore, improving relationships across the island is also required under the spirit of the Agreement. **A Shared Future** looks at the problem only through a unionist perspective. It is worth recalling the debate which took place in post-unification Germany where there was much talk about the borders in peoples' minds which had to be overcome. This in fact has been one of the most debilitating influences of partition, the way in "borders of the mind" have been entrenched in the two parts of Ireland Unless the context of national reconciliation across the island is intrinsic to eventual policy, resources will continue to tinker with symptoms rather than tackle root causes.

- **That the role and agency of the British state in constructing and maintaining sectarianism through institutional activity and policy are absent from the document.** The impression is created that responsibility for the problems and for action to address them decreases the closer one goes to the heart of government. Unless, for example, NIO civil servants and military and security policy are engaged in the promotion of "good relations", the hope for progress will be slim;

- **That no coherent definition of sectarianism is included, or even attempted.** The "problem" outlined in the Fundamental Principles section is "division with and between communities" based on "deeply rooted mistrust and suspicion". In our view this is not an adequate analysis because it fails to include power relationships into the equation. Thus, for example, if one defined racism as being simply founded on mistrust between racial groups without acknowledging discrimination and inequality against the black community, the analysis would be risible. In similar fashion, therefore, the analysis of sectarianism, to be credible

and capable of a meaningful policy response needs to be seen in the context of unequal relationships at an individual and community level.

- Finally, **that no analysis is developed of the different approaches of the “the two communities” in the six counties in terms of their approach to the issue of sectarianism.** By way of illustration, the following differential experience and mood are surely germane:
 - It is generally recognised that the republican/nationalist/catholic community has a positive future orientation whereas the loyalist/unionist/protestant community looks to the future with hesitancy;
 - There is much talk of a crisis of confidence within the protestant community as compared to the catholic community;
 - The relationship to state institutions differs radically;
 - The experience of inequality and access to resources differs;
 - Consequently, the ability to organise at grassroots community level is more developed within the republican community;
 - Of relevance to our own network, the relationship between our wider community and political ex-prisoners differs radically and reflects a very different analysis of the conflict compared to people in the loyalist/protestant/unionist community;
 - It is widely accepted – though seldom mentioned in public – that willingness to dialogue with “the other side” is greater within the republican/nationalist/catholic community;
 - There is far less evidence that protestants living in catholic areas are threatened than *vice versa*. (We comment below on the surprising absence of statistical information when compared to the extensive data available in relation to racial attacks and harassment.) In addition, evidence of protestant attacks feeling in relation to – for example - Holy Cross and at Carnmoney cemetery shows a deep anti-catholicism which is not reciprocated in the catholic community. On a general level, it is clear that in the protestant community, relationships are defined in religious terms whereas the predominant approach on the catholic side concentrates on political analysis.

These examples are all relevant to consideration of policy on the promotion of good relations. They indicate a deeply different experience and outlook. Furthermore they indicate that a policy on promoting good relations will throw up different priorities for different communities. Without an adequate theoretical framework, policy will be as ineffective as it has been up to this point.

In seeking a theoretical framework to underpin a discussion on sectarianism and the promotion of good relations, in our view, it is impossible to ignore the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland and way in which “the two communities” relate to the British connection with Ireland. It follows that the “settler/native” paradigm¹ is the clearest approximation to the relationship between “the two communities” in the six counties. This explains why identity is a more pressing issue for the protestant/Unionist/loyalist community whereas the search for equality is more urgent for catholics/republicans/nationalists. It also suggests that hoping for a homogenous “Northern Ireland” where everyone feels at home is a futile objective

It is of course also important to include nuances to this basic framework. The impact of class, or gender and the arrival of immigrant ethnic communities all need to be factored into a coherent policy initiative on the promotion of good relations.

3. A republican ex-prisoner perspective

3.1 How we got here

This paper is being submitted by Coiste in order to ensure that the position of the republican ex-prisoner community is reflected in any proposals for a shared future on this island. Coiste represents the interests of an estimated 15,000 ex-prisoners and their extended family circles. They live throughout Ireland, from Antrim to Cork, Dublin to Galway. Coiste has, as one its primary aims, the ongoing struggle to combat legal barriers and discriminatory practices against this constituency. As the only legally identifiable group ‘responsible’ for the conflict of the past three decades and more, the community of ex-prisoners often finds itself marginalized and vilified by wider society

¹ For the clearest enunciation of this see Liam O’Dowd’s foreword to Albert Memmi’s **The Coloniser and the Colonised**.

(though not within their own community) and denied 'acceptability' and 'legitimacy' as full and equal citizens.

This is largely the result of the way the conflict has been portrayed by the British government and hence reflected in the media. In its crudest form it is summed up by the view that 'prior to 1969 everything was great in this little province and then along came the bad people with guns!' Yet that very same government and its agencies oversaw institutionalised racism and sectarianism throughout its period of responsibility for the north of Ireland: allowing discriminatory practices in employment, economic investment, housing, voting and numerous other fields. This is not republican propaganda: the institutions and legislation established under the Good Friday Agreement explicitly recognise that fact. To even have this 'discussion' on a 'shared future' – as opposed to the 'dominance of one community over another' - is a further recognition of that truth.

From our analytical perspective we regard the document as one that reflects a very limited understanding of (or chooses to ignore) the nature of this society and the historical, political and cultural influences that have shaped it. Its emphasis is on 'good relations' between two communities in the North; its focus is entirely located within the six county state whereas the Good Friday Agreement and the political processes that flowed from it recognise that we must look at Ireland and its people as one entity. Most significantly, the document ignores the pro-active role of the British state in creating the current divisions within our country and society – the role of its military and paramilitary forces; its Civil Service; judiciary; legal system; heads of industry/commerce; and its overall lack of effort in establishing equality as a cornerstone for building a new future.

In our opinion, the British government has tried to portray its role as that of the 'honest broker', the 'neutral arbiter'. In fact it occupied the pivotal role and it was in order to dislodge it that republicans fought for so long. The British government chose to focus on fostering 'good community relations' as an alternative to establishing justice and equality. This was deliberate policy for definite political ends, not an accident or error of judgement.

It is within the context of this analysis that we offer our opinions on what we fear is a 'pre-set discourse'.

3.2 Our vision for the future

It is our view that the existence of two 'states' on this island is a situation that requires changing. We look forward to the establishment of a unitary state and actively work towards that end. The "good relations" that we are committed to bridge the island and flow from the constitutional framework in the Good Friday Agreement. Nowhere in **A Shared Future** do we find the outworking of the constitutional formulation of the Good Friday Agreement that "it is for the people of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts"² to determine their future. This implies a constitutional imperative to facilitate such a dialogue. This should be reflected in policy proposals and government commitments.

However, until the political landscape is fully transformed we see the interim as hinging on the issue of equality for all; the guarantee of full rights of citizenship to all – regardless of political views, ability, creed etc. That must be enshrined in International law and guaranteed, preferably by some independent overseeing body

We are mindful that religious differences have been deliberately fostered by both the British and former Stormont administrations to divide communities and that we all must work to rectify this position. Coiste is extensively engaged in such work through its Processes of Nation Building Programme. However, the root of the problem is not, in our analysis, 'good community relations'. Whilst that might be a laudable if often vague ideal, the concept has so often been used in the past as a smokescreen for the perpetuation of institutionalised racism against those who self-define as Irish and sectarianism against catholics. This is what must be admitted, confronted and eradicated if we are to have a 'shared future' as truly equal citizens.

We now move to our comments on the detail in **A Shared Future**.

² Good Friday Agreement, Constitutional Issues 1(ii).

4. Overall Policy Aim

Do you agree that the overall aim for policy must be for a more shared and pluralist society? What is your vision for NI in twenty-five years?

To respond to the latter part of the question first, our vision twenty-five years ahead is of Ireland as a unified state, politically and socially, with all citizens guaranteed equal rights regardless of race, gender, ability, religion, gender, political affiliation etc. and those rights to be underpinned by legislation.

It follows then that explicit mention must be made in any overall aim of the importance of promoting good relations across the island of Ireland. A mandate for this position can be gleaned from the Good Friday Agreement constitutional provisions.

Pending the achievement of national reconciliation, we would of course agree with the development of a more shared and pluralist society within the currently partitioned island. To counteract the structural resistance to such aims/goals – which has been a major impediment in the past and continues on today - all public departments under the current British administration need be made aware of the legitimate existence of that long-term goal. They need to be cognisant of the deep-rooted, institutionalised racism and sectarianism currently prevailing in such sectors, be instructed to challenge it, and be encouraged pro-actively to promote and implement policies fully compliant with the spirit and letter of the Good Friday Agreement.

On page 9 of 'A Shared Future, paragraph' 3.2, we are given the 'official' definition of our problems:

There must be an acceptance that the issue of the division between and within communities, whilst not unique to NI, is a major and continuing problem.

We agree that in its proper context the above statement is correct, but it does not stand alone; the underlying reasons for those divisions and conflict must be made explicit and not in religious, sectarian, or tribal terms. The definition of our 'continuing problem' must be comprehensive and inclusive and not attempt to hide the very real political and

historical factors that fostered such divisions. In particular, we must include British state responsibility for existing relationships.

Current divisions between communities on a religious basis are merely the symptoms of the problems, not the core. Society must be encouraged to look beyond the existing 'pre-set' parameters in order to set context.

We note with great concern the absence of any proofing in the document against Good Friday Agreement parameters. Thus, the need to entrench human rights, equality and parity of esteem, the rights to freedom from sectarian harassment, the right to freely choose one's place of residence and so on do not figure in **A Shared Future**. And we have already commented on the absence of consideration of the constitutional requirements flowing from the Agreement. All of these are of great relevance to the issues in the discussion paper. We note recent willingness among some commentators to try and undermine the Agreement, blaming it for increases in inter-communal tensions. This we reject entirely. The Agreement was mandated by the Irish people as a whole. It should not be ignored by senior civil servants in OFM/DFM and the NIO.

5. Main aims and Outcomes

What do you think should be the main policy aims and outcomes which should drive the new approach to promoting good relations in society?

What are the main problems/issues which stifle good relations?

What would help build good relations?

Are you aware of any models of good practice in good relations?

Equality is the key and cannot be over emphasised – and not just nominal equality. Here we point to Section 75 of the NI Act 1998. Page 22 of 'A Shared Future' quotes part (1)

*A Public Authority **shall** in carrying out its functions relating to NI, have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity' (emphasis added).*

We emphasise that this must be utilised as the lynchpin of policy for a positive future.

There must be economic equality along with political. The concept of 'good relations' is weak – what is 'good'? And, again, 'good' relations with whom? We reiterate that 'equal' is a much clearer/stronger term. 'Good' also has also been used for decades to imply a religious (catholic/protestant only) emphasis to relationships –and ignores the racial and ethnic components of our society, growing by the day on the island. This brings us to the core issue of 'community relations'- a pre-set discourse that totally ignores state role in those relationships.

When we talk today we must take care not to do so in a context which forgets/ignores the realities of our past. This is not to 'dwell in the past'; merely to learn from it. Our legacy of the past is one which had special laws for dealing with republican opposition to the existence of this state, special court systems, special interrogation centres and methods of interrogation, special prison systems and special releases from prison under the Good Friday Agreement.

A question which could be posed here is:

Over the past three decades 15,000 people were processed here for conflict related activities. They, along with their families, constitute a sizeable portion of this population and must be seen as positive contributors to the future here. Given all of the above, why does the British Government – and the Unionist establishment – insist on continuing publicly to view us as criminals, refusing to acknowledge our difference from others who were imprisoned for non-political offences? We suggest acknowledgement would assist relations between this community and the British Government.

We ask the simple question of the British administration in particular because, when the British made the political decisions under Good Friday Agreement to release all of the political prisoners, of what relevance is the need for such matters as revelation of conviction on job applications? Of course there is an obvious need for awareness of specific criminal convictions that can relate to specific jobs but we see no need for the casting of a net on all prison sentences. There is currently no official recognition of the legitimacy of alternative views, regardless of taking up of arms or not. The state and its agencies ignore the powerful role played by the Republican ex -prisoner community within their communities – working on issues such as anti-drugs, youth, Community

Restorative Justice, anti-suicide groups. When the British recognise the legitimacy of opposition of political views perhaps they will be moving in a direction which can facilitate the initiation of better relations between Republicans and themselves.

6. Principles

What do you think ought to be the principles upon which a new approach to promoting good relations in NI should be based?

We acknowledge that 'good' relations are important within society but we feel strongly that this question has to ask about **equal** relations and has to be relevant throughout the island to **all** communities. We stated, under question 1 that our answers are set within the context of a united island.

We recognise the need for all protagonists eventually to acknowledge past errors/wrongs – and that core reasons for the conflict have to be acknowledged by State agencies. They must get issues out of the 'internal' explanation. We here point to the example of our own Processes of Nation Building programme within which we as an ex-prisoners' organisation meet with and dialogue with a wide spectrum of public, religious and political personalities in order to pursue understanding in a spirit of openness, generosity and honesty.

Among the key groups we are pursuing contact with are Unionists, other nationalist and republican political groupings the Protestant and Catholic churches, civil society (including the women's' movement, the Trade Union movement and the ethnic minority community), the victims sector (including victims of republican actions during the conflict) and the media.

Also, there must be a major effort by all of us to draw in the international community to oversee the introduction of Equal Rights legislation to copper fasten equality for all groups within our society

7. Action at Local Government and Community level

What action needs to be taken at local government and community level to underpin the development of good relations between and within communities?

Again we are back to the 'good relations' issue. We again suggest 'equal' be used instead of 'good' – therefore taking a firm stand emphasising the basis for moving forward. In this context we refer to social class, cultural background as well as religious affiliation.

In Britain the police services record racial incidents, unlike the RUC/PSNI here in relation to sectarian incidents. We see racism and sectarianism as parallels – with the exercise of power by those holding the prejudices as the key. To qualify this we highlight the Noble indicators of resources distribution within the North of Ireland **concerning social need**. Nationalist communities consistently appear in the areas of greatest disadvantage. This is despite 25 years of equality legislation and policy initiatives such as Targeting Social Need, New Targeting Social Need and Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment. In our view, the consistent failure of these initiatives to achieve equality indicates ideological opposition within government agencies. It is also our view that community relations has been used to undermine the stated aim of equality. It is of fundamental importance that this new policy review comes up with a formulation that recognises equality as the major requirement from which good relations can follow.

We propose that the 'understanding' of 'community' change from the given – Catholic/Protestant. This must cease and move to the clearer understanding of Nationalist/Unionist. This was a situation made clear within the Good Friday Agreement that it is perfectly legitimate to desire the re-unification of the island of Ireland. This will remove the issues from the sectarian to the political arena. Many Catholics have never had issues with policing, judiciary etc, but Nationalists and Republicans certainly have. If moves are not made into this arena then we are leaving the simplistic 'religious' paradigm to continue – wrongly, in our view. We identify the assumptions underlying the 'religious' paradigm as a core problem. Instead of auditing ratios of Catholic/Protestant make up of institutions/structures there should be the political audits which will then throw a much clearer light on realities in key agencies such as the police, the senior civil service and other decision-making parts of government. This will also highlight the

imbalance of powerful positions held by people of one particular political viewpoint over the past decades - be that in judiciary, police, Civil Service, industry.

Move equality into the political instead of religious arena and our shared future becomes brighter.

8. Action at a 6 county level

What functions do you think should be carried out at regional level? Should these functions be delivered within Government or by an independent body, such as the CRC or a new statutory authority?

The concept of the Community Relations Council we agree with - on the understanding as outlined in this submission – that the policy aims and outcomes are focused not just on ‘good’ relationships between religious groupings, but the achievement of equality for all.

Governance of a new or continuing 6 county institution should ensure an inclusive representation on the board. We offer our **Processes of Nation Building** steering committee as an example of good practice. It was designed to have representatives of all target constituencies involved, including Protestant churches, loyalist, Unionists, other Republicans and civic society.

The Council and its make up must not be left to the whim of the British Government, with safe appointees put into place. Make up of the body (CRC) has to reflect the societal make up, probably in the d’Hondt mode – thus reflecting the political make up of this society. It must have guaranteed adequate funding for all voluntary and community groupings so that they can achieve levels of empowerment which allow them to reflect the concerns of their communities.

We also propose that this body reflect the reality of Southern Irish input and interest in issues here with representation from southern politicians with a remit within the island as a whole.

We also propose that the Irish language be fully integrated as the language of a sizeable section of this society and given its appropriate status.

9. Action at Government level

What action do you think Government Departments should take to improve relations?

Firstly the British Government should acknowledge its role in the formulation of the macro problems here. Thereafter it can acknowledge its roles in specific micro level problems. It is the British Government which makes and sets the rules, the parameters of debate and legislation. If we go back to previous answers we will identify our premise that structural inequality has been built into this state by the British and it is they who must undo the situation. Acknowledgement is the first step. Thereafter many things fall into place. One example is the failed EMU programme within education systems – imposed because our problems were identified as originating from solely religious ground. Of course religious discrimination exists as does sectarianism – but not at the core of our societal problems which are unquestionably political.

There needs to be a major push by the British Government to mainstream Equality issues – not to have them as marginalised side issues in the context of efforts to improve relations in the 6 counties.

We note the fact (in 4.19 of the document) that a “cross-departmental group has already been established to lead on action to promote better relations”. Led at ministerial level, it includes senior officials, representatives from local government, the police and the CRC. We suggest that an audit is made of this group to test whether it adequately represents republican opinion so that policy development is inclusive of all opinion in the north.

Finally, to reflect the fact that the promotion of good relations should be in an all-island context, we call for the establishment of a National Reconciliation Unit as proposed already by Sinn Féin in its proposals for the first Programme for Government. This should liaise closely with whatever 6 county structure emerges from this review process. It should be given adequate resources and responsibility to be involved in all “good

relations” infrastructure in the north of Ireland and proof plans and policies to ensure that adequate attention is given to the all-Ireland dimensions of the achievement of pluralism and cultural diversity. In the same way that relationships and common activity is developing between the Human Rights Commissions and the Equality Commission/Equality Authority, the current major policy review should give institutional recognition to the aspirations of nationalist and republicans.