

# **Sinn Féin's Response to the Consultation Document 'A Shared Future'**

## **Preamble: Sinn Féin's Vision for the Way Forward**

Sinn Féin believes that the task of National Reconciliation is incumbent on us all. National reconciliation can only be undertaken through a participative process of political and civic engagement.

Sinn Féin calls for an engagement of ideas, drawing upon examples such as the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, to examine and agree a vision and a framework for National Reconciliation. This engagement needs to be managed and resourced. One way to do this would be through a dedicated Commission on National Reconciliation that would operate under the aegis of the North-South Ministerial Council and report to the power-sharing Executive and Dáil Éireann.

A various range of organisations which have all-Ireland memberships not least Trade Unions, Churches, community organisations, human rights campaigners, and cultural and sporting associations have primary roles to play in the creation of a coherent, participative National Reconciliation process which will build good relations across the island.

Such a Commission on National Reconciliation should instigate participative consultation, research and inclusive discussion throughout Ireland to examine:

1. relations between the communities of people on the island of Ireland;
2. relations within those communities in border counties where relations have been fractured by partition;
3. relations between communities within the north of Ireland;
4. relations within communities throughout the north of Ireland;
5. relations with communities abroad which have experience of political conflict;
6. and most importantly at this juncture relations between the institutions of the state and those communities which have traditionally been alienated and marginalised from those institutions.

The findings of this Commission on National Reconciliation should include identifying the barriers in respect of each set of relations that have been identified. Ensuring that these barriers are overcome should become the primary function of a National Reconciliation Unit that would also produce a Charter which would include solid principles by which all programmes of work would be measured. This should be

action based and practical, and outline an actual way of demonstrating respect for others.

Local Government Councils should undertake National Reconciliation as a core function of their role in local government. All councils should be asked to produce a programme of work on National Reconciliation based on the principles set out by the National Reconciliation Unit.

All institutions of the state should also produce a programme of work on National Reconciliation based on the principles set out by the National Reconciliation Unit.

All State figures including the President of Ireland, Mayors and Ministers should build National Reconciliation into their programme of work. This would mainstream work already begun by such people as President Mary McAleese and the first Sinn Féin mayor of Belfast, Alex Maskey.

The media has the ability to appeal to a massive audience and should be encouraged to break down stereotypes across the island. The Education systems also need to be centrally involved in any programme for National Reconciliation. Reconciliation and understanding should form a part of the curriculum and the structural problems of society should be analysed. Means of exchanging experiences between school children on the barriers and opportunities for building good relations across the island could be assisted by twinning schools at primary and secondary levels. Sporting organisations should also develop an action-based programme for National Reconciliation. The Sports Council for example could encourage piloting crossovers of sports in all the schools.

The use of civic space which is shared by people from different community backgrounds should be guided by the principle of cultural equality or neutrality. Parity of esteem, as enshrined in the Agreement, has yet to be given effect in practical terms. The result is continuing dispute over the erection of monuments, displays, murals, flags, and emblems. Graffiti and posters which are threatening to people from other communities must be speedily removed. Old hegemonies should not be confused with legitimate traditions, and the civic spaces and civic buildings shared by people from different communities should be modified to reflect and affirm a new hegemony of National Reconciliation.

The issue of contentious parades remains a key challenge to the establishment of a shared society based on equality for all and to the proper implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

SF believes that the problem of parades is in essence a problem of loyal orders and unionist band parades wishing to parade in areas that are wholly or majority nationalist in make-up. Republicans and nationalists accept that there are areas in the six counties where the presence of republican and nationalist parades would not be

welcomed and, when necessary, have voluntarily re-routed. The loyal orders and band parade organisers have yet to accept this very basic principle that would radically transform relations in the north of Ireland.

A long-term solution to the parading problem, which so detrimentally effects good relations, can be found in the implementation of a policy which includes a broad acceptance of the right to march but which also includes a proper acknowledgement of the rights of host communities not to have parades forced through against their will. Without exception, there are alternative or other routes that marchers can take if they so desire.

Official tolerance of such parades has allowed the problem to persist. The sectarian nature and ethos of these parades needs to be acknowledged and tackled in a meaningful way.

New hate legislation which has just been announced should be sufficiently robust to effectively tackle sectarianism and uphold the rights and safeguards enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement. The spectacle of ongoing sectarian campaigns such as at Harryville, Holy Cross Primary School and Carnmoney cemetery should be tackled vigorously and immediately. While we do not wish to go over the policing debate in this document the fact remains that there is a fundamental problem at the heart of policing which manifests itself in such activities being countenanced and allowed to continue. SF believes that such problems will continue until a new accountable and truly representative police service is established.

### **Response to 'A Shared Future'**

## **1. General remarks**

### **1.1 The Nature of Sectarianism**

#### **Is sectarianism an individual/group behaviour or a structural phenomenon?**

Divisions in society take a number of forms. Racism or sectarianism can manifest themselves in terms of individual or group actions, attitudes or thought processes. They also manifest themselves through structural inequalities in a given society. **A Shared Future** deals only with the first of these. It fails to identify - and therefore to tackle - the structural inequalities through which sectarianism and community division has manifested itself. There must be acknowledgement that the structures of both the Unionist regime and the British state (under direct rule) have actively reproduced sectarianism through a whole variety of direct policies and deliberate outcomes: the geographical location of investment and capital infrastructure; the development and implementation of security policies; the "playing of the Orange card" by both unionism and the British establishment since the lead up to Home Rule in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the present. Thus, any successful attempt to create a shared future must be premised on social, cultural, economic and political equality for all.

The omission of structural roots of sectarianism leaves two fundamental flaws at the heart of the document:

- Firstly, by limiting the debate to the field of individual or group ideas or actions, the documents authors see ‘sharing’ and ‘understanding’ as the basis of the solution. They fail to address the need for good relations to be premised on equality. They also see divisions *within* the major communal blocks as being the same as divisions *between* the major communal blocks. They are not the same
- Secondly, the authors of the document fail to see themselves – the institution with the greatest level of power and resources – as part of the problem. Because of this the authors reproduce the most fundamental of barriers to tackling community division - that everyone but oneself is sectarian.

Renowned human rights lawyer the late Paddy McGrory described his community’s experience as that of: *‘living in an alien and hostile environment.....strangers in their own land’*. This did not result from the actions of individuals or groups of unionists alone but rather from official state policy in the north of Ireland.

## **1.2 The primacy of equality**

A view has been promulgated in the last couple of years that community tensions have increased in the 6 counties since the Good Friday Agreement and that this can partly be explained by the “cross community” guarantees and safeguards contained in the agreement (see for example recent Democratic Dialogue report by Wilson and Wilford). According to this view, unionists believe that nationalists have made ”gains” through their emphasis on rights and equality and at the expense of the unionist community. It is therefore posited that striving for equality has undermined relations between the two communities.

SF would reject this analysis. Equality and human rights threatens no one and benefits all. This is the message that needs to be actively promoted at all levels of political leadership – including the British government.

Bringing about a more equal society can help tackle community division and bring about good relations, even if those divisions are brought into starker relief in the short term. Denying equality cannot help heal community division and bring about good relations, , even of those divisions appear to be brought into less stark relief in the short term.

The fact that good relations cannot be allowed to take precedence over equality of opportunity lies at the heart of Section 75 of the NI Act 1998. The ordering of the wording of s.75 is no accident. In s.75(1) the words ‘due regard’ and ‘need’ are used

while in 75(2) the words ‘regard’ and ‘desirability’ are used. Moreover, 75 (2) states “Without prejudice to its obligations above....” The section therefore gives legislative and statutory effect to what was agreed during negotiation; that good community relations will flow from the achievement of equality and not the other way round.

This does not mean that the desirability of promoting good relations can be ignored. Neither does it mean that it can be used to pursue policies that do not promote equality of opportunity. It must also be remembered that s.75 is merely one part of a range of text in the GFA requiring all parties and both governments to secure parity of esteem and equality of treatment.

In this regard, the consultation document has failed to heed the main finding of the Harbinson Review (on which it claims to be based) that the achievement of equality should be the *sine qua non* of any community relations policy.

### **1.3 Addressing disadvantage is the primary objective**

Acting on the basis of objectively identified need - and explaining why investment and resources are being targeted in this way - can promote good relations by explaining to those in deprived areas – be they unionist or nationalist – that they can expect investment commensurate with their level of need. It can help decrease tension where investment is going to an area which is seen as being ‘worse off’ or ‘objectively in greater need’ as opposed to being seen only as going to another community/section of the community, with no clear rationale for why ‘they’ should benefit.

This is also a much fairer way to distribute resources than that of promoting a misplaced sense of ‘balance’ where everything that a nationalist area gets must be matched by something being given to a unionist area, even when the majority of the most disadvantaged areas are nationalist.

If policy makers become consumed with what they think unionist communities or unionist politicians will or can accept, they act in a manner contrary to Section 75. It is notable that the dangers of creating “a cold house for unionists” was a potential publicised by the British direct ruler, John Reid. Rather than seeking to manipulate policy as a cover for unionist unease, British Ministers and their civil servants should concentrate on implementing both the letter and the spirit of the s.75 requirement.

Any “good relations” policy must reflect the consociationalism that is at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. The document discusses a “vision for Northern Ireland” which in itself fails to address the situation post-Good Friday Agreement. The tone of the document indicates that the Irish national aspiration has not been fully engaged with. There is no role for the Irish government alluded to. The fact that nearly half the population do not have a long-term vision for “Northern Ireland” beyond a new constitutional island wide settlement is not mentioned. Indeed, the document appears

to have ignored the finding of the Harbinson Review that “homogenisation” (i.e. the attempt to create a single Northern Ireland identity) should be rejected.

By contrast, the Good Friday Agreement was negotiated as a constitutional compromise that asserted that both the unionist and the nationalist identities should have expression in institutions and structures of governance. It therefore follows that this should be reflected in any policies that are undertaken by the statutory sector. This new reality must therefore underpin any new developments in community relations/good relations.

While the constitutional and identity assumptions of unionism will find nothing inimical in this consultation paper, the nationalist/republican aspirations are not present. Consideration must therefore be given to the position of the Irish language, the role of north/south integration, the need for building good relations across the island and the failure of successive NIO policies to even recognise the different view of the nationalist/republican community. We re-iterate proposals made by Sinn Féin in consultations on the 1st Programme for Government of the Stormont Executive for a National Reconciliation Unit to champion and drive activity promoting good relations across the island of Ireland.

The Irish language is not dealt with adequately in the document. In particular, the commitments made by all parties and the two governments to the protection and promotion of the Irish language in the Good Friday Agreement should be included. Moreover, the significance of the signing and ratification of the European Charter up to Part III for Irish should also be included. Finally, though there is a commitment given to promote and protect the Irish language, a detailed breakdown of how this will be done should be spelt out in any policy paper.

## **2. Responses to the consultation paper**

While we welcome the recognition that community relations policy has “had relatively little effect” on divisions, our own view would be rather more negative. We believe the British government has never had the political will to tackle divisions or their root causes. Our community looks at this in the context of unionist death squads that were set up, directed and resourced by British intelligence. They see the British government’s community relations policy over the years absolve the British government of any responsibility for the conflict here and as little more than an attempt to present it purely in terms of “two communities” or “two warring factions”. It is worthy of note that there is no mention of the words “colonialism”, “imperialism” or “partition” in the document. These are surely some of the causes or roots of division on the island and within the 6 counties.

In passing we note that the “selected bibliography” in Annex C indicates how narrowly focused is the intellectual basis of the consultation document.

### **2.1 Overall aim**

In our view, the overall aim of any policy on good relations should be: to promote equality, value diversity and to recognise inter-dependence of all individuals and communities across the island of Ireland.

## **2.2 Main policy aims and outcomes**

Policy should reflect:

- the drive to entrench human rights protection;
- the achievement of equality; and
- the all-island scope of the tasks.

These should be designed:

- to promote good relations and reconciliation across the island of Ireland and between unionism and nationalism and all other ethnic groups on a 32 county basis
- to promote the safety of those living in vulnerable communities
- to see the rights affirmed in the GFA entrenched in legislation
- to promote respect, encouragement and celebration of different languages, indigenous, ethnic and sign languages, in line with international practice and standards regarding the different circumstances of each category and each individual language
- to achieve the full and equal participation in society of all regardless of religion, political opinion, race, national identity, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, marital or family status, age, social background, language, irrelevant criminal or political conviction. Such a commitment should not promote views or ideologies which are exclusivist or supremacist in relation to any of these categories.

## **2.3 Acknowledgement of the Problem**

We note that the consultation document suggests that the root causes of division are “mistrust and suspicion”. This is a totally inadequate explanation. We have already remarked on the absence of reference to colonialism, imperialism and partition and the thin intellectual base on which the document is based.

In addition, no definition of sectarianism is attempted. This means that people will be talking about different things when they respond to the paper. It would have been helpful to at least find out what officials mean when they use the word “sectarianism”.

Unless there is a realistic engagement with nationalist and republican views concerning the causes of sectarianism there can be little hope of meaningful policy development in this area. Our remarks in the first part of this submission spell out our critique and suggest ways forward.

## **2.4 Fundamental Principles**

The principles outlined in the paper form a useful starting point, with two caveats:

- In relation to acknowledgement, the whole document indicates that the British state's role in the instigation and reproduction of division on the island is not to be acknowledged. This must be a fundamental requirement for moving forward;
- Equality must inform every principle and consequent actions. It must be the starting point that good relations flow from the achievement of equality.

## **2.5 Implications for Action**

- In para 3 of this section “ Effective action .....neighbourhood renewal/regeneration and promoting social inclusion.....’ we would reiterate the primacy of promoting equality. The failure of government policy in relation to New TSN is an indication of a lack of will in tackling social exclusion.
- The promotion of a bi-lingual (Irish-English) society along with the introduction of an Irish language Act to guarantee the rights of Irish speakers. In addition:
  - The adoption of clear, strategic, co-ordinated and cross-cutting policies geared towards the protection and promotion of the Irish language within all sections of the government and public sectors
  - to shape policies, practices and institutions to enable the building of a bilingual society
  - The appointment of an Ombudsman to assess service provision for the Irish speaking community and to hear complaints

## **2.6 Local action**

In para 3 of this section ‘Funding for the new arrangements....’ Consideration needs to be given to what funding will be used? Does this mean a dedicated community relations budget? Is it talking of the economic development budget? Or is it envisaged that all budgets will be skewed to take account of community relations?

In our view, it is crucial that community relations are not funded out of money for economic development of areas of greatest need or by skewing New TSN. The poor should not be made to pay disproportionately for the promotion of good relations. Rather, there should be more resourcing for New TSN to establish equality and end disadvantage.

In para 4 of this section, the paper speaks of ‘... build[ing] the capacity of local communities to enable them to identify and express their needs..’. Does this include capacity building to help local communities participate in the development of government policy and/or contribute to EQIAs? It says ‘this is particularly the case at interface areas’. The key question is why? The conflict and tension may also be with the state and its agents e.g. the role of the police/army and the approach these institutions take to dealing with violence.

There is widespread suspicion that NIO policy in relation to loyalist areas has been to try and “buy off” UDA elements with the promise of resources if violence is stopped. This is a misguided approach (as outlined in a recent paper by Councillor Mark Langhammer **Cutting with the Grain: Policy and the protestant Community**). Rather, we would support resourcing for conflict reduction carried out by networks that are inclusive and community based.

Local Councils must continue to develop the range of services offered to Irish speakers, including the employment of Irish language officers, the co-ordination of translation and other services and full consultation with the Irish speaking community at local, regional and national levels.

At local government level, development of services to immigrant ethnic groups needs to form part of any comprehensive approach to the promotion of good relations.

## **2.7 Action by the Equality Commission**

- Harmonisation upwards of equality legislation across the island along with closer co-operation/integration between the Equality Commission and the Equality Authority
- The adoption of clear guidelines in relation to the promotion and protection of the Irish language as a central part of the equality issue
- Must play a pro-active role in the inclusion of Irish language issues in the equality issue
- There is an urgent need for clear policies in relation to the political opinion ground of the EC’s duties. While much work has been done on religion, the question of discrimination on the grounds of political opinion is hugely under-developed. This should include training and expert advice for Commission staff whoc clearly have not been able to negotiate this fundamental question.
- A review of the adequacy of powers and resources of the EC must be carried out in order that it can drive equality more effectively.

## **2.8 Central Government**

The following commitments should be entered into by central government:

- The designation of the BBC under s.75 of the NI Act along with other institutions/government departments which impinge on policy in relation to the 6 counties
- draft and enact clear and unequivocal legislation through an Irish language Act to enshrine the rights of Irish speakers
- establish a cross-Departmental group chaired at Ministerial level to lead on action to promote the Irish language
- pro-actively educate and explain the rights of Irish speakers to all sections of government / public sector and carry out a planned programme of monitoring and evaluation in relation to clear performance indicators established in conjunction with the Irish Language Council and the cross-Departmental group
- The Irish Language Council in conjunction with the cross-Departmental group should develop an over-arching strategic plan for the Executive with associated actions and targets geared towards the promotion and protection of the Irish language
- The Irish Language Council and the cross-Departmental group shall be supported by resources in line with those outlined in 'A Shared Future' at point 4.23
- promote liaison and exchange between the Irish Language Council and bodies in the south of Ireland, in Wales and Scotland in relation to indigenous languages
- The Dept of Culture, Arts and Leisure should be responsible for liaison with the Irish Language Council in order to ensure that there is continuity with the aims set out at point 4.25 regarding 'cultural diversity'.

## **2.9 North South Ministerial Council Action**

Acknowledgement is made within A Shared Future that the community relations industry has failed. SF welcomes this acknowledgement and hopes that this will lead to government and policy makers fundamentally altering policy particularly regarding the role of the state and the British government in detrimentally affecting good relations both within the north of Ireland and throughout the island. The failure of the state's community relations strategy has resulted in organisations associated with such strategies being compromised. SF, therefore propose the establishment of a new National Reconciliation Unit under the aegis of the NSMC that would develop a policy framework for the entrenching of equality and good relations across the island.

## **Conclusion**

In commenting on the work of the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities in South Africa, ANC MP Blade Nzimande warned against the institutionalisation of ethnicity:

“There is always the danger of cultural identity being mobilised to political ends.”

Sinn Féin believes that the process of developing a framework and programme for National Reconciliation is fraught with similar hazards. Such hazards can and will only be negated if a process of National Reconciliation in Ireland is premised upon equality and underpinned by generosity and reciprocity. Sinn Féin believes that great opportunities await and a truly new beginning in our country is possible if our vision of National Reconciliation is clear.