

***AN AGENDA FOR A SHARED FUTURE  
A POLICY PAPER***

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Briefing Paper QU/GOV/12/2004

2004



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## **Introduction**

This paper has been prepared by the Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research at Queen's University Belfast as a contribution to the debate on improving relations between the different parts of the community in Northern Ireland.

The paper follows a successful conference held on 27 January 2004 in the Whitla Hall at Queen's that was attended by over 500 people. The Conference was a final part of a consultation process involving some 10,000 people on a document entitled "A Shared Future" issued in January 2003 by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister. The OFMDFM Paper followed submission to the Northern Ireland Executive of a report on community relations in January 2002 by Dr Jeremy Harbison.

The conference was opened by Sir George Bain, the Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University. Professors Colin Knox and John Darby summarised the responses in the consultation process. Two young people spoke about their vision for the future of Northern Ireland. A keynote speech was delivered by Nigel Hamilton, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. A Civic Panel, chaired by Professor Elizabeth Meehan, Director of the Institute of Governance, enabled contributions to be made on behalf of the private sector, the trade union movement, the voluntary and community sectors, the public sector and the churches. Senator George Mitchell, Chancellor of Queen's, offered a perspective by video. A political panel, chaired by Noel Thompson, provided input from spokespersons from the main political parties. Duncan Morrow, Chief Executive of the Community Relations Council, offered concluding remarks before Professor Gerry McCormac, Pro Vice Chancellor of Queen's, closed the Conference that had included many valuable contributions from the floor.

This paper is not intended as a summary of the 27 January conference. The papers contributed to the Conference are available on the Institute's web site and on the OFMDFM Shared Future web site. Rather, this paper is meant as:

- a reflection on the debate that has already taken place, and
- an attempt to outline an agenda for moving towards a shared future.

The focus of the paper is on the divisions that exist within Northern Ireland. It recognises, without debating the constitutional and political future of Northern Ireland, the wider context within which these divisions have developed and the need to seek solutions that are appropriate to the area's past, present and future. Reconciliation and relationships at an all Ireland level are also a major and closely related challenge, regardless of whether one favours practical co-operation between the two parts of the island or seeks movement towards eventual unification.

## **A Deeply Divided Society**

No-one can seriously dispute the fact that Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society or that the divisions between Catholics and Protestants have been deepened and broadened by the events of the last 30 years, with the added dimension in recent years of increasing racial and ethnic tensions

A key to setting an agenda in relation to any major problem should be a clear and agreed definition of the problem. However, one of the many unfortunate realities about the deep divisions in Northern Ireland is that it continues to be very difficult for the people who live here to reach agreement about what is the problem. Much has, of course, been written and said about the problem, but we are some distance from a consensus on its nature. Indeed, outsiders are sometimes better able to see the true nature of the issues whilst those closest to the issues continue to react in a knee-jerk manner or avoid aspects that do not confirm their prejudices and preconceptions.

Two significant – amongst many different – reasons given for continuing division might be simplified as follows:

- “It is all about equality and rights; if these were secured and guaranteed, we could make real political progress and agree to live together in harmony”
- “There can be no lasting peace and reconciliation until the violence ends, the paramilitaries disappear and there is certainty about the constitutional future”

There are, of course, valid points to be made on each of these approaches - for example, good relations cannot be fully achieved without equality or while paramilitary violence persists and there are not acceptable political structures in operation.

If there is a difficulty in agreeing the nature of the problem, there can be more certainty in recognising the consequences of the deep divisions, whether it is:

- the number of people killed and injured;
- the thousands living in fear or forced to move home;
- the physical scars on urban and rural areas left by the violence
- the massive extension in separation of the two main sides of the community;
- the huge costs in dealing with the results of violence and the threat of violence;
- the growing evidence of racial and ethnic violence;
- the continued high incidence of crime and anti - social activity and drug use;
- the high levels of social exclusion; and
- the hefty costs of duplication of public services for a divided society.

Whatever the validity of the differing views about the causes of community divisions, no-one can afford to ignore the central truth that this is a society that can never be at peace with itself and in harmony with its neighbours, or realise

its full potential, whilst it continues to be riven by community tensions and divisions.

Many people have been working, and continue to work, tirelessly and bravely to address these issues. Without their efforts - often in daunting, hostile and frustrating conditions - things would be much worse; and indeed, in some respects and in some areas, significant advances have been, and are being, achieved. Nevertheless, it is clear that not enough progress has been possible. The time has come to embark upon a new agenda.

### **A Shared Future**

But an agenda towards what eventual destination? The OFMDFM paper suggested that the vision should be of a shared, pluralist society. The response to that paper and the 27 January conference showed strong endorsement for that vision. A shared future should be our destination.

The alternative of a society, frozen by its past, consisting of “separate but equal” parts, would be a form of apartheid or parallel living that may reflect some immediate realities. But it is not an inspiring or viable future for a divided society that has suffered so much. It would reflect a weary acceptance of division as inevitable and possibly lasting; mean continued high levels of funding from London, Brussels, the USA and elsewhere to support inefficient duplication of services; and leave in place a deeply divided society haunted by its past, never at peace with itself or able to realise its full potential in the future. It would offer little prospect of stability and sustainability in the long-term, and carry the seeds of a return to widespread violence and discrimination.

Nigel Hamilton, speaking on behalf of the Secretary of State, told the Conference “That we are going to have a shared society is beyond doubt: the question is how are we to share that society”.

As Senator George Mitchell said, achieving a shared future will of necessity be a long-term process requiring resources, patience and endeavour. There could, from time to time, be set backs, sometimes major ones. It will not, as Duncan Morrow warned the Conference, be a miracle cure but involves finding better ways of addressing conflicts, not avoiding them.

What needs to happen now is a wide acceptance that a shared future is the difficult and complex path that Northern Ireland will follow. That vision must have powerful endorsement at all levels of society from political and civic leaders to the grass roots and individual citizen. It is a vision that can only be achieved if a very wide range of people throughout society agree that this is their vision for the future and they accept part of the responsibility for turning the vision into reality.

Put simply, the vision has to provide the accepted test against which all important decisions are taken:

- will this decision contribute to creating and sustaining a shared future? or
- will the decision make it more difficult?

### **A Good Relations Declaration and Pledge**

In order to achieve a clear sense of direction, a shared future might be given credibility and strength by two new initiatives to promote endorsement of the vision:

- The first might be a Good Relations Declaration that would be agreed by all the political parties and by the social partners, church leaders and other major leaders – for example, “to work towards a shared society, to foster good relations across all parts of the community, and to avoid doing anything that might damage good relations”.
- The second might be a Good Relations Pledge made, in their own words and on a voluntary basis, by every organisation and open to every citizen - for example, “to do all we can to foster good relations and to strive to avoid anything that might worsen relations”.

Cynics and those who call themselves realists may contend that this is “a motherhood and apple pie” approach that would have no real impact, believing that the only answer is a stronger legal requirement to promote good relations. What is required is a sea change in attitudes towards community divisions and acceptance of greater accountability and responsibility across the whole of society for shaping an agreed future. Legal obligations can assist in changing attitudes through changing patterns of behaviour and introducing new approaches. Additionally, people need to be engaged at all levels in society. The approach outlined above provides an opportunity for civic leadership and citizen engagement to be demonstrated.

### **Action by Government**

Government – whether by devolved institutions or continued Direct Rule Ministers – would have a new responsibility to examine all major strategies and decisions against the test of whether they assisted or damaged good relations. This would include a powerful commitment only to support actions that will foster a shared future. Only in the most exceptional circumstances, would an action be supported that did not meet the test of fostering or sustaining a shared future

Government would be expected to provide stronger, clearer leadership in the search for good relations, starting with a presumption that it would always act in ways that will promote and sustain a shared future. It would need to strengthen cross-departmental strategic thinking and action. It would have to give a higher priority to spending on those matters at the core of the problems

facing the community. Where stronger legislation was required - for example, to tackle race issues or strengthen good relations - it should receive proper priority.

Government would have to act decisively in leading the response to major incidents that threaten good relations; such situations are frequently the symptoms of the wider divisions and absence of trust in society. It would have to work harder to sustain existing mixed communities and to respond to opportunities to enable new mixed developments to succeed. As Duncan Morrow pointed out, targeting small things may also enable larger things to begin to be possible.

It should also be prepared to take more risks across all areas of government - for example, to challenge the ready acceptance of duplicate provision of services. A genuine commitment to a shared future must include questioning long accepted practices in areas like teacher training and the teaching of children from the two main parts of the community in separate schools.

If Government is to exercise a more powerful and challenging role, this will have implications for the roles of Ministers and senior officials. If community divisions are indeed at the heart of the problems in Northern Ireland, the response must be led from the centre of Government - by the Secretary of State under Direct Rule or by the First and Deputy First Minister under devolution - working across all parts of government in Northern Ireland, and advised by a strong central unit reporting to the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Such a unit, located at the heart of Government in Northern Ireland, should have the ability and knowledge to challenge any planned or emerging high-level decision that could impact adversely on good relations. It should also have a wide brief to initiate, for Ministerial consideration, proposals for new action that could improve relations. It might produce a cross-government strategy with targets and milestones as well as provide a lead in helping to make new things happen in critical areas like housing and education. The unit might include a mixture of career civil servants and secondees from other employers, recruited through public advertisement. While such a unit would form part of Government, it should be enabled to adopt an open approach, to consult widely and to publicise its activities.

### **A Good Relations Council**

If Government concentrates on the higher level issues, this reinforces the case for building on the good work of the Community Relations Council to support practical action on the ground, to conduct research, provide best practice advice and to stimulate and foster new thinking.

A reinvigorated body might be renamed the Good Relations Council. It could champion sharing, engage new constituencies, challenge government, councils and others and monitor progress. Whether it should retain the present

independent status of the Community Relations Council, became a public body under statute, or adopt another status would need to be examined. The crucial point would be the quality and commitment of its members.

The possibility of widening the membership to include, for example a third of the members being nominees of the main political parties, drawing on the precedent of the Policing Board, has considerable merit.

### **Local Government**

Local authorities have the potential to make a larger contribution to fostering good relations in their areas and taking the lead in handling local difficulties. Some councils have already been operating in these areas.

There is a possibility that, following the review of public administration, councils may be given a power of general competence - that is, an ability to do anything they believe is in the best interests of their district. Such a power would encourage councils, starting with cross-party support for the sort of good relations pledge described earlier, to work with others to promote good relations, provide positive local civic leadership, fund small-scale local activities, and provide part of the immediate response to tackling local incidents.

### **Political Leaders**

A critical responsibility for moving towards a shared future rests, of course, on political leaders. As Senator George Mitchell pointed out, they have to acknowledge that community divisions are a major challenge. Difficult, sometimes unpopular decisions and actions must be taken if Northern Ireland is to achieve reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust.

### **Civil Society**

However, politicians and governments cannot on their own solve the divisions in the community. They need strong support from responsible leaders and organisations across society. Senator Mitchell also stressed to the Conference that we must engage all elements of civic society in the effort to improve community relations. The churches, the private sector, the trade unions and the voluntary and community sectors have already made significant contributions to addressing community divisions. They will continue to have critical roles to play in their own right and in partnership with each other and others.

## **Conclusion**

This paper attempts to suggest an immediate agenda for action in moving towards a shared future for the divided society that is Northern Ireland. As is evident from the level of engagement in the consultation process and the January conference, progress should not be delayed whilst the important search for political agreement proceeds. The issues demand a sense of urgency and the consultation on “A Shared Future” confirmed a wide-spread desire for clear leadership and effective direction from whatever Government is in power.

We believe, and the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey supports this view, that a strong lead can attract many supporters to the vision of a shared future. There may, even now, be a greater level of support for movement towards more radical action in relation to, for example, education and housing than the pessimists feel or those who favour continued separation want.

It is time for greater urgency in addressing the deep divisions in our society and in starting the agenda for a shared future.