

NEW AGENDA SEMINAR REPORT
Galgorm Manor Hotel, November 26-27

The discussion during the seminar covered a range of issues divided over six sessions. There was no attempt to force consensus during discussion and this short report will offer no attributable claims. It was agreed by the participants that the seminar would be held under Chatham House Rules.

The first session dealt with the role of civil society on the political process. The main theme discussed during this session concerned the potential for synergy in enhanced links between civil and political society. It was noted that political discussion in Northern Ireland tends to occur in a way that keeps the wider society at a distance. This has two main disadvantages: it encourages a sense of powerlessness among the wider population, as people feel that are unable to affect processes of change; and second, it weakens politicians by limiting the extent to which any agreement is rooted in the wider society.

Stronger connections between civil and political society provides support and pressure in both directions: they provide the basis for creative ideas and critical voices to inform the political process, and make it more likely that progressive voices will be supported and agreement sustained. In a wider vein, such connections may encourage the development of a more participatory concept of democracy.

The second session was framed by the New Agenda discussion paper and a presentation on its essential themes. Initially this led to a discussion on the language of politics and, more particularly, a consideration of whether or not it was possible to define a new discourse of politics which avoids antagonism and encourages accommodation. In an echo of the earlier discussion, differences between political and civil society in Northern Ireland were noted: while the former base their unity on constitutional issues, the latter base their unity on the active avoidance of constitutional issues. In a society that appears to be so immersed in politics, it was noted as ironic that there were few opportunities for detailed discussion on the minutiae of politics. Even within the talks process it was felt by some that insufficient time was spent on the detailed outworking of specific proposals, while others felt that some participants to the process were seeking to avoid blame for failure, rather than actively pursuing success.

The main emergent theme from the discussion was on the need for greater transparency, and hence involvement, in the talks process. Civil society has a potential role in generating an atmosphere that is supportive of a language of accommodation, not least because people within civil society may have a little more freedom to use different words and promote different ideas.

The third session was also based on themes from the New Agenda paper, this time focusing on the parameters of a public debate. Not surprisingly this discussion developed themes that had arisen in the previous session, not the least of which was the need for more involvement and transparency in the talks process. The organisations within civil society were described as providing an infrastructure that reached into many parts of the wider society in Northern Ireland. One potential role for New Agenda was to act as a conduit through which politicians could begin to engage sections of the society, thus providing some public space for the articulation of ideas supportive of progressive political agenda. This has the advantage of possibly providing greater support for those politicians who are attempting to engage positively in the talks process, while confounding stereotypes of the positions adopted by different groups by encouraging the politicians and others to begin to discuss the fine detail of hitherto abstract proposals.

The fourth and fifth sessions focused on the notions of consent and self-determination. This discussion was framed by contributions on the experience of other countries and the best legal precedents available in international law. Two main themes emerged from these contributions. First, on the basis of legal precedent and practice it seemed appropriate that any decision on the future of the island of Ireland would depend on popular decisions made separately on both parts of the island. Second, while current territorial specificity should be respected, there is a strong case for trans-border systems to promote and underpin agreement.

The discussion that followed covered a range of specific considerations, including a suggestion by some that while there was a legal basis for majoritarianism, that is, defining majorities on the basis of '50 per cent plus one', there was a corresponding pragmatic recognition of the weakness of this definition in any divided society. In the case of Northern Ireland this problem with simple majoritarianism is one for the future and not just the present. It was suggested as ironic that simple majoritarianism is often cast as a strength, whereas in fact the constant need to reaffirm it only serves to illustrate its fragility.

The notions of consent and self-determination are important as they help to define the basis upon which any eventual decision on agreements from the talks process will be endorsed by the wider communities on the two islands, and possibly beyond. The New Agenda paper offers ideas rooted in the notion of sufficient consensus. Achieving firm agreement on these issues is, however, going to be difficult. One suggestion was that it might be possible to create a situation where some of the issues are deliberately left unclear, although even if this was desirable, it would depend on any context being perceived as stable and relatively immutable.

Towards the latter part of the discussion attention shifted away from the general framework and towards practice within the talks process. It was recognised that a set of rules for discussions and decisions had been agreed

and was operating. This only served to highlight once again the relative isolation of the talks process from the wider society: opening up the talks and enhancing the transparency of the process might help to highlight the areas on which agreement have been reached and strengthen the perception that some level of agreement is possible.

In the final session participants were invited to offer their reflections and thoughts on the discussions as a whole. A number of general themes emerged from these contributions. The process was seen as valuable and most said they had learned from the discussions. A number commented on the way the tone of the discussions had changed over the course of the two days. The key themes to emerge were that an more open and transparent talks process could only serve to strengthen that process and widen the agenda under discussion; that this could be encouraged by more links between political and civil society, with pressure and support going in both directions; and that New Agenda might have a specific role in providing a basis for enabling those links.

Tony Gallagher
January, 1998