

“A SHARED FUTURE”

CIVIC LEADERS PANEL

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Whitler Hall

Queen’s University, Belfast

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The Irish Congress of Trade Unions welcomes the invitation to participate in this Conference. Congress represents thirty-three trade unions in Northern Ireland comprising of approximately 240,000 members employed in all areas of economic and social activity.

Congress wishes to take this opportunity to renew its pledge to work for a peaceful and stable society in which the very *raison d'être* of our movement enhancing the quality of life for our membership can only be achieved. We wish to contribute to a future that is both fair and just. Our movement will as always strive to create a society free from intimidation and murder. A society that rejects sectarianism, social hatred and intolerance is what we all deserve.

Such goals can only be attained if we have an effective legal framework designed to support a progressive policy agenda. The implementation of which demands progressive political leadership illustrating a full commitment to the concept of a shared and progressive future for all our people. It is of concern to us that the consultation document down-plays the responsibility on Government to do anything to achieve improved relations, suggesting rather that the onus lies elsewhere. We believe, on the contrary, that politicians and senior civil servants have a crucial leadership role to play since they can mobilise the resources of the Government, devise and implement appropriate policies and influence public opinion.

At it's bluntest level it is impossible to have good relations if people are suffering from poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, poor health and social exclusion.

Congress believes, therefore, that a strategy to improve relations must be based on:

- Respect for human rights for everyone, including social and economic rights;
- A greater effort to tackle poverty and social disadvantage;
- Primacy for the principle of equality;
- Open and accountable public bodies, so that it is clear where the priorities for action and expenditure are and where the resources are being allocated;
- Recognition of the importance of all forms of equality, not just on grounds of political or religious belief, but also gender, race, disability, sexual orientation etc.

In pursuit of this agenda of pluralism, Congress acknowledges the prejudice within us all and disagrees fundamentally with the assumption in the consultative document that sectarianism is an issue for the working class only.

A recognition in previous decades of some trade union associations with sectarian practices in the workplace and across the movement generally contributed to a significant sea-change of action.

Commencing with the “Better Life for All” campaign Congress has been at the vanguard of challenging sectarianism, not just in the workplace, but in society at large. Apart from the numerous public demonstrations held to oppose sectarian murders of workers from both communities, other initiatives such as the Youth Campaign “Hands off my Mate”, CBI/ICTU Joint Declaration of Protection opposing discrimination, victimisation, intimidation or harassment in employment and supporting a neutral workplace, the G7 initiative Peace Work Progress, the establishment of Counteract (anti-intimidatory unit) exemplify our determination to tackle both internally and externally all manner of activities inhibiting the development of a democratic and equitable society.

Whilst leaders in society – including trade union leaders – need to show leadership, this does not mean that good relations can be imposed from the top down; even in the unlikely event this would be successful, it would not be desirable. Such an approach would not work. Whilst leadership is crucially important, a strategy to improve relations will mean nothing unless it comes from the bottom and ordinary people and their civic representatives can identify with it.

Consequently, Congress will continue to contribute to the education of its members on all aspects of diversity through our union members and shop steward courses.

Other challenges confronting our movement are the implementation of Congress policies formulated at the Northern Ireland Delegate Conferences. In the context of “A Shared Future” the constraint on time of this address does not allow for elaboration on these policies. However, a flavour of our policies can be best described as

Social Integration, Educational Integration, Economic Integration.

It is an imperative that underpinning the achievement of such integration is a firm legislative base inclusive of a tough law outlawing hate crimes of any sort. Statutory duty in the public sector with regard to good relations (Section 75b) should be strengthened and enforcement measures introduced. The primacy of the Equality Duty in Section 75a should be maintained, since equality for all the groups covered is a precondition for good relations.

Finally, if we are ever to really enjoy a Shared Future the Government should extend both the equality duty and the duty to promote good relations to the private and voluntary and community sectors.