

## **Spectres of Peace: Civic Participation in Northern Ireland**

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Before knowing whether one can differentiate between the spectre of the past and the spectre of the future, of the past present and the future present, one must perhaps ask oneself whether the spectrality effect does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other. (Jacques Derrida, 1994: 39-40)

### **Introduction**

The bulk of this article was written before the suspension of devolution in Northern Ireland. It presents an analysis of one of the new institutions set up under the Belfast Agreement, the Civic Forum of Northern Ireland, which is currently suspended along with the Assembly<sup>1</sup>. While all expectations are that devolution will be re-established at some future point, times remain uncertain. One could hardly be closer to Hamlet's declaration that 'time is out of joint', the quotation that Derrida places at the beginning of his *Spectres of Marx*. Suspension suggests a suspicion that the ghost still whispers, as he did to Hamlet, 'Mark me/I am thy father's spirit', such that devolution has not banished its spectres of the past. The logic of suspension suggests that Peace requires people to sincerely reject the spirit of the past, to refuse to follow the spirit of the past into the future. Those desires for the future of Northern Ireland that the Belfast Agreement had meant to consign to history cannot continue to reign over the present. Peace, it seems, cannot be haunted.

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<sup>1</sup> The Forum was provided for in the Northern Ireland act 1998 s. 56, which refers to the 'consultative Forum' agreed as part of the Belfast Agreement, at paragraph 34 of Strand One. Devolved Government of Northern Ireland was revoked on October 14<sup>th</sup> 2002 (Northern Ireland Act 2000 (Suspension of Devolved Government) Order 2002). There have been some meetings of some members of the Civic Forum since suspension, but these are on an informal basis. They have largely been motivated by a need to promote the reports – one on educational disadvantage and one on anti-poverty strategies - that the Forum had recently published (see Civic Forum, 2002a and 2002b).

But, as Derrida eloquently argues in Spectres of Marx, the distinction between past and future cannot be drawn so starkly. This being so, one may ask: does the pursuit of peace mean that ghosts must be banished, that no past spirits can be heard?

I will argue here that Peace, having no mode of presence, can be understood as a call to the future, a performative that orientates itself to a newly imagined future. That call to the future however, cannot be thought as a break with the past. It is entwined with and dependent upon the past. I will argue that the attempt to call that future into being even *requires* the past as an internal and necessary condition. Not simply because past beliefs are tenacious and past desires rarely relinquished in the signing of Peace Agreements, but because to insist on the death of ghosts will always fail. 'A spectre is always a *revenant*', writes Derrida, 'one cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back.'(1994:11). Drawing upon a study of the workings of the Civic Forum during its first two years of existence, I will argue that in that new institutional space, there has been a real attempt to make a call to the future. The Civic Forum is an institution set up under the Belfast Agreement but whose spirit is in line with international interest in the importance of civic participation. Small and powerless as it is within the structures of the devolved administration<sup>2</sup>, it exemplifies the performative call that so much political theory and contemporary philosophy describes, for it explicitly attempts to perform that 'being-in-difference' that is required in order for Peace to emerge and to survive. Like an exorcism, its performative practice attempts to assert a death – in this case the death of conflict within the citizen body - in order to inflict that death.<sup>3</sup> What is of interest here is how that performative call for a future in-difference *cannot* kill off the past because it remains dependent upon its treatment of the past. Indeed, it will be argued, the very possibility of Peace is constituted by the openings it gives to that past.

This article is structured in three sections. In the first, I introduce the concept of civic participation mechanisms as a means by which democratic culture is promoted. Within countries emerging from conflict, civic participation carries a further hope that the involvement of civic society will foster co-operation among groups and therefore carry the society forward into the peaceable future that a peace agreement only imagines as a possibility. Civic participation is thus one of the means by which the future is supposed to be promoted and protected. The second section of the article presents the analysis of my qualitative study. The Forum was, and will hopefully be again, an attempt to contribute to the government of Northern Ireland by involving civic society in the decision-making process of government. I will argue that there has been a pressure on the Civic Forum to display the peaceable potential of civic participation, to be deliberative, inclusive and distinct in purpose. This pressure has had certain consequences for

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<sup>2</sup> The Civic Forum reports to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). For more on the Forum's structure and working practices see Bell, 2004.

the *modus operandi* of the Civic Forum: it is an anxious space, keen to take on its task and to prove itself successful. This anxiety cannot be easily relieved due to the central paradox within which the Forum works. The central paradox is this. The Forum operates under what amounts to an injunction to banish the ghosts of the past. But its success is measured by how it gives space to the differences that arise precisely because those spirits do continue to whisper in the present, both within and outside the Forum.<sup>4</sup> The third brief section offers a comment on the difficulty of evoking a spirit of the future.

## I. Civic Participation as a technology of Peace: The Civic Forum

Democracy is no longer conceived narrowly in terms of setting up of elections. 'Democratisation' is nowadays held to include the explicit inculcation of a commitment to democratic values within the citizen body<sup>5</sup>, with mechanisms to ensure these values are maintained. Where this relates to countries emerging from conflict, especially 'ethnic' conflicts, this shift can be understood as the attempt to ensure that a commitment to peace becomes shared throughout the citizen(s) body (Bell, 2000). One method by which to achieve this widespread culture of democracy reigns supreme: civic participation. According to the rhetoric, civic participation mechanisms are held to improve democratic procedures, wherever they are implemented, by increasing the involvement of individual citizens and civic networks in decision-making processes. In societies emerging from conflict, the hope is that civic participation will function furthermore to promote participation *across* different groups fostering mutual co-operation. Civic participation mechanisms are intended, in short, not merely as means of participation but as technologies of peace.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Here I am still following the argument of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994:47-8).

<sup>4</sup> Some might argue that the suspension of devolved government, even the 'failure' of the peace process in Northern Ireland is a result of the naivety of attempting to banish the ghosts of the past. Why, then, give attention to this body, which attempted to do so? While the Civic Forum is a marginal and powerless body, it is of interest because by its very existence it represented a small pocket of dissensus from the larger picture. In much theoretical literature on democracy, where civic participation and local democracy are promoted as a means of bringing democratic culture 'all the way down', of creating 'nested sovereignties' these small pockets signal hope.

<sup>5</sup> This shift in cultural values, writes one commentator, translates 'the achievement of freedom by a people into a continuing process of self-rule, to anchor their liberation in the *culture* of democracy.' Thornberry, (1993:102). Thanks to Myrto Boutsis for this reference. Increasingly, it is the 'international community' that is to ensure this inculcation occurs; liberation into democracy is understood as for the people of these nations and regions but also, paradoxically, as something too precious to be left up to the people. In post-Cold War global politics the scope of international legal standards is reaching deeper into the domestic organisation of democracies to achieve these ideals. For a critique of this development specifically in relation to Bosnia, see Chandler (1999).

<sup>6</sup> They are also a way in which 'international community' can give a measure to the success of Peace, and are valuable indicators for those countries seeking international recognition and acceptance.

To speak of 'technologies of peace' and to invoke the work of Michel Foucault by this phrase, is to ask how the citizen-subject imagined. Rather than emphasise the formal structures, the new constitutional arrangements implemented by the Belfast Agreement and Northern Ireland Act 1998, Foucault's approach leads one to consider how these new structures articulate political rationalities that invite new subjectivities. Importantly, Foucault's concept of governmentality asks not only about how new political structures reconfigure political relations and spaces, but also how these structures subtend new ethical practices that those who move within them are invited to embody. On the most general terms, the figure imagined within the text of the law is asked to become the bearer or sign of Peace. But Peace is a peculiar concept. It is a word, that threatens to 'empty itself of content at the very moment when it is declared'(Rose, 1996:80). Peace cannot be observed, being defined only negatively, as an absence of something else: it has no mode of presence. Indeed, as Jacqueline Rose has argued, Peace is not a 'state': it is always 'to come', a name we give to the 'call' to the future. Like Justice, Peace is 'as a call, suspended along the path of its anticipation.'(Rose, 1996:79). Peace is about how those in the present anticipate the future of their social and political community. It is about which spirits they follow. Peace can only be studied therefore through the observation of performative practices in the present and by asking how they anticipate a newly imagined future, a future that dissociates itself from the conflicts of the past and thereby seek to 'achieve' Peace. In this way the complex question of temporality becomes entwined within a study of the new practices brought about by new democratic spaces.

In terms of facilitating the call to future, the concept of a Civic Forum would seem to bode well, its constitution exemplifying the principles of civic participation in democratic structures. It attempts to guarantee a route for civic participation by facilitating the involvement of the 'social partners', that is, the trade unions, the farming and business networks and the voluntary and community groups in the decision-making process.<sup>7</sup> It explicitly leaves aside the question of territoriality in order to focus on the 'how' of governance.<sup>8</sup> As such it operates beyond the party politics and the correlative ethno-nationalisms that still foreground issues of territory and that still structure, by and large, the present machinations of the Assembly<sup>9</sup>. It also institutes a space

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<sup>7</sup> The collaborative involvement of the social partners in Northern Ireland has been promoted via the EU's 'Peace packages' Peace I (1995-2000) and the regional aid package (incorporating the peace programme) running 2000-2006. See NICVA's web-site: [www.nicva.org](http://www.nicva.org)

<sup>8</sup> This was one of the key contrasts emphasised by Foucault in his contrast between an earlier model of government that looked to the sovereign along the model of the Prince (a la Machiavelli) for whom defence of territory was the aim of government and an 'art of government' that has developed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and which operates with a decentred model with dispersed sites within which are deployed tactics aimed at governing the conduct of the population in relation to a whole range of 'specific finalities'(Foucault, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> The successes of those already outside these, such as the Women's Coalition and the Alliance party, should not go unmentioned. However the electoral successes of Sinn Féin and the DUP as

where the voices of ‘ordinary citizens’ might be channelled and heard. It strives, therefore, for a democratic practice in line with the hopes of those who espouse a model of democracy beyond representative democracy rooted in participation; procedurally, moreover, in the imaginations of those who promoted it, the Civic Forum was designed to leave behind adversarial politics and to adopt a model more akin to the ideals of deliberative democracy.

The idea of the Civic Forum had been articulated in Northern Ireland for some time. But it was the Women’s Coalition Party who championed it during the multi-party talks (1996-8), insisting upon its inclusion in the Belfast Agreement. They hoped (as had others before them) for some form of corrective to the Assembly, which was always going to be dominated by the main political parties fiercely opposed to one another. It would also be an acknowledgement of the important role that had already been played by active citizens, especially the voluntary and community groups of Northern Ireland, during the period of direct rule. The importance of community and voluntary groups in Northern Ireland has been considerable (see eg. McCall and Williamson, 2001) as is clear from their pivotal role in implementing the social partnership conditions of the European Union’s ‘peace package’ to Northern Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

What emerged from the Agreement was a commitment to a less powerful body than the Women’s Coalition had wanted. Its remit was not to be anything like as important as a second chamber – an idea that other political parties involved in the talks insisted it absolutely must not be – since it had no right to veto Assembly decisions or insist its own be implemented. Instead it was to be an advisory, ‘consultative’ body made up of representatives of civic society. The passage of the Forum was aided by the success story of the National Economic and Social Forum in the Republic of Ireland that was established in 1993 and has been a ‘leading example of democratic innovation along participation and social partnership lines’ (McCall and Williamson, 2001:374). The NESF served as a loose model for the Civic Forum<sup>11</sup> to the extent that the Civic Forum mirrored its logic of social partnership as well as its attempt at ‘joined up’ government, that is, the recognition of the potential utility of a body able to address issues that cut across government departments.<sup>12</sup> Significantly however, the Civic Forum was not to include elected politicians, as does the NESF, which draws a greater demarcation in personnel between the Forum and the

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opposed to the more moderate parties since the Belfast Agreement indicates that the divisions have not lessened.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that some of the support for the Civic Forum during the talks may have been lent cynically by those who saw it as a way to contain social activists who had had the access to the administrative power coveted by politicians (McCall and Williamson, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Although this Forum also includes elected politicians, which the Civic Forum does not. The NESF has one third membership from the Oireachtas (the Irish parliament), one third from the ‘social partners’ or employer/trade union sectors, and one third from the ‘third strand’, the voluntary groups. Its objective centres on social and economic policies to address unemployment.

Assembly than there is between the NESF and the Oireachtas (the Irish parliament). Moreover, while the NESF was set up specifically to address unemployment in a 'joined up' manner, the Civic Forum's purpose was to remain rather ambiguously defined as 'consultative'.

The Agreement itself lends few words to the Forum. In Strand One, S.34, it states: 'A consultative Civic Forum will be established. It will comprise representatives of the business, trade unions and voluntary sectors, and such other sectors as agreed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. It will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic, and cultural issues.'(April 1998). The Northern Ireland Act 1998 s.56 (re-)states that the First Minister and deputy First Minister 'shall make arrangements for obtaining from the Forum its views on social, economic and cultural matters' but lent little more clarity to the Forum's remit.

Although in principle the Forum had been seemingly accepted in the talks, after the Agreement it became controversial. The detail of how the Forum would operate caused some controversy, so that by the time the body that was to give flesh to the idea of a Civic Forum came together at its inauguration in October 2000, it was already haunted not only by 'the conflict' but also by disagreements about its role.

As the First and Deputy First Ministers (Designate) received consultation papers on how the Forum might operate<sup>13</sup> concerns were raised from both pro and anti Agreement sides. Questions started to be raised about how it was to be made truly representative of civic society, about the scope of its work, the extent of its powers, and about its non-elected status. Anti-Agreement unionists, and especially the DUP, were most vocal in their opposition to the Civic Forum, arguing that it was an 'unnecessary layer of bureaucracy'. Ian Paisley referred to the Forum as a 'monster quango'(Northern Ireland Assembly Hansard September 14 1998). The composition of the Forum was laid out in the First and Deputy First Ministers Report to the Assembly on February 15<sup>th</sup> 1999. It was to be composed of eleven sectors.<sup>14</sup> As the Forum was preparing to start its work, the DUP again attacked its composition, specifically its non-inclusion of a member of the Orange Order. Nigel Dodds (DUP) laid a motion urging the appointment of a representative of the Order by the First and Deputy First Ministers (Official Report, 25 October

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<sup>12</sup> And indeed, provision is made for a consideration to be given to a North-South Consultative Forum that would join the Civic Forum with the NESF. As yet, it has not been established, although a working group of MLAs was set up to investigate its potential contribution.

<sup>13</sup> A sub group of MLAs discussed the Forum's remit in a series of meetings. Also, several of the important representatives of established networks of civic society came together to produce their own consultation document under the auspices of the New Agenda network (available at [www.democraticdialogue.org/publications](http://www.democraticdialogue.org/publications)).

<sup>14</sup> These eleven sectors are: the voluntary and community (18 seats); the business (7 seats); the trade unions (7 seats); the churches (5 seats); culture (4 seats); agriculture and fisheries (3 seats); arts and sports (4 seats); education (2 seats); victims representation (2 seats) and community relations (2 seats). The First and Deputy First Ministers each appointed 3 of the remaining 6 seats.

2000). It proved to be an acrimonious debate, especially between DUP and Sinn Féin Members; the motion was ultimately defeated (Wilson and Wilford, 2001).

During the run up to its inauguration therefore, the Civic Forum was subject to some considerable debate. Many concerns were raised about its role, its composition and its members' selection<sup>15</sup>. Could the Forum fulfil the hopes of civic participation? Would it only prove its critics' points? Certainly for those who came to comprise its membership, there was a desire to put the controversies behind them, to prove that this body of sixty people (plus their Chair) could both cohere across political and sectoral divides and produce effective 'civic representation'. From the outset, there was a pressure to show that the dissenters were wrong<sup>16</sup>, and that this Forum could play an important role in the transition of Northern Ireland's governance to peaceable 'participative' democracy.

The Forum held its inaugural meeting in October 2000, and met in plenary every two months until the current period of suspension<sup>17</sup>, as well as in smaller subgroups set up to address specific topics chosen by the Forum as key issues. Sub-groups were established at the outset to look at distinct areas in which the Forum might make innovative policy recommendations. These sub-groups, which have been the main focus of the Forum's work, addressed: life long learning, anti-poverty strategies and social inclusion, issues of sustainability, and issues in the transition 'towards a plural society'. The Forum has also responded to requests from the Assembly to comment on the draft Programmes for Government, the Human Rights Commission's draft Bill of Rights, as well as the draft terms of reference for the Parades Commission. To a lesser extent, the Forum has debated current issues at its plenaries, although this has been controversial within the Forum (in part because of the lack of clarity about what the Forum's 'consultative' role means, see Bell, 2004) as we will see.

## II. Civic Participation in Practice

How to be a 'technology of peace'? This study, based upon observation and interviews with Forum members<sup>18</sup>, offers the opportunity to consider the Forum's work in this regard. The

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<sup>15</sup> The main fear in this respect was that the Forum should not become a 'talking shop' for the 'great and the good' - those active citizens who were already relatively high profile as a result of their previous incarnations in the social partnerships, community and voluntary groups. The New agenda document addressed the question of selection as an important consideration. The procedure adopted saw posts advertised in the newspapers and sectors organising panels for interviewing candidates.

<sup>16</sup> Excepting of course, those anti-Agreement members of the Forum who would be happy to see the Forum fail.

<sup>17</sup> Earlier short periods of suspension temporarily interfered with the Forum's work, as any planned meetings were cancelled during suspension.

<sup>18</sup> The 11 formal interviews drawn upon here took place over the course of an 18month study between February 2001 and July 2002. Some were conducted face to face. The majority were

analysis focuses on the pressure to display success that, it is argued, places specific burdens on the Forum's work. In order to show its success, the Civic Forum has to be exemplary in its call to the future. It has always to avoid being pulled 'back' into the past from which it is designed to help the present escape. This pressure reverberates within the Forum. First, there is the pressure to display or to perform inclusivity, a 'future-in-difference'<sup>19</sup>. The Forum is not 'allowed' to fall back into lines that replicate those of the conflict. Secondly, there is an anxiety about the relationship of the Forum to the Assembly. The Forum is clearly subordinate to the Assembly. But its explicit role is based upon its potential to instruct the Assembly, to critically advise. This creates a problematic relationship. Thirdly, in relation to its other constitutive outside – wider society – there are anxieties about the relationship of the Civic Forum to 'the public' in general. It can only claim its distinctive role insofar as it can claim to be in touch with wider society. I shall explore these points in turn.

### i) Ghosts: The paradox of Peace

'I don't want to go in to the jargon of it but this idea of building civic society did seem an important idea when, you know, when our politics here are the way they are and even once our politicians got into the business of actually running the place there'd still be that sectarian overlay and the baggage of the Troubles in the way ... I thought it was a very good idea from the Women's Coalition to actually think about creating another space ... [to] get people involved'<sup>20</sup>

If the Forum distinguishes itself by its ethos of inclusivity which is in turn central to its performative call to the future, it 'cannot' replicate ethno-nationalistic divisions, nor allow sectarian, religious or pro-/anti-Agreement differences to disrupt its work. It was quite clearly for this reason that, for example, the Forum took the decision to move by consensus rather than by voting. 'Voting' as one member succinctly put it 'is by its very nature exclusionary' in relation to any minority grouping (meaning, in this case, the participating anti-Agreement members)<sup>21</sup>. Despite its time consuming nature, over which many interviewees expressed exasperation<sup>22</sup>, the plenary operates by consensus. To display its future orientation, the Civic Forum needs to give difference this time, this space-ing.

A paradox arises from this commitment to inclusivity, a tension that is not just about taking time, but about taking the Forum 'back'. In the words of one interviewee the 'whole ethos' of the Civic Forum is to 'be inclusive' and those nominated to the Forum and their nominating bodies would have seen it as an 'alternative to party politics' with its exclusionary tactics.

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telephone interviews. Further, informal, conversations took place at plenary sessions. I observed the bimonthly plenary sessions on six occasions during the course of the study.

<sup>19</sup> By this phrase I mean to recall the work of Jean-Luc Nancy who has most powerfully argued that Being should be understood as a being-with. See eg. Nancy, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Interview 7 (trade union sector).

<sup>21</sup> Craigavon plenary, April 2001, my notes.

However, ‘people do come with baggage’<sup>23</sup>. That is, the people who comprise the Forum are not immune to the political agendas of Northern Ireland and these will surface in their contributions. The ghosts cannot be banished, or this Forum would cease to be regarded as drawn from civic society in Northern Ireland. There have even been, as another interviewee put it, rare ‘outbreaks of naked sectarianism’<sup>24</sup>. Clearly, because these political and sectarian agendas are a clear sign of what the Peace process intends to render historical, they create extreme tension, threatening the future orientation of the Forum by allowing ‘the past’ to be articulated within it. But by the same token they cannot be disallowed. For it is not despite but *because of* the need to display a future orientation, to perform that future in order to institute it, that whenever party political or sectarian issues arise they have to be given space for expression. The Civic Forum’s ethos of inclusivity means these differences have to be engaged.

The composition of the Forum exemplifies this paradox insofar as the incorporation of anti-Agreement members within a Forum set up by the Agreement is in the words of one Member ‘a funny thing... a paradox’<sup>25</sup>. But their inclusion is also absolutely necessary given the intention to create an inclusive future-in-difference. As some articulated explicitly, it is imperative to the success of the Forum and the Peace process:

‘I get on with [names him] who logically ... I should not ... but I welcome his attempt to articulate for his community even though I would disagree with a lot of what he says ... I would still argue that he’s one of the voices who has to be given special voice ... he comes from a part of the community in Northern Ireland who would be very anti-the Peace process and feeling very beleaguered, feeling the process isn’t addressing their concerns.’<sup>26</sup>

Granting ‘difference’ space and time can display a new ethical sociality. But it carries with it the threat of disrupting that ideal. The Civic Forum has found itself having to carefully manage those moments when the ‘old’ agendas threaten to overwhelm its proceedings. Contentious issues emerged immediately as the Forum formulated its internal procedures. Unsurprisingly, language was one such. It was decided eventually that the Forum would employ translation from Irish into English; this provoked a request for parity and, as a consequence of some lengthy discussions within a sub-group, the Forum decided there would be translation from Ulster Scots as well.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview 3 (sports sector); also see below interview 7.

<sup>23</sup> Interview 6 (appointed member).

<sup>24</sup> Interview 5 (voluntary and community sector).

<sup>25</sup> Interview 5 (voluntary and community sector). They are a paradox because they state that they do not support the Agreement but partake in the institutions that it set up and complain where their voices within them are marginalised. One such anti-Agreement member said in his interview with me that he would be the last man going down with the Civic Forum; he felt that he would perhaps stay longer in the Civic Forum than perhaps he would want to because his nominating sector felt he should be there ‘it’s one of the strange peculiarities of Northern Ireland that I shall be the man who goes down with the ship even though I thought that the whole thing was a foolish idea to start with.’ Interview 8 (churches sector).

<sup>26</sup> Interview 7 (trade union sector).

While some were pleased with this result, other members felt that this issue illustrated how the Forum, as one described it, ‘bent over backwards’ to be ‘accommodating’<sup>27</sup> of difference, when not a word of Ulster Scots has been spoken so far, and when the Ulster Scots speakers, as well as those who can speak Irish, ‘can also speak English’<sup>28</sup>. The yogic metaphor of the backbend is absolutely the knot in which the call to the future finds itself. The centre of gravity shifts precariously to achieve a form that will be rooted in the present, eyes front, while simultaneously being pulled backwards. The language issue forced the Civic Forum to bend, to yield, because even if these agendas were a form of repeating older political agendas - since in Northern Ireland, language is always tied up with cultural identity and cultural identity with political (see eg. Finlayson, 2001) - it tested the Forum’s commitments to inclusivity, and it had, therefore, to be conceded on both sides. The Forum had to perform its backbend – and spend its resources employing translators and providing equipment for translation - because it was always already ‘surrendered’ to difference<sup>29</sup>.

In the course of the Forum’s business, these challenges to the ‘call to the future’ arose whenever political or sectarian issues were thought to require comment. In these instances there was precisely the danger that the Forum would simply fall into agendas that would take it ‘back’ into a simple rehearsal of the obstacles to peace or into an endless exposition of the wounds of the past. Overtly ‘political’ issues put anxiety within the Forum at its height.

This anxiety has been diffused by a form of ‘translation’ of the debate into one around the Forum’s remit. The suggestion that the Forum might become involved in a ‘listening’ exercise to document the views of people embroiled in the dispute around Holy Cross school in September 2001, for example, was, after much discussion, deemed ‘inappropriate’ for the Forum’s attention, given that the Assembly-appointed Dunlop committee was carrying out an investigation into the event. This was despite the sense that some, frustrated, Civic Forum members felt their role would be of a different order. One interviewee reported:

‘The North Belfast project would’ve been have been engaged in part of unpacking that [persistent sectarianism] as a listening exercise. I don’t think the Forum can go in and say we’ve got the solution to anything but if the Forum went in to give voice to people in desperate situations that would help not only the Forum to understand where people are coming from and why there continues to be conflict in these interface areas. But also help educate policy makers and others as part of documenting that. The Dunlop team have a very specific piece of work to do, to recommend what the statutory bodies should be doing. Our role would be to listen and give voice to the despair, to the disaffection, to the hatred that lies within those communities.’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Interview 6 (appointed).

<sup>28</sup> Interview 6 (appointed).

<sup>29</sup> On peace as surrender to difference see Cubitt, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Interview 7 (business sector).

A request to debate the exclusion of the DUP from the Weston Park talks was referred to one of the Forum's committees, approved, and introduced, but a full debate never took place. The issue was 'translated' into an agenda item elsewhere, and consequently it missed its moment. Referring to this lost debate, the member proposing the debate describes a 'fear' of contentious issues:

'The Civic Forum listened to me but there was no vote and no decision taken... the Civic Forum studiously avoids tackling any such contentious matter... it's fear... the Chairman and the Secretariat of the Forum are scared that the divisions on view in Northern Ireland could ever be heard or raised within the proceedings of the Civic Forum. The Forum wants all things to be dignified and respectable and in what it sees as an adult fashion. But because of that it can never deal with what makes passions run high in Northern Ireland life. ... It's politeness gone mad.'<sup>31</sup>

These controversial issues are noted therefore but have been repeatedly deemed as inappropriate issues for the Forum's work<sup>32</sup>. A similar fate met a motion brought by a member who represents victims of the Troubles. This Member asked the Forum to condemn the actions of the RUC, who on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2002 (in the aftermath of the Castlereagh incident) had raided the offices of a victim support group in London/Derry and taken confidential records. Her request for a debate was referred to a committee but at the next plenary it was announced that it had been decided no debate should take place.<sup>33</sup>

Such curtailing of debate clearly works to frustrate these particular Members of the Forum. But the frustrations are not only individual. They touch upon the central paradox we have been describing. The Forum's task requires that it cohere, that it carry all of its members with it. But this means it has to be a space in which membership feel they can raise what they consider important issues and projects for the Forum.<sup>34</sup> Ducking these because they are 'divisive' threatens the potential of the Forum to fulfil its purpose as an inclusive body, one receptive to and in touch with civic society.

The Civic Forum's call to the future is caught in this paradoxical situation of having to listen to the ghosts of the past *as the very route* by which to achieve the future. That future

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<sup>31</sup> Interview 8 (churches sector). It should be noted that this member is one of the 'paradoxical' people, an anti-Agreement member of the Forum. One hostile respondent to this paper referred to the Civic Forum, similarly, as a 'wish factory of pleasantness'.

<sup>32</sup> Of course, who ultimately decides these issues are inappropriate is a highly controversial issue (see below).

<sup>33</sup> Request made plenary, Loughgiel, April 2002. The full debate requested was subsequently declined by the chair who at the following plenary stated that 'the issue was given to the KIC committee [Key Issues Committee] and then to the GPC [General Purposes Committee] and I will amplify my reasons as to the sorts of criteria applied [for deciding which issues we should debate]. It really revolves around hearing a members' concerns and the solving of them... [some] could be dealt with better in another manner (my notes, plenary Lisburn, June 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Not least because if members feel their concerns will not be heard, they will tend, as some have done, to disengage.

demands a receptive relation to the past. Peace comes about via its treatment of the past, its ability to conjoin – to conjure with – the spirits of the past. Indeed, any attempt to dissociate past and future will be problematic. The Forum ‘knows’ this. In its proceedings, as well as in its composition<sup>35</sup>, the Forum ‘remembers’ the political context within which it works as well as the legacy of the conflict. One member related how he had argued for the inclusion of the words ‘towards a plural society’ to be in the Forum’s mission statement so that its work was always under the sign of remembering the task was not merely civic participation but also part of a wider movement away from conflict.<sup>36</sup> Distinguishing too strongly between the past and the future obliterates the fragility of the attempt. One cannot be pulled back, but in order to move forward one attends to the past. This applies, moreover, not only to those who seem to listen only to the spirits of the past, but also to those who would move too quickly into the future.

From time to time the Members pulled their colleagues up on moving too quickly, on being too *futural*, forgetting the shadow that the Troubles still cast over the present. The latter were accused of moving too far towards the ‘fantasy’ of Peace that they had themselves become fanatical, forgetting the present within which they live. The accusation usually figured this forgetting as the result of a kind of well meaning but fanciful naivety. The challenge was put, for example, by a member who argued<sup>37</sup>, in the context of a discussion about a perceived fall-off in active membership and attendance at such sessions<sup>38</sup>, that:

‘The work we’ve heard about today is excellent [presentations on the life long learning sub-group’s immanent report] but we don’t seem to marry the reality of ourselves with the reality out there ... these are issues that affect people’s lives. I’m not looking forward to the next few months [the marching season] – I work in interface communities and conflict resolution and ... I haven’t received anything [from the Civic Forum] on interface issues or angry disputes around primary schools ... Members have raised them ... [but they are] not followed up’.<sup>39</sup>

This idea that ‘external reality’ requires attention was deployed in this instance in an attempt to pull the membership ‘back’ to the realities of sectarian conflict, and with specific reference to the then recent sectarian fighting and shootings in North and East Belfast, as well as the ongoing tensions around Holy Cross primary school in North Belfast. The concerns articulated can be understood as a form of reigning in of those whose pursuit of peace had them straying too far ‘ahead’. Responses to this accusation have ranged from a simple rebuttal to a

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<sup>35</sup> Not least through its inclusion of two members who are specifically there to be a voice for victims of the conflict.

<sup>36</sup> Interview 7 (trade union sector).

<sup>37</sup> My notes, plenary Lisburn, June 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Members attending plenary sessions have diminished; there were 35 and 23 members at the April and June 2002 plenaries respectively, out of a potential 61. Members are, however, attending meetings outside plenary and interviews suggest they prioritise those meetings, as a form of time-management. The time devoted to the Civic Forum was underestimated at the outset, when one or two days a month was anticipated.

refusal of its relevancy, that is, some members argued that the legacy had not been forgotten, but that despite the sensationalism of the conflict, for many people life goes on with little reference to it.<sup>40</sup> More commonly, however, the challenge received muffled acknowledgement. It is a line of attack to which the Civic Forum feels vulnerable. For despite the anxieties of the Forum's management about addressing these issues as within the remit of the Forum's work, many members were aware that present conflictual realities cannot be dismissed as signs of archaic tendencies to be selectively ignored in the pursuit of a more harmonious future.

Of course, the performative attempt to bring the future into being cannot be a form of simple pluralism in which the ghosts of the past, unchallenged, run riot over the present's desire for 'inclusivity'. Orientating the present toward the future is performative, but the performances require audiences who are not merely passive but who judge.

One of the near impossible judgements that this argument implies has been an issue in the Civic Forum: how does one know who is and who is not truly following a spirit of the past? Might some be merely, as one Member put it, 'play-acting'? In contradistinction to the suggestion that it is the pursuit of Peace that makes subjects fantastical, some Members of the Forum suggest that there is a sense of play-acting and unreality exactly when political agendas or sectarian concerns are voiced. One of the members who 'challenges everything' is described by an interviewee as 'mischievous'<sup>41</sup>, implying that there is a pleasure being derived from a certain almost farcical posturing at plenary sessions when objections formed within the 'old' agendas are raised to interrupt the future orientation of the Forum. However, this interviewee defended this member's inclusion within the Forum as in principle positive because she believed that, although his attitude potentially threatened the call to Peace, it also afforded an opportunity for the others present to reinvest in their broad commonalities. She echoed in other words, the need to allow his pleasures to be displayed in order that they might be brought forward as archaic, as the archive out of which the future is written.

Interestingly then, the relationship to the past here is one that invites voices from the past but necessitates judgements, including how to de-mote voices, how to mark them as past. Perhaps that demotion is achieved in part by allowing other distinctions and concerns to be heard in the pursuit of the future. Another member comments that there is a potential for the Forum to invite people away from the idea that pluralism need be fixated on the divisions that animated the conflict. However, he had found it difficult to achieve this even

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<sup>39</sup> My notes, plenary Lisburn, June 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Or even that life goes on and in some sense has even 'benefited' from the fact that there has been conflict. For example, at one plenary (Craigavon, April 2001) a woman member reported that in one of the towns where a sub-group had been talking to people about educational facilities as part of their 'out-reach' work, 'the troubles had resulted in the community centre being set up'.

<sup>41</sup> Interview 2 (voluntary and community sector).

within the Forum. Despite a declared openness to differences, those differences other than Protestant/Catholic or political groupings – such as different ethnic groups, genders or sexual orientations – were rarely given time. As an example, this member mentioned a residential meeting of the sub-group set up to discuss the safeguarding of a diverse society. He recalled,

‘A number of us were trying to say “what’s this [sub-group] to be about?” ... If we’re calling it ‘Towards a Plural Society’ it can’t be just about Catholics and Protestants. It has to be about all those communities that live in Northern Ireland.. but it was ‘OK alright, now back to the Catholic/Protestant issue’.<sup>42</sup>

Another Member, similarly, suggested that pursuit of the future had to carry the ghosts of the past forward while not allowing their ‘old agendas’ to threaten the Forum’s substantive work; he expressed this as a need ‘to keep the Civic Forum *real*’<sup>43</sup>. Like Habermas and many theorists of communicative rationality, this interviewee saw the role of the Forum as building debate on the ‘real’ social issues which in contrast to the deployment of a notion of reality articulated above, was precisely *not* a concern with conflict:

I don’t think the Forum should be, you know, a platform ... just to concentrate on peace building or resolving conflict or, you know, just how do we all just get along? Or how to resolve the Parades issue. I don’t think that’s what our role should be. At the same time there should be a peace- building dimension to it but it *should be primarily trying to change the agenda* from traditional issues of division towards trying to build commonality around social issues. In an effort to be accommodating and inclusive you can’t distort everything and *we have to keep the Civic Forum real and to be dealing with real issues* that can be seen to effect and have a relevancy for people right across the political spectrum, right across society.<sup>44</sup>

As this interviewee implies, and as this section has argued, the pressure to be future orientated - to operate in anticipation of and as a call to the future - has led to confusion and anxiety around how to address the past. The Civic Forum is a new space which regards itself – and not infrequently defines itself - as guarding against any collapse into the camps that the formally elected chamber more carelessly replicates in its version of democracy. Its commitment to inclusivity across camps is integral to its call to the future. So too, then, is its need to listen to the ghosts of the past that continue to animate events both within the Forum and within Northern Ireland. The Forum operates within this paradox. Consequently, it has to conjure with a series of difficult injunctions: to both acknowledge difference but also to move on, to remember but also to forget, to be responsive but also to judge. Because these involve a delicate openness to the past as *a condition* of its performative call to the future, it is clear that the future will only be truly beyond the present if those who pursue it can operate within the truth that the attempt to cleanse the

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<sup>42</sup> Interview 4 (voluntary and community sector).

<sup>43</sup> Interview 6 (appointed).

<sup>44</sup> Interview 6 (appointed).

future of the past - as if Peace could only dawn if no whisper of/from the past were permissible - may well remove its very possibility.

## ii) Ticking Off: Relations with the Assembly

'You have very pro-Agreement people [in the Assembly] who are actually quite anti-Civic Forum ... I think it's on the grounds that they see it as, you know, unnecessary. I think it was concerns about was somebody trying to get a second chamber by the back door - "do we really need a Civic Forum looking over our shoulders, we're elected" - a kind of preciousness about being the elected politicians.'<sup>45</sup>

One concern about the idea of a Civic Forum, as we have seen, was how its role would develop in relation to the Assembly. Since its inauguration, the Forum has had to negotiate this concern, not least because the Forum does indeed have the potential to be critical of the Assembly. Because the Civic Forum's composition and purpose is innovative, it has the potential not only to criticise the Assembly for its lack of requisite solutions to problems of government - a familiar fear of civic participation along the lines of 'Give the people power and they will endlessly repeat your shame'<sup>46</sup> - but also to show how it is more '*advanced*' than the Assembly because more able to form an inclusive Forum for the debate of issues of governance. Given the fact that the Civic Forum has been set up in part *because of* what the Assembly is unable to achieve, this critical function is invited. Simultaneously, the Forum is of course subordinate to the sponsoring department - the Office of First and Deputy First Ministers (OFMDFM) - and more broadly speaking to all the elected representatives. With its powers and resources, the Civic Forum could never pose any real threat to the Assembly. Nevertheless, and in fact because of the Forum's critical yet subordinate role, the question of how to approach the Assembly has created some of the most difficult issues for its work.

The very rationale for the Forum risks putting it 'ahead' of the Assembly, placing a strain on the relationship it has with those to whom it reports. When asked what the Forum might bring to the Assembly that it would otherwise miss, one interviewee replied that the formal political structure restricted the Assembly's freedom to have adequate discussion. In this respect the Civic Forum is indeed somehow 'out in front':

I think Mark Durkan [current Deputy First Minister] is on record as [saying that] his vision of it was 'thought outriders' and I think that's right [prompting question: thought outriders?...] yeah, people who are just out in front a bit and .. yeah we all have responsibilities to our sectors - some are stronger than others ... but you're not tied to being elected, you're not tied to any specific constituencies necessarily and that does give a certain freedom. So ... it offers the opportunity to open up debate and open up discussion to get people involved in talking about things ... It is harder for elected bodies to achieve.'<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Interview 5 (voluntary and community sector).

<sup>46</sup> Rose, 1996.

<sup>47</sup> Interview 5 (voluntary and community sector).

Similarly, another member suggested that the Civic Forum had the potential to debate issues that the politicians would find difficult to debate without falling into their ‘natural camps’. In this sense the Forum is potentially *beyond* the Assembly:

‘We’re not policy makers we’re merely influencers so to create a debate is the main reason we exist ... to basically think in different ways because they [Assembly members] are restrained ... it’s to allow civic society to engage wider debates in ways that policy makers wouldn’t necessarily come at a debate. And it’s also sometimes easier for us, if we were a bit more bold about it, to create debates around issues that politicians will naturally fall into their normal camps [around] and have difficulty crossing party boundaries – to have debate *beyond* that.’<sup>48</sup>

As one member of the Forum disdainfully put it, the lines of debate within the Assembly are stuck in the ‘two tribes approach’ so that political leaders can become embroiled in trivialities: ‘the key focus seems to be whose flag happens to be flying and which type of flowers happen to be in the hallways of the Assembly up at Stormont.’<sup>49</sup> Placed beyond the bounds of the Assembly’s ability to performatively call to the future, the Forum builds upon and adds to a history of social partnerships and voluntary and community groups that have already in a sense proven themselves. It has the potential to consult civic society in a way that elected representatives don’t or daren’t, and thereby to institute itself as an innovative space out of the reach of the Assembly: it has the potential to be a *preferable* space, which was perhaps the legitimate fear of those politicians opposed to the concept all along.

The Civic Forum – reflecting the central tenet of the civic participation principle - is built upon one major suspicion: that the Assembly will not in and of itself be able to provide sustainable, inclusive democracy. Northern Ireland’s Civic Forum is not only part of the Peace Agreement but also part of the United Kingdom’s experiment in producing *improved* democratic structures. Consequently, the Civic Forum invites its members into the position of the already suspicious subject who refuses to merely believe or merely spectate<sup>50</sup>, who invests time and energy into this Forum which is in turn built upon the promise that it can be a critical guide for, and check on, formal political institutions; what one member referred to as ‘not letting elected democracy run away with itself’<sup>51</sup>.

Insofar as this is the case, there is an attendant risk of being seen to scold the Assembly. One member relates a small example of just such a scolding on a trip that some Civic Forum members took, with members of the Assembly, as well as politicians from the Republic of Ireland, to Harvard University, which runs courses to facilitate dialogue:

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<sup>48</sup> Interview 7 (trade union sector).

<sup>49</sup> Interview 10 (business sector).

<sup>50</sup> See Dean, 2001.

<sup>51</sup> Interview 2 (voluntary and community sector).

'The Assembly members there brought their Assembly baggage with them in terms of the way they conducted themselves with each other at times and there was a lot of petty and silly stuff going on ... Myself and someone from the Women's Coalition actually pulled them on it in a group session and said you know 'it's not on the way you're all behaving' ... You know, it's like when you have small children you know 3 and 4 years olds and they can be in a room full of people but they live in this little world of their own. They can be doing something very naughty in front of everybody and its only when an adult says 'what are you doing?' and then [they respond with] shock that people are actually looking. .. [They said] 'well this is what we do, this is how we treat each other, we don't take it personally' and we were like 'well you're somewhere else now can you adjust your behaviour'.<sup>52</sup>

Put like this, it is clear that the relationship of the Forum to the Assembly is a delicate one. Within the Forum, the concern about the relationship to the Assembly has been articulated most clearly in relation to a central question that was left underdeveloped in the guidelines for the Forum: how should the Forum's programme of work properly arise? That is, should the Forum be doing pro-active work or merely responding to the proposed and actual decisions of the Assembly? This question masks the critical question: should the Forum tell the Assembly what it should be doing?

It is thought by some of its members that the Forum should limit its role to a limited definition of 'consultative' and respond only to requests from the Assembly. It has indeed occupied this role in its production of responses to the Executive Programmes for Government, the proposed Bill of Rights and the Parades issue. However, others strongly believe that the pro-active work in sub-groups has been the most important work the Forum has done. One member referred to the importance of this work:

'If we were merely to respond to legislation I don't believe there would be a need to have a Civic Forum because everyone is entitled to respond to a white paper, to any legislation and ... it's the coming together as civic society that creates a new dimension to it because ... we're responding as a collective [with] ideas that've been debated and negotiated'<sup>53</sup>.

This member speaks for many when he argues furthermore that this work is paramount in terms of the Forum's mission to allow 'unheard voices' to be heard.

These different interpretations of 'consultative' caused some friction among members. This internal debate was absolutely bound up with how this innovative but subordinate group should handle its potentially critical role, and this debate was given added heat by the dissatisfaction most Forum members felt with response that the Forum's work had received from the Assembly. This was despite Mark Durkan's positive comment quoted above, and despite the fact that some of the Forum's recommendations in the First Programme for Government were agreed. One member explained that members felt frustrated by a sense that the Assembly was not

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<sup>52</sup> Interview 5 (voluntary and community sector).

receiving their work well, and that the sponsoring department (OFMDFM) was unable or unwilling to promote their work. So while the Forum may have the potential to ‘tick off’ the Assembly in the sense suggested above, for some members it was the Forum itself that was being ticked off as a mere item on a ‘to do’ list. The Civic Forum’s existence was a form of ‘tick boxing’ of the Belfast Agreement, according to one member whose opinion was that: ‘we’re being managed not to interfere, that we’ve been set up and that’s it in some way, that [OFMDFM is saying] we’ve fulfilled a tick box but we don’t really want them to do anything.’<sup>54</sup> Before suspension, there was much hope that the Forum’s two published reports – one on educational disadvantage, the other on social inclusion - would give greater stature to the Forum’s profile within the Assembly. During this period of suspension, some members of the Forum have been campaigning to allow those reports to be properly circulated and promoted so that they might have an impact.

Formally, the route to the Assembly is through the Chair of the Forum. Unsurprisingly, the Chair’s role as the conduit between the Forum and the sponsoring department has been called into focus by these concerns. For members, this is discussed primarily as a question of appropriate lines of accountability. As it stands, the Chair is appointed by OFMDFM, and reports to that department. Many members articulated a wish that their chairperson be accountable instead to the Forum. While some members wished the Chair to be more hard-hitting in delivering the Forum’s suggestions to the Assembly, others were happier with a conservative role. This conservatism was prompted in part by the fear that anti-Agreement members would use any criticism of the relations between the Forum and the OFMDFM to criticise the Peace process *in toto*. The Chair himself can only respond with incredulity to the concerns and suspicions that surround his role<sup>55</sup>. That members’ should come to focus their concerns on the Chair’s attitude and conduct had almost an inevitability about it, given the fact that he is their formal link to the politicians and as such his negotiations are the main chance that their call to the future be heard. He is obliged to negotiate between the different forms of representation found in the two spaces. The potential for critique means that in his negotiations he risked placing himself outside and ‘beyond’ the political structures that appointed him and sustained his role. How well he

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<sup>53</sup> Interview 7 (trade union sector).

<sup>54</sup> Interview 7 (trade union sector).

<sup>55</sup> Interview 1 (chair). Talking about the suspicion that he is not putting the Forum’s views forcefully enough, and that this was because he was appointed by OFMDFM rather than elected by the Civic Forum itself, the Chair argued: ‘I was appointed to this as chair...there has been a suspicion that I was there for administering some writ that was given to me from on high. No such thing! I was interpreting and leading in a way that I believe was constructive and is constructive for the on-going future of a Civic Forum.’

The surfacing of an early working paper that had imagined the chair as elected from within the Forum, as opposed to the appointment by the OFMDFM which subsequently occurred, and the Chair’s refusal to have this long buried document re-assessed in the Forum’s formal review, added fuel to the fire.

negotiates – and how well he is supported in that negotiation - was always going to be a matter for debate. But that he must do so arises from the fact that the Forum was always going to have to negotiate its critical alongside its creative role.

### iii) Providing a Route to Governance

A third anxiety ran in the other direction, and concerned the fact that every civic participation mechanism has to be a voice of ‘civic society’. Historically, political participation in terms of voting has been high in Northern Ireland, but the Civic Forum as a key civic participation mechanism was always intended to facilitate more meaningful involvement. The concern, therefore, was that the relationship of the Civic Forum to wider society be as good as it could be. Implicit in some of the comments quoted above in relation to keeping in touch with the ‘grassroots’, and the ‘realities’ of people’s lives, is the worry that this was not the case. It was expressed in more general terms as a need to remain connected to the wider public so that this new ‘route to government’ might be more than a legitimisation exercise. A Civic Forum has to actually offer people more participation opportunities, and for it to be declared successful, people have to take up that opportunity; in other words to respond to the invitation to become a ‘participating’ subject. The wider strategy that seeks to articulate – and so to performatively achieve - a call to Peace through making participation in governance attractive relies upon the *widespread* attraction of that subject-position. It has to convince people that it is both in the present – and listening to their concerns – and that it represents new possibilities, even new futures, for a mode of governance in Northern Ireland to which their participation is not only welcome but fundamental. Otherwise, any ‘Peace’ achieved in the Forum would be an index of little beyond its own confines, and this new institutional space will be judged as such.

On the positive side, one of the most satisfying results in this direction was the process that led to the Forum’s report on educational disadvantage. Here the Forum felt it had allowed the public, through a series of public meetings on educational disadvantage, to articulate their views. The report was considered a success in terms of offering “unheard voices” a route previously unavailable: ‘[with the life long learning project] we specifically sought to engage people who have never had an opportunity in any way to speak to have a pathway through to government. They do [have that] when we pick up their experience and replicate it and print it and sit it in front of a panel of ministers and start talking about it.’<sup>56</sup> In this way, this interviewee continued, the experiences of the public can enliven statistics with the ‘raw honesty’ that people’s individual stories convey. Affirming the public’s stories through publication and giving

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<sup>56</sup> Interview 11 (education sector).

‘credibility and authority to people’s experiences’<sup>57</sup> the Forum’s work affirms the opinions and experiences of wider society, legitimising itself as a Forum underwritten by wider society.

But the objection that the Civic Forum might be a quango or a talking shop for an elite made up of Northern Ireland’s ‘great and the good’ – meaning here those citizens who were *already* actively participating in forms of governance before devolution – left its mark. One member recalls: ‘Initially there was an awful lot of bad publicity around the Civic Forum ... about it’s a talking shop and it’s a quango and *it’s a bunch of Trimble and Mallon’s people up there pontificating from on high*’.<sup>58</sup>

This critique stayed with members. One of the most commonly articulated concerns about the Civic Forum’s procedures was that the wider public of Northern Ireland was too little aware of its existence to consider it as a route to greater participation in governance. The plenary sessions of the Forum were all held in public spaces, and moved around the country so that geographic access was maximised. But attendance at these plenaries was not as good as some hoped, and the venues were considered by some to be too up-market to claim themselves socially ‘accessible’. Many stated that they considered it important to work harder in order to be truly providing civic participation. The issue of publicity for the Forum became a source of hope and frustration in this regard. In the words of one, ‘There’s still a lack of awareness of who the Civic Forum *are* for Joe Public, for the person on the street, and I think that’s something the Civic Forum really needs to concentrate on... the first stage is an awareness raising exercise.’<sup>59</sup> Another Member echoed this point, suggesting that one of the main tasks ahead is to realise that civic participation cannot be achieved through sectoral representation alone. He states: ‘We might be serving through sectoral representation but we have to keep an eye on the awareness of the public of the Civic Forum and how to use the Civic Forum.’<sup>60</sup> But members were anxious that the Civic Forum was not adequately promoted and that it did not receive enough support from the Assembly – or its own under-resourced Secretariat – to correct this.<sup>61</sup> The potential good of the Civic Forum, many believe, did not spread beyond its own boundaries, so that its benefits tended

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<sup>57</sup> Interview 11 (education sector).

<sup>58</sup> Interview 4 (voluntary and community sector).

<sup>59</sup> Interview 4 (voluntary and community sector).

<sup>60</sup> Interview 6 (appointed).

<sup>61</sup> Thus for example, there has been an on-going discussions about how long it is taking to have a communications officer appointed within the Secretariat. There has been concern within the Civic Forum recently that many of its members seem to be drifting away, losing faith or interest in its potential to contribute – or, as the more suspicious might put it, to be allowed to contribute – to the design and government of a peaceful Northern Ireland. The members complain that: the resources and support for the Forum are not adequate, so that while its members give voluntarily of their time they fail to see adequate support or recognition of their work from those in a position to so do. This is linked by many with the tension discussed above in relation to the potential for critique of the Assembly and the forms of jealousy that the Forum inspires in elected representatives.

to accrue predominantly to those who participated in it: ‘sometimes I think that the most benefit of the Forum has come to the members in the sense that it has broadened their view ... I’ve found it fascinating meeting people ... from prisoners to pastors.’<sup>62</sup>

Clearly, many members were of the opinion that it is not enough for such ‘success’ to remain internal to the Forum itself. The wider public has to become aware and ideally, involved beyond simple awareness. If those who had cast aspersions on the potential this body to engage with ‘the public’ were proven correct, the specific role of the Forum would disappear. Thus publicity and good public relations became a vexed issue for the Forum, as newsletters did appear, but sporadically, while media presence was slight. In an on-going debate, the members challenged the Secretariat as to why a public relations appointment remained unfilled for a long period. Many Forum members were frustrated in this respect, seeing their attempts to invite ‘the public’ into governance, to promote the possibilities of participation, as rising or falling with publicity. They needed, in effect, to ‘market’ Peace. But they had no effective advertisement campaign.

### III. A Note on Sentimentality and the Spirit of the Future

Because Peace has no mode of presence – it is no *thing* - it cannot be marketed, as a commodity would be. Those calling for Peace call not for some thing, but for a new spirit. Peace has often been presented to the people of Northern Ireland as a spirit they both need and would enjoy. For example, the advertising campaigns that were broadcast by the Northern Ireland Office invited viewers to take up such a new spirit. These ‘advertisements’ repeatedly featured music and children, the latter there to remind us, as Finlayson and Hughes argue, how political persuasions are taught, and ‘how silly it is of us to be obsessed with difference rather than sameness’ (2000:407). Children seem to figure the future to come, used to represent the chance of a new beginning. But this sort of imagery sentimentalises the call to the future in the attempt to persuade people to follow the whispers of a new spirit. Such a wholly new spirit is impossible, and can only operate in this sentimental fashion. The Forum’s future orientation, unsurprisingly perhaps, has also made it a site for such a potential slide into sentimentality.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, within the Forum’s plenary (and public) sessions there has been a courting of such sentimentality, as if to distinguish the Civic Forum from conventional modes of governance. For example, before the beginning of each plenary session there is a performance, offered in a

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<sup>62</sup> Interview 3 (sports).

<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Lauren Berlant has analysed the promotion of a sentimentalised form of citizenship in the United States. She argues that recent history has seen citizenship increasingly promoted via the ‘intimate public sphere’ to the extent that citizenship has been sentimentalised. In contrast with a legal or rights-based relationship, citizens’ relationships to the State have become imbued with attachment and sentiment. (Berlant, 1997).

spirit of celebration and geared explicitly to differentiate proceedings from dry political speech. In one plenary (Craigavon, February 2001) a young flautist played a couple of pieces; in a later one (Newcastle, April 2001) the director of the local arboretum and his anthropologist partner spoke about a peace maze that has been planted in nearby Castle Wheelan; in Derry (February 2002) one of the members read Seamus Heaney's poem 'Blackberry picking' to open proceedings, commenting that he believed 'the arts will sustain us all ... perhaps with a little help from others'; and in Lisburn (June 2002) a group of older people under the auspices of Age Concern, acted out a short play that gave attention to forms of age discrimination against older people.

To take one of these examples, the plenary was told how the Peace maze was in large part designed by primary schoolchildren, who were asked to send in their ideas for its design. They said, *inter alia*, that they wished the path of the maze to represent the road to Peace: a rocky road, with crocodiles along the way to symbolise the terrorists, and a drinking fountain en route because we all ultimately 'drink from the same source'. The children are presented as less tainted by the world, more hopeful and therefore more able to bring about Peace. Moreover, the director of the arboretum explained, the maze itself will not only represent but also foster Peace for 'in mutual "lostness" people communicate'. To facilitate the idea that people can help others toward Peace the goal of the maze is on a raised spiral mound so that those who have arrived can guide others below by shouting the way to them. The last eighty yards one can't go wrong. The way to the goal, as to Peace, he suggested, was 'just don't turn around'.<sup>64</sup>

These 'preludes' to the plenaries are not strictly speaking part of the Forum's work<sup>65</sup>. Perhaps it is unfair to single them out for comment. But it is of interest that the members instigated and continue these 'softer' openings, and that there was a request that these openings be reported in more detail in the minutes which had been – in more formal business style - excluding all reference to them. The slide to sentimentality could, moreover, be seen within some of the substantial debate. In the debate on the future of education for example, the plenary session displayed the commitment to listening to 'unheard voices' by asking some school children from a local school to speak about their experience of the 11+ examination that still exist in Northern Ireland. One small boy who was small for his age spoke about how he didn't sleep before his exam, his hands shook: 'so much depends on 60minutes' he said. In the debate that followed one member remarked on this young boy, who had failed this test: 'I can't see how he was any less impressive than others who may be going on [to grammar school]'.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> That Peace is entwined with technologies of celebratory display was confirmed by the decision to place a web-cam at the centre so that 'people all over the world' could potentially see people in Northern Ireland arriving at their goal.

<sup>65</sup> And in relation to the maze for example there was quite a bit of shuffling and discomfort mainly due to the length of time that the presentation took out of the morning's 'work'.

<sup>66</sup> Plenary, my notes, Newcastle, April 2001.

Again, the Forum 'knows' this style of presentation of its work risks sentimentality. At another plenary session the chair closed the morning by saying that she welcomed those in the public gallery and that she was especially pleased to see school children there: 'the youth are our future - it *sounds like such as cliché when you say it* but it's true'<sup>67</sup>. As the placing of the child who gazes woefully out from the Forum's published report on Anti-Poverty (Social Inclusion) testifies, children figure not just because they 'are' the future, but because they invite a sense of commonality in relation to it. They chastise those who are backward thinking, who attach themselves to divisive spirits of the past, refusing to tackle the things that really matter in life.

But, as this article has argued, the attempt to reach beyond the present into the future cannot afford to slide into sentimentality. It becomes clichéd. For sentimentality loses its bearings in the present, and Peace can only be fostered within a present in which the past is not simply chastised or banished. Those approaching the goal *do* have to 'turn around'.

#### IV. Conclusion

How best to create sustainable, peaceful, democratic life is a question currently understood as of highest import, justifying military actions and guiding international involvement in post-conflict countries as well as spawning a myriad of local level democratic participation schemes within established democracies. Across all the different contexts within which this desire is articulated, all players seem to agree that wide civic participation is an important principle. Civic participation is understood to inculcate democratic values in those who might otherwise have been, or have felt, left out of political processes, as well as fostering participation across groups. By approaching the Civic Forum in Northern Ireland not as a (minor) institution appended to the new institutions of Northern Ireland but as part of a new *mode* of governance that the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 sought to make possible, I have suggested that the Forum can be analysed as a technology of Peace.

As John Morrison (2001) has argued, one way to consider the changes wrought by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is through the lens of Michel Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' (see Foucault, 1979; Rose, 1999). The notion allows consideration not only of the formal rationalities by which states seek to govern, but also of the new spaces and subjects made possible by constitutional change. For Morrison, at his most optimistic, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 'opens up the potential for a re-invigoration of democracy' (2001:308), not least due to the participatory logic embodied there. This logic, one long promoted in Northern Ireland by voluntary and community groups, extends beyond the provision for a Civic Forum, as Morrison notes (2001:308). But the Forum is perhaps the clearest example of that intended change and commitment. By giving consideration to how those within the Forum attempted to take up their

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<sup>67</sup> Plenary, my notes, Derry, February 2002.

role, this article has also invoked Foucault insofar as it has sought to consider how the Civic Forum might be understood as a 'technology' that has in turn invited the fashioning of a new democratic subject. This 'subject', moreover, is operating not merely within a new institutional space and within new processes but within what amounts to a new ethical landscape.

Furthermore, while the participatory ethos links the Forum's work to much wider changes in the notion of 'democracy', the specificities of the Forum's context – its role as part of the Peace process set against Northern Ireland's history of conflict - give its work a further particular purpose. The new landscape is one in which the 'call to Peace' is foregrounded, initiating a complex relationship to what has been, what 'is' and what the future potentially holds. I have argued that the particular character of the Forum can be understood when approached not only as a participatory mechanism but also as a technology of peace whose purpose is to perform such a call. Indeed, even those anxieties that seem to be simple anxieties over whether the Forum is 'working' as a participatory mechanism, entail questions of temporality concerning how the Forum is positioned in relation to Northern Ireland's past and potential futures.

Frequently, the future is figured as a complete break with the past. 'The future begins today' a newspaper headline declared the day after the Belfast Agreement was signed. 'The political class, and everybody else in Northern Ireland, have to learn to live in the future rather than in the past' said Chris Patten when asked on the BBC local broadcast how he believed his committee's recommendations on policing would be received there (quoted in Rooney, 2000). But no one can live in the future. Peace requires, rather, a call to the future, a call for a new spirit. This new spirit is one that cannot be conjured, marketed and distributed like an easy sentimentality, not least because sentimentality simply ignores the present's tie to the past. Rather, the pursuit of Peace has to be sought in the messiness of the present, and has therefore to be open to the heterogeneity of the past. Competing injunctions arise from the spirits of the past, urging those in the present to follow divergent paths. These ghosts cannot be simply banished. As this study of the Civic Forum illustrates, how the Forum positions itself, both institutionally and procedurally, involves its negotiation of notions of past and future. For its task, this is necessarily so. The successful pursuit of peace will be dependent upon how those in the present receive the ghosts of the past and how they can allow for their enjoining. Indeed, conjuring the future into being requires a conjoining of these divergent paths as a condition of that future's very possibility.

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