

# Strategy for the future that could return us to the past

**H**ow can Northern Ireland progress towards a more peaceful future? The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has laid out its 'strategy' in its Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) document.

But CSI, rather than providing an inspiring vision and a practical plan, could facilitate a complacent sleep-walking back to the Troubles.

CSI abandons any hope of reconciliation, refuses to deal with the past and responding to the needs of victims and survivors, and is a shadow of the previous Shared Future document.

Shared Future referred to reconciliation as goal worthy of working toward, but it isn't mentioned in CSI. Rather, there is talk of an 'inter-cultural' society and 'mutual accommodation.' This seems to indicate that OFMDFM will settle for a begrudging, 'benign' apartheid.

CSI does not adequately recognise the possibility of changing cultural identities, except in the very long term. Conflict resolution and reconciliation practitioners can testify these changes are possible and have

The Cohesion, Sharing and Integration proposal is not a wise blueprint for our society, argues **Dr Gladys Ganiel**



happened, albeit slowly. The related issues of 'dealing with the past' and victim/survivor support are not integrated into CSI.

Comparative international research demonstrates that difficulties arise when the past is buried rather than addressed and when the needs of victims and survivors are not seriously considered.

CSI's simplistic pledges to get flags removed underestimate the depth of the problems. As long as the past is not dealt with, groups that would still see violence as a political tool will keep drawing on it.

The language used in CSI implies that OFMDFM wants to deal with relationships between Catholics and Protestants, and other ethnic and minority groups, in the same way. This shows a stunning disregard for history and is not realistic.

Alarming, CSI also proposes re-

placing the current Community Relations Council (CRC) with some other sort of institutional arrangement. It proposes four options, all of which place more power in the hands of governmental ministerial panels and less with people who have experience on the ground.

It speaks of practitioners and academics acting as 'critical friends' of the ministerial panel. But it is likely these 'critical friends' would lack true independence and could be much more easily ignored than a body like the current CRC.

From an international perspective, the establishment of the CRC was one of the most innovative and effective strategies undertaken during the Northern Ireland conflict. Curtailing the power of the CRC would compromise ongoing conflict resolution and reconciliation.

The Shared Future process re-

sulted in a recommendation for a CRC-like body to continue. Does the reconciliatory ethos of the CRC provide too much of a challenge for the apartheid agenda of CSI?

Do we need reminding that, in an ethnic party political system like we have in Northern Ireland, it is in the electoral interests of the political parties for people to stay in their ethnic blocks?

The Shared Future, while not without its shortcomings, is a better starting-point for moving Northern Ireland forward than CSI.

CSI repeatedly references the current difficult economic climate. Is CSI hinting that Northern Ireland just can't afford a shared future?

We need investment in community relations right now, not after a period in which CSI has encouraged separate cultural development, resulting in further deterioration in community relations.

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