

**RESPONSE TO ‘CONSULTATION ON MEASURES TO IMPROVE THE OPERATION OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY’ FROM THE NORTHERN IRELAND CATHOLIC COUNCIL ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS.  
OCTOBER 2012**

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Catholic Council on Social Affairs welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Office's consultation paper on measures to improve the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Northern Ireland Catholic Council on Social Affairs is the Northern Ireland sub-committee of the Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Bishops' Conference. With a membership of mostly lay Catholics with relevant experience and expertise, NICCOSA provides advice and support to the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland on social, legal and political issues. The Council is chaired by Cardinal Seán Brady, Archbishop of Armagh and President of the Irish Bishops' Conference, assisted by Most Rev Noël Treanor, Bishop of Down and Connor.
- 1.2 NICCOSA's interest in the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly arises from its commitment to the promotion of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching (including human dignity, human rights, solidarity, social justice and the common good) and its recognition that the NI Assembly has a key role to play in this aim through its legislative and policy outcomes. While NICCOSA is not directly concerned with the mechanism of government and its decision-making process, it is aware that an efficient and effective Assembly is an essential element in the development of a socially just society.
- 2.1 NICCOSA recognises that the size of the Assembly (Question 1) is related to the wider issue of the size of Northern Ireland's representation at Westminster. Since changes to the overall number of MPs at Westminster are unlikely to happen in the lifetime of this parliament, reform of the size of Northern Ireland's representation is not an issue of immediate importance. As both the NI Assembly and Westminster use the same constituencies (albeit with different voting systems), the preservation of the Westminster status quo is likely to see no short-term change in the number of MLAs at Stormont.
- 2.2 However, it is still important to point out that the size of the Assembly should take into account contemporary representation levels in neighbouring jurisdictions, including the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Westminster. It is recognised that the higher than average representation level in the Assembly has arisen from an attempt to form an inclusive administration and this is to be welcomed. But at a time of growing economic austerity, it would appear just and prudent to consider a revised model of representation, provided that such a model does not adversely affect the inclusive nature of government at Stormont.
- 3.1 Pursuit of democracy requires a balance between maximising the electorate's opportunity to shape government policy and performance on one hand, and allowing government sufficient time to implement its policies on the other. Thus, while a shorter time between elections is likely to enhance government responsiveness, it may also prevent government from developing, implementing and evaluating social and economic policy.
- 3.2 In an attempt to achieve this balance NICCOSA would suggest that four years appears to be a reasonable amount of time for the life of a government. A responsive model of government would appear particularly necessary today in view of the rapidly changing social, economic and technological developments in the modern world. A period of more than four years may reduce that level of responsiveness. It would also appear a reasonable amount of time for government to pursue its policy objectives and to meet the objectives which government parties proposed prior to their election.

- 3.3 It would therefore appear reasonable that the current term of the NI Assembly should end in 2015 (Question 3) and that the Assembly's term of office should not be extended to five years on a permanent basis (Question 4). The timing of the elections in Westminster and Stormont is a matter for the two governments (Question 2).
- 4.1 In a democratic society, elected members of a national or regional parliament might reasonably be expected to devote all their time and energy to undertaking the responsibilities which come with an electoral mandate. For that reason it is hard to find an argument in favour of multiple mandates (Questions 5 and 6). The timing of legislation to implement such a practice is a matter for legislators (Question 7).
- 5.1 The Northern Ireland Assembly's system of power-sharing offers the prospect of participation in government to almost all parties which currently stand for election. That is a helpful structure of government in a divided society. But while it can be used as a step towards normal democratic practice, it is difficult to justify its permanent retention because it offers government in perpetuity for the bigger parties. The prospect of permanent power is not a concept which sits easily with the theory and practice of democracy.
- 5.2 For that reason, it would appear that the Assembly should work towards a model of government and opposition, while at the same time recognising the special difficulties which governing Northern Ireland brings. It would not be helpful if government was once again dominated by unionism and the role of nationalism was to serve as a permanent parliamentary opposition which, as in previous generations, might well evolve into opposition to the existence of the state. Such a system of government and opposition would not be constructive or helpful.
- 5.3 For that reason government and opposition must be based on broad, non-sectarian politics. However, there appears little prospect of the larger political parties in Northern Ireland developing a non-sectarian electoral appeal. The system of government offers no incentive for political parties to consider opposition or to consider non-sectarian politics. It would therefore appear that the only prospect of developing a normal parliamentary democracy at Stormont is to re-consider its current structure and culture and to work towards normal politics through encouraging and rewarding non-sectarian politics and policies (Question 8).
- 6.0 In addition to the changes proposed in this consultation, NICCOSA wishes to emphasise the need to provide effective mechanisms to enable effective participation by civil society in democratic processes and institutions. In particular, we wish to draw attention to the model provided for under Article 17 (3) of the Lisbon Treaty, which invites member states to engage in 'an open, transparent and regular dialogue' with churches and religious associations. Given the significant role of religious faith and Churches in the life of individuals, local communities and wider social, cultural and political dynamics in Northern Ireland, we take the opportunity of this consultation to strongly recommend a more formal, agreed and regular mechanism of dialogue between Churches and the Northern Ireland Assembly. We recommend that primary responsibility for coordinating and maintaining such dialogue would reside with the *Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister*. In addition to recommending such a 'structured dialogue' with Churches and Faith Communities, we suggest the Assembly should give serious consideration to the benefit that would accrue to the life and work of the Assembly by the formal appointment of Chaplains drawn from the denominations and faith traditions represented by membership of the Assembly. Such a practice is not uncommon in other democratic institutions around the world.

In respect of both these suggestions, we recommend that contact be made with the leaders of the main Churches and faith traditions to explore how they might be taken further.