

# **Platform for Change**

## **Membership Survey**

### **Summer 2011**

#### **Introduction**

In order to find out more about our supporters, including what they think about the campaign so far, Platform for Change (PfC) carried out a membership survey in the period building up to our Annual General Meeting in June 2011.

The survey was opened on 6 May and closed on 28 May. An initial report was presented at the AGM on 4 June.

Members of PfC were notified about the survey several times via email. The survey was also advertised through our Facebook Page, Twitter account, and the Platform for Change website.

In total, there were 108 respondents. Of these, 58 were signatories of the Platform, 37 were paid-up members, 69 were on the mailing list, 23 were Facebook fans and 12 were followers on Twitter (there was evidently some overlap between categories).

This report highlights key responses and outlines areas for further development.

## **Section 1: Support profile**

The results of the survey suggest that PfC supporters are more or less equally balanced between those identifying with the Roman Catholic Community (38%), the Protestant Community (35%) and Others (27%, which included those who identified themselves as 'both', 'neither', members of 'the Northern Ireland community', humanist and atheist or agnostic).

In areas such as gender, there was less balance, with a clear differential between male and female (75% male and 25% female).

Age was also a key factor, with almost 65% of respondents aged over 46, just over 30% between the ages of 26 and 45, and less than 5% below the age of 25.

The majority of respondents (62) were based in Belfast, with pockets of support emerging across North Down (10), Derry/Londonderry (6), Lagan Valley (5) and South Down (5). There was a scattering of support across a number of other regions, but notably no support in the Mid-Ulster or West-Tyrone constituencies.

In terms of occupation, 26 respondents were involved in the education sector, while 21 worked in law, policy and administration. 15 were involved in community and social work, 11 in business and technology, 8 in culture, media and communication and 7 in health. The remainder were job-seeking, retired, or did not fit into any of the above categories.

When asked about their position on social and economic policy, a clear left-wing bias emerged. 64% of respondents identified themselves as left of centre, compared to 17% who were centrist and just 12% who were right of centre. 3 people described themselves as far left and 1 person as far right. Another 3 respondents believed that there needed to be a search for alternative solutions.

## **Section 2: Communications and events feedback**

A majority of respondents (47%) said that they had first found out about Platform for Change from a friend or colleague. Approximately 25% found out through the website or another internet source, while 15% found out via newspaper, TV or radio coverage. Others were either on the founding committee or found out via another organisation.

Respondents were asked to rate our communications and events. Most people (65%) rated our online communications as very good, while just 4% said that they were poor. Of the 108 respondents, 42 said that they had not attended any events. Of those who answered the question about events, over half described them as very good, one third gave a neutral response and just 3 people said that they had been poor.

Suggestions as to how we could improve our communications and events strategy included:

#### Communications

- There need to be more regular news updates
- There should be more transparency regarding decision-making
- Press communication needs to be improved
- Discussion papers need to be in more accessible language
- There needs to be more policy thinking to back up our manifesto
- There should be a more detailed newsletter or blog allowing for greater interaction

#### Events

- Meetings are too concentrated in (South) Belfast
- Childcare is a concern on evenings/weekends
- There should be more youth involvement
- Events should be less lecture-like, more creative
- There should be more vigorous activity and more frequent events
- Events should have a clear sense of aims and outcome

### **Section 3: Campaign feedback**

Respondents were then asked what they thought about the overall campaign. While over 50% rated it as very good or excellent, 35% were neutral and 10% thought that it was poor or very poor.

When respondents were asked about the areas they would like Platform for Change to be more engaged with, the overall order of preference turned out to be as follows (the number of respondents is in parentheses; respondents could choose more than one answer):

1. Anti-sectarianism (60)
2. Political structures (53)
3. Education (47)
4. Social justice (46)
5. Environment (28)
6. Equality (23)

In relation to a similar question about campaign strategy, respondents listed their preferences for the following methods:

1. Lobbying politicians (52)
2. Public events (50)
3. Networking with other organisations (46)
4. Assembly monitoring (42)
5. Community outreach (40)
6. Discussion workshops for members (27)
7. Online petitions (25)
8. Public demonstrations (12)
9. Audio-visual campaigning (9)

When asked about participation, 27 respondents said that they would be interested in forming local groups, while 17 indicated an interest in committee membership. 15 said that they would like to be involved in outreach, and 13 with event planning. Smaller numbers were interested in developing campaign materials, including the website. However, many more expressed a lack of time to commit to volunteering.

While there were many positive and encouraging comments about the campaign, there were also a number of criticisms. Suggestions for future directions included:

- Broadening our support base
- Holding more events that could attract a wide audience
- Determining policy solutions to key economic and social issues
- Developing a 'think tank' capacity
- Narrowing our focus to either political reform OR social justice
- Forming a political party or movement

## Section 4: Additional comments

Respondents were also given the option to expand on their ideas of change for Northern Ireland. Some of these are copied below with the permission of the authors.

*Q. What is the change you would like to see in Northern Ireland?*

“[There is a] need for continued independent and critical analysis & also positive analysis of the Stormont Executive when it is found to be wanting or doing a good job. Campaigns like that in regard to the consultation for the CSI strategy should continue.” (Community Relations worker, Derry)

“Helen Zille, the leader of the South African opposition Democratic Alliance party, said the following at a recent local elections campaign event: ‘this election is not a contest between race groups. This time, we must take the next step. We must make **the issues** the issue in this election.’ This is the change I would like to see in Northern Ireland. I would like to see leadership that represents voters and **issues** with integrity, rather than emphasising identity above all else. I would like to see better political education across communities in Northern Ireland (not just in schools) so that voters feel motivated to vote because they **understand** the choices they are making and their implications.” (Student, Belfast)

“More ‘statesmanship’ from our Politicians and a genuine tolerance and respect throughout government” (Voluntary worker, Belfast)

“A thriving, peaceful society of equals” (Student, Limavady)

“A collective pride and passion among communities across Northern Ireland to create a different way of life” (Consultant, Castlewellan)

*Q. What is your vision of a Platform for Change?*

“A non partisan think tank and lobby organisation pressing for measures to promote sharing and integration throughout civic society in Northern Ireland” (Public policy manager, Belfast)

“To continue to generate progressive policy suggestions that represent a viable alternative to current position and to put these in the minds of our elected representatives” (Company director, Holywood)

“Bringing new ideas to the fore, influencing politicians and the wider public, and highlighting ways of achieving various milestones on the road towards a more integrated society in Northern Ireland” (Lecturer, Belfast)

“An organisation which fosters debate toward political realignments and in the shorter term at least contributes to holding those in power to greater account” (Lecturer, Portrush)

“That it would create a new mood for change in the community and give people an alternative to the same old same old political faces and parties. Also that it would encourage young people to become involved in creating change” (Youth worker, Belfast)

## **Conclusion**

On the whole, the survey showed a positive response to what Pfc has stood for and achieved so far, as well as frustration at a lack of greater clarity and cohesion. Respondents had a clear vision of a future for Northern Ireland in which politics is focused on making responsible ('joined-up') social and economic decisions, allowing communities to come to terms with the past. There was also a strong sense that greater integration, including integrated education, was the necessary way forward for our society.

Platform for Change can play an important role in working towards these aims by generating positive policy suggestions and public discussion regarding social, economic and political reform. What is equally important, however, is getting these debates to link up to political decision-making. Unsurprisingly, a majority of respondents thought that we needed to do more lobbying, and that our campaign should focus on issues related to sectarianism and political structures.

In the short term, we need to broaden our support base, especially by developing our links with women and young people. We also need to encourage more members with right-wing political leanings to participate in the debates about social and economic reform. There must be more opportunity for dialogue, not only at our events (which need to reflect a wider range of times and places) but through our online media. Everyone should feel encouraged to have their say on the full range of issues we want to cover.

We also have to find ways of engaging with our current members, enabling them to form local groups or working groups on particular themes, to organise events or to make written contributions to our newsletters/website. Pfc is run on an entirely voluntary basis – there need to be a lot more volunteers in order to make the kind of impact we desire.

Building an organisational network from the bottom up will take time, but it is important to reach out to people while they have the motivation to get involved. Over the summer, as we work on our Action Plan for the coming year, we need to find out where our untapped sources of support lie. If you or a group of people you know are interested in any of the issues outlined in this report, then please do not hesitate to contact us to discuss further developments.

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