

PRESS RELEASE

THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY

**Launch of new citizens' initiative
Black Box, Hill Street, Belfast, 12.30, 25 February**

It is time to focus politics in Northern Ireland on working for the public interest and the common good.

That's the message from a new campaign launched today in Belfast, which is supported by citizens from a wide range of walks of life.

Platform for Change believes there is a public appetite for a positive political agenda which does not endlessly replay arguments linked to Northern Ireland's 'troubles'.

The platform says: 'The better life we had hoped for following the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement is not being delivered. While a fragile peace has been a huge gain in our everyday lives, the politics of recent years has too often looked backwards rather than forwards, inwards rather than outwards to the wider world. This makes no sense to a new generation of voters.'

Calling for 'joined-up' solutions to problems as they are experienced on the ground, the platform insists: 'The devolved executive must provide coherent leadership with a robust Programme for Government behind which all ministers unite. The assembly must be fully engaged with legislation to implement policies attuned to the needs of the region and must resolve differences through deliberation across the chamber.'

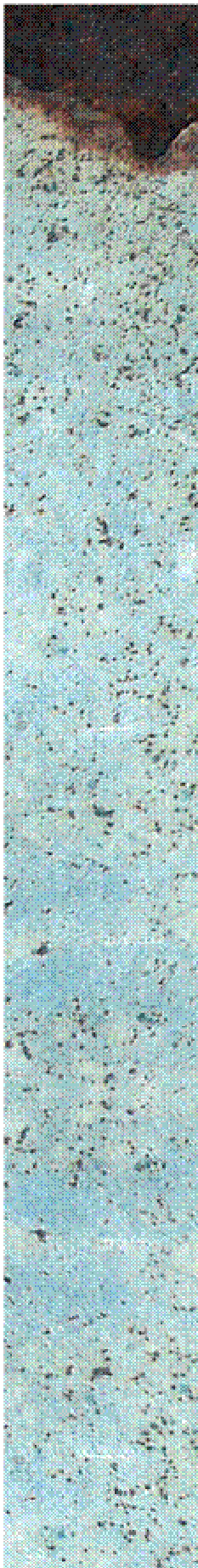
Citizens need to feel that they have a genuine say in government, it declares. And it urges the full integration of business, the trade unions and the voluntary sector into decision-making.

The platform says the first and deputy first ministers must each represent all the citizens of Northern Ireland. And, looking to the next assembly poll, it states: 'The electoral agenda should be defined by how credibly parties seeking votes indicate they will collaborate in office to produce good public policies and services, rather than how they will veto the other side.'

In that context, it calls for a genuine debate about the political structures that best serve all citizens. More flexible arrangements enjoying widespread confidence could enable genuine opposition in the assembly and allow people to vote for parties or coalitions on 'bread and butter' issues rather than along sectarian lines.

In advance of it going public, more than 200 people have already signed up to the platform, which is the product of months of under-the-radar discussion around key policy issues. It includes concrete proposals to:

- resolve the stand-off on the '11+', by placing it in the context of a broader vision of what schooling is for and prioritising support for individual youngsters as they chart their pathway through school;
- give meaning to the economic priority of the Programme for Government by linking it to the substance of a 'Green New Deal'; and



- show how a polarised society can become normal, as elsewhere in Europe, by embracing the European concept of intercultural dialogue.

The launch will be addressed by a number of personalities supporting Platform for Change. They include:

- an individual campaigner with international recognition,
- former top-level sports figures,
- a leading writer and cultural commentator, and
- the principal of a renowned school.

Also speaking will be signatories drawn from business and the unions, NGOs and youth work, working on the ground across Northern Ireland.

The secretary of Platform for Change is the actor Nuala McKeever. Its chair is the policy analyst Robin Wilson.

Ms McKeever said today: 'Northern Ireland has the potential to be a really vibrant society if it can shed the baggage of the past, hold on to its young talent and face rather than fear a rapidly changing world. I'm involved with Platform for Change because I want that liberty, the foundation of cultural dynamism, and I want to see others enjoy it too.'

Dr Wilson added: 'Platform for Change is a non-party and cross-party campaign for a new political agenda for Northern Ireland. But that is not all. It is also about a new way of doing politics, which encourages individual citizens to participate rather than leaving them feeling frustrated and alienated.'

Notes to news and picture editors

1. The platform is attached in a summary and an extended version.
2. Platform for Change is being launched on Thursday, 25 February, at 12.30 in the Black Box, Hill Street, Belfast. Following a short presentation, supporters of the platform, including those identified above, will describe the 'change' they want to see.
3. There will be a performance aspect to the launch involving two members of the Circus School.

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