

6th March 2015

Talking point

Media presence at MCESD

The Times editorial of Wednesday, 4th March castigated the MEA for “questioning” the presence of journalists at its MCESD presentation of EIRA amendments’ proposals. Under certain aspects this criticism may be justified, however the matter of media presence at MCESD meetings is more complex than might initially appear. In respect of the specific incident, in terms of publicity and coverage, if anything, the MEA had every interest to allow the press to stay on for the presentation of its proposals to amend the Employment & Industrial Relations Act. However, as expected, GWU officials raised the dubious issue of “unfair” and “undue” exposure to MEA’s proposals, at the expense of their views on EIRA changes.

The issue of the presence of the Press at MCESD meetings is still very much unresolved. Currently there are three schools of thought, one advocates a total ban on the presence of journalists, another would allow the presence of journalists at an initial presentation stage, and not the ensuing discussion, and finally the option of a full opening up of the meetings to journalists even at debating stage. Any one of the three options implies advantages, and disadvantages, to the attainment of the objectives that the law has set for the MCESD.

A total ban on the presence of journalists contradicts basic principles of press freedom and shackles a process of open consultation and free expression of views of members.

No doubt formal, MCESD presentations, as part of a consultation process, will invariably benefit from the presence of journalists.

Excluding journalists from an ensuing debate can be justified on occasions but not necessarily always. The Times editorial hints that sometimes the presence of the press may inhibit disinterested and objective debates, particularly on controversial and delicate issues. However the editorial also rightly points out a justified interest of the public to know about the views expressed at the council.

Should the MCESD be perceived as a debating institution similar to the House of Representatives? Hardly. The MCESD is primarily a consultative council that reacts to social and economic events as they happen. It receives information from Government, which information is assessed, debated and a feedback is given. However, furthermore, the council can and does, call for special debates and focus when particular problems emerge, Libya a case in point and the deteriorating industrial relations environment, highlighted by MEA, another.

MEA did not in the past, and does not now, agree with the Chamber of Commerce description of the MCESD as being a rudderless, irrelevant and inconsequential national body. This description which the Times editorial quotes, does not describe the MCESD. The MCESD is not in dire need of a radical reform, however there is certainly a need for a different engagement from its chairperson and its members.

Independent leadership and initiative are required from a chairperson to keep the MCESD relevant and effective. Members too must become more pro-active in proposing topics for discussion. They must become more demanding so that particular issues are brought for discussion at MCESD. They must not just passively only accept for discussion whatever is presented to them by whoever.

So to re-confirm, of course, Ministers may and should continue to request Council slots to come and make their presentations. Likewise, however, should do Employer, Union and Civil Society Council Members. As aforesaid there seems to be no problem when a request is made so that a media presence occurs during presentations. There however may, or may not, be a problem, if the media presence is requested at the post presentation debating phase.

Perhaps this issue of a Public debating MCESD is best decided ad hoc on a case by case basis. Meanwhile an MCESD Chairperson does not require permission from or consensus of members to put an item on the Council's Agenda, when such a request is legitimate and is not precluded by established rules. Members of the MCESD are more than free to attend or not attend convened meetings and are equally free to participate or not in a debate.

In practical terms it is becoming very evident that a sensible Chairperson should immediately set up standard recurring monthly or bi-monthly meetings. For these set meetings the Chairperson will accept and line up members' items, including ministerial presentations, to be placed on the Agenda. Concise presentation times must be strictly adhered to. Ad hoc convening of MCESD meetings should only occur extraordinarily. Whoever requires the attention of, or the exposure to, the MCESD, should accept to adhere to the dates of the recurring set meetings.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of the MCESD will hinge on the courage and ability of individual members to condition the Council to consider and debate really relevant social and economic issues. Undue pressure, or not so undue, applied to preclude undesirable discussions on particular issues must be resisted by all the social partners.