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NOTE ON POLITICAL INCLUSION

1. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition have consistently argued for the inclusion of all elected political parties in the Talks irrespective of pre-conditions. Equally, however, the Coalition has called for the establishment and maintenance of cease-fires on the grounds of respect for human rights.

2. Despite this the Coalition now believes that the real-politick of the situation is established by the joint communiqué of February, 1996 and the legislation governing entry to the Peace Talks 1996. These entail the declaration of a permanent cease-fire. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition would support the declaration of a cease-fire on the basis of its support for the principle of human rights rather than as a pre-condition for entry to the Talks. Nevertheless, both Irish and British Governments have accepted it as a means of entry to the Talks.

3. The Women's Coalition accept the Recommendations of Principles of Democracy and non-violence contained in the report of the International Body on Decommissioning (the Mitchell Report) i.e. commitment to:

- a) Democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues;
- b) The total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations;
- c) Agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of and independent commission;
- d) Renounce for themselves, and to oppose any efforts by others, to use force to influence the course or the outcome of all-party negotiations;
- e) To agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of that outcome with which they may disagree;
- f) Urge that 'punishment' killings and beatings stop and to take effective steps to prevent such actions.

Affirmation of, and adherence to these principles can be taken as the minimum entry to the Multi-party Talks.

4. The Women's Coalition believes it is important that despite the breakdown in the IRA cease-fire that the affirmation of the Mitchell Principles remains core to both the legislative conditions of entry to the Mullet-Party Talks, and is reiterated in John Major's statement of 27th November, 1996

5. In relation to the Major document the Women's Coalition takes heart from a number of statements -

- a) "The Government is not erecting new hurdles or seeking delay. We wish to see inclusive talks involving all parties as soon as possible."
- b) "The British and Irish Governments urge that beyond the unequivocal restoration of the IRA cease-fire, these negotiations are without pre-conditions."
- c) "In their report the International Body said the parties should consider an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process of all-party negotiation. We and the Irish Government support this compromise approach. Agreement needs to be reached on how to take it forward so that the process of decommissioning is not seen as a block to the progress in the negotiations but can be used to build confidence one step at a time during them....."
- d) "For our part, we are wholly committed to upholding our responsibility to encourage, facilitate and enable agreement over a period through the negotiations. This must be based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions. We want to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement."
- e) "We are also determined to see these negotiations through successfully as speedily as possible."
- f) "We are committed to raising confidence, both through talks and through a range of other measures alongside them. The International Body's Report itself proposes a process of mutual confidence building"

Given the recent bombings the Women's Coalition is somewhat reassured by the fact that the British Government is still making statements in the above vein.

6. Nevertheless, the Coalition recognises the inevitable gulf in mutual trust between the British Government and Sinn Fein, not least due to the lack of political and confidence-building progress over the 1994/95 cease-fire period. In the context of such distrust we accept the potential ambiguity in the following aspects of the Major statement.

3.

- a) "...If Sinn Fein want to join the Talks, it is for the IRA to declare a restoration of their cease-fire in terms which are convincingly unequivocal, indicate the intention that this cease-fire should be lasting and reflect commitment to exclusively peaceful means"
- b) "...Assurances obviously needed that any new cease-fire would be intended to be genuinely unequivocal, i.e. lasting and not simply a tactical device...."
- c) "...Sufficient time would have to be taken to ensure the requirements of paragraphs 8 & 9 of Command Paper 3232 were accordingly met before Sinn Fein were invited to participate in negotiations."
- d) "Provision for bilateral and other consultations with other parties."

The combination of mutual distrust and certain possible ambiguities can make future progress seem very doubtful.

7. Nevertheless, the Women's Coalition feel that we currently have a window of opportunity in terms of

- International circumstances which largely favour politically inclusive Talks.
- The skilful chairpersonship of the Talks by Senator Mitchell and his colleagues.
- The growing political climate for Talks and political progress among a wide range of sections of the community in the North.
- The pressure of the Government of the Republic of Ireland.
- The continuing wide political acceptance of the principle of inclusive political talks.

Thus it would seem to be a shame not to develop a method of working progressively within this context.

8. The Women's Coalition firmly believes that Sinn Fein should reply on the legislative base for entry in the Talks, with the compliance of getting the IRA to call a formal cease-fire which will be unequivocal in nature. In other words Sinn Fein should call the bluff of the British Government.

9. In the light of such an occurrence the British Government argue that they do not want to set a time frame for acceptance within the Talks given that Sinn Fein might achieve compliance within an earlier period. Thus, in theory, Sinn Fein could win entry to the Multi-Party Talks within a four week period.

10. Despite the somewhat protracted time frame implied by John Major in his statement, the Women's Coalition would suggest that in reality the period of waiting might not be overly long. Should any unnecessary delay be experienced it is likely that freshly mobilised local communities and the international spectrum might make their voices heard about the continued exclusion of Sinn Fein.

11. The Coalition feel that bilaterals with other parties should be held in the context of the Talks process and that in the advent of an unequivocal cease-fire that the British Government should invite Sinn Fein to participate in the Talks.

12. In the event of good faith being shown by Sinn Fein in relation to the maintenance and deepening of the cease-fire process, it seems acceptable that Sinn Fein should announce its own timetable and raise questions if the Government do not show the ability to abide by the legislation.