

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

OPENING STATEMENT - To Multi-Party Negotiations on Northern Ireland - June 10th, 1996.

Chairperson, Prime Minister, Taoiseach, delegates. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition Welcomes this gathering with an optimism born out of necessity. Despite the delays we have experienced to date we still feel that these negotiations provide us with a chance to address the anxieties, concerns and options for the future, which confront all of us around this table.

We have lived too long in circumstances of unacceptable fear and insecurity - an insecurity that has been tragically underlined in recent days. It is now timely that we should concentrate on the task of negotiating solutions to our shared quandaries rather than concentrating on mutually exclusive aspirations. It is important that we grasp this opportunity to untangle possibilities for change, rather than seeking to rely on the certainties of the past. We have all suffered as a result of conflicting certainties. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is entering these Talks with an open and hopefully facilitative approach, which is nevertheless grounded in three important principles -

- 1 POLITICAL INCLUSION
- 2 EQUITY
- 3 RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

It is the Coalition's belief that these principles should inform the various political options that will be put forward for consideration by the delegates at these Talks. It is also our belief that these principles should form the basis of society within whatever constitutional construction that we finally agree on.

The Women's Coalition is firmly committed to the concept and the principle of political inclusion as the bedrock for creating space for discussion and as a means of achieving an honest exchange of political views. We have already stated clearly our belief that all elected political parties should have access to all Party negotiations and whilst deploring the violence and destruction that occurred recently we remain committed to this view.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition objects now - and will object in the future - to the exclusion of any of the duly elected political parties from these Peace Talks. We believe that each of the ten elected parties represent political view points that should and must be heard.

The Coalition accepts that we all have much work to do in building confidence and in effectively ensuring the inclusion of the wide diversity of view points that exist within Northern Ireland. Our view of Political Inclusion is one that sees the need to address the possible tyranny of rule by simple majority. For this reason we congratulate those who have worked to draw out the broader definition of “sufficiency of consensus”. We feel that it is basic to our deliberations that we recognise consensus must be built, rather than simply arrived at and that we must strive for a balanced accommodation of as many interests as possible. The reality of these Talks is that we are living in a society in conflict, and hence we require new ideas about how to resolve our age old problems through consensual solutions and imaginative approaches. Such imagination must also extend to confidence building measures, which to our mind should not be interpreted as tests or obstacles, but rather the need to start creating a basis of mutual respect and tentative trust.

Equity, alongside inclusiveness, is also a key principle espoused by the Women’s Coalition . In order to encompass the full range of diverse communities and interests that make up our society, we need to be sensitive to the fact that there is more to Northern Ireland than the “them” and “us” of the two recognised traditions. The Women’s Coalition would encourage delegates to look at initiatives on an international canvas, which have sought you address the issue of

equity in practice. In South Africa, the system established in the aftermath of the peace process deliberately provided for minimum levels of gender representation in the National parliament and at decision making levels. In Scotland, the campaign for a Scottish Parliament also specifically addresses equity issues on the proposed structure of any new Assembly.

To our mind, experiences and aspirations such as these may offer important pointers for any new structures that might emerge as a result of the success of these Talks. As you will understand, we are concerned about gender equality in building new political structures but our view of equity extends further than this.

The third main theme which informs the Core of the Women's Coalition is Human Rights. We unconditionally re-iterate our belief that it is a basic human right to be able to live free from the fear of violent attack. Consequently we call for a re-instatement of Republican cease-fires; a maintenance of existing Loyalist cease-fires; and no response to violence from any quarter.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition sees attention to Human Rights as crucial. We are committed to the immediate incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights and to the development of the Bill of Rights. We further feel that without due attention to social

and economic issues there is a danger that legally based civil and political rights can become a somewhat abstract concept. The Women's Coalition would thus hope that Northern Ireland could look to the example of the Reconstruction and Development Programme in South Africa, which brings together a comprehensive approach to rights, equity and development. Within any such approach in our own context in Northern Ireland there are many specific issues that the Women's Coalition would wish to table for discussion - not least matters relating to the victims of the conflict to date, and the position of politically motivated prisoners. Time, however, does not allow us to address these issues in detail today.

The Women's Coalition believes that the processes that we adopt during the Talks will be crucial to their success. We are conscious of the damage done to Northern Ireland to date by decades of adversarial politics. We want to move away from the **WIN - LOSE** syndrome, in the hope of allowing the prospect to appear less threatening. We do not see politics as a battle arena for the total victory of one side over another. Instead we see it as crucial for us all to work constructively towards a form of democracy that will be open and can reflect a diversity of interests.

We need to put in place a building block approach towards obtaining political progress so that with the development of confidence, we can

achieve a broader political momentum which can allow for consideration of increasingly sensitive and potentially divisive issues. It is our view that by necessity there will be a close relationship between on the one hand progress towards political accommodation, and, on the other, arms decommissioning.

The Women's Coalition believes that it is an important aspect of political negotiation that issues of conflict should be sub-divided and considered within their own limits, rather than generalised and aggregated into immovable political positions. It is the sincere wish of the Coalition that the delegates can facilitate processes of negotiation rather than adding to the marshalled array of political certainties that we have so often been subjected to over past decades.

We also re-iterate the self-evident fact that when tensions occur, as indeed they will, that the need for communication and a clear flow of information is particularly important. The Women's Coalition will play its part in making this possible. We ourselves were drawn together by a vision of the type society that we might yet achieve in Northern Ireland: a society that is open and pluralist; a society that has managed to escape the "scalded memories" and to move away from conflicting political cultures which thrive on a sense of exclusion, defensiveness and victimisation.

Consequently, it is our belief that we must spend time in thinking about the values that we wish to see informing the practice of government and of society as a whole. For the Coalition, it would be political progress if these Talks could focus on values and visions for the future, rather than remaining fixated on myths and stereotypes.

The Women's Coalition has a vision of society which has the confidence to both address and accommodate its internal differences, as well as reaching out to its neighbours. The Coalition supports the establishment of mutually beneficial arrangements both within the island of Ireland and a European context.

The prize for successful negotiations will be to effectively break the vicious cycle that holds the danger of condemning our children to the conflict and bitterness that we have all experienced. We hold with the lines by Evan Boland on the untimely death of a child in the Troubles:

We must
 "Find for your sake, whose life our idle
 Talk has lost, a new language
 Child of our times, our times have robbed your cradle
 Sleep in a word your final sleep has woken"

The tribute was written in 1974 - twenty two years later, we still need to work for that new world. We now have an opportunity to create it - together.