

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

OPENING STATEMENT - 10 JUNE 1996

Chairperson, Prime Minister, Taoiseach, Honoured Guests - the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition celebrates this occasion with an optimism born out of necessity. We recognise that these negotiations provide us with a chance to address the ~~anxieties~~ ^{all} 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; it is now ~~the time to~~ ^{the time to} ~~timely that we should~~ focus on sitting together to negotiate possible solutions to our ~~shared~~ ^{problems} ~~quandaries~~ rather than concentrating on mutually exclusive aspirations.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is entering these talks with an open and 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 - and indeed by the broader society here in Northern Ireland.

The Women's Coalition is firmly committed to the concept 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 stated clearly our belief that all elected political parties should have access as of right to All Party negotiations.

Thus, for these crucial Talks to succeed we need the full participation of the Representatives of all the elected parties and coalitions. Without this we will effectively exclude views that should, and must, be heard. On the basis of this principle, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition wishes to place on record its disagreement with the absence of Sinn Fein Representatives from this Plenary today. Similarly we would object to the exclusion of any of the other elected parties from these Peace Talks.

① The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition will take its principled position of political inclusiveness into the Forum when it meets. We are committed to making the Forum a mechanism where public discussion can take place about the type of society that people would like to see developing here. We feel the Forum should be used to build working relationships between the elected representatives and the many organisations - such as trade unions, ^{the} business ^{sector} organisations, voluntary and community groups - whose expertise could usefully contribute to our deliberations. Furthermore, the Women's Coalition favours bringing back the essence of these broader inputs to assist in informing our discussions during these Talks. The Women's Coalition believes that citizen ~~and community~~ participation, and our willingness to listen to people who were previously silent in public discourse, is needed to inform our decision-making. (For this reason we would call on all elected parties to take up their seats in the Forum as well as to participate in the Talks.)

② The Coalition recognises that we all have much work to do in building confidence and effectively ensuring the inclusion of the wide diversity of viewpoints 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. In place of this, what we need to strive for are new ideas about how to resolve our age old problems through consensual solutions. However we understand that consensus must be built, rather than simply arrived at.

In this context the Women's Coalition wishes to make a number of points about sufficiency of consensus. (This has been referred to in the Procedural Guidelines for the conduct of Substantive All Party Negotiations). While we welcome the concept of a "sufficient consensus" which includes the two main traditions of Unionism and Nationalism, we believe that to achieve full inclusion and equity, the meaning of a sufficiency of consensus should extend further than this. We believe a sufficiency of consensus should entail a balanced accommodation of all interests represented.

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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 to address the issue of equity in practice. In South Africa, ^{for example,} 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 addressed equity issues in 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} we are concerned about gender equality in building new political structures but our view of equity extends ^{much} 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 ceasefires; a maintenance of existing Loyalist ceasefires; and no recourse 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 a 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 of change 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 its 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 of society that we might yet achieve in Northern Ireland. A society that is open and pluralist and 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 would 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 ^{the United Kingdom and the} ~~the~~ European context.