

SUBMISSION TO PEACE TALKS

3rd June, 1997

We would like to welcome you back Senator Mitchell, General de Chastelain and Mr Holkeri and their respective secretariat. We would also like to take this opportunity to welcome the new Secretary of State, Dr Mowlam and the Minister for State, Mr Paul Murphy. We welcome the Tanaiste and the Minister of Justice and wish them luck for the elections on Friday.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition welcomes the recommencement of these Talks, and the continued commitment of our three distinguished Chairpersons. We hope that the current weather outside will be reflected in the climate of the Talks inside. If ever we needed optimism and a determination to make progress then it is now.

The Women's Coalition believes that the recent Open Letter issued by the various employer organisations, and the Trade Unions throws down a gauntlet to us all. They quite correctly highlighted the fact that society in Northern Ireland is facing choices -

- Real opportunities and real potential for peace, progress and prosperity or
- More hostility, animosity and sectarianism if the right direction is not chosen.

Arguing from an economic base the CBI, the Hospitality Association, the Institute of Directors, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, the Northern Ireland Committee of the ICTU, the Northern Ireland Economic Council and Northern Ireland Growth challenge have held that:

"We all need to recognise that there can be no place for violence, or threat of violence in our community.

We must all act responsibly and consider the impact of our words and actions.

We should encourage dialogue and discussion to resolve differences whatever difficulties stand in the way of progress.

We must build a better society based on consent".

And that in essence is what we hope to be facilitating over the next few weeks - the potential to achieve peace; responsibility; dialogue and consensual options for progress. The alternative is to retreat into the apparent comfort zones of repetitive sloganising, epitomised by the negativity of 'Ulster Says No'. The ostrich style of politics may bring short-term political gains by feeding on fears and the 'slippery slop' thesis - but it also runs the risk of bringing long-term disaster, particularly to the link with Britain that a majority in Northern Ireland seeks to maintain.

While intransigence is by no means one-sided, there is a danger that unwavering intransigence will merely breed a sense of frustration in Britain, as well as a continued public representation of the Unionist position as uncompromising and lacking a sense of vision for the future. If even Winston Churchill was less than enamoured by the re-emergence of the "dreary spires of Enniskillen" after World War II - and we would take issue with him over Enniskillen - how much more likely is it that Britain in the 21st century will have little time for the constancy of our disputes?

In short, what we need now is leadership and a willingness to take calculated risks. The context set by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair provides a clear and balanced framework for such leadership. It is clear that the union is not in doubt for the foreseeable future and certainly not while a majority of the people in Northern Ireland wish it to remain in place; but equally there is the crucial recognition that the region of Northern Ireland is not directly comparable to any other region of the United Kingdom, and consequently must come up with different options. Though while the union remains safe, arrangements must be developed that will take due account of the dual identities that exist in Northern Ireland. This is also a challenge that requires political leadership.

The Women's Coalition believes that the necessary political leadership we need at this critical point in time entails a number of essential elements:

- The ability to distinguish genuine threats to the union from manufactured and exaggerated threats;
- The ability to differentiate between political disagreement and sectarianism;
- The courage to recognise that we have to accept difference and develop structures to accommodate them rather than to adopt a policy of offensive assimilation;

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- The confidence to recognise that possible new arrangements such as North/South institutions with clearly defined powers can be positive as well as negative;
- And the courage to publicly recognise that compromise and accommodation are the stuff of life and particularly of political life.

Is it too much to ask those politicians with the biggest mandate to demonstrate a sense of political responsibility? Certainly if we cannot achieve this we may well see Northern Ireland lagging behind Scotland and Wales in terms of devolution.

The Women's Coalition is convinced that Stormont was abolished essentially because the leaders of unionism failed to even attempt to find any accommodation with nationalists. We must pose the question - are we to continue to go around in these flat circles of fruitless intransigence?

We are not doomed to political rigor mortis. We need not bind ourselves to the politics of threat and innuendo. The choice and the power to take a different path are in our own hands. We can choose to use the next few weeks to build defensive blockages, to stop talks, and prevent people entering talks. Or we can choose to start addressing real issues - the issues contained in Strands 1, 2 and 3. It is within the discussion of these strands that we will find the fuel and the energy to move the well quoted train of negotiation forward.

If we cannot find the will or the imagination to move into genuine negotiations, then we are in danger of fulfilling the Sinn Fein argument that these talks are not worth anything without them. Having said this, it is the belief of the Women's Coalition that Sinn Fein involvement in these discussions would bring an important dimension. The very idea of Sinn Fein's inclusion challenges the comfort zone of some parties to the extent that they would prefer to see the talks flounder on the unachievable objective of prior decommissioning. We are opposed to the wrecking of these talks from any quarter. The Women's Coalition is constantly asked what side it is on. We know what side we are on, the side of genuine dialogue with a will to address options for our future.

And this brings us back to the essential element of negotiation that the employers and trade unions understand so well. Negotiation as we understand it entails putting forward realistic proposals acknowledging the need for compromise; and striving for the win - win outcome rather than a winner -takes - all scenario. Negotiation also involves an acceptance of the responsibility to make the compromise stick, and not heightening tension and then letting potential violence take its course. The penchant of issuing threats and then washing one's hands of the consequences or blaming them on the 'bully boy' element is not the mark of genuine negotiators.

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The other important mark of negotiation is a clarity about aim. In our case the Women's Coalition identifies the aim of these talks as being about engaging in a peace-building exercise and seeking a range of options for this part of the world that will bring about a society that can live in peace and have the confidence to respect the different aspirations and identities that make us what we are.

It does not facilitate this peace building process:

- to adopt purist approaches on who should be included in dialogue, whether here in these talks or locally over marches, over the pragmatic necessity of including as many political viewpoints as possible;
- to narrow the space for discussion by characterising all other political forces as the enemy, and by demonising them whenever possible;
- to allow the horror of the last atrocity to dictate the parameters of political dialogue;
- to mobilise fears and pressures to stymie political progress.

The Women's Coalition believes what we now require is an agreed clear aim that what we want out of the current Peace Talks is the framework, arrangements and relationships for a peaceful, stable, inclusive and shared society - a society in which people can live free from fear of violence, intimidation and discrimination; can enjoy economic and social progress; and can hold their heads up high to the rest of the world.

We also need the courage to name those who would put other priorities before this aim. Equally we need to monitor the rhetoric and the actions of political representatives outside of this room to ensure that what they are saying is not at odds with our aim of peacebuilding.

Perhaps we will be accused of being idealistic, or being naive, or inexperienced in expressing these sentiments. Given the legacy of ineffective political developments over the last quarter of a century, the Women's Coalition is not particularly worried about not sharing in that experience. But what we are convinced of is the need to support a politics that will not condemn people in Northern Ireland, whether loyalist or republican, unionist or nationalist to another quarter of a century of violence. It is also our belief that while any minority should be prepared to compromise and to accept the principle of consent, the onus is on any majority to show leadership and to move the politics of Northern Ireland towards a politics of partnership both internally and externally.

At this critical stage of our political development genuine leadership means being prepared to take strategic risks for peace.