



NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

YOUNG PEOPLE: CITIZENS OF TODAY

YOUNG PEOPLE'S MANIFESTO

ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

1998

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

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YOUNG PEOPLE: CITIZENS OF TODAY

The Belfast Agreement is about the future – no group has a greater stake in that future than the young people of Northern Ireland. But young people are not just the citizens of tomorrow. **Young people are citizens of today.** Their concerns must be heard and acted on, so that young people can realise their potential, and be active now and in the future.

Young people know what their issues are, and they know the best ways of addressing the problems that matter to them. Young people must have direct access to policy-makers and must be able to participate in decision-making at every level. Governments and political parties must urgently address their failures in this regard.

In one sense, there are no 'youth issues'. All policies are relevant to young people. We believe the concerns of young people should be 'mainstreamed,' not set aside as a separate policy area. Every government policy should be 'youth-proofed,' to ensure that it meets the needs of young people.

Young People and Education

Investment in education sends the strongest possible message that government is committed to young people. It affirms our hope and belief in the future, it acknowledges the potential of youth. And it expresses the value of young people's contribution to society. The NI Women's Coalition recognises several key issues for young people:

The Transfer test: (11+) leaves many young people with low self-esteem. Children face pressures at an unacceptably young age. The Transfer system also perpetuates inequalities -- the benefits of a well-resourced and fair education system must be available to all children and young people. Educational and academic achievement must not be contingent upon ability to pay.

Defining education broadly: Learning is not just about sitting at desks in classrooms. It is also about personal development and enrichment. The NI Women's Coalition believes a broad range of educational opportunities should be available, so that young people gain the skills they need to participate fully in the social, cultural, political and economic life of our community.

Further and higher education: We believe that access to further and higher education is a right for all. When access to further education and training becomes a privilege for those who can afford it, society loses the talents and resources of many young people. The cuts to student grants, increases in student loans and the introduction of tuition fees all make it increasingly difficult for young people to avail of higher education. The closure of some departments at local universities aggravates the 'brain drain', forcing young people to study outside Northern Ireland. We believe such policies are not only unfair to young people, but are shortsighted, false economies. A healthy economy over the long run requires investment in training and education for the workers of today and tomorrow.

Young People and Health and Social Services

The health needs of young people must be addressed in a pro-active and realistic way. Young people have a right to the information they need to make good decisions about their own health and welfare. They also require services and resources appropriate to their needs.

Fostering healthy life-styles: The state of our health is intimately connected to our social and economic circumstances. That is why the Women's Coalition is proposing a new **Minister for Environmental Protection and Public Health** to oversee these links. A healthy lifestyle should be facilitated through access to good health education, including peer education, drug awareness programmes and good sexual health and education programmes. There is a particular need to develop initiatives that address young men's health. Sport and recreational provisions must be available to all young people, whether disabled or able-bodied, rural or urban, male or female.

Addressing emotional needs: One of the best measures of a fair and just society is in how well it supports its most vulnerable members. The Women's Coalition is particularly concerned that the suicide rate for young people is unacceptably high. To us, this highlights the significant failure of society to address the needs of young people in a holistic way. We believe there is an urgent need for school-based programmes, early recognition of anxiety and depression and adequate support services.

Support services must also be provided to address the counselling needs of young people faced with bereavement and trauma arising out of the conflict. And the needs of young people who are leaving care must also be addressed.

Safeguarding young people's welfare: The Women's Coalition is concerned at the tendency of the welfare system to single out young people for unfair treatment. We completely oppose any inequality in the provision of benefits on the basis of age. We are pleased that the New Deal attempts to address the serious problem of youth long-term unemployment. However, we are seriously concerned about whether it will provide real jobs, with decent wages and conditions. We remain dismayed at the government's treatment of lone parents. Single parents often struggle to raise children in extremely difficult and isolated circumstances. They must not be further disadvantaged by punitive welfare provisions. The manner in which young parents are treated has a profound effect on their ability to support the next generation. The Women's Coalition has proposed a **Minister for Children and Families** in the Assembly, so that the needs of families in all their forms are addressed through appropriate policies and programmes.

Young People and the Environment

The interest of young people in environmental activism and 'pressure group politics' in general perhaps tell us two things. Firstly, that Northern Ireland's politics leave many young people seriously alienated. And secondly, that even when they are interested in politics, they find many of their priorities set aside as older politicians stick with what they know best (generally saying No!).

Protecting the Environment: Many young people are interested in such issues as environmental protection, renewable energy sources, and proper waste management, including extensive recycling programmes. The Women's Coalition believes that economic and social development must safeguard the environment and wellbeing of future generations as well as meeting today's needs. In order to ensure that environmental issues are at the top of the political agenda, we are proposing a new ministry for the Assembly: **Environmental Protection and Public Health.**

Roofs over our heads: Young people have particular housing needs. These must be identified through proper consultation and should be reflected in planned development – both public and private.

Going Places: An accessible, affordable and extensive public transport system is particularly important for young people. Properly planned, it can reduce pollution and strengthen connections between communities within Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the UK.

Transport policy should focus on road safety. Twice as many people have died on the roads in the last thirty years as died in the conflict and many of these have been young people. The Women's Coalition supports continuing education work that focuses on road safety - from the dangers of drink driving and speed, to reckless and inconsiderate driving. There are many needless deaths amongst our young people. A situation that we find both unacceptable and unnecessary.

Young People and Economic Development

Northern Ireland has a well-educated and highly skilled work force, especially among our young people. We do not want to see young people forced to leave Northern Ireland in order to realise their full potential. Young people must be supported to develop their talents and then to use those talents to benefit their local communities.

Equal pay for equal work: The Women's Coalition supports the call for a decent minimum wage for all workers. We believe the Low Pay Commission's proposed £3.60/hour is too low. We find recent proposals to set a lower minimum standard for young workers completely unacceptable. People must be rewarded for the value of their work, not penalised for their age. We also oppose the suggestion that tips should count as part of the minimum wage. A minimum wage should result in real benefits to workers. Many young people work in the service industry and depend on tips to make ends meet.

Supporting young entrepreneurs: Many young people have the drive, the energy and the imagination to create their own economic opportunities, given the chance. Opportunities for young people to start their own businesses will lead to economic development that is both loyal to the area and appropriate to the local context. Specialist local businesses can provide distinctive attractions for tourists. Young entrepreneurs must be supported in their endeavours through the provision of start-up grants free from red tape; information; and assistance in accessing international markets.

Young people are involved in a whole range of voluntary work. This work must be recognised and acknowledged for the contribution it makes to the community.

Young People and Agriculture and Rural Affairs

People should not be disadvantaged because they live in rural areas. And yet many young people face particular difficulties in accessing services allocated according to the priorities of an urban-based population.

Transport problems can create obstacles for young people, in terms of education, training and employment opportunities. The Women's Coalition believes that rural transport must be extended and re-organised on the basis of consultation with its users.

Helping to stem the exodus of young people from rural communities: The drain of young people from rural areas has a serious impact on the immediate and long-term health of farming communities. An Early Retirement Scheme designed to provide an adequate income for farmers would allow parents to pass farms over to their children at a younger age, encouraging young people to stay on the land. Successive governments have failed to put forward a consultation paper on this scheme. Indeed, this may be work for North/South consultation bodies, since a similar scheme currently operates very successfully in the Republic of Ireland. We will push for the immediate implementation of such a scheme.

Diversifying rural options: Increasing the diversity of employment opportunities would encourage young families to stay in rural areas. These must be matched by access to health and education services from pre-school to third level: these are the building blocks of rural communities.

Young People and Public Spending

The allocation of public spending is an area of responsibility for the new Assembly where consultation with young people is absolutely essential. It is only through such consultation that spending priorities, reflecting the needs of all sections of our society, can be properly established. Such priorities must be able to take the long-term view and reflect the needs of young people as well as maximising their potential contribution to society.

Adherence to the principle of additionality: The Department of Finance and Personnel has responsibility for the distribution of European Peace and Reconciliation funds. These were intended to be additional to existing government spending commitments and had the potential to create new projects in Northern Ireland's communities, many of which would directly involve and benefit young people. There must be government accountability to ensure that EU funding is not being used merely to fill in the gaps caused by cuts to core funding. There must be adequate provision for the period after the end of the Peace and Reconciliation Funds, to ensure that vital projects are not abandoned in mid-stream.

Young People and Decision-Making

Participation is a key issue for young people – we are aware that many young people have found no place for themselves in the politics of the past in Northern Ireland.

We now have a new beginning. Northern Ireland needs young people to be involved in decision-making and in all areas of social life. Government and political parties must not only start listening to young people. They must start making it possible for young people to participate at every stage of the decision-making process

It is time for political parties and other decision-making bodies to ask themselves why so many young people feel alienated and excluded from the political process. The onus is on those organisations to make themselves more accessible and attractive to young citizens.

Young People and the Civic Forum

The Women's Coalition proposed the Civic Forum in the Talks because we are convinced it offers a vital tool for broadening and deepening democracy. The Civic Forum is not for political parties. It is a way of including in the decision-making process people who represent the particular interests of various sectors within our society, for example: the community and voluntary sector; trade unions; arts and culture; and industry.

We have also declared our intention that young people should enjoy specific representation on this body. We are determined the Youth Sector panel in the Civic Forum will include representation from organisations that are run *by* young people -- not just those set up in the name of representing young people's interests *for* them.

The exact shape of the Civic Forum has yet to be decided. But we will work hard to ensure that it does not become another QUANGO. The representatives in the Civic Forum must not be political appointments. Instead, the Civic Forum must bring the interests of various sectors into government, to contribute to policy debates and to place on the agenda issues of importance to Northern Ireland.

The Civic Forum will offer the opportunity for young voices to be heard in a wide-ranging consultative and policy-formulating environment. We also hope that it will encourage many young people to move into electoral politics, in a constructive and positive way. The future of politics in Northern Ireland can only benefit from the greater participation of all its citizens, particularly its youth.

Young People and Equality and Social Justice

The Women's Coalition supports the suggestion in the Agreement that the Assembly should include a Department of Equality. This, we believe, would place equality issues at the heart of government. However, it is important that this Department views 'equality' in the broadest possible way. No section of society should be overlooked in terms of the protection that such a department could offer. We would give particular priority to young people, especially those suffering from multiple disadvantages. For example, provision must be made to ensure that disabled youth enjoy equality of opportunity in all areas of society. Young people should not be subject to prejudicial treatment, particularly in regard to sexual orientation.

The Women's Coalition also supports a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland with the widest possible consultation as to its contents. We believe that Northern Ireland requires more than the minimum standards established internationally. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child should be used to change the lamentable attitude of Northern Ireland society towards children and young people.

The issue of young people and policing is also a serious concern. In many respects youth alienation from the police appears to be a global phenomenon. But this does not mean it can be ignored. The Commission on Policing and the review of the Criminal Justice system must seek the views of young people. We will encourage young people to participate in this and other consultation exercises, and we will demand that young people's views be taken seriously.

On May 22, the voters of Northern Ireland delivered a clear message to their political leaders. They want a future that moves Northern Ireland away from conflict, a future where people and politicians work together in a spirit of partnership, problem solving and progress.

We share these values. We also know they can work. We have been putting them into practice for the past two years. We have proved able to work with all parties in a spirit of partnership to solve our common constitutional problems. We have done that. It's time, now, to make the Agreement work.

The Women's Coalition is truly cross-community. Our members are women and men from diverse backgrounds: rural and urban, young and old; nationalist, unionist and others. Every decision we have made has been on the basis of agreement reached between people coming from these diverse perspectives. This is the way the Assembly will have to work. We look forward to playing our part.

We entered the Talks determined to produce an Agreement that all sections of the community could feel they owned. Since our formation in 1996, we have worked hard to promote our three core principles: HUMAN RIGHTS, INCLUSION and EQUALITY.

We are pleased that we persuaded other political parties of the value of these principles, and, indeed that we placed them at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. In particular we were specifically able to secure:

- A commitment to community development
- Recognition of victim's rights and needs
- Recognition of the role of integrated housing and education in reconciliation
- Establishment of a Civic Forum
- The right of women to full and equal participation

The Agreement has provided the platform for peace. We are determined to enter the Assembly to promote the concerns that will underpin peace. The concerns that really matter to people on the ground. Concerns that have been left on the political back burner for too long. The basis of a democratic society is an adequate social safety net. A decent standard of health, education and social services is a right for all, not a privilege for those who can afford them.

It's time to catch up, time to move on. Time to include women in our political representation. **The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is a new voice for these new times.**