

**COMMENTS BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION -
RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION PAPER BY THE BRITISH AND
IRISH GOVERNMENTS - STRAND 3**

1. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition accepts the need for a standing Intergovernmental Conference. We feel that such a body should deal with the two governments' shared interests in Northern Ireland, but it should also encompass the wider aspects of the relationship between the various regions of these islands that have not been delegated to other bodies.

2. The Women's Coalition believes that it is important that there should be clear lines of reporting between the Intergovernmental Conference, the new institutions in Northern Ireland, the Dail/Seanad in the Republic of Ireland and the Westminster Parliament.

3. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition recognises the potential for dynamic development of regional governance within the United Kingdom. It believes that a Council of the Regions should be set up, composed of elected representatives from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of the Republic of Ireland. This body should be seen as complementary to the existing British/ Irish Interparliamentary Body.

RIGHTS AND SAFEGUARDS

4. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition welcomes the acceptance of the fact that any new Agreement will need to incorporate a new framework establishing the comprehensive protection and guarantee of fundamental human rights. The Coalition believes that if individual and communal rights are to be protected effectively, then both Governments will have to be bound by the same obligations. An effective method of proceeding would be for both Governments to draw up and bind themselves to a formal delineation of a bill of individual and communal rights for application to Northern Ireland.

5. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition also recognises the advantages of developing a shared mechanism for the protection of fundamental individual and communal rights throughout the British and Irish isles. We would favour the development of parallel procedures for the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights, and other relevant international conventions, such as the essential individual and communal rights guaranteed by the European Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities. A sub-committee of the proposed Council of the Regions might be given specific powers to investigate and report on general issues of concern in this sphere.

6. Specifically in the context of the divided society of Northern Ireland, the Intergovernmental Conference will need to agree, and put in place mechanisms for the monitoring and enforcement of human and communal rights and obligations in Northern Ireland. For this reason both Governments should have power through the Intergovernmental Conference to make appointments to a Human Rights Commission, and to allow for external representation - possibly from the European Union and/or the United Nations.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CONSENT

7. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition re-iterates its belief that the concept of consent must mean the achievement of the widest possible consent of the people of Northern Ireland, and not simple majoritarianism. The Coalition accepts the guiding principle set out in the Framework Document that "the consent of the governed is an essential ingredient for stability in any political agreement". The Coalition believes that the political opportunity and challenge facing both the British and Irish Governments, as well as the political parties throughout the island of Ireland, is to create political structures and arrangements which can command broad consent, and which are open to development in order to reflect a continued broad consensus over time.

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