

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

When the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition came together in April 1996 it set itself a number of measurements of success. These included:

1. Putting pressure on political parties to actively seek and address women's views, and to select women candidates.
2. Demonstrating that women were available to contest elections, and to train women in electoral politics.
3. Fielding candidates who would directly address women, and getting Women's Coalition representatives elected.
4. Raising the level of public debate and awareness about women in politics, and encouraging media attention on the issue.
5. Demonstrating the contribution that women have made, and can make, to politics, peace and progress.

By the evening of Friday 31 May, it was clear that the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition had effectively met its targets. Seventy women had contested the election on behalf of the Women's Coalition, with two being elected on the Regional List. A large number of women had been introduced to active politics for the first time. The issue of women in politics had attracted considerable media attention. As a result, mainstream political parties began arguing that the Women's Coalition was unnecessary as they were promoting women within their ranks. However, the Women's Coalition was proved to be right in the end; it has provided the only women at the negotiating table.

SUPPORTING PEACE AND INCLUSION

Throughout the hectic weeks of April and May, the Women's Coalition had agreed a number of policy positions. At the core of these were three political principles:

- Political Inclusiveness
- Equity
- Respect for human rights.

While the practical realisation of the principles of equity and human rights may well be the most difficult to accomplish in the long-term, in the short-term it is the principle of political inclusiveness that must be addressed. As a "solution focused" group, the Women's Coalition has always held the view that all parties and interests have to be heard if realistic political options are to emerge. Hence the demand of the Women's Coalition that all elected parties should have access to All Party Talks. The active participation of Sinn Fein in both the Talks, from which it is excluded, and the Forum, which it has chosen not to attend, is important and would underline a clear commitment to peaceful negotiation. The Women's Coalition continues to assert this position even though, in common with others, it is sickened by the return of the IRA to the politics of the bomb. It believes violence is not only a sign of defeatism but a tragic return to the zero-sum option of anti-democratic militarism.

NEW FACES

The elected representatives of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar, have contributed positively to the Talks and the Forum, not an easy task in light of the antics at these meetings. These delegates, who each come from a different political tradition and are supported by a team of other women, have attended plenary sessions, business committees, rules committees and a multiplicity of informal meetings associated with both the Talks and the Forum.

The going has not always been easy, and the deeply etched lines of the decades of division between the mainstream political parties continue to over-shadow the current proceedings. When delegates from the new parties, including the Women's Coalition, talk about the need for momentum to be established, they are met with a shake of the head from those who have been through it all before.

The most disappointing, if not altogether surprising, aspect of the Talks is the overwhelming sense of defensiveness and fear which results in some parties seeking to close down options and take up entrenched positions long before political possibilities have been explored. Thus proxy political battles are fought over issues of procedure even before the Talks proper have commenced. The atmosphere of abstract legalism and pettiness that is generated does little to contribute to any sense of movement, let alone a commitment to meaningful negotiation. The Women's Coalition remains bemused by this and by the strident public speeches by some parties attacking others on issues which are not yet part of the debate. The unfortunate outcome is that the public is being misled about what is actually happening.

Despite this the Women's Coalition delegates remain optimistic. They were elected on a platform of drawing together different views, ideas and options and working with these in a constructive way capable of reaching solutions to our political differences. With this goal clearly in mind they recognise the importance of nurturing the Talks, engaging in the necessary procedural discussions and keeping doors open rather than slamming them shut. Despite appearances, progress is being made slowly but surely.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

There have been a number of positive developments. The Talks have been marked by the patient and inclusive approach of Senator George Mitchell and his colleagues, General de Chastelain and Mr Harri Holkeri. These Independent Chairmen have demonstrated how valuable their contribution is, and it is important that they have sufficient powers to enable them to facilitate negotiation. Also notable is the constructive approach taken to the Talks by the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), many of whose members have travelled a difficult road to political involvement and continue to maintain their commitment to the democratic process.

The Women's Coalition welcomes the broad political framework set for the Talks. It urges that parties agree to address all the issues at the heart of the conflict including the confidence building measures identified in the Mitchell Report. The Women's Coalition accepts the importance of an open agenda in ensuring meaningful and inclusive negotiations.

EXTENDING PARTICIPATION

The Women's Coalition continues to hope that the Forum will be seen as an opportunity to extend public debate. With an element of good will, and a hint of imagination, the Forum could be used to build working relationships between elected representatives and the many organisations whose expertise is a valuable asset to political debate and to the social and economic process. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition will seek to broaden the Forum's consultative role, for example through the establishment of public hearings across Northern Ireland. Despite its shaky start the Women's Coalition still hopes that the Forum will be an arena in which issues of equity, human rights and social justice can yet be addressed in a positive and inclusive manner.

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