

**The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition's response to the
Ulster Unionist Party's Motion on the Peace Talks to the Forum 4th
October, 1996.**

1. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is contributing to discussion of the Ulster Unionist Party resolution to this Forum, conscious of the fact that all the parties involved in the Talks have agreed a position on confidentiality - a position that would often seem to have been honoured more in breach than in observance. Given this, the Women's Coalition welcomes this opportunity for a chance to comment, in general terms on the progress of the Talks process, and if possible to correct some of the distorted representations of that process that have been given out to the media for the purposes of party political gain.

2. The Coalition is committed to the eventual successful resolution of differences within the framework of the Talks, and would wish to underline the importance of the very continuation of the Talks in a climate that has often been hostile, and that over the summer period, that was downright divisive. However, to be very honest we find it difficult at this stage to share the sense of encouragement that this

motion would seem to suggest.

3. We do welcome the fact that the Rules of Procedure have been agreed - even if it took some eight weeks of detailed, and often semantic debate to achieve this landmark event. We also welcome the acceptance of Senior George Mitchell and his team in their role of Chairperson and facilitators. And we would like publicly to pay tribute to Senator George Mitchell, General de Castellian and Prime Minister Holikeri, for the invariable courtesy, dignity, skill and patience that they have shown in moving agreement around the Rules of Procedure forward - even in the face of some behaviour that would have disgraced a school playground.

4. Unfortunately the Women's Coalition cannot agree with the suggestion in the resolution before us, that the parties are coming together on an agreed Agenda for the first Plenary Session and on the issue of decommissioning. Yes, two weeks ago we were hopeful that we were moving forward through the process of bilateral discussions, but to our tragic loss the proposers of this motion are clearly more concerned about not being out of step with Messrs Mc Cartney and Paisley - even if that means stepping backwards rather than moving forward.

leadership and sense of vision to think in terms of a viable long term

5. Since the commencement of the Talks the Women's Coalition was conscious that there are those who see change and movement - any change and any movement - as a threat. Certainly it is increasingly clear that genuine negotiation; lasting peace and God forgive us - political compromise, are certainly seen as threats to political parties whose very existence is promised of fear and division, and yet the pity is that we now have an opportunity for people of the Unionist/Loyalist /British affiliation and identity to negotiate themselves a valued place in not only British and Irish but in European and International consciousness and institutions. The battle cry 'No Surrender' could actually be translated into the politics of engagement. a politics that would command respect rather than a siege mentality that elicits pity. The Women's Coalition hopes that the main Unionist representatives can yet show the strength of leadership and sense of vision to think in terms of a viable long term future, rather than short-term political advancement. We have all suffered too much in Northern Ireland to fall victim to the politics of the next election; and we are dismayed when we are aware that some parties within the Talks are thinking in terms of the next exit strategy.

6. On the latter part of the resolution the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition wishes, once again, to re-state its commitment to a peaceful future for this region, and to call for a long-term reinstatement and maintenance of all cease-fires. Moreover we are also conscious that we can condemn; and demand; and exhort and make rhetorical statements until we are blue, or orange or green in the face - all to no avail. We have been through decades of denunciation and demonisation and where has it got us? We could all adopt the spin doctors mode of demonisation - Sinn Fein/IRA; Democratic Unionist Party/Third Force; Ulster Unionists/ Orange Order/Vanguard - but where will it get us? In short peace, is a much maligned work in a Northern Ireland that has just witnessed as serious a summer of discontent as we have seen for many a year.

7. Yes the Women's Coalition wants to see progress and political development by peaceful methods. We owe it to our children to not only aspire to this objective but also to create the conditions for this to happen. And it is our belief that George Mitchell and his team provided the framework for this to happen when his report highlighted the importance of confidence-building measures - and

underlined the fact, and I quote, "As progress is made on all political issues, even modest mutual steps on decommissioning could help create the atmosphere needed for further steps in a progressive pattern of mounting trust and confidence". In other words it needs the trust and confidence of a genuine commitment by all those involved - or by certainly the main players to the Peace Talks to create the conditions for decommissioning. And this is what we need if we are to turn rhetorical demands made for public consumption into a real attempt to save lives.

8. I want to conclude by drawing out the implications of this resolution in terms of this Forum. Surely we must all pose the question as to how much the content, tone and tenor of debate in this gathering has helped build mutual trust and confidence in our grievously divided society. How much are the insults and the speeches directed at local street corner politics, rather than a political reality that might offer generations a way out of continued bitterness and suffering? The Women's Coalition believes that if ever we had the luxury of the political sneer, innuendo and misrepresentation then that no longer exists in the current state of Northern Ireland. We, for one, salute those who have managed to