

## **NI Women's Coalition**

### **Debate on Departmental Arrangements and Structures**

**14<sup>th</sup> September 1998**

The NI Women's Coalition would first like to thank the First and Deputy First Ministers Designate for preparing this report during what has been a difficult summer for all of us. We would also like to record our thanks to the officials who produced the preparatory documents which helped stimulate our thinking on this important matter.

We welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue. For many years we relied on a less than democratic system of administration, and one of the dividends of the Good Friday Agreement is that we have charged our selves with taking charge of our own affairs.

Not many new governments have the opportunity to mould a new administration in the manner we have now, and we should be conscious of that.

This is indeed welcome, but we should observe that, no matter how keen we are to fashion our own unique governance structures and methods, there is always merit in taking the advice of others. We believe we should be listening, not just to each other inside this room, but also those outside it – in trade unions, in the business sector, in the farming, voluntary, community and education sectors – who have had, perhaps, much closer interaction with the old administration than we have.

There are two needs, we believe, that need to be balanced in this debate. One, the need for an inclusive strategic review of the old administration, while retaining some continuity and the need to move quickly and collectively to govern our community in an inclusive and fair manner, both of which we are pleased the Report before us notes.

Taking account of this, we believe that there is little point in creating and allocating arbitrary Departments to quench contemporary political thirst: we need, in a sense, to put

the needs of the community at large before our own party political needs. We must remain focused on those we serve, and what goals we are collectively working for.

The Women's Coalition takes the view that we should not overly fragment the existing departmental structures; there are specific responsibilities to be retained. This does not mean we cannot radically overhaul the administration. We agree with the Report's initial configuration. We favour the upper end of this scale, seeing 10 Departments, five of which would be major operational, high-spending Ministries, roughly contiguous to our current Departments. We also agree that there should be some mechanism whereby policy that cuts across several departmental concerns. We would strongly support such a mechanism being created. Thus our five additional departments would oversee the strategic direction of governance and peace building – in effect implementing the Good Friday Agreement. These Ministries would stimulate and advise on policy formulation, and would play a role in ensuring, as the First and Deputy First Ministers highlight, that the administration can promote integrated policies (para 4.8). These Ministries would be low-spending, policy units. In looking forward we should also be mindful of our past, which could examine not only the hurt of the past, but specifically how we rebuild for our future – and which other places emerging from conflict, as surely they will, can look to for models of good practice. Our first 'policy unit' then would be:

Equality, Human Rights and Community Relations

And the remaining four:

Social Inclusion, Women's Issues and Community Development

Children and Young People

Public Health

Culture, Arts, Heritage and Sport

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- We see potential intra-Departmental conflicts of interest in the current arrangements, for example Roads and Transport, in the Department of the Environment; or the interests of both producer and consumer being lodged with the Department of Agriculture.
- There are also some Departments, we feel, which do serve people well. The integrated Department of Health and Social Services is one such example, which views the individual and community in a holistic fashion.
- Some of the work of governance is currently executed by quangoes – we need to examine carefully the role of these bodies in the light of our current situation.
- Neither should we be afraid of challenging historically important, and controversial departments. The world is moving on fast: in which department shall we determine our policy on cryptology and other information technology advances? What will our biggest industry be in the first quarter of the next millennium, and how should we provide for it?

We note the significant lobby arguing for the voices of our young people and children to be included in our administration. We proposed in our manifesto, and remain strongly committed to a Minister for Children and Families, in all their shapes and sizes, and we are pleased that the Report highlights a similar portfolio.

We are also pleased that the establishment of the Civic Forum has stimulated considerable debate, both within these walls, and outside. We believe it important that the sectors that forward delegates to the Forum establish fair and open arrangements for doing so, and we agree with the Report in that the Forum should be as representative of civic society as possible. This means really hearing the voices of those who are not

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traditionally heard: our young people, women, the disabled, victims of our conflict as well as the more organised trade union movement, the business and education sectors.

The meetings of the Civic Forum should be as open and as accessible as possible, and we believe it would be appropriate for it to sit in different locations from time to time.

It is important that no track of the Good Friday Agreement gets too far ahead of others: all three strands bear equal weight in our view, and we need to be spearheading movement on all three. We are comfortable supporting the progress on the North-South Arrangements and the British Irish Council, though we accept that much detailed work needs to be done, and we are keen to get moving on it.

In conclusion we would reiterate our thanks to the First and Deputy First Minister Designate and their staff for preparing this report for us today. We look forward to submitting our detailed views on paper to you later this week.

Ends.