

OPENING STATEMENT ON SUBSTANTIVE NEGOTIATIONS

1. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition wishes to express its commitment to the opening and development of substantive negotiations about our shared future on these islands. It is our hope that all the parties elected to these Talks will participate within them; as we believe not only in inclusiveness as a political principle, but also we feel that politicians have a duty to represent the views of their voters in these negotiations.

Despite the inevitable difficulties, the Women's Coalition is optimistic, feeling that the climate of this society is right for political talks. The opinion polls that we all saw published last week leave us in no doubt that while people of all political hues may be fearful of the possible outcome of this process, they still recognise the importance - and the inevitability - of discussion. It is also accepted that Northern Ireland has reached the end of the road in terms of the international acceptance of political intransigence. It is only so many times that the bleak grey spires of Enniskillen can re-emerge from the mists of violence. We need political negotiations and we need the ability to compromise.

2. While the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition accepts that substantive talks will not be an easy process for any of us - or for our supporters - we feel that Northern Ireland deserves the leap of imagination that is required to turn political obstacles into political challenges. It also needs the sense of political courage and risk-taking to take that leap. If we allow every obstacle to become a blockage to progress we will frustrate not only ourselves but more importantly the peoples of Northern Ireland and beyond.

We believe that in entering into these substantive talks we must move away - as far as is possible from a conflict mode which emphasises winners and losers; the 'them' and the 'us'. Instead we must set our mind to a design mode, which stresses the importance of jointly designing an outcome, or a range of possible outcomes for the difficulties facing us. We must seek to adopt lateral thinking so that we can look beyond the limited range of time worn options perceptions and positions, and try to create new possibilities. Argument can do this only to a very limited extent, we need to identify the issues and problems and discuss them with a view to finding new solutions not concentrating on protecting historical certainties.

Hence, in place of the practice to date, which in our experience has all too often been divisive and narrowly defensive, the Women's Coalition feels that our first challenge is to create a sense of unity around our common project; and to formulate a talks process that will underpin this sense of shared challenge. Clearly the eventual aim of our common project is to identify, and flesh out the parameters of an agreed settlement - or at the very least a range of feasible options - through an inclusive Talks process.

3. The Women's Coalition has been waiting eagerly for substantive negotiations to begin in order to put forward a number of ideas based on our declared principles of Equity, Inclusion and Human Rights. We accept the centrality of the constitutional issues to the substantive negotiations but we want to approach these issues in a manner that will seek to draw out themes, and even fears that our divided society may well hold in common.

- How can we recognise the identities and traditions of both of the main communities in Northern Ireland on the basis of equity and human rights?
- How can we structure the recognition of, and the right to, differences in the context of a pluralist state. And what lessons does this hold for the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom?
- How can this small piece of land be both British and Irish in a constitutional arrangement that will have sufficient acceptance to be stable, but can also be dynamic enough to allow for development and change?
- How can we seek to create new relationships and arrangements that can transcend current borders and boundaries? For example we might well wish to look at our relations with a more autonomous Scotland and Wales as well as with the Republic of Ireland.

We recognise the need to address all these issues and more but we also want to examine other important concerns such as:

- How can we formulate decision-making structures that are closer to people and local communities?
- How can we develop the concept of participative democracy that can draw on the expertise of the many sectors in our society - business, trade unions, agriculture and the voluntary sector among others - to ensure that politics here reflect a new social and economic agenda?
- How can we ensure gender equity through new electoral arrangements and appropriate social support?
- How do we guarantee that human rights will be repeated in the context of any new constitutional framework?

The Women's Coalition believes that for too long our thinking has been bound and limited by fears and apprehension, rather than stretching out for new visions and opportunities.

4. We accept that these are genuine fears and hurts but we condemn the cynical exploitation of these fears for political ends. Indeed we are conscious that it is often those that have suffered the most who are the most prepared to face up to change, and to accept the need for political compromise. We owe it to the generosity of such people that we identify the nature of change, and that we are seen to be making progress beyond the rhetoric which has so often obstructed possible movement.

5. The Coalition also believes that it is important that we give attention to the various ways in which we can ensure that people are made to feel part of any political progress. The task of peacebuilding that we all face must be seen as an open and accessible system, that seeks to win as many advocates and allies as possible. It is crucial that we identify mechanisms that will enable and encourage local communities and various interests to participate in the process of peacebuilding, and to feel a share of responsibility for the future of this society; rather than leaving this task exclusively to the owners of the negotiating table. We need to see the peacebuilding that we are all hopefully engaged in, as an interdependent model, which acknowledges the importance of the negotiating table but recognises that it is not the exclusive deliverer and sustainer of peace. We need to examine how we can use various confidence-building measures to bring all sectors of our society to a point where they feel that they are respected, and that they can associate themselves with the peacebuilding process. We believe that people cannot be expected to vote in a referendum without an understanding of how, and why, we arrived at our eventual conclusions.

6. The real challenge facing us here is to put our various fears and hopes on the table in order to forge an agreement which can win greatest possible consent across all our communities. Consent must be more than simple majoritarianism, while respecting the views of the democratic majority at any particular time. We must work to win consent from each other here at the table, building an eventual consensus which can win the consent of as many of our people as possible.

We believe the people of Northern Ireland are giving a clear message to all politicians that they wish to see a negotiated settlement that can remove any perception of the need, by any group, to resort ever again to violence.

7. The time has come for us to move away from the "scalded memories" of the past. Rather than remaining fixated on myths and stereotypes we need now to focus on the values that we wish to see informing the future governance of this country.

The Women's Coalition also has a vision of society which has the confidence to both address and accommodate its internal differences as well as reaching out to its neighbours.

The prize for successful negotiations will be to effectively break the vicious cycle that holds the danger of condemning our children to the conflict and bitterness that we have all experienced. We hold with the lines by Evan Boland on the untimely death of a child in the Troubles:

We must
"Find for your sake, whose life our idle
Talk has lost, a new language
Child of our times, our times have robbed your cradle
Sleep in a word your final sleep has woken"

The tribute was written in 1974 - twenty three years later, we still need to work for that new world. We now have an opportunity to create it - together.

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