

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition Response to UUP Motion
14/11/97

MOTION: "This Forum calls on the Government to recognise that the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement has failed to bring peace, stability, and reconciliation between the two traditions in Northern Ireland, but is rather a cause of division and confrontation and its replacement is a pre-condition for progress."

A year ago, we debated almost exactly the same motion. Now, thankfully, we have much less violence on our streets. The climate should be conducive to a more constructive process. Sadly, at times we are left wondering: has anything else moved on?

As we said at this time last year, the Women's Coalition recognises that unionists have deep concerns about the Anglo-Irish Agreement. We also recognise that it was imposed without discussion.

However, we do not believe that responding by attempting to impose other preconditions to negotiation and discussion is the most constructive way to move forward. Rather than scuppering the process in advance, we would urge all parties to enter into dialogue and negotiation. Unionists have accused other parties of setting preconditions before entering negotiations -- are they now engaging in the same tactics?

We may not agree with everything in the Anglo Irish Agreement. But we do support the Anglo-Irish process, because we believe that the establishment of good relations is an important step towards peace. There are multiple social and economic benefits to be gained from working together on matters of common concern. We believe it is vital to move to a situation where we are no longer talking about either/or [BRIEF PAUSE]: winning or losing, a United Ireland on the one hand or total integration with Britain on the other. We seek a genuinely inclusive approach. There are many alternatives that could accommodate our respective hopes, if we have the courage and the imagination to consider them.

Entering a process of change is difficult and can seem risky. However, there can be no growth without risks. Opinion poll after opinion poll show that most people in Northern Ireland want a settlement that will be acceptable across the community, and see it as essential to a peaceful and stable future for ourselves and our children. We, as political representatives, must catch up with this spirit of compromise.

We recognise that the Unionists may be right when they say the Anglo-Irish Agreement has not brought peace, stability and reconciliation. However, this agreement is not the only factor at play. The AIA has never been given a chance to work. From the beginning, it has been undermined.

We would like to think that this debate is inspired by a genuine desire to increase equality, pluralism and mutual respect. But we fear that the failure of the AIA to bring peace, stability and reconciliation is being used as another platform for adversarial politics, rather than in the spirit of reconciliation.

The Anglo Irish Agreement is part of a series of constitutional proposals. These emphasised that political change should be pursued by peaceful means and governed by consent. The AIA also stated a commitment to devolving power to a Northern Ireland administration. It

may not have fulfilled the stated aims of equality and pluralism. But it is not set in stone -- it can be renegotiated.

We believe that the way forward is for all the parties to bring concrete and specific proposals to the Talks table. Equally, we would like to see all parties at this Forum, with a genuine will to increase dialogue and understanding.

We cannot support this motion because we believe the way to foster peace, stability and reconciliation is by seeking to persuade others, rather than threatening to veto the process if certain conditions are not met in advance.