

## NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

SUBMISSION TO STRAND 2 :            CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES,  
OCTOBER 20, 1997

- 1        In its approach to constitutional issues the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition places priority on aspects that bring benefit and positive progress to the people of this island and that promote co-operation and interdependence among people in Ireland, these islands and the European Union.

We accept the importance of thinking in terms of East-West as well as North South co-operation. However, we believe that the structural synergy that is possible to achieve on the island of Ireland will bring important economic and social benefit.

2.        Both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are small open economies that share many common challenges such as dealing with long term unemployment, low levels of research and development and heavy reliance on the agricultural sector. While there are twice as many people employed in manufacturing in the Republic of Ireland as in Northern Ireland, both are relatively small. It seems to us that structures for co-operation and mechanisms for cross-border decision-making should be put in place to facilitate economic strategic planning on a cross-border basis. These should address the following issues -

- (a) promoting economic development and inward investment. The current situation of cut throat competition between the IDA and the IDB should be changed to one of complementary strategies, which do not allow multinational investors to play one region of the island off against another.
- (b) developing an all-island economic infrastructure, eg. transportation, energy, R& D activity.
- (c) developing strong industrial clusters straddling the border.

The benefits of island wide strategies with regard to tourism, agriculture, environmental controls, water management and trade promotion are also self-evident.

To achieve synergy in practice however, we require cross-border institutions with delegated decision-making powers to drive integrated approaches forward. We agree with the statement contained in the Common Chapter of the National Development Plan of the Republic of Ireland and the Single Programming Document for Northern Ireland that -

“Both Governments recognise the need for economic regeneration to proceed in harmony with the principles of equity and equality of opportunity and the need to secure social cohesion”.

3. In line with a focus on the beneficial impact of planning for an all-island economy, there is also a need to take steps towards the creation of a single labour market, with the specific aim of creating a high quality labour market. There is a need to develop coherence in employment services, labour market policy and social security policy. An agreed minimum wage policy could also prevent the emergence of distorted differential development.
4. Given the importance of the active participation of many sectors of society in the development of these cross-border frameworks, it is crucial that multi-sectoral alliances and fora should be actively encouraged on a cross-border basis, to complement the decision-making mechanisms.
5. The NIWC would like to see an integrated approach to the use of an element of EU Structural Funds in the 2000-2005 Plan, with a strengthened Common Chapter, policy and implementation.
6. We recognise the sensitivities within communities in Northern Ireland to all Ireland institutions that impact on issues related to citizenship, identity and allegiance (as underlined by High Smyth last week). The challenge is to create a web of relationships which can accommodate the diverse identities within our divided society. To this end such frameworks must take account of the East-West as well as the North-South dimension.
7. In terms of citizenship it must be possible for people within Northern Ireland to opt for British, or Irish, citizenship or both. The right to vote in appropriate elections and to carry passports must be agreed, and guaranteed to the people of Northern Ireland. If the constitutional Articles 2 and 3 are to be amended, they would need to be replaced with legislation which would guarantee those people of Northern Ireland who so chose to -
  - 1) carry an Irish passport;
  - 2) potentially have a direct vote in Irish Presidential elections, and a possible recognition of the right of District Councils to make nominations for the presidency on the same basis as County Councils.
  - 3) have a more inclusive and active involvement in the various sectoral representation in Seanad Eireann - as already applies to the university seats.

In other words, in place of the territorial claim, the NIWC would seek to see a more active effort by the Republic of Ireland to include those people of Northern Ireland - who chose to exercise the right - in a more active Irish citizenship.

Rights attached to British citizenship must also be guaranteed by the Government of the United Kingdom, for so long as the people of Northern Ireland chose to avail of them, whether on an individual and/or a collective

basis. There must be a sense of security for the people of Northern Ireland in both their British and Irish citizenship. We consider this a suitable function for the proposed Inter-governmental Conference.

8. On issues of identity, the NIWC recognise the importance of people within Northern Ireland being Irish and British; or Ulster and British; or Ulster and Irish, as the case may be. A purist sense of either 'Irishness'; or 'Britishness' cannot be taken as the essential requirement of political credibility or of acceptable political allegiance. It seems clear that both North-South networks and East-West networks are required to underpin this complexity of chosen identities.
9. We welcome the statement by the British Government last week that the Government's role in Strand 2 is to

"Encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of a comprehensive agreement based on full respect for the rights and sensitivities of both traditions".

Equally, we welcome the recognition by the Government of the Republic of Ireland that -

"A new political dispensation is required, representing an honourable, democratic accommodation between the two major traditions with which both can live, and which is based on consent, and on full respect for the concerns, rights and identities of all . . ."

One of the rights that the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition accepts is the right of people within Northern Ireland to aspire to either the re-unification of the people of the island of Ireland, or for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. We also accept that neither aspiration can be enforced, or resisted, by violent methods, and every opportunity must be afforded to allow the expression of both aspirations through the examination of stereotypes and fears, discussion, and the development of synergy and structural arrangements for the benefit of all. To this end the Women's Coalition supports the position that -

"Mutual understanding and contact between individuals, groups and communities, organisations and institutions have an important role in the elimination of barriers of suspicion, in the creation of mutual trust and in the building of confidence, and should be further promoted and supported, including financially" (Sinn Fein)

Like the Ulster Unionist Party we feel that this should occur on an East-West basis as well as on a North-South basis. A network of arrangements can only be consultative and advisory in nature. This is not to undermine their importance, but to recognise that there must be a co-operative approach for the issue of mutual understanding to be progressed on a productive basis. Thus a consultative Council of the Regions for our two islands might be considered as a way of taking forward these issues

10. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition accepts that there is a requirement to put in place firm safeguards to underpin both individual and collective rights in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We support the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the enactment of a comprehensive Bill of Rights. Given the realities of our divided society in Northern Ireland, we acknowledge a role for the Government of the Republic of Ireland in being a joint guarantor of such rights, with the British Government. Again, this is a matter that we would expect to be dealt with under Strand 3. In terms of human rights we also place a strong emphasis on the issue of the rights of women, and of minority ethnic communities, as well as those pertaining to the two main traditions on the island of Ireland.

11. In summary then, the NIWC envisages the institutionalisation of this web of relationships and arrangements in the following manner -

(i) acceptance of a number of areas of joint responsibility for the Governments of Britain and the Republic of Ireland in terms of citizenship and the protection of individual and collective rights.

(ii) a Council of the Regions of these islands (East, West, North, South) to consider, on an advisory and consultative basis, issues of cultural identity and common interest.

(iii) a formal strategic North-South body to secure synergy around issues of common concern and benefit, rooted in clear criteria that is in the mutual socio-economic interest of the people in the North and South. We envisage that such a body be composed of representatives of the political structures North and South (proportionate to the strength of the representatives in those structures) This body would have certain decision-making powers, operated on the basis of sufficiency of consensus. This strategic North/South body should draw on and engage the strength and expertise of the sectors involved in economic and social development through an additional North/South body in the form of a North/South Partnership Board or North/South Economic and Social Forum.

Finally the NIWC wishes to re-assert its aspiration for a development of the recognised interdependence and mutuality between the people of these islands, rather than any narrow concentration on territorial claims. We accept the limitations and contradictions surrounding the concept of the nation-state and nationalism, and aim instead to build a sense of mutuality, pluralism and respect around principles of human rights, equity and inclusion, underpinned by equitable social and economic progress.