

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

SUFFICIENCY OF CONSENSUS

INTERPRETATION OF REPRESENTATION

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

1. Welcomes the search for unanimity indicated in Para 24 of the Ground Rules.
2. Welcomes that under Para 24 of the Ground Rules any departure from the rule of unanimity is within minimal limits.
3. Understands from Para 21 of the Procedural Guidelines the application of sufficient consensus will be applied in such a way as to ensure that there is majority acceptance by both of the two main traditions.
4. Understands from Para 21 of the Procedural Guidelines that the operation of this sufficient consensus will have regard to the political parties voting strengths according to the percentage valid poll.
5. Welcomes the fact that the relatively equal size of party representation at the Talks not only establishes some equity among interests (rather than sizes of constituency) but creates the possibility of a new dynamic, a different flow and ebb to unblock barriers and achieve progress.

6. Sees a contradiction between establishing conditions of equity in representation in the negotiations if it can be undermined continually by recourse to voting strength.
7. Believes that the size of voting strength cannot be ignored, but that a balance needs to be attained between this and accommodation of different interests.
8. Is concerned that no accommodation will be lasting unless all parties are bound into it and by it.
9. Refers to Para 20 where sufficient consensus as defined under Para 21 "may" be applied to the Plenary and the Business Committee and "may" be applied in committees and sub-committees, and thus that it also may not be applied.
10. Calls for the enlargement of the concept of sufficient consensus by the addition of a second definition - ie that sufficient consensus should also mean the necessity to secure the agreement of a set number of parties.
11. Calls for sufficient consensus to be defined and applied differently at different levels of decision-making (Option 1); or for both definitions of sufficient consensus to be applied in combination at all levels (Option 2).
12. **Option 1.** In every meeting and forum except in Plenary Session, sufficient consensus should mean sufficient consensus among the parties, with the operation of a high threshold of 7 or 8 parties. At Plenary level the voting strengths of the parties should be applied as per Para 21 of the Procedural Guidelines.

13. **Option 2.** The application of sufficient consensus should mean the achievement of a combination, or double, sufficient consensus. To achieve sufficient consensus at every level and in every forum including Plenary Session a threshold of voting strength and a threshold of parties should be attained; for example 66% of the valid poll and the agreement of 7 or 8 parties.
14. Believes the benefit of this approach means that the involvement of minority parties is more meaningful, that every party must work to win consensus, that practical lessons about respecting minorities are applied and that as far as is humanly possible all parties are bound into the agreement.
15. Believes every effort should be made to ensure that parties are able to be represented in Sub-groups and Committees to build a common consensus of all interests throughout the process.
16. Requests that in the spirit of Para 7 of the Scenario of the Opening Plenary when it refers to "representatives of the two governments and of the political parties," a flexible interpretation of the word representative should be applied. On occasion it should mean elected representative in the case of final decision-making fora such as the Plenary Sessions. On occasion at lower level discussions it should mean representative of the party to allow the participation of party alternates with the appropriate skill and expertise.
17. Believes this to be necessary to ensure full use of all parties' expertise and to secure the full involvement and binding in to consensus along the way of minor parties with less elected representatives.

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