

POLITICAL DILEMMAS IN NORTHERN IRELAND :A VIEW FROM THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

1. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was elected on a platform of Human Rights, Equality and Inclusivity. These three core principles still govern our programme and political positions on issues as diverse as procedures and parades. However, the Coalition has had to grapple with how to translate these principles into a practical politics which seeks to go some way to accommodate the diversity of traditions and political allegiances that make up the Women's Coalition. A diversity that in many ways reflects the deeper divisions within Northern Ireland itself.

2. While arriving fresh and, some would say, naive into a rather static political milieu, the Women's Coalition acknowledges the merit in many of the initiatives that have littered the politics of Northern Ireland over the last two decades. We believe, for example, that there is merit in areas of the various Framework Documents, particularly in respect for pluralist, egalitarian norms and rights (as highlighted in the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement)

and the potential of the Downing Street Declaration to be interpreted as saying that no settlement in the North can win widespread allegiance and agreement if it includes inequalities unacceptable to the other community. We feel that the governmental acknowledgement of the importance of respect for diversity and a recognition of the potential of weighted majorities and a more participative democracy (as illustrated by the recent Talks electoral formula) can have a relevance for not only Northern Ireland but also for women and indeed for the Republic of Ireland.

3. However, what still haunts us like the perennial ghost at the banquet is the unresolved issue of consent.

Interpretations range from the traditional Republican view of the right to self determination based on the consent of people of the island of Ireland to the traditional Unionist view of the consent of the majority within Northern Ireland.

While in between we have an acceptance of the consent of the majority within Northern Ireland based on anticipation of future favourable demographic change or at times an acceptance of the principle of consent based on strong guarantees of cultural and communal equality.

Problems around the issues of consent and particularly around concepts of majoritarian consent have virtually given rise to the idea of a double veto scenario that is contained in the Downing Street Declaration i.e. that the present minority in Northern Ireland have a right to consent to, or veto constitutional positions put forward by the Unionist politicians while the present majority can both consent to or, more likely veto, constitutional options advocated by Nationalism. It is this double veto approach that, put in a positive way, has been turned into the substantive majority procedure that is governing decision-making in the current political Talks in Northern Ireland.

4. The basic premise of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is that Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society. That the violence that has characterised that society throughout its existence cannot be either likened to or treated as an aggravated crime wave. And that the simple majoritarian approach to democracy in Northern Ireland neither will not nor cannot work in a society where a significant minority withhold their support for a political system.

✓ ✓

However within this analysis the Women's Coalition are also deeply aware of the fears and uncertainties not only of the current minority community within Northern Ireland but also of members of the majority community. We accept the characterisation of the politics of Northern Ireland as a double minority problem - the fact that while the largely Catholic/Nationalist community may well see themselves as a minority within Northern Ireland, those of the Protestant Unionist tradition are acutely conscious of the fact that they are a minority within the island of Ireland, and have an abiding fear that there is a certain historical inevitability for a United Ireland, actively aided and abetted by militant Republicanism and British apathy. And it is within this double minority problem, and the fears related to it that sits the crux of the issue.

5. At a constitutional level the Women's Coalition would like to see a broader framework for the discussion being proposed in order to allow a lessening of the focus on the

conflictual North-South relationship and to place the latter, which incidentally we believe, is very necessary in the context of the regional relationships within the islands of Britain and Ireland. Thus we envisage an additional strand to be added to the current proposed strands of the Peace Talks.

Strand 1 - Internal Relations within Northern Ireland;

Strand 2 - Relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic;

Strand 3 - Governmental relations between Dublin and London.

In addition to this we would argue for

Strand 4 - Inter-regional relationships within the two islands, bringing Scotland and Wales particularly into the frame. For example we applaud the work of the Scottish Constitutional Convention which argues for an extension of democracy based on principles of equity and we believe that the constitutional modernisation of the United Kingdom would provide a more conducive context for the discussion of not only North/South, but also of East/West relationships.

Within this framework we would hope that the current often reinforcing blocs of cultural identity/religious identity and political allegiance might be deconstructed into less homogeneous and antagonistic elements allowing for more political movement and a reduction in communal fears about cultural extinction.

6. Thus in principle the Women's Coalition prioritises a transfer of power from Westminster to the regions - and it would also argue for the development of a less centralised state in the Republic of Ireland where currently all roads seem to lead to Dublin - however, equally we accept that the exercise of power must be governed by our founding principles of Human Rights, Equality and Inclusivity; principles that were flouted for many years by the Northern Ireland state, when power lay with Stormont. Thus the Women's Coalition accepts that the problem in the

North is not so much the issue of increasing decision-making that may be deemed appropriate to the region but in guaranteeing that the power will not be abused as it was in the past.

We also agree with the conflict theorist, Jean Paul Lederach when he notes that it takes as much time to achieve a positive solution, as the time period over which the conflict took place. With this in mind we should be thinking in terms of a minimum 30 years framework for implementing a non-threatening redistribution of power in Northern Ireland. Hopefully paralleled by greater regional distribution of power within both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

7. A basic element in moving forward in a positive vein would be the creation of an inclusive political culture within Northern Ireland. The NI Women's Coalition feel that the current UNESCO concept of a global culture of Peace has much to recommend it in terms of seeking to establish a culture of peace based on values, attitudes, behaviours and ways of life that reinforce non-violence and respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of every person. It hinges upon the acceptance of peoples rights to be different and their right to a peaceful, secure existence within their communities. At a national/regional level the UNESCO approach is rooted in a number of basic concepts which we also accept as being relevant to Northern Ireland.

The non-violent management of conflict;
The development of democratic procedures and respect for political and human rights for everyone;
The participation and co-operation in the development process of all parties to the conflict to ensure that development is sustainable and equitable.

UNESCO also explicitly refer to the importance of gender equity within this framework.

In our case the democratic procedures that need to be articulated must accept diversity and be participative in nature.

8. Building on the detailed work that is required for a new political culture based on respect and understanding is the need to develop institutional initiatives. The Women's Coalition would be open to any institutional arrangement being interim in nature and subject both to evaluation and to change depending on the progress achieved in terms of political accommodations reached.

We feel that there is the possibility of establishing an indirectly elected Partnership Assembly with powers of scrutiny (for example on appointment to quangos etc.) and of strategic planning (for example, on social and economic development; the allocation of EU Structural Funds etc.)

The composition of this body might be modelled on the current Northern Ireland Partnership Board, or the National Economic and Social Forum in the Republic.

Essentially one would envisage a mix of directly elected representatives as well as representatives from the Social Partners and the NGO's. It would of course be important that this body would have a regional and community balance as well as a gender balance. The Women's Coalition feel that work on cross-border relationships must also develop in practice. It is almost six months since George Quigley made reference to the economic corridor idea which has more recently been broadened out into "an island economy" analysis. The Women's Coalition feels that welcome moves towards economic co-operation on a North/South basis must also be underpinned by social co-operation and interchange, particularly in terms of academic and community development initiatives alongside the existing Trade Union links.

At a political level it is important that we can move forward from a situation where the Republic's civil servants in Maryfield are seen as little more than a support team for the SDLP, to a situation where political interchange can carry with it the interchange of best practice in terms of achieving a democracy that is both participative and is based on respect for diversity. It may well be that there is also a need for room to be made for an Northern commentary on Southern developments as well as vice versa although this will need to be carefully thought through in order to avert justifiable criticisms of tokenism.

9. At present the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is seeking to identify a range of interim initiatives that would be put in place (like the establishment of a Bill of Rights) that might help to both build confidence among the public in Northern Ireland and develop the best elements of civic Unionism and civic Republicanism. In our view the process for a negotiated settlement may well take a long time, and while politicians need to be focused on the fact that people in Northern Ireland have to be offered a set of realistic options to allow them to live together in peace; nevertheless we should not lose sight of the fact that we might yet be able to

transform conflict stand-offs into a positive critique of traditional representative democracy. By breaking with simplistic majoritarian democratic concepts by virtue of necessity given the deep divisions in our society, we may yet develop a more consessional and locally representative framework which can work in solidarity with regional developments across these islands.

November 1996