

Plenary Session Address - 5th March 1997

Chair, Fellow Delegates

On behalf of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition I would like to make an admission. We came into this gathering guilty of an optimism about the potential of these Talks; guilty of a belief in the basic goodwill of our fellow delegates; and guilty of a commitment to consensus of politics. We came into these Talks conscious of the knife-edge on which the future of this region balanced, and happy that for the first time at least the majority of the parties to the conflict - and to the future of Northern Ireland could sit around the table together to discuss that future in all seriousness.

It was and still is the belief of the Women's Coalition that all the parties to the conflict should be sitting around this table in order to engage in dialogue and negotiation, but we were prepared to press ahead with those that are here and to explore how the peace process could be moved forward.

And in that too, Chair, we were guilty, we were guilty of thinking that all those who sat around this table recognised the need for a peace process, and might be prepared to engage with others in seeking one.

In reality, the high points of the last eight months have been

- i) Agreeing, to the position of Chair**
- ii) Agreeing to a set of Rules and Procedure**
- iii) Surviving the bitterly divisive summer of last year**
- iv) Surviving the determined attempts of the UK Unionist Party to undermine these Talks.**
- v) Surviving the blatant disregard by certain parties of the confidentiality of these Talks.**
- vi) Surviving the external attempts by Republicans and the internal attempts by the DUP and the UK Unionists to force the PUP and UDP out of these Talks.**
- vii) Surviving the lack of political leadership and divisiveness that we have seen from the Ulster Unionist Party**

Thus, in total the high points consist of two agreements and five survivals. Given this rather low baseline, I will refrain from re-iterating the low points of the last eight months.

Chair, the Women's Coalition acknowledge that we lack political experience and indeed we have been constantly reminded of this fact by the representatives of a number of parties around this table.

However, all we can say is that if political experience results in the type of behaviour and lack of progress, that we have seen over the last eight months, then perhaps it is as well that we remain inexperienced. Because at least with that inexperience comes an openness and a commitment to change, and to dialogue.

What, to our mind, has pervaded this gathering since it came together last June was a sense of insecurity; of political weariness; and of brinkmanship, and this is reflecting on parties that at least agree to engage with the Talks process.

There are, of course, those parties who would seem committed to bemerely wrecking these Talks - perhaps because they see peace, on any terms except their own, as an unacceptable threat. And it is the interests of these parties to confuse, and misrepresent, and name-call all those who are engaged with the Talks process. Unfortunately the politics of fear is all too common a currency in Northern Ireland. It

is a politics that the Women's Coalition believes has been overly exploited by politician who should now better.

However, I want to examine the very genuine sense of political insecurity that has dogged these Talks

At a micro level the re-establishment of the IRA campaign of violence can certainly provide valid grounds for such uncertainty about the future - and Women's Coalition has consistently called for the re-establishment of an IRA ceasefire on the basis of that most basic human rights, the right to life. However, on a macro-level the acceptance of the principle of consent in British and Irish politics by all parties (with the exception of Sinn Fein) has safeguarded the union more than ever, locking it into the democracy of Northern Ireland. In essence, what we have seen over the last decade is a gradual process of realisation by virtually all concerned that Irish nationalism would only come to terms with partition when it came to terms with Unionists, and their fears. We have seen a decisive shift from a situation where Unionist fears of the implications of a united Ireland were denounced as groundless by a majority of nationalists to a situation where there is an acceptance that such fears are genuine and must be acknowledged. In short, we have seen a watershed in the politics of this island, which was the

acceptance by a majority of political parties that there is a democratic legitimacy within Unionism.

The pity is that this shift has gone virtually unacknowledged by the vast majority of Unionists. There are of course those who have a vested interest in denying any such shift - their political energy is derived from demonising the anti-Christ of pan-Nationalist machiavellianism. However, there are others who simply seem to lack the political imagination of grasping the possibilities that the principle of Northern Ireland consent brings with it. If, as the Women's Coalition believes, it does, the Irish Government now accept that an internal settlement in Northern Ireland is more important than Irish unity then why aren't Unionists in Northern Ireland seeking to work towards that settlement. Surely such a settlement can offer more than dancing on the head of a pin over the currently unrealistic demand for involuntary decommissioning.

If nationalism has moved from a fundamentalism to a position of negotiated consent, then the challenge is for Unionism to show the leadership - to do so as well. Instead, what we have seen over the last eight months in these Talks, is the determination by Unionists to characterise nationalism

in terms of republicanism. There has been a will to see a pan-nationalist and to involve the ghost of Sinn Fein at these Talks.

In fact, it is the belief of the Women's Coalition that if Sinn Fein had been represented here in reality, they would have had less impact than they have had through the fears of the Unionist parties. We have mis-spent the period of the Talks to date in trying to create rules that will minimise the likelihood of Sinn Fein's entry; challenging the chairmanship in case it might be a secret plan to insert Sinn Fein's presence; and making unrealistic demands in terms of decommissioning in order to ensure Sinn Fein's exclusion; the order of business has even been a matter of dispute in order that items that militate against Sinn Fein's entry are high on the agenda.

In short, all public pleas that these Talks should make progress irrespective of Sinn Fein's position, are hypocritical - the debate to date (and the lack of progress to date) has ensured that Sinn Fein has effectively dominated these Peace Talks. This has resulted in a situation that instead of listening in bilaterals to what nationalist parties have

actually been saying, there seems to be an obsession with the echo of Republican war drums.

In reflecting back over the months of the Peace Talks one of the things that has become increasingly clear was that Yeats got it wrong when he wrote

“.....The centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”.

The worm at the core of politics in Northern Ireland is that the so-called centre has too often proved itself to be more extreme than the extremists. While we have sat, and so often not made progress here at the Talks, it has been the historical extremists who have successfully attempted to prevent the outbreak of violence on the streets and in the communities. The violence of the word has continued and even escalated while the violence of the deed has to a large extent been curtailed. The Women's Coalition firmly believe that those who talk division and bitterness and betrayal must eventually take responsibility for their words; as the

many politically motivated prisoners and ex-prisoners, in this region have had to take responsibility for their deeds. and with the future of Northern Ireland still on a knife-edge the Women's coalition feels that there is little room for politically immature and irresponsible politicians. This irresponsibility also applies to our lack of political progress; the willingness of parties to tread water at the Talks, leaves a dangerous vacuum within our society.

Can I conclude by referring to the fact that the big battalions here in this room and indeed some in..... adjuncts, such as the UK Unionist Party have referred disparagingly to the little parties and the 'fringe parties' fringes we maybe are but at least we have come with a commitment that we the people of Northern Ireland - both Unionist and Nationalist - want a future that moves beyond distrust, and bitterness and division. We still have a belief that politics can heal as well as fester; and that the art of politics is the art of the possible.

I said at the beginning of my contribution that the Women's Coalition was guilty of optimism when it entered these Talks, I am happy to report that it is still guilty of optimism - if somewhat tempered by the experience of the months since June. We believe that we have little option but to work towards a reconvening of these Talks, with the very patient and skilful facilitation of our current Chairs, in a post election atmosphere that will be more settled on examining realistic options for the long-term, rather than fleeting short-term opportunism.