

# proposals on agenda for Ahern meeting

By Geraldine Kennedy,  
Political Correspondent

THE British Prime Minister has personally drawn up a paper on the structure and workings of North-South bodies, the most difficult component of the agreement on Northern Ireland.

Mr Tony Blair's paper, drafted over the weekend, has been presented to the Ulster Unionist leader, Mr David Trimble. Mr Blair's North-South structure would provide for "implementation" bodies.

It is understood Mr Blair took considerable trouble to set out, and understand, the way in which devolved powers, such as trade and tourism, would operate in the North-South structure.

Mr Trimble's reaction to the paper will be discussed by the Taoiseach, Mr Ahern, and Mr Blair at a special Anglo-Irish meeting in 10 Downing Street tonight.

The "summit" has been arranged to give time to assess the state of the negotiations. It is expected to last four hours and only a short statement will be issued afterwards.

The Taoiseach signalled in the Dáil yesterday the gulf to be bridged between the Government and the Unionists in the next nine days. There were still difficulties with the proposed assembly, he said, though not necessarily from the Government's point of view.

The North-South dimension was still "a very difficult area". The constitutional questions had yet to be agreed though they had been teased out extensively.

But it is understood the Government is experiencing considerable difficulty in securing the UUP's agreement for changes in policing in the North.

With 18 six-seat constituencies in the North for the assembly elections, a new difficulty has also arisen over the prospects of the smaller parties winning seats. The Government is looking for a mechanism to have these parties represented.

There is also a growing fear in Government circles that, with a deadline of tomorrow week for reaching agreement, pressure may be placed on Mr Ahern to "split the difference", so to speak, in the participants negotiating positions on the North-South structure.

This has engendered the belief that striking a consensus between the two positions, in the end, would be insufficient to secure voters' support for changes to articles 2 and 3 of the Consti-

## INSIDE

Talks Deadline — analysis by  
Frank Millar  
Billy Hutchinson interview  
page 6

Wide gap on new NI assembly  
RUC criticised in UN report  
SDLP seeks cabinet to head  
North assembly  
page 7

ious to secure a signal from the Prime Minister tonight that the Unionists will be prepared to sign up to a powerful North-South structure in the agreement. This has not yet been forthcoming.

Meanwhile, the Taoiseach was questioned in the Dáil about his proposal for a Border poll every five years on the status of Northern Ireland. The Fine Gael leader, Mr John Bruton, asked how this would contribute to the stability required to ensure that North-South and internal arrangements worked harmoniously initially.

The Democratic Left leader, Mr Proinsias De Rossa, said the idea that demographics would be the trigger for holding a poll would be obnoxious.

Mr Ahern said the idea of regular Border polls had been around for years and had been discussed in the talks. "I see these proposals as something that could happen in time," he added.

The Government now believes it may be Monday before it can assess the prospects of agreement. The Northern talks chairman, Senator George Mitchell, has set tomorrow as the deadline for making progress. A revised synthesis paper may be produced on Friday.



Front page  
Cash Times  
1.4.98

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## Coalition calls for 'top up' elections

By William Graham

THE Women's Coalition yesterday called for a top-up system in elections to a new Northern Assembly and claimed that the UUP, SDLP and Alliance were trying to share power only amongst themselves.

The argument inside the talks process is over whether there should be an STV system of five or six seats per constituency; or if there should be a top-up list type of election similar to that used for the Forum poll.

Monica McWilliams of Women's Coalition said that during the course of meetings it had become clear that the UUP, SDLP and Alliance saw no advantage in having the smaller parties as part of any future assembly.

"They want to share power, but only amongst themselves. To call that democracy is to stretch the word far beyond its original meaning.

"The UUP, SDLP and Alliance are planning to stitch this up in order to keep out the very voices which have helped move the process forward from the deadlock of the last 30 years," she said.

The Coalition said that the UDP, PUP and Labour would also favour a top-up system.

Alliance's Eileen Bell said that it was plain that the Women's Coalition wanted an appointee system rather than an electoral system.

"Their proposals are totally unacceptable to other parties. If they want to get women into politics they should follow the example of those of us who are prepared to stand for election on the same basis as everyone else.

"For the last 20 years Alliance have been proposing an electoral system that allows for the fairest possible representation of the electorate and we are in no way interested in stitching up any party. At the end of the day, who gets elected will be up to the voters," Mrs Bell said.

### McWilliams to voice opinion

TELEPHONE diplomacy was set to continue today with the Women's Coalition due to speak with British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Monica McWilliams said last night they would raise the issue of strong north-south structures and a Northern Ireland assembly which should also have a civic chamber which she said would create stability.

Last night Mr Blair also spoke to Ulster Democratic Party leader Gary McMichael by phone.

Mr McMichael said he told Mr Blair that the "lack of realism" within nationalism surrounding cross-border structures must be redressed.

There are difficulties, of course, in any power-sharing system, but the 1974 executive is not a bad model, leaving aside the contentious question of the Council of Ireland, which never came into operation. The unionists and the SDLP combined well together as ministers, and for the UUP to suggest that they could do an equally effective job in a committee format is not credible. Nationalists inevitably see this as a way of maintaining unionist domination and avoiding true power-sharing — as is the case in Belfast City Council, which uses the same system.

If devolution of power from London is the aim, as it should be, there is no substitute for a locally-based legislature, with all the checks and balances in decision-making to ensure that both communities feel a part of it. At the same time, there must be a realistic assessment of the potential for parties linked with paramilitary organisations to corrupt the system. The Mitchell principles must survive the conclusion of the Stormont talks and a review procedure should be put in place so that parties connected to acts of violence or threats can be debarred.

The contribution of the smaller parties — and especially the loyalists — has been important to the talks process, but it will be difficult to ensure their survival in a normal electoral system. Some provision should be made for them, but not below a certain percentage vote.

As for the powers to be given to north-south bodies, these will be dependent on the powers of the assembly representatives, who must be at a disadvantage compared to ministers of the Irish government. In the initial stages, at least, the cross-border links will be largely symbolic, as they will exist between two distinct states, with different laws, policies, taxes and currencies — many of them still moving further apart. In the same way, the Council of the Isles may not be the threat, or the saviour, that it is seen in some quarters.

The whole edifice will stand or fall, according to the wording of the changes in the Irish Constitution, to eliminate the territorial claim and at the same time to guarantee Irish nationality to those who want it, north of the border. If there is a failure, for domestic reasons, to meet reasonable unionist objections, or to pass the referendum with a sufficient margin, the new deal may never get off the ground.

Mr Blair and Mr Ahern have an onerous responsibility on their shoulders, as they prepare for a final assault on the perennial problem. But so have the parties, given the choice between guaranteed uncertainty and potential disaster.

Ann - the BT editorial

RBin



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## Tough talking

**LONDON MEETING:** *Mr Blair and Mr Ahern must show leadership skills*

**T**HE focus switches from Stormont to London tonight, as Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern sit down to finalise their ideas for the proposals that will be put to the parties. There are several issues on which sharp divisions have emerged, namely the structures and functions of an assembly; the powers of a north-south council and its relationship with the Council of the Isles; and reciprocal changes in the Irish Constitution and the Government of Ireland Act.

All have the capacity to sabotage an agreement, but are not insuperable, if political leaders accept their responsibility to lead. The make-up of an assembly is fundamental to the whole process, since it is designed both to fill the democratic deficit and to provide the arena where political reconciliation between unionists and nationalists can take place.

Initial exchanges show that unionists would prefer a minimalist administrative assembly, operating through departmental committees, while nationalists want a full-scale legislature, with a power-sharing executive on Sunningdale lines. Each have their reasons — to minimise or maximise the powers of the north-south bodies to which representatives would be sent — but there is little doubt what the voters would desire. They want workable, effective governmental structures that will take back responsibility from unaccountable civil servants and will provide all the safeguards needed by both communities

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*Pro fide et patria*

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# Women have a case to put

IT was disappointing to hear suggestions yesterday that some of the larger political groups involved in the Stormont talks are pressing for an electoral system which would effectively exclude smaller parties from any new Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Ulster Unionists in particular are said to be advocating a 90-member body, consisting of five representatives from each of the 18 constituencies.

Such an arrangement would mean that both the Progressive Unionist and Ulster Democratic parties would have difficulty securing any seats in the assembly, while the Women's Coalition and the Labour group would have practically no chance of getting a candidate elected.

It may well be that the established political forces regard the smaller groups as something of an irritation, and would prefer to see the back of them.

It also has to be accepted that the mainstream groups still hold the support of the vast majority of the electorate.

At the same time, even those who would not necessarily give a first preference vote to the smaller parties would recognise the substantial contribution they have made over the last two years.

Both the PUP and the UDP have made a notable impact through their fresh and dynamic approach to unionist politics.

The UDP had to recover from its temporary exclusion from the talks earlier this year but has returned to argue its case in robust terms.

Labour has been hit by a split in its ranks but has at least succeeded in making sure that the voice of the left was heard at Castle Buildings.

However, one of the most unexpected developments over recent year has been the emergence of the Women's Coalition as a force to be reckoned with.

None of the established parties can deny that women have consistently been seriously under-represented in electoral politics

The leading 21 posts available, 18 at Westminster and three in the European Parliament, are all in male hands.

Women are involved in all the main parties, but are seldom if ever given the opportunity to contest the safe seats.

Indeed, it is almost 30 years since a woman, Bernadette Devlin, last topped the poll at an important election within Northern Ireland.

Given this history, the progress made by the Women's Coalition has been significant.

Coalition members have not had an easy time since their launch, and were singled out for particularly crude abuse from DUP figures in the early days of the forum.

The women stood their ground and have since proved that they are politicians of determination and substance.

If the new body is elected through a 'top-up' system, the coalition would in all probability be represented there.

The assembly would be a poorer place if the coalition is denied the opportunity to state its case.

# Women's Coalition criticises planned electoral system

By Theresa Judge

THE Women's Coalition has accused the biggest three parties at the Stormont talks of planning to "stitch up" the smaller parties and keep them out of an assembly by their choice of an electoral system.

Ms Monica McWilliams said it had become clear during meetings that the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists and the Alliance Party saw no advantage in having the smaller parties in the assembly. The issue will be raised today at a meeting between the Women's Coalition and the British Prime Minister, Mr Tony Blair.

Under the electoral system favoured by the biggest three parties, it is very unlikely that the Women's Coalition would win any seat in an assembly, and the Ulster Democratic Party also could have difficulty getting a seat. The Progressive Unionist Party and the Labour grouping are the other two small parties.

"The UUP, the SDLP and Alliance are planning a stitch-up in order to keep out the very voices which have helped move the process forward from the deadlock of the last 30 years," Ms McWilliams said.

The Women's Coalition said it appeared that the bigger parties had agreed a PR system with 18 five-seat constituencies.

The coalition is arguing for six-seat constituencies with a "top-



Ms Monica McWilliams: to raise issue with Mr Blair

up" element for at least the first election to the assembly. This system would give at least two seats to each of the 10 parties which get the most votes. Such a system was used for the election to the Forum for Political Dialogue and for entry to the peace talks two years ago.

Ms McWilliams said this system was in use in nine European countries and in South Africa.

The Alliance Party rejected the accusation, saying it had proposed "an electoral system that allowed for the fairest possible representation". Mr Seamus Mallon of the SDLP said there was no final decision yet on a method of election.

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# Participants play cards close to their chests

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ified with outlines: they wanted the Full Monty. They wanted their lawyers to pass the new text to ensure it was "judge-proof", and there could be no further question of Dublin being under a constitutional imperative to seek Irish unity.

At least that was the unionist position in public. As with other participants, one wondered to what extent their statements could be taken as face value. They must know there is little or no sentimental attachment to the present Articles 2 and 3 in the Dublin camp, and there would be little

hesitation trading a couple of used wordings for a respectable North-South body any day of the week. Indeed, there was an expectation among talks insiders that Dublin could well agree to remove the reference in draft amendments to having a "firm will" to achieve Irish unity. There was speculation that this might appease the unionists. Besides, references to "firm will" were seen as more appropriate to the central Europe in the 1930s than to liberal, progressive modern Ireland.

Mr Gerry Adams, fresh from a

## TALKS DEADLINE: APRIL 9th

### As activity at the Northern talks acquired what one participant called 'unbelievable' intensity, Deaglán de Bréadún, Northern Editor, assesses the state of play in the multi-party negotiations



McWilliams and her colleagues. This sideshow will run for a while yet. The Women's Coalition will be raising the matter, among others, with the Prime Minister today. And it will be surprising if Dr Mo Mowlam fails to show some gender solidarity on this issue.

There was a definite smell of practical politics about this little row. If politicians are fighting over the allocation of seats it is a sure sign that a deal is in the offing and that the much-heralded assembly might prove more than a mirage.

From the real world outside, news came in of a new peace-line being built on Belfast's Whitewell Road. That is the reality the new administration will have to face, if it ever gets off the ground. The Taoiseach was reported to be talking tough in advance of his meeting with Mr Blair, sowing doubts over the possibility that a united Anglo-Irish position would emerge from the meeting. This could have knock-on effects for the outline agreement Senator George Mitchell is expected to produce by the weekend.

Although nobody is prepared to

say it on the record, the real bottom line for many participants in the talks is that whatever emerges must not provoke the IRA and the mainstream loyalists to end their ceasefires.

For good or ill, the entire process was built on the absence of shooting and bombing from these groups; and if an agreement is successful the reality, however regrettable, is that the men and women in balaclavas must be prepared at least to acquiesce in its operation if not actively support it.

For that reason, observers say, it is highly unlikely the nationalist side can agree a cut-and-paste deal, cobbled together at the last minute with the Ulster Unionists. There has to be significant change in the position of Northern nationalists expressed primarily through a North-South body with *de facto* executive powers.

So far, the hardline position of the unionists has proved disappointing for the nationalist side. ("There is no sense of convergence", one source said), and there were growing if unspoken doubts over Mr Blair's willingness and capacity to bring about a unionist change of heart.

one participant called "unbelievable" intensity. The SDLP, for example, took part in meetings yesterday with the UUP (twice); the three chairmen (twice); the loyalist parties; Sinn Féin; the Alliance Party; and the decommissioning committee.

The Women's Coalition was fighting a vociferous rearguard action for an electoral system which would give smaller parties like themselves a chance of being represented in the new assembly. However, bigger parties were doing their best to grease the slide into political oblivion for Monica