

DEVELOPMENT ISSUES FOR THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

Confidential Membership Paper
by Gerry Gribben, Training Team

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1. Introduction:

I have written this short paper with the intention of stimulating internal debate among members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition about our processes and future development. We have learned much from our involvement in the mainstream political process. While I do not claim to speak for all, one of the most repeated remarks I have heard most from people was that it was enormously exciting but enormously demanding - emotionally, physically and financially.

In the year and a half of our existence much of our focus has been on Elections, then the Forum and the Talks. It has not been on our own political development. Much time and energy has been spent. With the welcome move into Substantive Issues yet more time and energy will be required, especially of those women in our Coalition who have to date given so much.

Some discussion on where we want to go, and how we are to get there, needs to happen. This discussion can, I suggest, go on in heads and in the form of papers or indeed articles to our newsletter. I am not suggesting more meetings. But it must somehow take place.

2. Context:

Our present mandate

At the moment we have a special mandate to speak for those who voted for us - almost 8,000 people. That mandate has allowed us or rather 2 women to speak for us at the Talks table. A further mandate we have or one of our number has - Anne Carr, who has been elected a W. Coalition representative on Newcastle District Council.

Achievements: Obscurity to public prominence in 365 days

- * We have fought three elections in our first year of existence.
- * We have been successful in getting three women elected to public office, raising the whole issue of women's invisibility from the NI political scene, pressurised other parties, generated discussion, got loads of attention, and sustained three offices and two representatives at the Forum and Peace Talks.
- * We have produced a significant number of reports, made numerous foreign visits including to America and S. Africa, done dozens of interviews, attended numerous conferences, run a number ourselves, given dozens of talks, run our public meetings, raised thousands of pounds to pay our way, taken a public stand on many contentious issues, taken women "of the street" and persuaded and trained them for public office....

All this on a kind of "wing and a prayer" and yet with a political instinct that was unerring and with much skill, inherent ability and significant amounts of pure courage.

Addressing needs, focusing on our development

In the last Training Needs Analysis most people said that they wanted the Coalition to:

- * get into mainstream politics
- * get women into local councils
- * help to develop women politically.

Most people specifically asked for training to deal with the media and understanding mainstream politics. We have tried to supply these. However I believe we need to focus on our own political development. To date we have not come to terms with the following:

- * There has been no in depth-discussion among the membership about our input into the Talks and what we wish to see as part of the Settlement. Do we know our bottom line - indeed do we know our starting line? We have talked much about process and criticised other political parties but what do WE want in the settlement and what demands are we making in terms of the representation of women at all levels of government and whatever structures are put in place.

Need to ask what our political future is

- * Our political future
- * Our internal organisation
- * Our model - party or popular Movement? *or something else?*

3. Issues for Consideration: Stresses and Strains

Avoiding differences: I think that we have avoided a lot of issues - like our political differences. Skill with media will come when we are all very clear about what we do believe and are strong and passionate about.

Living on the edge: Do we "muddle" along as a grouping hopefully able to inject enormous surges of woman power and energy when the need - like an election - arises or do we try to design our organisation to fit a number of purposes. The last election and particularly the local elections put immense stress on our internal resources and organisation and indeed put a number of people in very stressful situations. Woman power at every level was at a premium and that seems to me to be something we need to look at. I think that there needs to be greater coherency between our principles, processes and how we impact on NI politically.

Models of Effectiveness: There is no doubt we all wish to intervene in our society to make it a better place but in this instance we do need to think about how WE propose to do it. I suggest we have the principles of our philosophy and processes in our manifesto but I do think that we need to look at some models to make our intervention more effective. Our present model has worked - indeed even been highly effective under strain but could it cope with say another election?

Personally speaking On a personal note I would never wish to go into an election - particularly a local election - as unprepared as we were for the last local election. Had we had some kind of internal structure, and I acknowledge the efforts of all who did try to co-ordinate central support - we might have had more women elected. I feel we lost potential candidates at that point. One of the reasons I did not stand was because I knew I did not have the resources to support myself and my other sisters in the field as well.

While I have not been deeply involved in the Forum or Talks Process as have other sisters - all of which has given some of us great opportunity for hands-on political experience and indeed a lot of hard work, commitment and headaches - what I am hearing at grass roots level, from women in rural areas I happen to meet at other conferences or other events, from women in urban areas keen to do something to improve their own communities, is that there is a lot of support out there we haven't tapped.

- * Do we need a broader base ? Perhaps a recruitment drive ? -
- * Do we need more money ? Perhaps a series of fund raising events (excluding bank robberies).
- * Do we need more paid workers or people with more specific responsibilities ?
- * Do we need to consider our day-to-day decision making or delegate or "elect" people for certain periods?
- * How do we become accountable to each other without being oppressive to each ?

What worries me about the demands of the Forum and the Talks is the amount of time and energy, skills and personnel needed by us to sustain them. I do not suggest any deduction or reduction in Forum or Talks personnel but am simply recognising that we need another tier or rear guard not involved in those places to carry on the normal developing of our political constituency if we are to have a future.

The membership of the Coalition as it stands is at 500 but where are they ? Have we a very dormant membership or are we losing people? We need to activate those people who are not in the Peace Talks and give or negotiate a purpose and meaning for them to be more actively involved. I do not say this in a recriminatory way - women, overcommitted, we probably just get tired. I ask all this because like most of you I believe that there is much for us to do and many opportunities opening up. How do we build on our achievements and make ourselves more effective internally and externally.

4. Where do we go from here ?

This question has continually cropped up in informal discussions with NIWC members and others. My impression of people's perceptions of and motives for being in or supporting the NIWC was that it was perceived as new, "a breath of fresh air"; it had sound, well-thought-out policies and was determined to put women on all political agendas as well as to speak for the people who voted for us. I also have the impression that people wanted it to last. That brings us to another fundamental question. Is the NIWC here to stay. Will it last beyond the Talks process ?

Provisional decisions

I do not disassociate our political future from the Talks for I believe our performance there will help to cement our political future, but I also think that when peace comes - when NI becomes a sane political place - we will have to "fight" our corner on normal political issues. We need to be thinking about not only the terms of any settlement but what kind of Northern Ireland is going to emerge in the next few years and what is our role and the role of women in it.

- * Will our role be dependent on a Settlement - what if there isn't one ?
- * How will we get a mandate when the Peace Talks end ?
- * How do we find ways to make our political vision felt ?
- * Are there other mainstream structures by which we can be effective - either individually or collectively, ie as a Coalition ?

So, it seems we have TWO fundamental questions to ask:

1. Do we wish to intervene in mainstream politics in the accepted and traditional ways ie Local Government and Representation at whatever Political structure (elected Assembly ?) that is the outcome of the Talks ?
2. How will our internal organisation facilitate the model of intervention we choose ? (I am not suggesting our present open organic structure doesn't serve us quite well but it has flaws.)

5. Resources

To answer some of these questions it seems to me that RESOURCES have an important part to play. By Resources I simply mean: time, money, skills and people.

- Do we use our people resources effectively ?
- What do we need from our members ?
- Do we need more members or more commitment or both ?
- Do we need to start targeting certain women or all women for political office ?
- > What can we offer potential members or indeed potential councillors or MPS ?

All this is asking YOU to think very concretely about very basic issues.

Some recommendations for development:

It seems to me that our most serious problem is women power and yet everywhere I go women are telling me how excited and heartened they are by the existence of the Coalition, and how appalled and angry our treatment by some of our local politicians has made them. We need those women. I propose a Recruitment Drive.

- * It could be as simple as everyone who is now a member of the Coalition "converting" ONE person and getting them to sign up.
- * We change the Training Unit into a Political Development group, with other members.
- * We set up a small group (same group) who are not involved in anything else to visit groups of women to talk about how they could set up small NIWC groups to begin to build in their local areas for the next elections. (If we decide to be around ?) There we will have a strong local support group for a candidate that could run almost autonomously.)
- * We make a decision about our political status.
- * We endorse a Constitution (for the Coalition).
- * We target women in our community and in conjunction with those communities consider them for political careers.
- * Have free membership to all women under 25 years and a special focus on "selling" the Coalition to younger women.
- * List what "perks" we can offer women - in terms of training, opportunities, visits, for example.
- * We draw up a time table of targets to be achieved from now Oct 97 - to June 98.

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- maybe include something on membership form: what are you like to work on? what would you like to get out of the coalition etc.

I am not expecting immediate answers to this paper nor is it intended to be a Five Year Plan. However, we need long term plans. We have a constituency out there but we need to reach them - we need to determine our internal workings and what and where we want to be in five years' time. I have deliberately set the timescale at six months to allow space for reassessing the political climate. We may only want to continue on the political until then or we may respond to the community need of a women's political "party".