

NI Women's Coalition: A New Voice for New Times

On May 22, the women of Northern Ireland delivered a clear message to their political leaders. They want a future that moves Northern Ireland away from conflict, a future where people and politicians work together in a spirit of partnership, to a future based on problem-solving and progress.

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

We share these values. We also know they can work. We have been making them into practice for the past few years. We have proved it is possible to work with all parties in a spirit of partnership to solve our historical constitutional problems. We have done that, here, it is time to make the same happen in the rest of Northern Ireland.

A NEW VOICE FOR NEW TIMES

Our diverse backgrounds, beliefs and views, young and old, academic, religious and others, every decision we have made has been on the basis of agreement reached between people coming from these diverse perspectives. This is the way the Assembly will have to work. We look forward to playing our part in making it happen.

We signed the Talks Agreement because we believed that the political process could lead to a better future. We have not forgotten the principles of HUMAN RIGHTS, INCLUSION and EQUALITY.

MANIFESTO

We are pleased that we persuaded other political parties of the value of these principles, and intend that we proceed to implement them. In particular, we were specifically able to secure the following:

ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

1998

- A commitment to community development
- Recognition of women's rights and needs
- Recognition of the role of integrated housing and education in the constitution
- Establishment of a Civic Forum
- The right of women to full and equal participation

The Agreement has provided the platform for peace. We are determined to enter the Assembly to promote the concerns that will underpin this peace. These are concerns that really matter to people on the ground. They are concerns that have been left on the political back burner for too long. The basis of a democratic society is an adequate social safety net. A decent standard of health, education and social services is a right for all, not a privilege for those who can afford them.

It's time to catch up, time to review us. It is time to include women in our political representation.

The NI Women's Coalition is a new voice for new times.

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On May 22, the voters of Northern Ireland delivered a clear message to their political leaders. They want a future that moves Northern Ireland away from conflict, a future where people and politicians work together in a spirit of partnership, to a future based on problem solving and progress.

We share these values. We also know they can work. We have been putting them into practice for the past two years. We have proved it is possible to work with all parties in a spirit of partnership to solve our common constitutional problems. We have done that. Now, it is time to make the Agreement work.

The Women's Coalition is truly cross-community. Our members are women and men from diverse backgrounds: rural and urban; young and old; nationalist, unionist and others. Every decision we have made has been on the basis of agreement reached between people coming from these diverse perspectives. This is the way the Assembly will have to work. We look forward to playing our part in making it happen.

We entered the Talks determined to produce an Agreement that all sections of the community could feel they owned. Since our formation in 1996, we have worked hard to promote our three core principles: HUMAN RIGHTS, INCLUSION and EQUALITY.

We are pleased that we persuaded other political parties of the value of these principles, and, indeed that we placed them at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. In particular we were specifically able to secure:

- A commitment to community development
- Recognition of victim's rights and needs
- Recognition of the role of integrated housing and education in reconciliation
- Establishment of a Civic Forum
- The right of women to full and equal participation

The Agreement has provided the platform for peace. We are determined to enter the Assembly to promote the concerns that will underpin that peace. These are concerns that really matter to people on the ground. They are concerns that have been left on the political back burner for too long. The basis of a democratic society is an adequate social safety net. A decent standard of health, education and social services is a right for all, not a privilege for those who can afford them.

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Investing in Education

Cutting education funding -- at any level from pre-school to university -- is a false economy. Not only is education a right in itself, but countries that invest more in education, research and development also have the healthiest economies over the long term.

The NI Women's Coalition stands for:

A commitment to adequate education spending: We welcome the Government's recent commitment to additional capital spending. However, the history of inadequate support has left a legacy of substandard accommodation, which undermines the morale of both teachers and pupils.

A reverse to cuts in funding for libraries: Libraries are the most frequently used public service in this country. More than half of Northern Ireland's population is library-users, with 10.5 million books borrowed last year. We would like to see extended IT and Internet services available through libraries so that they are not restricted to those who can afford them privately. Cuts in library services have the most detrimental effect on the unemployed and low-waged. Libraries also provide one of the very few 'neutral' public spaces in our communities.

A comprehensive review of the Transfer Exam ('11 plus') system: There is growing concern regarding the impact of the Transfer examination on primary school children. Recent research has shown parents of school children to be deeply unhappy with the current system. The Transfer test puts huge pressure on parents - particularly to provide private tuition and it reinforces social inequalities. Schools' curricula are skewed by the requirements of the examination. The Transfer test impacts on the long-term development of children; in particular the self-esteem of young people deemed 'failures' at such an early age. We believe these concerns are valid and must be addressed with a comprehensive review of the Transfer system.

Greater consultation with teachers: Teachers are increasingly expected to deliver government-set targets for achievement, without adequate backup in terms of training and long-term planning. We also feel that there must be a greater commitment to developing appropriate policies for early school leavers, and young people whose needs are not served by current educational structures.

Educational opportunities at all life-stages: Learning is a life-long affair. We will work to ensure that appropriate pre-school and early years provision is available to every child. Every parent should have the opportunity to send their children to a school with an integrated ethos. And continuing educational opportunities must also be available to adults of all ages.

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Promoting Health and Social Services

Good health should be acknowledged as a basic right for everyone. The greatest contribution to improving health will be through reducing inequalities in income and opportunity. Health cannot be considered in isolation. Every government policy has an impact on health and well-being. The Women's Coalition advocates health and social services policy driven by an emphasis on prevention, the provision of good primary care and high quality and accessible services. We strongly support the maintenance and development of a comprehensive, publicly funded service.

The NI Women's Coalition stands for:

Protecting Public Health: The Women's Coalition calls for a separate Minister for Environmental Protection and Public Health. Poverty, violence, unemployment, environmental problems such as pollution, and lack of social support are key factors which affect health. Public health cannot be separated from the effects of social welfare and economic policies. A minister with combined responsibilities for environmental protection and public health would assess the effect of all public policies on health and the environment, as well as driving the public health agenda forward. Food safety, the impact of industrial development and hazardous waste disposal, and the effects of biotechnology on food crops, would fall under the remit of this department.

Getting care to people who need it: Good primary care is the basic foundation of comprehensive health and social services provision. Dialogue between providers and users is needed to produce an appropriate balance between centralised and local services. Some services are more appropriately provided at local level, and patients and their families are often more comfortable when services are available nearby. Local multi-disciplinary primary care teams are an excellent way of organising health care at this level. However, where centralised provision can provide a higher standard of care, this must be recognised and developed.

Consultation with health care providers is crucial to ensure they do their jobs effectively. Many staff report that increasing emphasis on task management and efficiency is having a detrimental effect on the 'human side' of patient care, as they do not have enough time to spend talking to patients and their families.

The valuable work of nursing must be reflected with job security and an adequate level of pay, comparable with other public sector workers -- this is a matter of "Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value."

We believe there is scope for more extensive co-operation with the Republic of Ireland, particularly in many border areas.

Supporting Carers: Carers play an invaluable and vital role in health and social services. This should be more widely recognised. The 15% of women, and the many men, in Northern Ireland who provide essential care for sick, elderly and disabled relatives must be supported through the allocation of benefits and appropriate services, such as respite care.

Emphasising prevention: The Women's Coalition is committed to the promotion of good health and the prevention of disease. Education for healthy life-styles and sport and recreation provision for people of all ages are essential elements of this goal. There is a particular need to ensure that efforts are made to develop initiatives which address issues relating to men's health. Recent reports on the high suicide rate among young men raise an issue of real concern which must be addressed urgently through school based programmes, early recognition of anxiety and depression and support services.

The issue of reproductive choice is a difficult one. We are committed to working for a situation where women have greater control over their lives, so fewer women are faced with an unwanted pregnancy. This means we support effective and comprehensive sex education, affordable and accessible contraception and an end to violence against women. The Women's Coalition believes a broad discussion and a thorough review of policy and legislation in relation to reproductive services in Northern Ireland is needed.

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Supporting Children and Families

The Women's Coalition believes that families in all their various forms are the building blocks for society. Placing children and families at the heart of government policy is our clear objective. We will work to develop family-friendly policies.

A dedicated Minister for Children and Families: The work of raising children benefits the whole of society. That work must be recognised, valued and supported through government policies and programmes. A Minister for Children and Families would be responsible for ensuring that the interests of children and parents were properly served through the allocation of resources and support services. Every child should be entitled to free pre-school education, and high-quality, publicly funded child-care must be available to all who need it. Caring for children is often stereotyped as a 'women's issue.' The Women's Coalition believes that fathers should also be supported in playing an active role in raising their children. We will work for statutory provisions to enable both parents to take significant periods of parental leave, without being professionally penalised.

Equality for young people: Young people are not just the citizens of tomorrow, they are citizens of today and must be treated as such. Young people need better access to decision makers -- it is they who understand best the challenges that they are facing. They know what needs to be done to move their issues forward. The Women's Coalition is determined that the **Civic Forum** will offer a good avenue of communication between elected representatives and representatives of community-based organisations, including those run by and for young people.

Serving the needs of senior citizens: The Women's Coalition will work for policies designed to ensure all senior citizens are respected and adequately supported through a combination of benefits and services. Concerns about safety and security must be addressed. People have the right to be active into their older years -- this must be recognised through provision of appropriate community recreational services. Services are needed to enable elderly people to stay in their own homes as long as possible.

Eradicating poverty: It is unacceptable that children born into poor circumstances have over 25% higher chance of dying in their first year of life than babies of those who are better off. Fighting poverty, especially as it affects children, is at the top of the Women's Coalition agenda: it is completely unacceptable that one in three of our children lives in poverty. We will lobby for an immediate improvement in benefits and an end to restrictive benefit measures. We call for an end to the indirect taxation of necessities and for the creation of a fairer income tax structure.

Ending violence in all its forms: The Women's Coalition is dedicated to ending all forms of violence. As we move from conflict to peace, resources must be redirected towards ending violence against women and children. The Women's Coalition will continue to prioritise women's needs for housing and social services -- a key factor in their ability to remove themselves and their children out of violent situations. We will press for a thorough review of all areas of the criminal justice system, with a view to eradicating and preventing domestic violence.

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Protecting the Environment

Our built and natural environments are major influences on our health and wellbeing. The NI Women's Coalition supports the concept of sustainable development – that economic and social development should safeguard the environment and wellbeing of future generations at the same time as meeting today's needs. We also support the principle of "the polluter pays."

The NI Women's Coalition stands for:

Promoting Sustainable Development: The challenge of sustainable development is a crucial issue, which has emerged, in recent years. The NI Women's Coalition supports the aim of managing all social and economic activities to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the needs of future generations.

An important step is ensuring that the environmental and health impact of all government policies is assessed. We propose a separate Minister for Environmental Protection and Public Health to carry this forward.

Achieving Targets for Environmental Protection: The NI Women's Coalition believes that targets for the reduction of air pollution should be widely publicised. We will support local and national action to achieve these targets.

The Women's Coalition believes that efforts to reduce waste production and recycle waste should be developed and encouraged. We particularly support the efforts being made by local government under the umbrella of Agenda 21.

Promoting Integrated Transport Policy: The NI Women's Coalition supports an efficient and sustainable transport policy. This means increasing the attractiveness of public transport, reducing reliance on private cars and strengthening transport links. Public transport, especially rail services, is seriously underdeveloped and poorly funded. The NI Women's Coalition believes that advocacy for public transport has been missing in Northern Ireland. Efforts to ensure that community representatives and users of transport services are involved in planning services are rare and inadequate.

Many people do not own private cars. There is a particular need to ensure access to public transport for those whose needs are often ignored – elderly people, people with a disability, women with small children and people living in rural areas. We particularly support efforts to promote cycling, such as cycling lanes and provision for carriage and security.

Initiatives such as traffic calming, bus lanes, integrated ticketing, better customer information and local transport packages are all important ways in which moves to public transport could be encouraged. Efforts to improve road safety are particularly welcome.

The Women's Coalition support efforts to improve road and rail networks across Northern Ireland and throughout the island of Ireland. Air and sea links also need to be maintained and developed.

Joint Planning: The Women's Coalition supports the extensive consultation exercise being undertaken to develop a regional strategic plan, Shaping Our Future. We acknowledge the importance of inter-departmental and multi-sector planning. But we believe that there is a clear need to ensure that the needs of women, those living in rural areas and people with disabilities are not ignored in this exercise.

Addressing Housing Needs: Demographic change over the next 25 years will mean an increasing number of single-person households and numbers of elderly people. Their needs must be taken into account in housing planning. Most urban growth is housing led and while it is important that all towns have the opportunity to receive new housing development, this must be balanced against environmental objectives.

Maximising Sustainable Energy: A sustainable energy policy, which maximises energy efficiency and reduces consumption of non-renewable sources is an important objective. The Women's Coalition supports efforts to use innovative power sources and encourage energy conservation.

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Securing Economic Development

Economic development is crucial in order to create sustainable jobs and a competitive industrial base. However, it must also be environmentally sustainable and bring real benefits to the community. Economic development is clearly necessary to counteract the serious levels of unemployment in many areas in Northern Ireland. However, the Women's Coalition does not believe in jobs at any cost. "Cheap labour" and a lack of long term commitment to the local area must never be incentives for investment. All economic development should be pursued with the clear aim of eradicating poverty and inequality.

The NI Women's Coalition stands for:

Government policy that emphasises *positive* incentives to investment: a committed and productive work force fostered by good pay and conditions; highly trained workers, underpinned by investment in education, research and development; incentives for investors who offer long-term, environmentally sustainable and locally appropriate prospects.

Greater emphasis on local small and medium sized enterprises: While there is a place for larger, international firms, we cannot rely on them to be a panacea for all our problems. Local industry is both effective in terms of job creation and has a stronger commitment to the local area. Such businesses need customised grant-aid, free from red tape and every assistance in accessing international markets. Specialist local businesses can provide distinctive attractions to tourists. We believe that enhanced support to such areas as the arts and cultural activities could bring similar benefits.

Targeting social need: We welcome the government initiatives aimed at targeting the areas of greatest social need. Addressing problems of long term unemployment, inter-generational deprivation and uneven economic development must be a top priority. Similarly, industries must be given every support in implementing equality measures.

Better wages and working conditions and family-friendly policies: Women continue to earn, on average, one-third less than men, with a number of recent policies, such as compulsory competitive tendering, acting to increase that gap. We will work to reverse these trends and to create programmes that result in a real closure of the wage gap. Women make up three quarters of part time workers. Working part-time can be a positive choice for many people, but they must not be disadvantaged with lower wages, job insecurity, ceilings on promotion, or inadequate benefits.

The Women's Coalition wants to see an end to job insecurity and poverty wages for all workers: women or men, and workers of any age. The Low Pay Commission's proposed £3.60/hour minimum wage would benefit 142,000 workers -- 72% of them women. A rate of £4.00 would mean gains for another 27,000 women, and less than half that number of men. The Women's Coalition supports the TUC call for a minimum wage above the £4/hour mark. Proposals to set a different standard for younger workers are completely unacceptable.

Labour regulations for all workers -- full or part-time -- must recognise and support the unpaid work of caring for families, and both parents must be eligible for realistic periods of parental leave. Northern Ireland is woefully lacking in publicly-funded child-care, with the lowest rate of provision in Europe. High-quality, affordable day-care should be available to all who need it.

Improved transport infrastructure across Ireland: An integrated, cross-border public transport system can benefit consumers, reduce traffic congestion and pollution and -- if it is run on a cross-border basis -- enhance tourism potential North and South. The Women's Coalition advocates improved road-rail links throughout Ireland as a means of encouraging internal and cross-border trade. We also support similar initiatives on an East-West basis, for example, improved road-sea links between Northern Ireland and Scotland, as well as between the East and West of this island.

Supporting the Farming Economy: The Women's Coalition recognises that agriculture is the sustaining industry within the rural economy. We also recognise the importance of the farming family as an economic unit within rural areas and the particular contribution made by women. We will work to ensure the legacy of family farming and the recognition of the work of women within this economy. The Women's Coalition will work to ensure that farmers have continued support following the impact of the BSE crisis. The interests of farmers and the agribusiness sector will be best served if consumers have confidence in their produce. The Women's Coalition will continue to argue for the establishment of an effective Food Safety Agency. A proper debate is needed on the advantages and risks of the introduction of biotechnology. This matter would fall within the remit of our proposed Minister for Environmental Protection and Public Health.

Agricultural production systems need to be restructured in the light of market trends and the restructuring of the CAP and Agenda 2000. Research and development should focus on identifying the opportunities available to the agricultural industry. National advisory services should be expanded and targeted to the most vulnerable members of the agricultural community. Due to its permanency and predominantly poorer quality land, Northern Ireland should continue to have Objective 1 Status.

Enhancing Community Regeneration: The Women's Coalition recognises the value and contribution of local development initiatives to social and economic regeneration in rural areas. Statutory provision and support should reflect and build upon this work. Policies for mainstreaming and financing worthwhile projects should be put in place. Financial support from the EU, central government and other sources should be linked to and secured for local initiatives.

Developing the Rural Economy: The manufacturing and service sectors must be developed as a way of increasing employment opportunities in the rural economy. The Women's Coalition believes that local indigenous industries should be promoted and supported. We will work for planning policies that reflect the need for sensitive industrial development.

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Supporting Agricultural and Rural Affairs

Many people live, work and grow old in rural areas. Their needs must be addressed through new policies and action to secure the economy and support people living in rural areas. The Women's Coalition recognises that agriculture, as a vital part of the Northern Ireland economy, needs to be sustained.

The Women's Coalition stands for:

Addressing the Social Economy of Rural Areas: There are many issues and problems associated with living and working in rural areas. We believe that people should not be disadvantaged by location. This means having equal access to services such as health and child-care, employment, education training housing and transport. It means that poverty and exclusion in rural areas must be addressed. We will work to ensure the maintenance and development of services and facilities, and the equitable allocation of resources, on rural areas.

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Developing the Rural Economy: The manufacturing and service sector must be developed as a way of increasing employment opportunities in the rural economy. The Women's Coalition believes that local indigenous industries should be promoted and supported. We will work for planning policies that reflect the need for sensitive industrial development.

Development agencies should adopt strategies to attract industry to rural areas, particularly those which are new and environmentally sensitive.

Sustaining the Environment: The Women's Coalition supports planning policies which reflect the need to protect the environment, while allowing people to live and work in rural areas. A particular issue is the need to address falling fish stocks. Inland and marine fish stocks need to be managed appropriately. The worldwide depletion of fish-stocks is a matter of urgent concern, however quotas should not be introduced without alternatives such as ecologically community-based aquaculture programmes. Our aim is to work towards a sensible and sensitive policy on rural land-use, which will ensure the protection of livelihoods and rural resources.

Cross-border benefits: The Women's Coalition believes that cross-border co-operation can bring benefits to the rural economy, for example there are opportunities for marketing and exporting agricultural produce, developing agricultural systems and planning socio-economic initiatives.

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Managing Finance and Personnel

The principles of equality and transparency and openness must apply to all budgetary decision-making.

The NI Women's Coalition stands for:

A budgetary emphasis on equality and social welfare: Decisions about the distribution of resources must be made in terms of where they can bring the greatest good. This means creating a society where all citizens have access to adequate income and services, to enable them to play a full and equal part in social and democratic life.

Adherence to the principle of additionality: The Department of Finance and Personnel has responsibility for the distribution of European Peace and Reconciliation funds. These were intended to be additional to existing government spending commitments. Real additionality means the creation of new projects in Northern Ireland's communities, but it can only be measured at the Treasury level. There must be greater government accountability to ensure that EU funding is not being used merely to fill in the gaps caused by cuts to core funding. There must be adequate planning for the period after the end of the Peace and Reconciliation Funds, to ensure that vital projects are not abandoned in mid-stream.

In addition to this, principles of Equity and Fair Treatment, as well as those of Targeting Social Need must inform the forthcoming submission on behalf of Northern Ireland for EU Structural Funds, 2000 – 2006.

Clear equality targets within the civil service: The DFP has responsibility for organising the competition for promotion to Senior Civil Service posts. We welcome recently introduced equality initiatives and call for an ongoing emphasis on policies designed to produce equality of opportunity and results.

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Partnership through the Civic Forum

The Civic Forum should be constituted with a view to ensuring equity in its composition, particularly in terms of gender balance and perceived community background. Rural as well as urban interests should be assured.

The Civic Forum, will provide an opportunity for the widest range of interests in Northern Ireland to engage constructively in the democratic process and with politicians.

It will assist in overcoming the difficulties in achieving democratic development in a divided society by augmenting the opportunity for active citizenship.

It will assist in embedding understanding of and respect for new political institutions within communities and among different sectoral interests and strands of life across Northern Ireland.

It will accelerate the impact of electoral and participative democratic processes and promote a style and level of interaction and involvement more suited to the new millennium.

It will provide an opportunity for a structured and strategic economic and social partnership between political representatives in the Assembly and specialist representatives from the Second Chamber.

It will contribute to the stability and sustainability of a political settlement by complementing the work of the Assembly and ensuring that a broad range of society has a stake in its operational and political success.

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Working for Equality and Social Justice

Rights, equality and justice lie at the heart of the conflict in Northern Ireland. This has been recognised in the Agreement. However, these issues will continue to test the Assembly and all other institutions.

Institutions must be **Inclusive** and reflect the diversity of communities in their make-up. They must adhere to international **Human Rights** standards. They must work towards **Equality** in the broadest sense of the word. These are the foundations upon which a future that is both peaceful and stable can be built.

Support for the new Human Rights Commission: The Women's Coalition welcomes the establishment of a Human Rights Commission to guard the interests of ordinary people. We will push for the inclusion of international expertise, in the first instance. Such a Commission must reflect the diversity of the community. Whilst the Agreement states that the Commission should reflect 'community balance', it fails to define this. It is essential that the process of appointment and the working practices thereafter be transparent in order that they enjoy the confidence of the whole community.

The Development and Adoption of a Bill of Rights: Whilst the Women's Coalition welcomes the government's adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights, we also believe that the special circumstances in Northern Ireland require more than the minimum standards. We welcome the inclusion of rights pertinent to Northern Ireland's circumstances in the Agreement and will work for the development of a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights

Targeting Social Need: This is the backbone of an anti-poverty strategy and we will work towards its full implementation. However, the anti-discrimination perspective offered by Policy-Appraisal and Fair Treatment provisions is not as strong as it could be. The Women's Coalition will work to see this aspect of policy-making strengthened so that discrimination can be tackled at the decision-making stage. This is a more effective way of dealing with inequalities than focusing on outcomes, and the traditional differentials between the different communities could begin to be properly addressed.

An Equality Commission: The Women's Coalition has already registered its concern that current government proposals for an Equality Commission will – albeit inadvertently – create a hierarchy of discrimination. We are particularly concerned that the government White Paper, whilst focusing on the serious issue of differentials in Catholic and Protestant employment, must also include a strong commitment to gender equality. We will demand stringent safeguards to ensure that the work of other equality commissions are not subsumed by the prominence of the employment issue. The work of the recently established Commission for Racial Equality and the yet to be established Commission on Disability should not be undermined by future developments. It would go against the spirit of the Agreement and the new era we are attempting to achieve, if their embryonic work was sidelined.

A Department of Equality: The Women's Coalition welcomes the suggestion in the Agreement for a Department of Equality. This, if implemented, will place the issue of equality at the heart of government. It will also send a clear message to the people that never again will controversies and grievances be left to fester.

It is also clearly important that the remit of such a body is not confined to equality between Protestants and Catholics, unionists and nationalists – but should be understood in the broadest possible terms.

Police: The Women's Coalition does not believe that the current level of police is sufficient, but we are convinced that change is inevitable – and that the best way of ensuring that the police are seen to be independent is to have a Commission to oversee the police arrangements and we intend to continue to work for the establishment of such a Commission. The Women's Coalition believes that the police should be accountable to all members of the community. The composition of the police should reflect the diversity of the communities it aims to serve. Currently, Catholics tend to be under-represented in the police. We will work for political parties to put forward a police force that reflects the population in terms of religion and gender. We have three main objectives support change. It is a very different thing to police a society experiencing communal conflict and one at peace with itself. We will advocate programmes that will support the police during this transition.

Criminal Justice: The Women's Coalition supports the review of the Criminal Justice System outlined in the Agreement. In order to consider the impact of the new legislation, the criminal justice system must reflect the diversity of the communities it serves. We particularly look forward to the issue of women judges being addressed.

Decommissioning: The Agreement asks political parties to commit themselves to achieving full decommissioning. This issue is about trust – something that will take time to develop. The Coalition wants to see decommissioning, we want to see this society a safer place and that means fewer weapons in circulation. Decommissioning must not become an obstacle to political progress. As Senator Mitchell said, decommissioning small arms is the most important task – and the one most likely to deliver long-term peace.

The release of prisoners: We recognise that this is a difficult issue for many people. The release of prisoners should occur in the context of a proper recognition of the rights and needs of victims. The recognition of victims' rights was something the Women's Coalition worked to ensure was in the Agreement.

The Agreement has suggested that most prisoners belonging to organisations will not be given an amnesty but will be released on licence and may be recalled if they re-offend. Each prisoner will have his or her sentence reviewed by a new Review Body to be established. Currently prisoners are eligible for early release once they have served half of their sentence. If the new arrangements were not implemented, about two-thirds of these prisoners would be recalled anyway. Many people see these prisoners as being particular threats to the community. However, since 1993, 35,000 prisoners have been released on licence and only 1,000

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Continuing Responsibilities of the British Government

As well as the departmental responsibilities that will be transferred to the new Assembly, the Women's Coalition will continue to consult with the British government in areas which remain their responsibility. These areas include policing, criminal justice, decommissioning, the release of prisoners and parades.

Policing: The Women's Coalition does not believe that disbanding the RUC is really an option, but we are convinced that change is inevitable – and should be welcomed as evidence of putting the conflict behind us. An independent Commission has been established to review future policing arrangements and we intend to contribute to its examination of future policing for Northern Ireland. The Women's Coalition believes that the police should be accessible to all members of the community. The composition of the police should also reflect the diversity of the communities it aims to serve. Historically, Catholics and women have been under-represented in the police. We will work for policies aimed at producing a police service that reflects the population in terms of religion and gender. We know that the police themselves support change. It is a very different thing to police a society experiencing communal conflict and one at peace with itself. We will advocate programmes that will support the police during this transition.

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The Agreement has suggested that most prisoners belonging to organisations adhering to cease-fires will be released within two years. These prisoners will not be given an amnesty but will be released on licence and may be recalled if they re-offend. Each prisoner will have his/her sentence reviewed by a new Review Body to be established. Currently prisoners are eligible for early release once they have served half of their sentence. If the new arrangements were not implemented, about two-thirds of these prisoners would be released anyway. Many people see these prisoners as being particular threats to the community – however, since 1985, 600 life sentence prisoners have been released on licence and only two

have been recalled to prison for non-violent offences. The release of prisoners is an essential part of the Agreement, they have been part of the problem and should be part of the solution.

Parades: A core principle for the Women's Coalition is respect for Human Rights. We see marching as a basic civil right and freedom. But so is living free from intimidation and enjoying freedom of movement where you live. The Parades issue represents a clash between these two Rights. Both are well-founded and should be respected, but neither is unlimited. Even in America – where we hear a lot about freedoms and rights – the right to march is limited by the authorities who can impose conditions such as where, when and how many people can take part. We have consistently advocated dialogue and continue to do so.

The Women's Coalition proposed an independent body such as a Parades Commission to take these decisions before it existed. However, as with all institutions in the new Northern Ireland, its make-up must reflect the diversity of opinion on this issue. It must perform its role in a balanced and fair way, and free from political interference.

NI Women's Coalition: A New Voice for New Times

Putting the Conflict Behind us

On 10th April 1998, an Agreement was reached by the eight parties at the Stormont Talks. The aim of the Agreement was to start a process, which could consign to history the conflict, which has touched the lives of so many people in this community.

The Referendum was truly historic. More people voted in that election than any other in living memory. The message they gave is very clear. People want to look forward. They want to be represented by politicians who think and plan for the future. This does not mean turning our backs on the past. The legacy of violence will continue to have an impact on this community. It must be adequately addressed.

We often hear politicians tell us what they will not or cannot do. Not the Women's Coalition. We have listened and we have achieved what we set out to do. But the hard work of what we must do is just beginning. The impact of violence on all aspects of social and economic life cannot be underestimated. We must take this into account when moving forward. Issues such as reform of policing, decommissioning of weapons and release of prisoners will all help to build the peace. Some people find these developments hard to accept, for others they cannot happen quickly enough. The NI Women's Coalition will continue to work to advance these issues, while also addressing the real concerns of those who find them difficult.

The NI Women's Coalition will steer a course through these difficult and sensitive issues in the same way we did in the Talks. Our primary concern is to move Northern Ireland society out of conflict, to create a culture of tolerance and inclusion. It is politically unacceptable for any party or group to claim a monopoly on the moral high ground. We are committed to moving forward. We accept that each of us has some responsibility for the past and has some part to play in building for the future.

To continue playing our part, we need your vote.