

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

OPENING STATEMENT - To Strand 1 of the Multi-Party Negotiations
on Northern Ireland - October, 7th 1997

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition welcomes these negotiations with an optimism born out of necessity. We have all lived too long in circumstances of unacceptable fear and insecurity - an insecurity that has been tragically underlined countless times. It is now timely that we should concentrate on the task of negotiating solutions to our shared problems rather than concentrating on mutually exclusive aspirations. It is important that we grasp this opportunity to untangle possibilities for change, rather than seeking to rely on the certainties of the past. Is there any participant who has not suffered as a result of these conflicting certainties?

We all have much work to do in building confidence and in effectively ensuring the inclusion of the wide diversity of view points that exist within Northern Ireland. Having utilised the concept of sufficient consensus we have learnt that consensus must be built and is not simply arrived at. In Strand 1 the task we set ourselves is to continue to strive for a balanced accommodation of as many interests as possible. The reality is that we are living in a society in conflict, and hence we require new ideas about how to resolve our age old problems through consensual solutions and imaginative approaches.

It is important that we give attention to the various ways in which we can ensure that people are made to feel part of any political progress. The task of peacebuilding that we all face must be seen as an open and accessible system, that seeks to win as many advocates and allies as possible. It is crucial that we identify mechanisms that will enable and encourage local communities and various interests to participate in this process of peacebuilding, and to feel a share of responsibility for the future of this society; rather than leaving this task exclusively to the owners of this negotiating table. We need to see the peacebuilding that we are all engaged in, as an interdependent model, which acknowledges the importance of this negotiating table but recognises that it is not the exclusive deliverer and sustainer of peace. We need to examine how we can bring all sectors of our society to a point where they feel that they are respected, and that they can associate themselves with the peacebuilding process. We believe that people cannot be expected to vote in a referendum without an understanding of how, and why, we arrived at our eventual conclusions.

We accept the centrality of the constitutional issues to the substantive negotiations but we want to approach these issues in a manner that will seek to draw out themes, and even fears that our divided society may well hold in common.

- How can we recognise the identities and traditions of the main communities in Northern Ireland on the basis of equity and human rights?
- How can we structure the recognition of, and the right to, differences in the context of a pluralist state. And what lessons does this hold for the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom?
- How can this small piece of land recognise our British and Irish identities in a new, unique constitutional arrangement that will have sufficient acceptance to be stable, but can also be dynamic enough to allow for development and change?

We recognise the need to address all these issues and more but we also want to examine other important concerns such as:

- How can we formulate decision-making structures that are closer to people and local communities.
- How can we ensure gender equity through new electoral arrangements and appropriate social support - as we have seen in practice in South Africa and in the current discussions on a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. This British Government has gone a long way towards changing the face of democracy by bringing women forward and ensuring their place in decision making processes.

We expect no less of them, or of any party around this table, in determining new political arrangements that are inclusive of women in Northern Ireland. Will there come a time when the Women's Coalition has no longer a job to do in this regard?

- How can we develop the concept of participative democracy that can draw on the expertise of the many sectors in our society - business, trade unions, agriculture and the voluntary sector among others - to ensure that any new political system here will reflect a new social and economic agenda that is growing so wonderfully in the communities of Northern Ireland at this time?

- How do we guarantee that human rights will be protected in the context of any new constitutional framework?

In relation to civil and political rights, we also see social and economic rights as human rights particularly in the context of the serious social and economic disadvantage which has haunted Northern Ireland for so long. We emphasise the right to live free from violence, intimidation, sectarianism and discrimination in all its manifestations. We should build on the example of the Reconstruction and Development Programme in South Africa, which brings together a comprehensive approach to rights, equity and development. There are many other issues that the Women's Coalition would wish to table for discussion - not least matters relating to the victims of the conflict and the position of politically motivated prisoners.

Justice issues are paramount in a conflict society such as ours and we need to invest in these issues if we are to secure sustainable peace.

We also want to see confidence building measures but these must not be seen as gifts or used as tests or obstacles within these negotiations. They should be used as measures aimed at creating a basis of mutual respect and tentative trust.

The manner in which we deal with these difficult issues during Strand 1 will also be crucial to their success. We are conscious of the damage done to Northern Ireland by decades of adversarial politics. We do not see politics as a battle arena for the total victory of one side over another. Instead we see it as crucial for us all to work constructively towards a form of democracy that will be open and can reflect a diversity of interests.

We ourselves were drawn together by a vision of the type of society that we might yet achieve in Northern Ireland: a society that is open and pluralist; a society that has managed to escape the “scalded memories” and to move away from conflicting political cultures which thrive on a sense of exclusion, defensiveness and victimisation.

Finally, it is our belief that we must spend time in thinking about the values that we wish to see informing the practice of government and of society as a whole. It would be political progress if Strand 1 could be driven by values and visions for the future, rather than concentrating on protecting historical certainties.

Despite the inevitable difficulties we will face, the Women's Coalition is optimistic, feeling that the climate of this society is right for successful negotiations.

The opinion polls that we all saw recently leave us in no doubt that while people of all political hues may be fearful of the possible outcome of this process, they still recognise the importance of us reaching agreement. It is also accepted that Northern Ireland has reached the end of the road in terms of the international acceptance of political intransigence. It is only so many times that the bleak grey spires of Fermanagh can re-emerge from the mists of violence. We need these negotiations to work and we need the ability to compromise to make them work.

It is the people who have suffered the most in Northern Ireland who seem the most prepared to accept the need for political compromise. We owe it to the generosity of such people to rise to this challenge.