

THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

OPENING STATEMENT ON SUBSTANTIVE NEGOTIATIONS

ON STRAND 2 - 7th October, 1997

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition welcomes the opening of Strand 2 and wishes to express its commitment to the development of substantive negotiations about our shared future on these islands.

While the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition accepts that Strand 2 will not be an easy process for any of us, we believe that Northern Ireland deserves the leap of imagination that is required to turn political obstacles on North/South relations into political challenges. If we allow every obstacle to become a blockage to progress we will frustrate not only ourselves but more importantly the peoples of Northern Ireland and beyond.

In entering into Strand 2 we must move away - as far as is possible from a conflict mode which emphasises winners and losers; the 'them' and the 'us'. Instead - as Unionists and Nationalists, Loyalists & Republicans and others - we must set our mind to a mode which stresses the importance of jointly designing an outcome, or a range of possible outcomes, for the difficulties facing us.

We must seek to adopt lateral thinking so that we can look beyond the limited range of time worn options, perceptions and positions, and try to create new possibilities.

Argument from pre-determined positions can do this only to a very limited extent. We need to identify the issues and problems and discuss them with a view to finding new solutions.

In our experience the practice to date when North/South relations have been raised has all too often been divisive and narrowly defensive. Our first challenge should be to create a sense of unity around our common project; and to formulate a talks process that will underpin this sense of shared challenge. Clearly the eventual aim of this common project is to identify and flesh out the parameters of an agreed settlement - or at the very least a range of feasible options.

It is of course easier to pose questions than to produce answers but we do so here so as to focus on some of the key issues facing us in Strand 2.

- How can we seek to create new relationships and arrangements that can transcend current borders and boundaries?
- How can this small piece of land have relationships and arrangements that will recognise and give expression to our Irish and British identities and have sufficient acceptance to be stable, but can also be dynamic enough to allow for development and change?
- Do we need to look at our relations with a more autonomous Scotland and Wales and ask what lessons can we learn from the democratic institutions being developed there?

- How is our shared European citizenship to be played out?
- How can the European Union as a model offer us security rather than a threat and how indeed can we offer a new model of co-operation to Europe?
- How can we build on this kind of European Union in acknowledging our interdependency on these islands?
- How can we secure harmonisation of economic and social policy to enhance the quality of life on an island whose recent history has shown us our dependence on each other. An unending, unrelenting conflict not only destroys tourism but the economic base in both parts of Ireland.
- Can we accept the need to build strong structures to develop a competitive island economy capable of overcoming its periferality in the European Union?
- Can we agree common sense criteria such as:
 - Common interest
 - Mutual advantage
 - Mutual benefit

- Can we craft genuinely co-operative North/South structures and arrangements committed to proactive and constructive engagement.

When South Africans sat down to design their new constitution, their first commitment was not just to achieving equality between people of all races but also men and women. How can we ensure that when this conflict is over, the role which women have played across and within their communities will not be forgotten? They need to be written into and not out of the scripts which we now have the opportunity to design. Let us ensure that this happens by committing ourselves to equal access for women as well as men to any new structures on this island.

The Women's Coalition believes that for too long our thinking has been bound and limited by fears and apprehension, rather than stretching out for new visions and opportunities.

We accept that there are genuine fears in relation to how much or how little we build into Strand 2. The real challenge facing us here is to put our various fears and hopes on the table in order to forge an agreement which can win the greatest possible consent across all our communities. We must work to win consent from each other here at the table, building an eventual consensus which can win the consent of as many of our people as possible.

It is our belief that while all parties should be prepared to compromise and that any minority should accept the principle of consent, the onus is on any majority to show leadership and to move the politics of Northern Ireland towards a politics of partnership both internally and externally.

It should not be an impossibility for us to have the confidence to create a society which addresses and accommodates its internal differences as well as reaching out to its neighbours. We believe the people of Northern Ireland are giving a clear message that they wish to see the kind of negotiated settlement that can remove any perception of the need, by any group, to resort ever again to violence.

The prize for successful negotiations will be to effectively break the vicious cycle that holds the danger of condemning our children to the conflict and bitterness that we have all experienced. We hold with the lines by Evan Boland on the untimely death of a child in the Troubles:

We must

“Find for your sake, whose life our idle

Talk has lost, a new language

Child of our times, our times have robbed your cradle

Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken”