

GIVE THE PEACE PROCESS A CHANCE

Let's give ourselves a new day in July that we can all celebrate. A day when we break out of the cycle of failure and commit ourselves to making the Agreement work. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition has actively worked for the Belfast Agreement. We are still convinced that it is our passport to a better future.

Any society emerging from the deep divisions and background of violence that we have experienced must be prepared to fashion creative political structures and processes, that allow everyone to become champions for peace, and part of the process to achieve it. Comparisons between Stormont and Westminster are inappropriate until we can collectively develop a unifying political culture that warms the previously 'cold house' of Northern Irish politics. A peace process based on conflict resolution is not about positing the 'extremists' against the 'moderate centre' It is about honestly examining the issues that give rise to genuine grievances and seeking to address the causes of conflict. The Belfast Agreement offers us both an ethos and structures that can achieve this aim.

The effective implementation of the Agreement has taken time and is bedevilled by mistrust. Given the legacy that we have inherited, this is not surprising. However, there are those politicians for whom compromise is still a dirty word and who are more comfortable with the politics of demonisation. Now is the time to face down the detractors, the demonisers and the doubters. Fear will not move us forward.

AN OPEN NOTE TO REPUBLICANS

Lets look at what the agreement offers Republicans and Nationalists:

- There is the recognition that the aspiration of an United Ireland and an Irish identity carry equal legitimacy as unionism
- There is the institution of power sharing within the administration of Northern Ireland and places in government
- There is the establishment of cross-border bodies
- There is the commitment to demilitarisation and review of the R.U.C

While both Republicans and Loyalists achieved the early release of politically motivated prisoners.

The Coalition is acutely aware that the peace process is about much more than the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. We are also conscious however, that the weapons which are seen as defensive by Republicans are viewed as aggressive by the Unionist community. As Republicans demand greater security through reform of the R.U.C. and demilitarisation, so too do Unionists demand a greater sense of security through decommissioning. The Belfast Agreement states that all parties have to use their best efforts to achieve decommissioning by May 2000 - the Coalition is committed to this target. We recognise the historic importance of decommissioning, given the fact that the gun has been used in Irish politics - by people from both traditions - virtually every decade over the past two hundred years, and never once have arms been formally decommissioned. Nevertheless, as a party we will continue

to campaign to have all weapons removed, not just from politics, but from society as a whole.

The Coalition welcomed the Sinn Fein statement during the recent Stormont negotiations that 'conflict must be finished forever', and their offer of a timetable for the decommissioning process. However, given that our party has never argued that Sinn Fein was inextricably linked to the I.R.A., we now wish to see the I.R.A. speaking for itself, and indicating support for the Belfast Agreement and the related de Chastelain Commission. People can, and have been, marginalised over the years, but they can also marginalise themselves. It is now time for the Republicans and Loyalists to count themselves into the peace process in an active manner.

AN OPEN NOTE TO UNIONISTS

What the Agreement offers Unionists:

- There is acceptance that the constitutional future of the state will be determined by the will of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland.
- There is the removal of Articles 2 and 3 from the Irish Constitution
- There is the establishment of a devolved administration in Stormont
- There is the establishment of British-Irish Council
- There is the target of decommissioning by May 2000

The Coalition is convinced that the Unionist aim of safeguarding the union is best served through support for the Belfast Agreement, irrespective of party tensions and misgivings. The way forward is to work to create the conditions that will deny any paramilitary group the excuse not work with the de Chastelain Commission. This will not be achieved by insisting on narrow certainties in the short-term, particularly when the winning of these certainties might frustrate the very process which holds the best hope of delivering eventual peace, stability and democracy. Proceeding with the implementation of the Agreement along the lines set out in the Stormont Joint Declaration is not about allowing paramilitaries to hold a veto over the Agreement, rather it is about throwing down the gauntlet to them to become part of the peace process.

Yes, the Coalition accepts that in their own terms Unionists are taking a risk - but one that we feel can be justified by Unionists who realise what they stand to gain if the Agreement is implemented fully. Those Unionist politicians of little faith, who seek to take refuge in caveats and qualifications, will simply allow the I.R.A. to escape their date with their own internal contradictions that both decommissioning and the Agreement as a whole, must raise for them. Risk-taking, in the context of a peace process is not appeasement - instead it forms the basis for the mobilisation of popular support.

STAND BY THE AGREEMENT

The Agreement also offers much for society as a whole:

- The collective political commitment to democracy and peace
- The copper fastening of civil liberties and equality of opportunity for people from all traditions
- A recognition of the importance of reconciliation and support for the victims/survivors of violence
- A commitment to social inclusion and the advancement of women in society
- Locally elected, locally accountable government, complemented by a civic forum

There is much talk of democracy in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition believes that the people spoke through the referenda last year, and that the democratic option demands that we stand by the Agreement and work for its implementation. The referenda votes showed that despite the justifiable anger and hurt that many people still carry with them, that the Belfast Agreement was accepted for what it is - a milestone on the road to conflict resolution and the creation of a better society that can be shared by all.

It is important that in the current controversy over details of the implementation of the Agreement that we do not end up throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water. There is so much that we have got right.

Monica McWilliams
NI Women's Coalition

8th July, 1999