

CONFERENCE SPEECH - NORTHERN IRELAND
WOMEN'S COALITION ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Good Morning ^{Delegates} ~~Sisters~~ and Friends, Comrades and Colleagues – thank you for your solidarity; and thank you for your hopes, vision and optimism. It is said that women are like a tea-bag – it's only when they are in hot water that you realise how strong they are. And pushed to boiling point, they don't get outraged; they get outrageous. Well politics in Northern Ireland is certainly the boiling water of our existence since 1996; and yes ~~Sisters~~, it has proved how strong we are, and how ready we are to be outrageous in pursuit of our objectives.

[When the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was established on 1st May, 1996, we agreed three core values and a list of challenges that could serve as benchmarks in the measurement of achievement. The principles are Human Rights; Equality and Inclusion. Our list of benchmarks was somewhat longer –

- Demonstrating that women were prepared and able to contest elections and getting Women's Coalition representatives elected.
- Putting pressure on all political parties to select women candidates and to actively seek to address women's views and issues.
- Demonstrate the contribution that women have made, and can make, to peace, politics and progress; and
- Raise the issue of the representation and active inclusion of women with the media and other institutions within our society.

While we have not always been successful with regard to these benchmarks, the very existence and electoral success of the Women's Coalition has served to meet some of those very challenges that we set for ourselves.]

Friends, the Coalition emerged out of a complex mix of years of aspirations; decades of experience; and a sense of indignation. In forming the Coalition we knew that we were exposing ourselves to risk and ridicule – but you had the courage to listen ~~to~~ ~~listen~~ to that deeper voice within you, the voice that says that it is no longer an option to take refuge in the safety of silence or in the shadow of the echo; instead it is time for women to be heard.

In forming the Coalition we realised the need to raise our voices for a purpose. We moved from the concept of naming and blaming, to the more creative approach of naming and framing. We named our three principles ^{of human rights, equality and inclusion} and we set ourselves the task of framing a form of politics that would serve to realise those principles in practice. In seeking to deconstruct a political system that has effectively excluded us as women, and that has been deeply alienating and injurious to all of us as people, we were conscious of the need to think imaginatively in order to devise new frameworks and options. In doing this we can draw comfort from Mahatma Gandhi's insight –

 "First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, and then you win."

Equally, however, we accept that we are not in the politics of a zero sum game. We have not, and possibly will not, achieve all our objectives – but winning can take the form of drawing others into a process that can lead to a questioning of established political certainties and discussion about the possibilities of a new politics. We recognise that we are not alone in this discussion, and we celebrate the fact that while the House of Commons has a shooting gallery, the new Welsh Assembly building will have a creche. We can draw on the progress of others, as well as raising issues regionally. We can think global and act local.

The continued existence and work of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is about re-affirming that change is possible – and that a cross-community coalition for change is the most effective means of allowing us the space to check out each other's hopes and fears – thus making change less threatening. The Women's Coalition has always accepted that we are living in a deeply divided society, which is emerging out of three decades of violent conflict, and which is experiencing a process of transition. Given this context it is important that we do not under-estimate the contribution that each one of us can make to the change process. As Nelson Mandela said in his 1994 Inaugural Speech –

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure

around you. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people the permission to do the same”.

This is what we have to do in order to work to release the potential of change in an insecure society that has often found change to be not only threatening – but destabilising.

[The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition welcomed and actively campaigned for the popular acceptance of the Good Friday Agreement in May 1998 because we believed that that Agreement offered us a charter for positive change and political development. The Agreement also encompassed many aspects of our basic principle of Human Rights, although we did feel that the frameworks for equality and inclusion might have been stronger. Nevertheless, we welcomed the initial steps that were taken in these directions, and we committed ourselves to working to extend them over time. However, most welcome was the fact that the Good Friday Agreement managed to encompass the complexities of our diverse sense of identity, citizenship and allegiance – and that it left windows of aspiration open rather than closing them. The potential for change was recognised as multi-faceted and multi-layered – looking West/East as well as North/South, and local to regional as well as inter-sectoral; with our own proposal of a Civic Forum representing the latter.

Yes, the Coalition would have liked to have seen a more representational electoral system. We argued for more robust provisions on equality and inclusion; while we suggested confidence-building measures that would include equitable socio-economic initiatives. We could have marked the Good Friday Agreement B+ - Could do better ! But the reality was that we recognised that at this point in time,] In these difficult and divided political circumstances, the Good Friday Agreement is as good as it gets. In the referenda of May 1998 the vast majority of the electorate of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland agreed with us. As democrats we respect that vote, and we respect the terms of the Agreement as they are written. We do not want any re-negotiation of the Agreement nor any re-interpretation of its provisions.

Over the past year the Coalition – through its elected representatives and negotiation team - has been engaged in four rounds of negotiation over the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. At Hillsborough last Easter we disputed the ~~representation~~ ^{exclusiveness}

*rejected it because of
and the lack of consensus.*

of the negotiations ~~by the Government spokesperson~~. At Stormont last summer we welcomed the stated willingness of Republicans to move the implementation process forward, and this week we have been given new hope by the ^{conclusions of Senator's Mitchell Review} Review Report issued by ~~Senator George Mitchell~~. We firmly believe that the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is within our grasp, but we are also acutely aware that if we do not move to implement the Agreement as a matter of urgency, that there is a danger of voters turning away from both the Agreement, and politics as a whole, due to terminal boredom.

The Women's Coalition believes that the Agreement offers a passport to a better future for all sections of society in Northern Ireland. ~~As we pointed out in an article printed in the Belfast Telegraph last summer,~~ for Unionists –

- There is the acceptance that the constitutional future of the state will be determined by the will of the people of Northern Ireland.
- There is the removal of Articles 2 and 3 from Bunreacht na hEireann.
- There is the establishment of the devolved administration in Stormont.
- There is the establishment of the British-Irish Council.

For members of the Nationalist community –

- There is the recognition that all aspirations and identities carry equal legitimacy.
- There is the institution of power-sharing within the devolved administration.
- There is the establishment of cross-Border bodies.
- There is the review of policing in Northern Ireland.

In addition, both Republican and Loyalist communities achieved the early release of politically motivated prisoners.

While for society as a whole there is –

- The collective political commitment to democracy and peaceful methods of change.
- The copper fastening of human rights, civil liberties and equality of opportunity.
- 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.