



**Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement
Post Weston Park Proposals
1 August 2001**

**A response from the
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
6 August 2001**

Introduction

The Women's Coalition continues to believe that the Belfast Agreement offers the only opportunity for a new beginning for the relationships between the people and communities in Northern Ireland, Ireland and Britain. We believe that support for the Agreement remains strong amongst the population of Northern Ireland.

We are steered primarily by the Belfast Agreement, its spirit, ethos and direction. The degree to which we have implemented the Agreement thus far – and we have made huge progress – has been possible by adhering exclusively to its tenets. We note that some of the proposals make reference to areas not referred to explicitly in the Agreement.

We are now in the third year of the implementation phase of the Agreement. Building a new, powersharing polity, and creating a peaceful democratic society underpinned by principles of social and economic justice will take time. We recognise that the Agreement will take time to take root, and we as politicians have a duty to cultivate those roots. Full implementation will not happen overnight, and we recognise that we are in a longer-term process. We note that many of the current proposals, on for example, policing, criminal justice, and inquiries into collusion will not yield results instantly. However, the Implementation Group that the governments propose will be a valuable way of monitoring and managing the implementation process over the longer-term on a collective basis.

We should endeavour to see things in perspective, to acknowledge the gains we have made, and look forward to more gains to come. Peacebuilding, reconciliation and social reconstruction are long term initiatives – we need to build trust so that they can be realised.

In this context we believe that the principles of the proposals the governments set out in the wake of talks at Weston Park have the capacity to strengthen the foundation of that long term aim. The governments have made clear that the proposals they set out on 1st August come as a package, that delivery on some is not possible unless there is delivery on all. For some these proposals may go too far. For others, they may not go far enough. It is our belief that they strike the best possible balance at this time. We believe that the proposals signpost the route to normalisation and normality.

There is a tremendous amount of detail in the government's proposals, which cover a comprehensive number of areas. However, we are disappointed that opportunity was not taken to deal with the outstanding resource and powers question of the Human Rights Commission. We will continue to work on these issues.

It is our view that that more time may be required by some parties to take account of and assess all that is presented. While it is useful that the governments have adopted this approach, we urge other parties to clarify their positions with regard to the proposals as near to the target date as possible.

We would highlight the following to comment on specifically:

Decommissioning

We agree with the government's assessment that this issue must be resolved in a manner acceptable to and verified by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning in accordance with its legal mandate. We would also comment that, in terms of current paramilitary activity, politicians should take account of where the actual threat from the use of weapons is coming from. It is essential that all paramilitary arms are decommissioned in the context of overall implementation of the Agreement, and this point should be stressed by all politicians. While we commend the IRA statements of February and May 2000, we note, in the context of the above, that the IRA is *primus inter pares* with regard to movement on this issue. We further note that, due to their engagements with the IICD since May 2000, political expectations about the possibility of physical decommissioning have been raised.

Thus we recognise that important gestures have been made by them. We continue to urge them to cement the peaceful foundation on which a new Northern Ireland is being built.

The signatories to the Good Friday Agreement committed themselves to using their best influence to bring about the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, under the auspices of the International Commission on Decommissioning. We believe that support for this package represents a positive way of asserting influence in this regard.

Policing

We are pleased that the government is to revise its approach to the full implementation of the Patten report, especially in respect of the proposed extension of the terms of reference of the Oversight Commissioner. We should like to view the Oversight Commissioner's new terms of reference as soon as possible.

We have viewed the new draft Implementation Plan and are satisfied that, taken with the extended ability of the Oversight Commissioner, and the scope for legislative amendment to come on stream in late 2002/early 2003 it will provide for the new beginning in policing heralded by Patten.

We note that Patten did not recommend the immediate abolition of Plastic Baton Rounds, however we urge the government to determine post haste an appropriate public order measures that deploy non-lethal force.

We would urge other political parties to take their seats on the Policing Board, so that these amendments will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

We look forward to the publication of the draft legislation and its attendant Implementation Plan on implementing the recommendations contained in the Review of the Criminal Justice System before the end of September.

Normalisation

We agree with the governments aim to ultimately vacate, return or demolish the army bases, and the demolition and vacation of all surveillance towers, together with no further army presence in police stations. Further, we feel that there should be no need for any army base nor any provision

for training of helicopter personnel in Northern Ireland. We are prepared to accept the proposed demolitions as a positive first step and a mark of faith as to the ultimate intention.

While we have always supported the Parades Commission as an institution, and will continue to support it, we accept that a review may be useful for its further development.

Public Inquiries

In terms of the proposed appointment of a judge of international standing from outwith both jurisdictions, we are satisfied that this will be an appointment made jointly by both governments. We are of the view that the terms of reference should be fairly narrow, so as to be manageable within a relatively short timeframe. Our discussions with the government indicate that this appears to be the intention.

Returnees

The issue of returnees is problematic, not least because the Agreement did not explicitly refer to it. The government's logic, however, is in the right direction. We note the low rate of re-offending by prisoners released under the accelerated release scheme, and are satisfied that the government's proposed action will not pose a threat to members of the public.

Future Management of Agreement Implementation

We are pleased that the government has agreed to establish an Implementation Group to manage the implementation of the Agreement on a more collective, robust and regular basis, shifting the locus away from fire-fighting or crisis management. We are pleased that a variety of formats will be available to the Group.

Protection of the Institutions

We welcome the proposed collective affirmation regarding the institutions. We note that the participation of any party in any part of the institutions to which they are democratically entitled is not the gift of any other party.

Conclusion

While these proposals are not to our complete satisfaction, we believe they have the potential to further bed down the Agreement, and create the concomitant stability we all crave. They can work if the necessary political will is available and applied with vigour. There are risks for all, but great gains also. We believe these proposals, particularly in the absence of any alternative suggestion from other parties, should be accepted and tested.

The thrust of these proposals are towards normalisation. The restoration of normality covers many aspects. At the security level, it means the removal of paramilitary and military weapons from politics. At the political level it means pursuing political objectives by exclusively democratic means and accepting opposing political aspirations as legitimate. At the economic level it means full employment and an end to poverty. At the social level it means reconciliation, challenging and combating sectarianism so that we can all participate in a society underpinned by values of democracy, equality and justice.