

13/14 July 2001 -

FIRST DRAFT

1. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition continues to believe that the Good Friday Agreement offers a historic opportunity for a new beginning in not only the relationship between the island of Ireland and the island of Britain, but also between the peoples and communities that comprise the island of Ireland. We re-affirm the aspects of the Agreement that for us represented the most important steps forward –
 - The total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving political differences.
 - The collective commitment to achieve reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights for all.
 - The acceptance by all of the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by the majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to the constitutional status of the area.
 - The recognition that there must be parity of esteem and just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both main communities within Northern Ireland.
 - The untangling of the concepts of citizenship, identity and national allegiance.
 - The establishment of the devolved institutions of governance in Northern Ireland, as well as related North-South and East-West bodies.
 - An acceptance of the importance of economic, social and cultural issues as well as a recognition of the role of civic society.
 - Addressing the issues of criminal justice, policing and security.

The vast majority of people voting in the 1998 referenda agreed with the Women's Coalition and other pro-Agreement parties that these gains were worth supporting and working to implement.

2. We are now in our third year of the implementation period – we all know the difficulties that have been experienced. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is not in the blame game, as we are convinced that it moves nothing forward, but only fuels suspicion and mistrust. However, it is clear that the 'zero-sum game' approach – the 'you win therefore I lose' mentality – lies at the core of our implementation problems. It is no wonder that there is disillusionment with the Agreement among the Unionist communities, in particular, when they have been consistently told about what they have lost rather than the critical gains that the Agreement secured. Human rights, equality and the achievement of fair and impartial policing should be a threat to no-one.
3. Nevertheless there are real problems that require to be addressed as a matter of urgency if the continuing dilemma of mistrust is not to be further compounded. There are areas of implementation that were left vague within the Good Friday Agreement. A number were referred to Commissions and reviews for progression. We have had the Patton Commission; we have the Independent International Commission on Disarmament; we have had the Criminal Justice Review and the Prison Sentence Review Body; and we have the British Government Review Group on Plastic Bullets. And we have some real, and very genuine political differences around the acceptance of the recommendations from these various committees and commissions. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition has in the past expressed its concern about the proposed manner in which aspects of the Patton Commission are to be implemented; the tone and tenor of aspects of the Criminal Justice Review and the fact that the Review Group on Plastic Bullets is an internal British Government body. Nevertheless, we still believe that it is possible to make progress on these issues.
4. The issues of demilitarisation and decommissioning continue to haunt us, and reflect the understandable fears that exist throughout our communities. We note the commitment within the Agreement that the British Government will make progress towards the objective of as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland, consistent with the level of threat. We also note the objective of the decommissioning of illegally-held arms in the possession of paramilitary groups. We also appreciate the fact that – with some exceptions over the past five years – the paramilitary ceasefires have largely remained intact. We condemn attempts to devalue the impact of these continuing ceasefires by politicians who are out to highlight the negative rather than the positive.

However, as a party committed to peaceful progress we want to work towards a situation where all guns will be taken out of Irish politics – Republican weapons, Loyalist weapons, police weapons, the appalling high level of legally-held guns in Northern Ireland and the withdrawal of the British Army. This is what 'normalisation' means for the Coalition. We believe that the Good Friday Agreement still provides us with the framework whereby this is achievable.

5. As a party that draws its membership from across the diverse communities of Northern Ireland the Coalition understands the tradition and 'theologies' of both Loyalist groups and the Republican Movement. We welcomed the expression of remorse for the pain inflicted that was made by Gusty Spence on behalf of Loyalism during the declaration of their ceasefire in 1994. We also recognize the importance of the statement made by Gerry Adams this week where he re-iterated his total commitment to playing a leadership role in bringing a permanent end to political conflict, including physical force republicanism. These statements are the stuff of radical political progress. However the very real challenge remains as to how we can action these aspirations. It is also our analysis that while we must work collectively to put all arms verifiably use beyond that the position of the I.R.A. is *primus inter pares* with regard to movement on the decommissioning issue.
6. In this context we reject as mischievous the conflation of Sinn Fein/IRA that some Unionist politicians continue to use on every occasion possible. We accept – and welcome the fact – that Sinn Fein has an understanding of the IRA position, and can seek to influence it. We also note the statement made by the IRA itself in February 2000 that the "IRA has never entered into any agreement, undertaking or understanding at any time with anyone on any aspect of decommissioning" – but welcome the fact that they went on to say that "The issue of arms has to be dealt with in an acceptable way and that this is a necessary objective of a genuine peace process". This critical statement was supplemented in an important manner by the IRA statement the following May when it was pointed out that the maintenance of the ceasefire was the IRA contribution to the Peace Process, but that the IRA leadership was committed to resolving the issue of arms. However the Coalition noted the framework the IRA outlined that would enable them to initiate a process that would 'completely and verifiably put IRA arms beyond use'. The structure of this framework was outlined as "The full implementation, on a progressive and irreversible basis, by the two governments, especially the British government, of what they have agreed will provide a political context, in an enduring peace process, with the potential to remove the causes of conflict and in which Irish republicans, and unionists can, as equals, pursue our respective political objectives peacefully." For the Coalition all agreements must be those contained within the Agreement itself, or emerging from the accepted recommendations of related Commission or Review reports.
7. In terms of the IRA's own definition of the root causes of conflict in Northern Ireland – "the British Government's claim to a part of Ireland, its denial of national self-determination to the people of the island of Ireland, the partition of our country and the maintenance of social and economic inequality in the Six Counties" – the Women's Coalition feels that the Good Friday Agreement addresses these points. This is particularly clear in the Constitutional Issues section of the Agreement – Para 1 (I) – (iv) and in the provisions relating to equality issues. The Coalition is concerned at the lack of clarity as to when the test of the 'full implementation' that will provide the political context that can then give rise to the initiation of a process that can put IRA arms beyond use. We are also conscious that the number of communiques from the IRA, alongside their engagement with the International Commission on Decommissioning has raised political expectations that this process has commenced.
8. When the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition supported the Good Friday Agreement it was conscious of the historic opportunity that was presented to the peoples of Ireland and Britain. but it also recognised that this opportunity needed to be driven forward by a series of positive dynamics in order to ensure that aspiration would be translated into practical policies. The stop-start experience of the implementation of the Agreement, and the subsequent series of missed timeframes, served in effect to undermine any sense of dynamism underlying the process. In addition, there was the problem of on-going zero-sum game negotiation around the implementation of aspects of the Agreement that served

to leech away any sense of collective ownership or responsibility. This was as true of the British Government, as it was of Sinn Fein or the Unionist Parties.

9. The Women's Coalition was also acutely aware of a philosophical fault line that continued to haunt the Agreement. This was represented on the one hand in the view that Northern Ireland had been a normal democratic society that had experienced an aggravated crime wave since 1969 – but that real-politik compromises had to be reluctantly put in place in order to achieve some semblance of peace; and the view that held that Northern Ireland had been a severely divided and dysfunctional society that had experienced a war that had grown out of frustration and the experience of minority discrimination. The first view gave rise to a constituency that was angered by the early release of politically motivated prisoners; saw human rights and equality issues as a concession; differentiated between 'innocent' and complicit victims of violence; was critical of approaches towards demilitarisation; resented any suggested need for reform of policing; and required the decommissioning of illegally held paramilitary arms as a sine qua non for political inclusion. The other understanding saw the undertakings for change contained within the Good Friday Agreement as the base line for a sometimes reluctant acceptance of the status and institutions of a Northern Ireland state, and as providing an honourable settlement of a justifiable war. Little or no work has been undertaken to reconcile these perspectives, and there seems to be no understanding by the British Government of the responsibilities that it carries for being more than a neutral referee in the situation – indeed, that it was integrally involved as a party to the conflict. Again, this inability to – or lack of energy invested in – reconciling these philosophical differences undermined the necessary dynamic in the process of implementing the provisions of the Agreement.
10. The question now remains what must be done? The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition suggests the following –
 - (a) A collective re-affirmation by the parties to the Agreement of the terms of the Agreement itself.
 - (b) A recognition of the need to design a conciliation process that will seek to address the differing philosophical perspectives of both the causes of conflict and future perspectives. The effective outcome of a successful conciliation process might result in an agreed Memorandum of Understanding.
 - (c) An inclusive implementation process which will actively enable all parties to the Agreement to take collective responsibility for the effective implementation on an on-going rather than a crisis management basis.
 - (d) A complementary process of the political management of the implementation of the Agreement that will take account of real political pressure points and tensions.
 - (e) The development of a strategic planning approach that would seek to establish realistic and collectively agreed benchmarks to indicate progress towards the stated objectives and which would clearly identify the issues of potential contention in the process. These contentious issues could be updated and re-framed as the process moves forward. Every effort should be made to posit them in terms that could create as much room for movement as possible, rather than parties seeking to make short-term political capital by closing down on the space that others might have to move.
 - (f) The collective re-affirmation that the movement towards 'normalisation' is an essential part of the process and must also have a continuing dynamic that goes beyond staccato movement at points of crisis. Normalisation is seen by the Coalition as including putting illegal arms beyond use; demilitarisation; and – where possible – movement on police arms and plastic baton rounds. The process overseen by the IICD must be seen as being robust in nature and the paramilitary interlocutors to the Commission should agree with the Commission a strategic management approach that might mirror those required to ensure the implementation of the Agreement.
 - (g) Agreement within pro-Agreement politics as how to promote and market the Good Friday Agreement in such a way that develops popular confidence in both the principles and the implementation of the Agreement.
 - (h) A complementary peacebuilding strategy at community and civic level to address the growing cynicism about both the potential of politics and the viability of the Agreement.