

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION

STRAND 2

RESPONSE TO UNRESOLVED ISSUES IN THE SYNTHESIS PAPER OF 10 MARCH 1998

1. Purpose of North/South Structures

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition welcomes the broad agreement that formal structures can play an important and valuable role in promoting the best interests of the island of Ireland across a wide range of issues. We feel that such North/South structures can provide an important institutional expression of the identity of nationalists in Northern Ireland, but more than this they can offer a clear framework to facilitate a synergy of social and economic development that can benefit all the people of the island. In order to effectively deliver this dual function we believe that the establishment of formal structures including a North/South Ministerial Council is an indispensable part of any overall political settlement.

2. Relationship with East/West Institutions

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition feels that the North/South Ministerial Council must have a clear and distinct institutional identity, linked to an agreed remit. We do not see the North/South and the East/West structures as being mutually exclusive, nor do we see either one as being subordinate to the other. We do believe however that it is important that the specific remit of each should be agreed as part of a political settlement.

3. Legal Basis of North/South Council

The Women's Coalition accepts that provision for a North/South Ministerial Council should be included in a new British/Irish Agreement. It is also our belief that any such body must have a clear statutory basis through legislation being passed in both the Oireachtas and Westminster.

4. Membership and Structure

The Women's Coalition feels strongly that the North/South Ministerial Council must be designed to be an effective body, whether meeting in a sectoral or a plenary format. It should have a clear remit which would lead to an agreed work programme which, in turn, would necessitate a timetable of regular meetings.

5. Duty of Service

The Women's Coalition feels that there should be an explicit duty of service on the Heads of Northern Ireland Departments to take part in the Council as required; with the same duty applying to corresponding personnel in the south. This duty should be contained in any relevant legislation.

6. Role and Remit of Council

The role and remit of the Council must be an integral part of any overall political deal duly underpinned by legislation in Westminster and the Oireachtas.

7. Functions of the Council

The Women's Coalition agrees with the points listed under (a) - (c). However it also proposes that the Council should have appropriate powers to enable it to agree common and/or joint approaches to policy in specified areas; to take decisions on matters designated as integrated policy and action; and to arrange for effective implementation of decisions, as indicated in the second (a)-(b).

8. Decision-Taking

The Women's Coalition believe that where agreement cannot be reached at this level of the North/South Ministerial Council, that the issue should initially be referred back to the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly. We do not feel that there should be an immediate recourse to the British and Irish Governments as arbiters, but we do feel that the Standing Inter-Governmental Machinery should receive an annual scrutiny report on the operation of both the political structures within Northern Ireland, and the North/South structures. If there are continuous difficulties with the operation of either one or both of these structures, the Standing Inter-Governmental Machinery should seriously review the situation.

9. Implementation of Decisions

The Women's Coalition agrees with the prospect of setting up appropriate agreed implementation bodies operating at an all-island and cross-border level.

10. Implementation Bodies

The Women's Coalition feels strongly that the establishment of appropriate implementation bodies must be agreed as part of the overall political settlement and given effect in both a new British-Irish Agreement and supporting legislation.

11. Accountability

In terms of accountability, the Women's Coalition believes that there should be regular scrutiny in the Oireachtas and in Northern Ireland of the North/South Ministerial Council's fulfillment of its responsibility to pursue an effective programme of work. This responsibility arises from the remit provided for the Council in the political settlement and any subsequent new British/Irish Agreement and legislation. The Women's Coalition does not accept the need for ratification of specifics in advance in a Northern Ireland institution or the Oireachtas; this would be unnecessarily cumbersome, bureaucratic and unwieldy.

However, we do assume a reporting and accountability arrangement, which would keep both the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland institution effectively informed about progress and provide confidence that the Council is meeting its remit. The only area where further ratification in advance by a Northern Ireland institution and the Oireachtas would be required is if there was a proposal to extend the area of remit of the North/South Body.

12. Further Development

As noted above, any evolution in the Council's role would have to be by agreement between the two sides and with the endorsement of the Assembly and the Oireachtas. In addition to this, however, the Women's Coalition envisages a periodic (5-10 year) review of the operation of the totality of arrangements under an Agreement by the British and Irish Governments in consultation with the Northern Ireland Assembly. This review might suggest an extension in remit for the various political structures (including the North/South body).

13. Administrative Support

The Women's Coalition does not feel that it is feasible, or likely to be effective, to have the same pool of administrative support for North/South work, as for East/West structures.

14. Joint Parliamentary Body

The Women's Coalition is in favour of such a body being set up in the context of a political settlement rather than awaiting decision by a Northern Ireland institution.

15. Role of Civil Society

The Women's Coalition feels strongly that the role of civil society should be developed in support of North/South cooperation. A Consultative Forum is one such approach, although support for the development and strengthening of strategic networks and linkages should also be supported.

16. Fall Back Arrangements

In the event of the Council failing completely the Women's Coalition believes that this would call into question the viability of all structures established under the proposed agreement. The two Governments would then have to take proactive action to review the situation and to suggest alternatives.

25 March 1998