

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition:

institutionalizing a political voice and ensuring representation

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Conflict has been a feature of life in Northern Ireland for centuries. It has shaped a society that is deeply divided socially and politically and where the space for real cross-community engagement has been constricted. It dates back to the time when mostly Protestant settlers from England and Scotland moved to the area, partially displacing the mostly Catholic indigenous Irish inhabitants. In 1921, when part of Ireland was granted limited independence, the six northern counties remained under British jurisdiction. The aspiration of some to a united Ireland (the 'nationalists' and 'republicans') and the determination of others to remain joined with Britain (the 'unionists' and 'loyalists') has been at the heart of the conflict ever since. Later, the conflict manifested itself powerfully around the issue of civil and human rights. The modern 'troubles' started in the late 1960s when demonstrations began for basic rights such as housing. After response and counter-response, the initially peaceful civil rights movement escalated into violent struggle, which lasted from 1970 until the late 1990's.

By the mid-1990s, it was increasingly recognized by both the British government and republican paramilitaries that the conflict could not be won through military means. After decades of various peace initiatives and growing cooperation between the British and Irish governments to sponsor joint efforts, a process for all-party talks began in June 1996 based, for the first time, on the assumption that: 'if you are a part of the problem, then you need to be part of the solution'. Representatives to the talks would be chosen through public elections with the intent of including the parties associated with paramilitary groups in formal political negotiations for the first time. In an attempt to ensure that the elections would result in delegates from all the main communities, the government developed an electoral system that offered participation based on relatively few votes. The number of seats would be assigned through a two-track system. The 18 territorial constituencies would each elect five representatives. Through a 'top-up' system, they would be joined by two representatives from each of the ten most successful parties across Northern Ireland as a whole. This enabled 110 delegates to participate in the peace process. Although the format enabled delegates outside the mainstream parties to participate in talks, there were no specific arrangements for the participation of other organized sectors of society. What follows is the story of a group of women rooted in civil society who organized to ensure their voice would be heard in the political negotiations and who became a channel for bi-communal civil society involvement in the official peacemaking process.

Forming the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was initiated by women with long histories of engagement in civil, human and workers' rights. Many were leaders in the community and voluntary sectors; others were teachers, university lecturers, professionals, and home workers. They included unionists and nationalists, as well as those who did not define themselves in either of these categories. They felt it necessary to take the gigantic step from the non-governmental sector to the political arena because they believed that the incumbent political leaders either ignored or refused to take seriously the issue of women's representation and participation in the peace negotiations.

At first, under the aegis of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (a formally constituted organization that still exists), the NIWC leaders lobbied for the existing political parties to include women in their candidate lists. When this action was effectively ignored and the government published its ideas for the electoral system, they decided to form a political grouping to contest the elections. Not all women's groups supported this idea. Some believed it would be difficult to sustain the bi-communal nature of the coalition over such contentious issues as policing because cooperation would require too many compromises. Despite these concerns, the NIWC attracted support from most groups.

Around 150 women attended the first meeting. Subsequent meetings regularly attracted up to 60 people. Twice-weekly and then weekly meetings were held in Belfast to debate positions and were facilitated by rotating chairs. Equality, human rights and inclusion were adopted as the coalition's three core principles and a principled approach became key to guiding and evaluating the development of positions. Another useful practice – and unusual in Northern Ireland – was that participants were encouraged to take their 'identity baggage' into the room with them. They were expected to acknowledge differences up front, rather than to 'be polite' and leave them outside the door.

The NIWC estimated that if they could win approximately 10,000 votes across Northern Ireland, they would be eligible for the two seats offered by the top-up layer. Their strategy was to organize women through all their various networks and contacts to gain the necessary threshold of votes. The NIWC initially had no money. A community college provided rooms and several individuals made donations. When it became clear they would not be able to pay for a bulk order for printing campaign materials, an anonymous donation and the generosity of politically sympathetic printers resolved the problem.

Other parties and the media initially dismissed the NIWC. Yet it gained one per cent of the vote and finished as the ninth most popular political party. It thus secured two seats in the negotiations, where its delegates had the status of full participants. The Democratic Partnership and the Labour Coalition were the other civil society groupings to contest the elections – with the latter winning sufficient votes to join the negotiations.

Participating in negotiations

During the talks, the larger parties were entitled to three seats at the table, supported by three back-up members; whereas the smaller parties were allocated two seats with three in back-up. For the purposes of voting, however, the parties were entitled to all the seats obtained through the constituency elections in addition to their two automatic 'top up' seats. While the other delegations at the table were overwhelmingly – and initially exclusively – male, the NIWC delegation was exclusively female. These demographics meant that male voices were heard more frequently during the negotiations. The NIWC delegates challenged this dynamic by ensuring that their perspectives were heard and by confronting delegates who monopolized the debate.

The NIWC was careful to ensure that both nationalist and unionist women were at the table at all times. The team of ten women who supported them with political advice and analysis was similarly balanced. Delegates were selected at an open meeting of the NIWC, drawn from those who had been on the regional candidate list. One hurdle the delegates encountered was the attitude of the other elected representatives. The NIWC delegates had assumed initially that they would be treated with respect as equal negotiating partners. Although some grew to respect the NIWC's contributions, others showed disdain. The delegates learned to develop a 'thick skin' and not to take rejection personally. Instead they tried to maintain their focus on the bigger picture and to make strategic alliances when and where possible.

The NIWC concentrated initially on making recommendations for procedural issues, such as amendments to the Rules of Procedure that governed the day-to-day operation of the talks and suggestions for agenda items and the order in which they should be discussed. They were sensitive to how these matters linked with process issues and were attentive to the underlying relationships between participants. They worked to promote an inclusive process and to prevent a small number of delegates getting drawn into a destructive spiral of blame that could harm the general negotiation ethos. They were later able to broaden the negotiating agenda to include such issues as victims' rights and reconciliation. The NIWC produced high-quality position papers and tried to model a fresh

approach to politics based on cooperation, non-competitiveness and a willingness to share ideas. While most parties did not regard the NIWC as a political threat, some of the nationalist mainstream politicians may have perceived the NIWC policies as encroaching on their terrain, which had traditionally been based on strong advocacy for human rights and equality. Thus, even though the NIWC included many women from a unionist background, the agenda it agreed and articulated was one that would be recognized as more traditionally nationalist – at least until the smaller loyalist parties also began to adopt this political ground.

They remained true to their NGO roots and kept their feet firmly in both the world of electoral politics and in the world of public activism. This happened on two levels. First, there was a monthly meeting of the full membership of the Coalition. They discussed positions on forthcoming agenda items and provided information to the membership about developments in the political process. The meetings provided opportunities for the membership to inform the representatives of their perspectives on the process. Because the membership was bi-communal, they provided guidance on approaches acceptable to either or both communities. Second, the NIWC maintained regular contact with a range of community and NGO leaders on specific issues under discussion. The NIWC was careful not to portray itself as having all the answers and gave serious consideration to the views of those consulted. These inputs from both the membership and from these networks meant that the NIWC was confident that its positions could command cross-community support.

After a year, the NIWC decided to formalize some of its decision-making procedures and confirm its status as a political party. It developed a constitution that provided for the annual election of a 12-15 member executive committee to make policy decisions, which consisted of two representatives from each county plus the publicly elected representatives as ex-officio members. Additionally, there was an option to co-opt additional members if necessary to maintain the cross-community balance of members. Monthly meetings continued to be open to the full membership, which supplemented the decision-making process as necessary.

Promoting the Belfast Agreement

After deliberating for 22 months, the negotiators concluded the *Belfast Agreement* in April 1998. Before it could take effect, however, it had to be endorsed through a public referendum. The NIWC played a key role in promoting the Agreement. Few parties were as unequivocal in their support and no other political party worked as closely with civil society leaders. The NIWC was

able to speak simultaneously to a number of constituencies: nationalist and unionist, organized civil society and individual members of the public. Members helped prepare a 'user friendly' version of the Agreement, using plain speech to make it more comprehensible. NIWC representatives spoke at public debates and organized debates amongst their own members. The NIWC supported the civil society-led "Yes" Campaign. As a political party, NIWC was entitled to free postage for sending a piece of literature to every voter. They put their own message on one side and gave the "Yes" Campaign the other side to print with its own message and logo.

The referendum on the *Belfast Agreement* was passed by 72 per cent of the Northern Ireland electorate – an event of massive historical and political significance. It created the new Northern Ireland Assembly, which would govern through a power-sharing executive on issues of economic and social concern. It established the North-South Ministerial Council to formalize links within the island and a British/Irish Council to formalize relationships amongst all the representative bodies in the islands. It proposed a range of measures that addressed the political and constitutional dimensions of the Northern Ireland conflict – though not necessarily the more internalized social and socio-psychological dimensions.

Assessing the outcomes

The involvement of the NIWC in the political negotiations had consequences for both the peace agreement and the dynamics of politics in Northern Ireland. Some of the issues the NIWC put on the agenda – such as victims' rights and reconciliation – became touchstone issues in the referendum campaign. It is arguable that if the agreement had not addressed these concerns, many people could have voted against it and thus jeopardized the greatest opportunity for peace in 30 years. The NIWC also initiated the idea of a Civic Forum as part of the Northern Ireland Assembly so as to institutionalize opportunities for broader public participation in politics – a proposal eventually incorporated into the agreement. The NIWC worked hard to protect and nurture the agreement during the implementation period. At times they helped to mobilize civil society to protect the agreement and at other times collaborated with political parties in joint efforts to promote it.

One immediate impact of the NIWC was that the issue of women's political participation was placed firmly on the map of electoral politics. Women delegates from other political parties began to attain higher profiles within their parties. When the Northern Ireland Assembly finally appointed ministers, two out of ten were women. The NIWC also contributed to de-mystifying the political process, which was one of its original goals. The NIWC's



involvement in the negotiations not only facilitated and promoted women's participation, it also demonstrated the possibility that civil society can participate in and influence formal political negotiations. It revealed that politics is not necessarily the exclusive preserve of customary politicians; groups other than those advocating exclusively a nationalist or exclusively a unionist perspective also have a place at the decision-making table.

The founders of the NIWC never intended it to become a permanent political party; yet it is becoming one, in part because the public has endorsed its longevity through elections. Elections to the new Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998 presented additional challenges. NIWC's delegates had to be elected directly from multi-member constituencies, rather than winning seats due to their overall proportional vote through the accumulator system used to elect delegates to the negotiations. Yet after an effective campaign, two candidates won seats from their constituencies. These Assembly members have since attempted to build cooperation with the smaller pro-Agreement parties.

The *Belfast Agreement* created a top-heavy executive. It is likely that the four largest parties, representing mirror

images of nationalism and unionism, will form a permanent governing coalition. A mature democracy demands a constructive opposition to critique the government. The NIWC has now assumed this role. Elections scheduled for May 2003 will provide a key test of both the *Belfast Agreement* and the NIWC. If and when a political re-alignment comes to Northern Ireland in the future, the NIWC will play a vanguard role – in its current form or in another.

The NIWC cannot claim the dominant role in negotiating the *Belfast Agreement*, which is a collective achievement of all the parties and governments involved. But it can claim a key role in changing, at least temporarily, the culture of politics in Northern Ireland. It brought solutions to the table that recognized and worked to accommodate difference, instead of throwing up obstacles based on those differences.